

*Evangelisation, protest and ethnic identity:
sixteenth century missionaries and*

*Indians in Northern Amazonian Ecuador**

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Introduction

The native people of the Ecuadorian tropical forest have had almost 450 years of contact with different representatives of white colonial and post-colonial societies. Through these years, the presence of missionaries among the native groups has been the most pervasive. Missions have been consistently organized as institutions whose main objective was, at least until very recently, to radically change the natives' world view and way of life.

Until the State became interested in the economic resources and the potential for colonization of its Amazon region in the 1940's, the missionaries practically maintained the monopoly of the task of 'civilizing' the different native groups and integrating them into the larger society. The control the missionaries had over the Indians greatly conditioned the impact of other 'civilizing' agents and, in a sense, still does.

The Indians' responses to evangelization have varied greatly during these 450 years, from acceptance of a new religion, to passive resistance, to active rebellion, and very recently to open criticism and attempts to control the action of the missionaries. This recent reaction by the natives has been also influenced by a critical change of direction experienced by some missions after Vatican Council II, when their previous evangelization strategies among native cultures were seriously questioned, and their future objectives radically redefined.

The general problem discussed in this paper is the interrelation between different missionary strategies of evangelization and the varied responses elaborated by the native population. The paper focuses on the ideological aspects of the contact underlying the interaction between missionaries and Indians as a confrontation between two conceptual representations of the world. In order to

* I gratefully acknowledge an SSHRCC grant and the support of the University of British Columbia. In Ecuador, my research is sponsored by Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales and the Instituto Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural del Ecuador.

understand the real meaning of this symbolic exchange, however, it is necessary to analyze the relation between the economic and social structure of the larger society, where the missionaries belong, and that of the different native groups.

As Ribeiro has argued in his book on the Brazilian Amazon, the Indians, when evangelized, are not confronted with several rational alternatives among which they can choose one, after a thoughtful critique of their own belief system [1973: 263]. The ideological confrontation between Indians and missionaries is not a free intellectual exchange, but an important element in a situation of colonialism. The main goal of the missionaries was always to convert the Indians, by implanting the 'seeds of civilization' and new forms of social relations. Consequently, the ideological practices of the missionaries always meant a denial of the Indians' own system of values and beliefs, the very basis of their ethnic identity. This is why the reactions of the Indians to evangelization have often been inspired, in different forms, by a reevaluation of their own cultural identity.

More specifically, the problem will be examined in an area of the Napo province in the Northern Ecuadorian Amazon. During colonial times, and mainly for missionary purposes, this area was known as the Governorship of Quijos. Several different native groups inhabit the region now: Quichuas, Cofanes, Sionas, Secoyas, Teetetes, and Huaoranis. Many more lived there in colonial times, but have since become extinguished. This paper will focus on the Napo Quichuas who live around Tena, the capital of the province, in the region near Archidona, Sumaco, Avila, Loreto, and in the upper tributaries of the Napo river. When the Spaniards entered this area, the native people they contacted were known as Quijos. Their language was not Quichua and, despite the careful ethnohistorical work done by Oberem [1980], it is still difficult to understand the process by which they became present day Napo Quichuas.

These Indians share with all the other Amazonian groups a tropical forest culture, living by shifting cultivation, hunting, and fishing. However, for a long time, this area has been opened to white colonists who compete with the Indians for land and resources. This colonization, coupled with the 'modernizing' influence of the Josephine missionaries since the 1920's onwards, have contributed to the process by which the Napo Quichuas are transforming themselves into peasants. A majority of these Indians are presently engaged in cattle raising, and in producing commercial crops, such as coffee and cocoa, for a national market. As a result, they now confront the same structural problems which seem to affect small peasant producers all over the world.

The missionary strategies analyzed here only cover the attempts at converting the Quijos by the secular clergy during the sixteenth century. Consequently, the Indians' responses were still expressed in the ideological practices which correspond to their earlier form of economic, social, and political organization.

Early attempts at evangelization and first rebellions

In pre-colonial times, the Incas Tupac-Yupanqui, Huayna-Capac, and Atahualpa had attempted to conquer the Quijos region but were not able, or willing, to subjugate them [*Rumazo Gonzalez, 1946: 11-14*]. The fact that the Quijos were never incorporated into the socio-economic and political organization of the Inca Empire explains, in part, the difficulties the Spanish *encomenderos* and missionaries had in their attempts to transform these Indians into a disciplined labour force and to settle them into *reducciones* for the purpose of catechization. Although the Quijos were able to keep their independence from the Incas, they maintained regular commercial relations with the highland groups, interchanging cinnamon and gold for arms, tools, cloth, and other highland products [*Ibid: 15*].

Probably through their traders, the Quijos learned of the consequences of Spanish domination over the highland Indian population, and this accounts for their fierce armed resistance against the first Spanish expeditions into their territory. However, the coveted cinnamon and gold which the Quijos used to bring into the highlands, constituted a strong allurement for the Spaniards who, immediately after the conquest of Quito, started organizing expeditions in search of the Land of Cinnamon and El Dorado. The first attempt was that of Gonzalo Díaz de Pineda in 1538. The difficulties of the jungle terrain and its rivers, and the number of men lost in the battles with the Quijos, forced Pineda to return to Quito [*Ibid: 37-38*]. He learned, however, that the land was populated by a large number of Indians led by powerful caciques, but that they were dispersed over an immense territory [*González Suárez, 1970: 3, 69*]. In 1541, Gonzalo Pizarro was able to capture some Quijos and, after horrible tortures, forced them to guide him to the famous Land of Cinnamon. This turned out to be a great disappointment because the cinnamon trees were dispersed over a vast and rough terrain, and very difficult to exploit [*Oberem, 1980: 67*]. However, gold and cotton still continued to be an attraction for other Spanish adventurers, but subsequent expeditions were repelled by the Quijos. This contributed to the Quijos' reputation as 'rebellious and unruly Indians' [*Porrás, 1974: 72*].

For the next sixteen years, the Quijos were left alone, until 1558 when they were again contacted by Spaniards, but this time peacefully, through a highland chief who was not only an ally of the Spaniards but also the brother in law of an important Quijo chief [*Rumazo Gonzales, 1946: 95-96*]. After long negotiations and an exchange of gifts, several Quijo chiefs invited the Spaniards into their territory. Gil Ramirez Dávalos was put in charge of contacting the Quijos. He took with him a Franciscan friar to evangelize the Indians. As an eyewitness of the negotiations, the friar reports that one of the caciques asked Gil Ramirez Dávalos for religious images and crosses 'because his father had died as a Christian, and his mother was a Christian from the time Gonzalo Díaz de Pineda

entered the Land of Cinnamon and they were baptized by Father Carvajal, provincial of the Dominicans [Vargas, 1977: 139-140].

Given the short time Pineda and other Spaniards remained among the Quijos, and the character of the other Spaniard expeditions, it is doubtful that the Quijos as a whole were even superficially Christian by 1559. However, they could have known about the 'whites' religion' through their traders or through their relatives in the highlands.

To receive the Spaniards, the Quijos built houses all along the roads putting crosses inside [González Suárez, 1970: 3, 64]. They also honored them with music and dances, and women and children carried crosses knowing that this was the symbol of the whites [Rumazo González, 1946: 95]. Probably, they did this to please the Spaniards and to entice them into their area, because the Quijos thought that they could probably increase their commercial exchanges if the Spaniards established their towns among them [Ibid: 86-87].

In May 1559, Dávalos founded Baeza, the first important town in the Quijos area. This event marked the beginning of the economic and political domination of the Quijos by the Spaniards through the establishment of *encomiendas* and *repartimientos*, as well as the more systematic attempts to convert them to Christianity. In the document written for the oath ceremony, the day Baeza was founded, it is already said that the Spaniards should make a list of the peaceful native chiefs, so that along with their people they could be assigned the work of building the church, the houses, and preparing the fields. They should also put their people at the service of the Spanish inhabitants. It is also ordered in this document that a mass should be celebrated 'with all devotion and solemnity to impress the natives and to move their hearts' [Porras, 1974: 66-70].

As first governor of the region, Gil Ramirez Dávalos gained a reputation among the Indians of being magnanimous and respectful of their land rights. When he was forced to leave the office to Rodrigo Nuñez Bonilla, the Indians complained to higher authorities [Rumazo González, 1946: 88]. As a consequence, the Spaniards started to worry about the possibility of an Indian rebellion [Porras, 1974: 72]. According to the chronicles, Nuñez Bonilla actually created all the conditions which provoked the first general rebellion of the Quijos in 1562. He changed the location of Baeza, probably invading Indian communal lands [Rumazo González, 1946: 102]. Unlike Dávalos, he did not order the cultivation of maize in the fields around the city and, consequently, the Spanish soldiers started stealing food and also gold ornaments from the Indians. Furthermore, the Indians were forced to make regular trips to Quito bringing heavy loads of food. Finally, Nuñez Bonilla started distributing the Indians to the Spaniards in *encomiendas*. Important caciques, with between 300 and 1,000 Indians under them, became dependent on the *encomenderos*. The Quijos, who knew already about the *encomienda* in the highlands, regarded it as practical

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'slavery' [Porras, 1974: 76-77], because it meant a considerable restriction of their freedom and the exploitation of their labor through force.

Not long after becoming governor, Nuñez Bonilla died in Quito and Captain Bastidas was put in charge as provisional governor. He tried to avoid some of Nuñez Bonilla's mistakes and, for the first time, introduced cattle and new crops into this area. In order to pacify the Indians, he granted privileges to the caciques and presented them with gifts of meat, shoes, gunpowder, wicks and lead [Rumazo Gonzalez, 1946: 103-105]. However, all his efforts did not succeed in preventing the general rebellion which took place in July 1562. The Quijos caciques joined forces to expell the whites from their territory, destroyed the bridges and barricaded the roads to prevent Spanish reinforcements coming from Quito. They attempted to kill Spaniards as well as highland Indian carriers, they burnt *tambos* (inns) and all the crosses located on the roads, *tambos* and towns [Porras, 1974: 85]. They attacked Baeza and burnt some houses but were repelled by Bastidas with silver bullets. Finally, Bastidas was able to calm the insurrection by the usual method of pacifying the most important chiefs with gifts and privileges. Other caciques, specifically the famous Jumandi, cacique of the Sumaco Province, preferred to warn the Spaniards against entering his territory. Jumandi threatened the Spaniards with an army of 15,000 warriors and went with his people to live deeper in the jungle [Rumazo Gonzalez, 1946: 127], until he reappeared as the main leader of the second and most interesting of the Quijos general rebellions in 1578.

In 1563, Captain Bastidas was informed that Melchor Vásquez de Avila had been appointed governor of Quijos and granted several *encomiendas*. As he lived in Cuzco, Vásquez de Avila governed Quijos for fifteen years through his lieutenant governors [Ibid.: 112]. Under no direct official control, the *encomenderos* and their soldiers felt free to exploit the Indians' labor and to treat them with extreme cruelty. Many Quijos died as a result of these abuses which included hunting them with dogs, confiscating their food, letting them die of hunger, and mutilating Indian women who resisted the sexual advances of the Spaniards [Ibid.: 131]. Confronted with this extreme genocidal situation, and out of frustration and despair, the reaction of some of the Quijos was self-destructive. There were cases of suicide, and it is reported that women killed their babies so that 'they would not live through such miserable times' [González Suárez, 1970: 3, 77-78]. Other Indians fled into the highlands, because they preferred to live as slaves of the caciques in Quito than to suffer under the Spaniards [Rumazo Gonzalez, 1946: 203].

During 1563, the lieutenant governor founded other towns in the area, such as Avila, in the land of Jumandi, Alcalá del Río in the Aguarico River, a tributary of the Napo, and Archidona in a densely populated area called *Los Algodonales*, rich in cotton and specially in gold [Ibid.: 119, 126-127]. Weaving and panning

gold became the two main forms of labor through which the Spaniards exploited the Indians. In that same year, the Quijos living close to the rivers Misahuallí, Tena, and Hollín – all areas near Archidona – fought against the Spaniards, but were finally forced to submit [*Ibid.*: 126].

The oppression of the Quijos was denounced by several officials [*Ibid.*: 203–204]. The situation was so serious that in 1576 the King ordered a Visit of the Governorship of Quijos by the *Oidor de la Audiencia de Quito* Diego de Ortegón. From Ortegón's report it is clear that by 1576, the conversion of the Quijos to Christianity was still superficial. Two Dominican friars accompanied the *Visitador* to establish two religious communities of this Order in the region to attend the evangelization of the Indians which, according to Ortegón's report, has been 'considerably neglected' [*Porrás, 1974: 96*].

While Ortegón was conducting the visit, the vicar of Quijos 'christened a great number of creatures' and Ortegón helped him with gifts for the Indians [*Ibid.*: 97]. They found a similar situation of neglect in Baeza and in Avila, where the Indians received religious instruction for the first time through the preaching of the vicar. In a report to the King about the 'sad situation of the Indians' another friar remarked that 'the *encomenderos* force the Indians to spin and weave continuously and they have them so occupied in these tasks that it seems that in this land they have forgotten about God . . . there are no churches, no ornaments, no images, except old and smoked paper ones . . . and in order to live the *Doctrineros* (priests) must collaborate with the *encomenderos*. We can clearly see the bad treatment and oppression of these Indians because a large number of them had died, and others are dying everyday' [*Rumazo González, 1946: 242–243*].

It is quite clear that at this time, the missionaries who worked among the Quijos were an integral part of the socio-economic system which exploited the Indians. The *encomiendas* in this area were not very productive for the *encomenderos*, due to the small and decreasing number of Indian tributaries. Consequently, the Spaniards did not pay the diezmos and other dues to the priests, who received a salary of 300 golden pesos from the Bishop, and the accustomed food and other offerings (*camaricos*) from the Indians [*Ibid.*: 186, 228]. According to Porrás [*1974: 100*] the priests had no alternative but to adapt themselves to the whims of the *encomenderos*, or to die of hunger.

Not many priests were willing to go to these forgotten regions. We get an idea of the type of priests who went to the area from information given by González Suárez about the priests working in another Amazonian Governorship further South: 'Some of the priests who entered in the Governorship of Salinas were fugitive monks from the Convents in Quito, and two of them had been excommunicated. It was not easy for them to learn the language of the barbarians, and evangelisation was done through interpreters. People were merely compelled to attend religious worship or to suffer the *Doctrinero's* punishments [*1970: 3*,

91-92].

Given this picture of evangelization around 1576, it is obvious that when chronicles report that at this time 'more or less half of the 16,509 Quijos dependent on the Spaniards were Christians' [Oberem, 1980: 85] it probably only meant that they had been superficially baptized in large groups or that the Spaniards counted as Christians those 6,803 Indians who were already tributaries in Spanish *encomiendas*.

Ortegón's 'solution' to evangelisation was to create *doctrinas* some of which were assigned to the Dominican friars and others to secular priests [Rumazo González, 1946: 225-226]. The Dominicans did not last very long in the area [González Suárez, 1970: 3, 91]. In order to evangelize the Indians in the *doctrinas*, Ortegón had to introduce another Spanish institution, the *reducción*, by which Indians from small communities or from isolated dwellings were forced to congregate in one town. Unlike the highland Indians, who were settled agriculturalists long before the Spanish conquest, the Quijos were hunters and shifting cultivators. They resisted the Spanish attempts to settle them in *reducciones*, because this new form of social organization constituted a serious threat to their own reproduction as a group. It is important to underline the fact that the *reducción* also challenged the established power of the shamans, some of whom were important caciques having groups of extended families organized around them [Oberem, 1980: 274]. The attempt to settle the Indians in *reducciones* necessarily contributed to the breakdown of this form of social organization, and to weakening the social and political power of the shamans.

Discouraged by the fact that their *encomiendas* were not renewed for more than one life term and by the scarcity of Indian tributaries, many *encomenderos* began to leave the area. Those who remained became impoverished and indebted [Rumazo González, 1946: 185-86]. Ortegón's visit contributed only to aggravate the situation of the *encomenderos*, both because of the expenses they incurred in entertaining him and his large retinue, and because of the fines Ortegón imposed on them for the abuses committed against the Indians. However, the worst consequences of this visit were for the Quijos who ultimately paid for all those expenses. The *encomenderos* forced them to spin and weave great quantities of cloth through forced labor [*Ibid.*: 185].

The increased exploitation resulting from this visit, plus the fact that Ortegón destroyed the dreaded dogs trained to hunt rebellious Indians, are mentioned by several writers as the most immediate causes which encouraged the Indians to engage in the general insurrection against the Spaniards in 1578 [González Suárez, 1970: 3, 76; Rumazo González, 1946: 185].

The Quijos rebellion of 1578: the rebellion of the shamans

While most of the previous uprisings of the Quijos had been organized locally by one group of cacique in protest against specific abuses by the Spaniards, the rebellion of 1578 was a carefully planned general uprising of all the Quijos to exterminate the Spaniards and to do away with white domination forever. It was coordinated in conjunction with highland caciques and was planned to include the participation of the Omaguas, another large and powerful tropical forest group, well known for their reputation as warriors. Like many other Indian uprisings, it failed militarily due to the superiority of Spanish arms and strategy. However, the rebellion is interesting for what it reveals both about the dynamics of the Quijos social and political organization in a period of acculturation and about the ideological factors of evangelisation.

The rebellion was started by two famous shamans or *Pendes* (sorcerers or high priests) called Beto and Guami, respectively from the regions of Archidona and Avila [see *Rumazo Gonzalez, 1946: 198*]. They were already dependent on *encomenderos* [*Ibid.: 187*]. According to Diego de Ortiguera's chronicle [*Rumazo Gonzalez, 1946: 187-222*] on which all reports about this rebellion are based, Beto and Guami called all the caciques and their people to arms against the Spaniards. They succeeded in getting a large number to join the rebellion, not only because all the Indians hated the Spaniards, but also because the powerful shamans threatened them with 'turning their fields into poisonous toads and snakes' if they disobeyed [*Ibid.: 198*]. People in this area still believe today that shamans have the power to kill them. After a ritual fast, Beto proclaimed that the devil had appeared to him in the form of a cow claiming to be the Christian god who was very angry with the Spaniards living in the region. This devil ordered Beto to kill all Spaniards, including women and children. For his part, Guami claimed to have gone for five days into another world (probably under the effects of *ayahuashca*, a hallucinogenic still used today by shamans in this area as part of their ritual) where the Christians god had equally ordered him to kill all Spaniards, burn their houses, and destroy their fields. The god had also chosen him to be Supreme *Pende* [*Ibid.: 187, 198*]. This last statement is important, since the chronicler states that a power struggle had developed between Beto and Guami, joined later by Imbate, an older shaman from another area. They met to decide who was the most powerful shaman worthy of leading the rebellion. The dispute seemed to have been solved by an alliance between Imbate and Guami and, later on, by appointing Jumandi, one of the most powerful caciques in the Quijos area, as commander in chief of the rebels. Before he joined, the shamans were successful in destroying and burning both Avila and Archidona, killing all whites and the highland Indians who were servants of the Spaniards. The hatred of the Indians was not stopped by the pleas for mercy from priests or churches. In

Archidona, for instance, they tried to burn the priest inside his church. When he tried to escape, he was speared [González Suárez, 1970: 3, 81].

After their initial victory, the shamans retired to Jumandi's land to prepare the assault on Baeza following five days of ritual fast. This assault failed because, by this time, Baeza had received reinforcements from Quito and from a cacique from the highlands. The attack of more than 5,000 Quijos was repelled [Rumazo Gonzales, 1946: 203]. The Omaguas arrived after the rebellion had been crushed. Many Quijos escaped into the jungle, including Jumandi's son who reappeared in 1590 in connection with another attempted rebellion [*Ibid.*: 203, 214]. Responding to the Spaniard's promise of peace, the Indians started to surrender, except for Jumandi and the shamans who were able to escape for four months. Finally they were arrested and taken to Quito to be given an exemplary punishment. Standing in carts they were paraded through the streets, tortured with hot irons and quartered, after which their heads and limbs were exhibited in the city streets. The highland caciques who had participated in the rebellion were exiled to the coast [*Ibid.*: 209–210]. Although it took the Spaniards ten months to pacify the Quijos region, the punishments seemed to have cowed the Indians because they did not engage in any other rebellion. However, the Spaniards regarded this rebellion as a threat, important enough that they found it necessary to remind the Indians of the punishments in a fiesta celebrated in Quito in 1631, where the Spaniards exhibited prisoners in carts representing Jumandi and the shamans [Oberem, 1980: 89]. This was a form of Baroque symbolism which, along with the religious ritual, the Spanish authorities often used in an attempt to impress the Indians and win their submission.

An examination of this rebellion shows that, despite the early attempts by the Church to Christianize them, the Indians expressed a total rejection of the new faith and a re-affirmation of their traditional religious beliefs. Those beliefs were incarnated in the persons of the shamans who, among tropical forest groups, have the ultimate power to interpret and make sense of ordinary experience. Rather than a direct ideological challenge to the shamans, Christian evangelization meant a threat to their power, mainly because the *reducciones*, as we have already explained, concentrated Indians in circumscribed areas, away from their traditional authorities and under the strict control of the Spaniards and the missionaries. The symbolic behavior and the discourse of the shamans during the rebellion represented the display of a very common shamanistic practice by which power is diverted from a powerful source, in this case the whites, by invoking their gods [Lanternari, 1974: 274–275; Taylor, 1981]. The shamans tried to appropriate the power of the whites through the image of the Christian 'devil' in the form of a cow, which was a new source of wealth introduced by the Spaniards. Besides, still today in their magical songs, shamans include names of saints, of powerful mountains, and of objects of the white world, all in an effort to

reinforce their own power.

In 1578, Christianity seemed to have been regarded by the shamans as an additional source of power which was re-interpreted within the traditional framework of their own magical vision of the world. Furthermore, it is clear from the chroniclers' accounts, that the shamans were not only fighting against the Spaniards, but also among themselves. The changes in the traditional social structure had unleashed an internal struggle for power, and an attempt to reorganize society along traditional lines. Consequently, the rebellion can be interpreted as a process of reassertion of native religious and cultural values and as a defense of the Quijos ethnic identity.

In 1578, evangelization among the Quijos was quite superficial, and the role of the priests too entangled with the worst aspects of Spanish domination for the missionaries to become effective competitors of traditional shamans. It was to take years of painful work by the Jesuits, Josephines, and Evangelical Protestant missionaries for this ideological competition to become a reality. But even today shamans are always respected, often feared, and regularly consulted by most Napo Quichuas, both Catholics and Protestants.

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