

# The Politics of Identification in a Shrimp Conflict in Ecuador: The Political Subject, “Pueblos Ancestrales del Ecosistema Manglar” [Ancestral Peoples of the Mangrove Ecosystem]

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## R E S U M E N

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Debido al éxito de las políticas de identidad ecuatorianas y (Latino Americanas) desde 1990 en adelante, actualmente las demandas sobre indigeneidad se han convertido en un poderoso lenguaje para conseguir derechos territoriales colectivos en esta región. En este contexto, la literatura sobre identidades étnico-raciales provee algunos ejemplos fascinantes sobre “indigeneidad” que cuestionan las concepciones dominantes de esta categoría. El presente caso de estudio va un poco más lejos en esta línea temática, al poner en cuestión la hegemónica premisa que considera las identificaciones étnicas en el marco de una única categoría racial. El movimiento social identificado con el sujeto político “Pueblos Ancestrales del Ecosistema Manglar” ha trascendido las divisiones “racializadas,” normalmente asociadas con las identidades étnicas, a través de la articulación de un contra-discurso étnico basado en los conceptos de “ancestralidad” y “pueblos.” Este sujeto político se auto-representa como “pueblos ancestrales” que pertenecen a un ecosistema natural específico, y al mismo tiempo está constituidos por un grupo “multi-racial.” [conflicto, Ecuador, etnicidad, política, raza]

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## A B S T R A C T

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Due to the success of Ecuadorian and (Latin American) cultural identity politics from the 1990 onwards, claims to indigeneity in this region have become a powerful basis for securing collective land rights. Recent literature on ethnic-racial identities provides many fascinating examples of “indigeneity” that challenge dominant conceptions of

this category. The present case study counters the hegemonic assumption that considers ethnic identifications within a single racial category. Here, the social movement identified with the political subject “Ancestral Peoples of the Mangrove Ecosystem” has transcended the “racialized” divisions usually linked to ethnic identities by articulating a contested ethnic discourse based on the concepts of “ancestrality” and “peoplehood” in order to demand collective rights. This political subject is self-represented as “Ancestral Peoples” who belong to a specific natural ecosystem while being constituted from a “multiracialized” group. [conflict, Ecuador, ethnicity, politics, race]

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TODAY, SCHOLARS OF BOTH race and ethnicity agree in terms of conceptualizing ethno-racial identities as shifting, de-centered, relational constructions, subject to political mobilization, and entangled with other subject positions such class, gender, and sexuality. These factors emphasize the fluidity of ethno-racial meanings, as well as their contested character (sociopolitical categories). Accordingly, recent literature on ethno-racial identities focuses on the processes of identity construction and deployment, moving beyond traditional debates on definitions and legitimacy, which are based on reductionist dualisms such as authentic/false, race/ethnicity, or indigenous/nonindigenous (Anderson 2007; Hathaway 2010; Wade 2010; Warren and Jackson 2002). In this regard, ethno-racial scholars deploy concepts such as “articulation,” “self-positioning,” or “emergent indigenities” in order to better grasp these complex realities (Clifford 2001; French 2004; Hathaway 2010; Li 2010; Warren and Jackson 2002).

Contemporary global phenomena such as transnational migration, urbanization, and ethno-racial social movements have created experiences that continue to challenge narrow constructions of indigeneity that depend on geographic or cultural fixity. An important role has been played here by Ecuadorian (and Latin American) cultural identity politics. Since the 1990s indigenous movements throughout Latin America (and, to a lesser extent, Afro-descendant movements) have been claiming collective rights based on their radical cultural difference from the dominant “white-mestizo” society. These claims have been recognized within constitutional bodies across several Latin American countries, which, in turn, have re-defined the legal status of indigenous people (and Afro-descendants) and the very meaning of citizenship (Jackson and Warren 2005; Lucero 2008; Yashar 2005). In these countries, claims to indigeneity have thus become a powerful basis for securing collective land rights. Recent literature on ethno-racial identities provides many examples of “indigeneity” being deployed in novel ways (see Bauer 2010; French 2004; Jackson and Warren 2005; Wade 2010). Regarding interrelations between indigeneity and race, the Honduran case stands out. Here, the Afro-Honduran social movement has self-positioned and has been recognized as

“indigenous” (Afro-indigeneity), challenging a dominant conception of indigeneity that is tied to the ethno-racial category of “Indian” (Anderson 2007). The present case study goes further, challenging the hegemonic assumption that considers ethnic identifications within a single racial category. The social movement identified with the political subject “Pueblos Ancestrales del Ecosistema Manglar” (PAEM), or “Ancestral Peoples of the Mangrove Ecosystem,” which is presented in this article, has transcended the “racialized” divides usually linked to ethnic identities by articulating a contested ethnic discourse based on the concepts of “ancestrality” and “peoplehood” in order to demand collective rights. This political subject is self-represented as Ancestral Peoples who belong to a specific natural ecosystem while being constituted from a “multiracialized” group.

This article starts with a general presentation of the location in which this political subject has been shaped, focusing on cultural and environmental specificities. Then, it moves on to analyze the development of Ecuadorian shrimp farming, which has been a direct disrupting and oppressive factor in the recent history of these mangrove ecosystems. Next, the article examines the complex network of relationships around the PAEM, which includes the mediators and mediations through which this political subject has been constituted. Finally, the article concludes with a characterization of this novel political subject’s particularities, and some reflections on the implications of this study for future research.

The main data collection for this article was carried out during five months in 2010, during which time thirty-nine interviews were conducted. During the first two months, I resided in Quito where the national organization office of the mangrove peoples’ movement is situated. I then moved to the southern province of Oro, where I lived in the house of one of the C-CONDEM (National Coordinating Committee for the defense of the Mangrove Ecosystem) local spokespersons; I also traveled to the province of Esmeraldas, to interview several local leaders. The work included both semistructured and extended interviews with national and local leaders, community members, academics, nongovernmental organization (NGO) representatives, and ministerial employees. Additionally, I carried out two group interviews with the main national leaders and attended three internal organizational C-CONDEM meetings. References to the self-representation discourses of Ecuador are principally based on a review of printed material and archival resources.

### **The Ecuadorian Coast: Its Mangrove Ecosystems and Inhabitants**

In contrast with the rest of the Ecuadorian coastal region, which in the contemporary period has relied on primary exported activities, the coastal strip remained relatively free of massive disturbance until the development of shrimp farming at

the end of the 1960s, as outlined below. In this intertidal zone, mangroves were the dominant vegetation. “Mangrove” refers to both trees and shrubs that have developed morphological adaptations to a tidal environment. They are widely recognized as one of the most productive coastal habitats in the tropics: they support a diversity of marine and terrestrial life through “food web interactions” (FAO 2007). They act as refuges and nurseries for many flora and fauna including fish, shellfish, and crustaceans. They are also valued for their key role as a provider of many socioeconomic and environmental services, such as maintaining water quality in estuaries, protecting shorelines from storm damage and erosion, producing and exporting organic matter from estuaries, and retaining sediments and heavy metals released into estuarine waters.

In Ecuador, this ecosystem has been occupied by a stable human population since the pre-Columbian period (Marcos 2005). For a long time, the mangroves served only the traditional productive activities of their inhabitants because up to the late 1960s mangrove ecosystems were considered wastelands that did not contribute to increasing national economic profits (ECOBIOTEC 2009; Snedaker et al. 1986). Ironically, this disdain, in turn, allowed for the ecosystems’ conservation. The main traditional uses and practices were the cutting of trees for firewood and charcoal, the elaboration of small-diameter poles for light constructions, and domestic and medicinal use; artisanal fishing; and shellfish and crab gathering (Bodero and Robadue 1995; Snedaker et al. 1986). However, nowadays only the latter uses are still in practice.

In general, mangroves gatherers live in conditions of social vulnerability and poverty. It is estimated that 10,029 inhabitants (0.08 percent of the national total) live in areas with mangroves (C-CONDEM 2007a). With little differentiation along the Ecuadorian coast, these populations consistently exhibit low wages, informal labor patterns, and exploitation by economic brokers (ECOBIOTEC 2009). They also suffer from malnutrition, low levels of education, and deficient public infrastructure and services—such as health, potable water, sewer systems, and garbage collection (C-CONDEM 2007a; Ocampo-Thomason 2005).

Conversely, the mangrove inhabitants’ traditional practices show some differences across the Ecuadorian coastal provinces, which reflect social and cultural diversity (Figure 1). In Esmeraldas province, the population linked to mangroves is mostly considered Afro-Ecuadorian. It is believed that they are descendants of slaves who reached the Esmeraldas coast after the sinking of two ships at the beginning of the Spanish conquest. Later, at the end of the 19th century, rubber fever attracted groups of *liberados* (ex-slaves) from the interandean Chota Valley (province of Carchi) to Esmeraldas, as well as Afro-descendants from Colombia (Estupiñán 1976).<sup>1</sup> Traditionally in this province, mangrove resource exploitation activities have been divided along gender and age lines, where artisanal fishing activities are considered men’s tasks, and cockle and other mollusk gathering is



Figure 1 Coastal Provinces of Ecuador (Elaborated by the author).

related to women's labor. However, more recently, with the increased scarcity of wild fisheries, this division of labor is being blurred (Mera 1999; Ocampo-Thomason 2005; Torres and Yépez 1999).

In the central-southern provinces, mangrove populations consist of *mestizo* and indigenous people. The latter group is a minority and is limited to a few isolated places, principally islands. This can be explained by the economic history of the coast, which was characterized by harsh conditions of exploitation during the colonial period, and by a thorough process of modernization during the republican era. Until recently it was believed that the indigenous people of the mangroves were wiped out in the 18th century, as a consequence of colonial transformations. However, during the last decades of the 20th century, a process of re-ethnicization among indigenous descendants began. This resulted in the recognition by the state of a novel ethnic group in the central-southern province mangrove area: the Pueblo Montubio (Government of Ecuador 2008).<sup>2</sup> In this region, in contrast to Esmeraldas, artisanal fishing and shellfish and crab gathering are considered male tasks. This was observed during the data collection process and mentioned frequently by my interviewees.

## The Development of the Shrimp-Farming Industry in Ecuador

The modern shrimp-farming industry has its origins in the late 1960s. Concentrated largely in tropical developing countries, principally in Asia and Latin America, it was seen as an alternative to over-exploited wild marine stocks (FAO 2008; Martínez-Alier 2001). It has been promoted by aid agencies, international financial institutions, and governments as a means by which to increase economic growth, reduce poverty, and improve food security (EJF 2003, 2004; FAO 2008; Rivera-Ferre 2009).

Ecuador is one of the first and top leading Western shrimp-producing countries. The origin of Ecuadorian shrimp aquaculture can be traced back to the limited industrialization process of the mid-1960s (Larrea 2006). Specifically, this industry was stimulated through land concessions, tax breaks, easy loans, and technical assistance (EJF 2004). Therefore, in the following decades, the new sector rapidly developed until it reached an average 3.5 percent contribution to the GDP during the 1990s (Marriot 2003). Today, around 90 percent of Ecuadorian shrimp production comes from the aquaculture industry (Marriot 2003).

In Ecuador, as in other producer countries, the shrimp industry is a powerful sector dominated by middle- and upper-income economic classes with close associations to key personalities from within state institutions (EJF 2003; Garí 2000; Olsen and Coello 1995).

The development of shrimp-farming activities in Ecuador has involved the construction of shrimp ponds in the intertidal and neighboring upland environments along the coasts. Initially, these ponds were located in salt flats where construction costs were minimal. However, as the pressure on land increased, the ponds began to displace mangrove forest areas and even to be located in supra-tidal lands. Prior to shrimp farming, some parts of the mangroves were already dedicated to agriculture (Bodero and Robadue 1995). However, according to the Ecuadorian Military Cartographic Institute (CLIRSEN), the 26 percent loss of mangrove forests between 1969 and 1999 is attributable mainly to the uncontrolled expansion of shrimp aquaculture (see Figure 2) (CLIRSEN 2007).

Beyond shrimp farming's contribution to wetland habitat loss, additional environmental impacts include: pollution and reduced water flow, soil and water salinization, depletion of ground and surface water supplies, reduction in wild fish and shrimp populations (due to loss of their habitat and by-catch fatalities),<sup>3</sup> as well as biological pollution of native shrimp stocks (EJF 2004; Olsen and Coello 1995; Snedaker et al. 1986).

Shrimp farming has resulted in the physical blocking of mangrove gatherers' access to and thus availability of mangrove resources and services (Fajardo and Torres 2004; Martínez-Alier 2001), since the shrimp industry has privatized land that was once held as common property. This change has caused those who fish

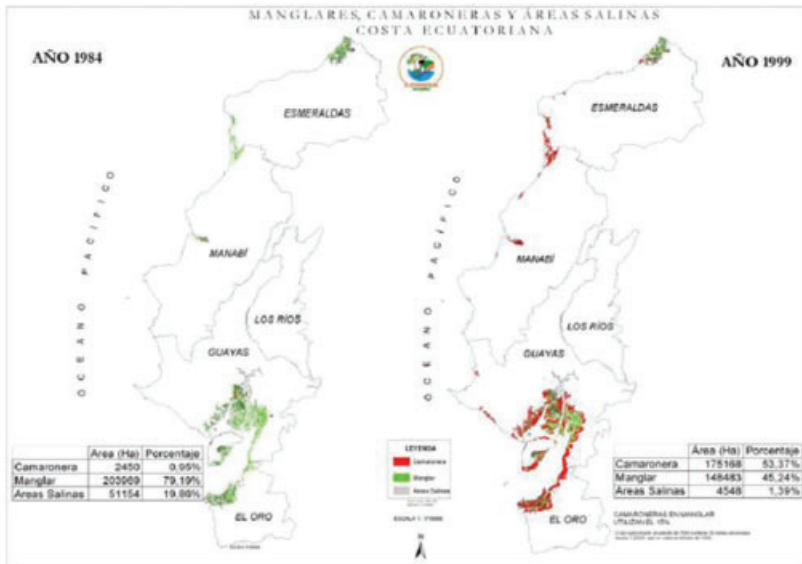


Figure 2 Mangroves, shrimp ponds, and salt flats along the Ecuadorian coast in 1984 and 1999 (Source: C-CONDEM 2007a).

in mangrove areas to devote more time and energy to food collection while facing lower chances that they will gather sufficient shellfish for self-consumption and local sale ( *Fundación Para la Defensa Ecológica* [FUNDECOL] [Foundation for Ecological Defense] 2002; Mera 1999). Furthermore, since most farmed shrimp production is exported to wealthy countries, the resources that are used are also unavailable for local consumption. Accordingly, food insecurity, poverty, and landlessness have increased among local people in the mangrove regions (C-CONDEM 2007a; Garí 2000; Ocampo-Thomason 2005). Additionally, there has been an increase of corruption, threats, intimidation, violence, and murder in these regions (C-Condem 2007a; EJF 2003; FAO 2008; Fajardo and Torres 2004; Garí 2000).

In 1999, Ecuador’s shrimp aquaculture industry experienced its worst outbreak of viral disease, which led to a catastrophic crash. Historically, the industry has suffered “boom and bust” disease cycles, due to its biological and ecological characteristics (EJF 2004; Marriot 2003), but the spread of the white-spot virus in 1999 to all four coastal provinces led to the abandonment of 40 percent of shrimp ponds. The following year, according to The National Aquaculture Chamber, out of an existing 180,000 hectares of shrimp farms, only 50,000 hectares were under cultivation (EJF 2004). However, since 2003, farmed shrimp exports have continually increased until present. Put simply, where the benefits of shrimp farming have tended to accrue to a powerful minority, most of the social and environmental impacts are suffered by poor and powerless populations.

## From International Awareness of Mangroves to the Ambiguous Politics of the Ecuadorian State

At the same time as the shrimp aquaculture industry was beginning to expand rapidly in Ecuador in the late 1960s, the Ecuadorian government turned its attention to managing mangrove forests (Bodero and Robadue 1995). This change in attitude (at least in formal and rhetorical terms) can be attributed to the rising influence of environmental concerns at the international level, as well as to greater understanding of the multiple functions and values of wetlands (Matthews 1993). Worldwide, many scientific publications in this period demonstrated mangroves' physical and regulatory role as a coastline stabilizer, as well as their biological productivity. At the international governance level, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands was established in 1971, which was significant in terms of policies concerning mangrove management.<sup>4</sup> Influenced by mainstream conservation approaches, the Convention exhorts the protection of wetlands, including mangroves, through integral reserves conceived of as wildlife sanctuaries without human presence (Cormier-Salem 2006). While this mainstream preservation paradigm shifted, during the 1990s, to a new paradigm that is more ecosystem-oriented and participatory, Ecuadorian law is still based mainly on the old sanctuaries paradigm. As a response to international concern, Ecuador adopted, during the 1970s and 1980s, a centralized government approach to mangrove management. This consisted principally of several laws and regulations prohibiting the destruction and alteration of mangroves and the installation of shrimp farm ponds (Bodero and Robadue 1995). A key moment came in 1985, when CLIRSEN published a document that revealed extensive mangrove damaged cause by shrimp aquaculture and urbanization processes (CLIRSEN 1990). In response to this, the government enacted Executive Decree 824, which declared mangrove conservation, protection, and restoration a matter of public interest. In addition, the government prohibited the traditional resource extraction practices of local users.

In general, with the exception of the creation in 1979 of the Manglares Churute ecological reserve (in the province of Guayas), the government did not allocate financial or administrative resources to the implementation of these mangrove conservation laws (Bodero and Robadue 1995). To understand this behavior, it is necessary to keep in mind the Ecuadorian economic situation during this period. In 1982, the country declared itself unable to pay its external debts; it was compelled by international lenders to increase primary export production in order to accumulate funds with which to pay this debt (Larrea 2006). As a consequence, the country enacted economic policies and programs that were contrary to its own domestic environmental legislation. Weak governance has, from the outset, characterized the mangrove management program, along with corruption and other illegalities



(C-CONDEM 2007a; EJF 2003; FUNDECOL 2002). According to CLIRSEN's data, in spite of the fact that mangrove destruction was illegal, during the period 1969–84 the rate of mangrove loss per year was 1,439 hectares; from 1984 to 1987 it was 2,434 hectares; and from 1987 to 1991 it was 3,348 hectares (Bodero and Robadue 1995).

This evidence forced the centralized government to acknowledge the failure of its policies; in the late 1980s and at the beginning of 1990s, the Coastal Resource Management Program (PMRC) was launched. During Phase I of the program (1986–2000), PMRC played a key role in the transition from the previous and ineffective “no use” policy to a more participative approach to mangrove management (Olsen et al. 1993). Here, it is important to keep in mind that from the early 1980s, the United Nations published a number of reports that emphasized the importance of traditional knowledge and local participation in the conservation of mangrove ecosystems (Matthews 1993). In addition, the influence of the social forestry movement on national policies and practices in the Asian mangrove regions was important for the Ecuadorian context. This movement, which led to changes in how international aid was being allocated, enabled the PMRC to access aid funding for the purpose of implementing small pilot projects based on integrated and participative management approaches (Bodero and Robadue 1995). As a result, the first “special area management zones” were implemented along the Ecuadorian coast and the first “user group agreements” were established. Both practices served to empower traditional users and to involve them in the management of the mangroves. Additionally, the institutional figure of the “Ranger Corps” was created. They have played an active role in helping traditional users to organize themselves and in the drafting of user group agreements, although it was not until 1999 that this community-based stewardship achieved legal status. In that year, Ecuadorian President Jamil Mahuad enacted Executive Decree 1102, in which mangrove cutting was prohibited and the opportunity for traditional users to participate in mangrove management was legally established. According to my interviewees,

Despite the fact we did not the claim the legal status as “use and custody” [as per Executive Decree 1102], but for “administration,” this legal status (use and custody) allows any community to be in charge of the custody and care of an area, but also would give the shellfish gatherers more legal mechanisms with which to fight against the shrimp-farm owners. That is the reason why we saw this [Executive Decree 1010] as great progress, despite its limitations. (group interview with two FUNDECOL members, September 6, 2010)<sup>5</sup>

Several events and actors have contributed to this resolution: in 1997–98 the el Niño climatic event caused severe damage along the coast, including substantial damage to shrimp pond infrastructure; in 1999, during the 7th Conference of

Contracting Parties to the RAMSAR Convention, Resolution V11.21–15 called for the establishment of a moratorium on shrimp farming; also in 1999, as noted above, a devastating outbreak of the white-spot virus put the viability of the whole shrimp industry of Ecuador in danger. In addition to these more structural influences, a number of local factors, reflecting a rise in grassroots collective action, were also increasing pressure on management systems. These factors, which relate closely to the development of the identity of PAEM, will be discussed in detail in the following section, establishing a basis for closer examination of this new ethno-racial political subject.

### **Resistance: From Grassroots Local Struggles to the Emergence of a Regional Movement**

As mentioned above, the harsh socioeconomic conditions experienced by mangrove gatherers made them vulnerable to the impacts of the shrimp aquaculture industry. The absence of the state as a provider of basic needs, accompanied by the area's inherent isolation, and a lack of grassroots organizations pushed these vulnerable people into negotiating directly with a far more powerful actor: the shrimp-farming industry. In an initial phase, shrimp entrepreneurs gained the support of most of the locals by arguing that they would offer employment and local development. This was true during the process of pond construction and, more recently, when local people provided shrimp owners with shrimp larva (Fajardo and Torres 2004; FUNDECOL 2002). However, as expansion of the shrimp ponds shifted to a massive scale, wild fisheries started to become scarce and traditional users were unable to move freely through mangrove areas in search of food because the ponds were guarded as private property. There was also increasing awareness of the socioecological damage of shrimp farming and, with it, a rise in social unrest. Initial local opposition in specific areas was supported by NGOs and technical staff, such as members of the Ranger Corps. This early opposition consisted mainly of reporting illegal shrimp pond expansions and trying to ensure that due process would be followed, once violators were identified. However, the asymmetric power balance between shrimp farming and mangrove gathering actors, strongly in the favor of the former, led to rapid expansion of the shrimp aquaculture industry. Shrimp farmers were able to act with impunity, as is evidenced by the extreme rates of mangrove ecosystem loss along the coastline.

In spite of the many difficulties associated with articulating initiatives of opposition, in the area of Muisne (south of Esmeraldas), at the end of 1970s, a strong well-organized movement began, directly linked to the Peasant Organization of Muisne (OCAME [Organización Campesina Muisne y Esmeraldas]). In this zone, using peasant-oriented models of intervention in rural areas, two priests, in line

with liberation theology,<sup>6</sup> performed intensive organizational work with mangrove gathering actors. As a consequence, a solid associative structure was articulated. Working with OCAME, in 1991 a group of Catholic youth was set up during the time of the first shrimp virus, which would lead eventually to the grassroots ecological organization FUNDECOL. As one of its members relates,

Muisne has a long tradition of fighting. It started with our experience of the liberation theology movement. First, the struggle was a peasant struggle, with the OCAME, and then, with the government of Febres Cordero it dispersed; there were many people assassinated. Then, some of us split off in order to study in Chimborazo where we had ties of friendship with Monseñor Proaño, while others kept fighting. Afterwards, many of us went back and rejoined the struggle in Muisne, from there FUNDECOL was born. (August 6, 2010)<sup>7</sup>

Due to its history, FUNDECOL membership consisted of a mixture of highly educated young individuals, traditional mangrove users, peasants, and labor union militants (Torres and Yépez 1999). Initially, its actions were focused on mangrove vigilance and the reporting of offenders to the authorities. Later, the organization expanded its objectives toward conservation and community development. FUNDECOL's praxis was based on an essentialized narrative that stressed a direct relationship between cultural identity and the mangrove ecosystem, conceptualized as a "territory." As two of its intellectual members state: "The loss of territory [the mangrove ecosystem] means, for ancient communities, the loss of the space where they belong, where they self-identify, where they place themselves, recognize themselves, where they self-reproduce and transcend"<sup>8</sup> (Torres and Yépez 1999:164). Hence, its overall objective was the conservation and restoration of the mangrove ecosystem as the basis for rural development, by means of strengthening identification of mangrove gatherers with their ecosystem (Fajardo and Torres 2004). This work facilitated the emergence of a feeling of belonging, an "Us"—"Ancestral Users of the Mangrove" with a shared history and subjectivity. FUNDECOL's narrative was influenced by both the ethno Afro-Colombian movement that developed in the early 1990s (see Escobar 2008; Restrepo 2002) and by its Ecuadorian counterpart (Ocampo-Thomason 2005; Walsh et al. 2005). During the mid-1990s, north of Esmeraldas, near the Colombian border, a dynamic movement of intellectual-activist and communitarian leaders called *Proceso de Comunidades Negras*—PCN (Process of Black Communities) began to take shape. Primarily, they focused on the claim of territorial rights, based on the historical experiences of *cimarronaje*<sup>9</sup> from the period of the Spanish conquest up to the official end of slavery in 1851. This ethnicity-claiming process had its climax in 1998 when the new Constitution of Ecuador recognized Afro-Ecuadorians as an ethnic group and granted them the fifteen collective rights guaranteed to indigenous peoples in Ecuador,

among them the right to territory. However, access to these rights has not been formally supported by legal regulation and although the ethno-organizational of the Afro-Ecuadorian community has had an impact, this has been limited to the local level (Walsh et al. 2005). Within this context, FUNDECOL made its first contact with the main gatherer and artisanal fishing organizations in the north. This relationship was strengthened in 1996 when FUNDECOL gave its support to Afro-descendant organizations' claims for inclusion of the northern mangrove ecosystems within the National Protected Areas System (Fajardo and Torres 2004). Although FUNDECOL adopted the identitarian and territorial discourses of PCN, it did not acknowledge their claims to their Afro-ethnic identity. As a FUNDECOL member relates:

As the discussion concerning the blacks of Ecuador began, there was a manner of distinguishing between people, the black is black and the white is white. However, there came a time when it was claimed that this was not the proper way and the mangrove struggle was born. A struggle based on where its people are really living, in the mangroves. And we started to discuss that yes we are black people but also we are mangrove people, where there are other peoples too, and that we need to join together with these others peoples, and we have done it properly up until now in Ecuador. (September 9, 2010)<sup>10</sup>

Here it is worth mentioning that apart from the ethno Afro-Ecuadorian movement in the north of Esmeraldas, there were no other political organizing processes characterized by ethno-racial identity along the Ecuadorian coast. Whereas mangrove dwellers from this area were demanding environmental justice in terms of ethnicity (Ocampo-Thomason 2005), the remaining majority of mangrove people identified themselves by other economic activities such as shellfish or crab gathering. What is consistent is that in the mangroves of Ecuador, people are resisting environmental dispossession in ways that resignify indigeneity. This raises the following questions: does indigeneity have a core of essential criteria that describe specific oppressed social groups and justify its attached rights, or is it better understood as a term that is subject to changing boundary politics and epistemologies according to history and politics? In this regard, is it possible to imagine indigeneity beyond race or "blood and soil" principles?

In Latin America, the concept of "indigenous peoples" has been traditionally associated with a single racialized cultural difference derived from its historical continuity of the original inhabitants of a country (Bowen 2000). The usage of these assumptions, despite being questioned by contemporary social theory, wherein the conception of culture has shifted away from the idea of an inherent stock of traits to the active process of self-making, has been defended as a mode to redress past and present wrongs (Kenrick and Lewis 2004). Therefore, normative approaches to indigeneity, in which issues of power and dispossession are central, have gained

more acceptance among scholars and activists, replacing earlier analytical ones (McIntosch et al. 2002). However, the very assumptions underlying the dominant concepts of indigeneity—racialized cultural difference and primo-occupants—act as limiting criteria for many (neo-)colonial dispossessed social groups.

Due to its economic history, the ethno Afro-Ecuadorian discourse has had less receptivity in the south of Esmeraldas. Here, coupled with the boom of banana production during the 1950s–60s, *mestizos* from the province of Manabí settled in the mangrove region. As a consequence, traditional mangrove users in the south, including FUNDECOL members, perceive themselves to be “multiracial”—albeit mainly Afro and *mestiza*—populations.

Since its beginnings, FUNDECOL has fostered cross-cultural and cross-boundary alliances in order to strengthen its own contestation activities as well as to articulate a broader movement of resistance; it has cooperated with universities and national and international environmental organizations. As a result of these collaborations, it was a co-founder of two international networks: IsaNet in 1997 and Red Manglar International<sup>11</sup> in 2001 (Fajardo and Torres 2004; Torres and Yépez 1999). Significant in this international process, due to the global visibility it brought to their struggle, were two appearances of Greenpeace’s Rainbow Warrior ship: first in 1998, during a period of national activist volatility in support of mangrove conservation, when the ship docked in Muisne, and then again in 1999. A FUNDECOL member commented:

It was important that the communities said to the world what they thought. And we knew that Greenpeace had a powerful communication system. The alliance with Latin American Greenpeace gave us the anticipated result because Greenpeace came with the Rainbow ship, reached Musine and we met, while all the television companies covered the event. It was the first time that Greenpeace had been here. The objective was to raise our voices in a single front against the shrimp-farming industry. (June 7, 2010)<sup>12</sup>

The year 1998 was a particularly strategic one for the movement because in the following year the moratorium for mangrove preservation (Decree 1907), declared in 1994, was due to end; it was also the year when Ecuador’s shrimp production peaked. This critical situation triggered a symbolic performance: around four hundred people from grassroots user organizations of the Ecuadorian coastal provinces, environmental NGOs, intellectual activists, and media reporters broke the walls of an illegal shrimp pond and proceeded to reforest the area with mangrove trees. The participants in this action made a public declaration, which demanded that the Ecuadorian government implement a permanent ban on mangrove cutting and called for the delivery of all mangrove areas into the custody of ancestral users’ organizations, under common stewardships:

We presented a proposal to the state where we demanded the “administration” of all the mangroves. This legal status not only gives you the right to “use and care,” but also the right to control the territory and to access the judicial system in order to ensure that the law is upheld. Moreover, it also acknowledges our territorial rights. (group interview with 2 FUNDECOL members, September 6, 2010)<sup>13</sup>

The Minister of the Environment responded by granting a continuation of the 1994 moratorium and by punishing illegal shrimp-farming offenders (Movimiento Mundial por los Bosques Tropicales 1998). Ultimately, this event served as the basis for the articulation of the various local mangrove users’ organizations into a national coalition, *Coordinadora Nacional para la Defensa del Ecosistema Manglar*, or C-CONDEM (National Coordinating Committee for the defense of Mangrove Ecosystem), which was created, once again, by the leadership of FUNDECOL. As the C-CONDEM leader observed,

[T]he C-CONDEM was only created on paper, and FUNDECOL was leading the process. We wanted to create a national movement. Then we started to mobilize . . . It is a radical, political and defensive organization, not about projects. This is our role. In 1999 we brought in Greenpeace again to reaffirm our work, we consolidated our national presence, and at that time we used to have exchanges between organizations, to share our experiences. (August 6, 2010)<sup>14</sup>

In 1999, Executive Decree 1102 was enacted, which allowed for the creation of mangrove gathers’ stewardships, commonly known as *custodias*. This fostered grassroots organizations’ development, including their alliance with universities and NGOs, as they worked to meet the requirements for receiving these *custodia* concessions, which were imposed by the government (Ocampo-Thomason 2005). The *custodias* are valid for ten years (with the option of renewing); in the first instance, they were primarily outside of the demarcated protected areas but with a small number inside of protected areas. Some *custodias* were co-constituted as custodial protected areas and are co-managed by the state and traditional users’ organizations. Finally, some others are located in areas that fall under the legal status of protected mangrove forests but are not awarded a national protected area classification (the predominant type). However, during the period 2000–09, only 24 *custodias*, which represents a relatively low number compared with the number of eligible organizations, were delivered to mangrove users’ organizations (ECOBIOTEC 2009). This outcome is a result of the high economic cost associated with administering a *custodia* and the formal requirement that binds those in charge of it to ensure the mangrove’s preservation. Since there is no economic support for setting up a *custodia*, the mangrove users’ organizations have to self-finance both their actions to stop the expansion of the shrimp industry and the work of

protecting their custodial area from exploitation by other gatherers who do not have stewardships.

In spite of the fact that the government conceded to the protestor's demands by extending the moratorium on mangrove cutting and establishing the *custodia* program, it did not take any direct legal or political actions to stop shrimp farming. Therefore, the illegal shrimp enterprises, which constituted the majority of the expansion, continued to operate with impunity and, still worse, none of the abandoned shrimp ponds reverted either to state control or to traditional gathering users (C-CONDEM 2007a).

### **PAEM: A Novel Ethnic Political Subject**

Over the years, the critical situation of these local communities continued to deteriorate; in spite of a stabilization in levels of mangrove coverage (CLIRSEN 2007), the bio-aquatic fisheries in the region collapsed. Along with the rise of the shrimp industry, other sources of pollution also increased, including mining activities, African palm monocultures, and waste water from neighboring cities. At the same time, the number of gatherers also rose, because of the lack of economic alternatives. In the case of the northern border region, this happened due to forced displacement from Colombia. Farther south it was related to the generally poor economic situation in Ecuador in the 1980s and 1990s. As a result, the possibilities for securing one's livelihood in these coastal areas have been slowly dismantled, year after year. In the face of this situation, the mangrove gatherers' claims to territory rights based on ethnicity closely reflect those made previously by indigenous ethnic communities. In the following years, after the establishment of C-CONDEM, the members of this movement worked to consolidate its presence along the whole of Ecuador's coast. One local promoter was designated to each coastal province, to strengthen its members' skills in different working areas such as legal, political, and technical fields. Through this work, C-CONDEM reached out to organizations in all the coastal provinces, promoting FUNDECOL's discourse over territorial rights and cultural identity.

Then, in 2007, representatives from the main organizations affiliated to C-CONDEM celebrated the First Congress of the Ancestral Peoples of the Mangrove Ecosystem in which they self-positioned as Ancestral Peoples and, hence, claimed their collective rights,

to reaffirm our status as distinct peoples under the enlightenment of the Ecuadorian Constitution and the Ancestral Law, with full rights based on our condition [as peoples] [collective rights, including territorial rights], we urge immediate consideration in every public policy with full recognition of our territorial rights as a fundamental and unavoidable guarantee for our continuity and transcendence as

distinct peoples. The destruction of the mangrove ecosystem is the main threat to our rights and our territory; we demand measures to stop the industrial activity conducted by shrimp aquaculture. (C-CONDEM 2007b)<sup>15</sup>

As this declaration shows, the political subject PAEM was constructed on a sense of belonging connected to the idea of ancestry *within* a natural ecosystem. These Ancestral Peoples bear a different culture, based on long-standing inhabitation of and adaptation to the mangroves, as is shown the following quotation:

The mangrove has become, over time, a cultural referent and an element of cohesion and identification for the cultures that live there. Through the daily fishing and gathering practices in these areas, a cultural way of life has been forged. Traditional activities that are expressed in songs, in dances, in storytelling and legends have been developed around the mangroves. (C-CONDEM 2007a:71)<sup>16</sup>

This representational discourse naturalizes the relationship between cultural identity and ecosystem place. The place-based identity of the PAEM presents similarities with the regimes of representation seen in indigenous and Afro-descendant movements. For all of them, land claims are framed in a discourse in which territoriality is seen to support the maintenance of a cultural way of life that is itself represented as an appeal to environmentally sustainable reasoning and practice:

The PAEM have managed their territory, where its history is forged, where their life is weaved every day, wisely and harmoniously. They have established an intimate and complete relationship of belonging with their territory. Their mode of organization and their subsistence economy—based on fishing, hunting, and gathering—mean that these people do not have a sense of themselves as being apart from this ecosystem. (C-CONDEM 2008:5)<sup>17</sup>

However, traditionally this ethnic political subject has consolidated groups otherwise differentiated along racial lines. Hence, the peculiarity of this new political subject is its ethnic identification with a particular ecosystem, while being constituted from a multiracialized group of members. As the C-CONDEM president states:

Today we name ourselves the PAEM, but there [in the mangrove] we are indigenous, cholos, afros, montubios, mestizos, and also some of us are called whites. We live there, it is our habitat, territory, our home, our natural enterprise that god has given to us. (C-CONDEM president, interview on Palabra Suelta EcuadorTV, April 2010)<sup>18</sup>

The term PAEM refers to the idea of native status while distancing itself from racial connotations. It enables this political subject to debate issues in terms of indigeneity and indigenous rights while at the same time transcending the racialized



segregations normally associated with these concepts. In this regard, this social movement has elaborated a counter discourse that justifies its right to own mangrove ecosystems as the collective property of an ancestral community. They have done this by appealing both to “nativeness” and their unique cultural systems, which are directly linked to the mangrove ecosystems that they inhabit.

This self-positioning from the beginning of 2007 as Ancestral Peoples reflects a response to the Ecuadorian political climate of the period, during the elaboration of the Ecuadorian Constitution (November 2007–July 2008): it built on the newly established precedent of indigenous rights protection by making a claim for a cultural identity (and its associated territorial rights). In November 2006, the Alianza País (AP) presidential candidate, Rafael Correa, won the elections and immediately called for a Constituent Assembly, which began the following November. Among the ruling coalition of AP, there were several key personalities with long histories of supporting the Ecuadorian environmental movement, and the AP’s Governmental Plan contemplated explicit environmental proposals.<sup>19</sup> These factors contributed to a situation in which the mangrove peoples’ movement saw a key opportunity to reduce their vulnerability and to gain power by securing recognition of their collective rights. As the C-CONDEM president stated, “we wanted to established precedence in order to avoid shrimp-farming owners being able to legalize their properties. There had been several attempts to do this under previous governments” (August 28, 2010).<sup>20</sup> However, this objective is still to be accomplished, as there has been a negative response from the Ecuadorian state to appeals by the PAEM. In this sense, while there is clearly a new political subject here, it is as yet unable to secure recognition. Indeed, this will be an uphill task, considering that the model for the ethnic political subject is associated with a delimited, single racialized group. As several authors point out, the indigenous model remains the normative heart of ethnic recognition, and this is directly linked to the racial category of “Indian” (Anderson 2007; Hooker 2005; Ng’weno 2007; Wade 2010). A further limitation relates to the politics of the Correa government, which is characterized by its confrontational and delegitimizing attitudes toward most social organizations that strive to maintain independence from the state, as well as toward those with environmental claims.

Finally, it is worth noting that cultural identity politics is not only associated with economic and political goals but also has cultural and symbolic dimensions. Regardless of the fact that they have not yet received official recognition, this new political subject has already positioned counter images about mangrove people that re-value and de-stigmatize a way of life. In the words of one C-CONDEM leader:

I believe that the people are proud about what they are, I am shellfish gatherer and I am proud, and I am not less than the other peoples, we have earned this identity,

this respect and the associated rights to be a dignified person. We are all equal, and along this path the people start to feel good about themselves. (August 9, 2010)<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusions

The present article has described the basic features of an emerging new political subject, PAEM. It can be understood as a creative response to inequalities caused by the dominant global economic development model, which is based on economic growth and transnational market integration. The shrimp-farming industry dynamics of Ecuador, to which this new political subject is a response, imply the advance of modern industry into ever more isolated geographical spaces in search of new raw materials that can be incorporated into the logic of capital production. This geographical expansion of capital has brought about new encounters between different social actors with unequal degrees of power and antagonistic territoriality claims. Faced with the threat of losing their way of life and their livelihood as a result of the degradation and destruction of the mangroves of Ecuador, communities linked to these mangroves have chosen to enact a politics of difference (of peoplehood), with the aim of articulating an emancipative political project, capable of confronting the power relations supporting this degradation. In their articulation of this innovative community, processes and actors have converged to generate a new form of ecosystem based on multiracial, multicultural, ancestral identity. At the global and national levels, the emergence of indigenous and Afro-descendant movements during the 1980s and 1990s, and of their ethnic discourses, led to reforms in the legal frameworks of a great number of Latin American countries and to the recognition of collective ancestral rights, including the right to territory. This new state configuration, coupled with increasing attention to environmental issues during 1990s, enabled the adoption of new environmental management approaches, informed by changes in the global conservation discourse, where biodiversity, and traditional knowledge and practices were viewed as valuable. Finally, at the local level, first the Catholic Church and its option for the poor and, more recently, the ecologist movement, were key contributors to the configuration and consolidation of mangrove users' organizations.

In spite of the difficulties they have faced in attaining formal acknowledgment in the national legal system, the PAEM subject has successfully positioned itself as a political actor in Ecuador and has become a recognized interlocutor with the state. Among the movement's primary achievements is that it has made visible the existence of human populations living within a fragile and threatened ecosystem who wish to continue to live there. This visibility has been coupled with the re-evaluation of a stigmatized economic activity, and a heightened appreciation for the mangrove gatherers and their rights to access and utilize mangrove resources. In

this respect, although they have not enjoyed significant formal political success, the PAEM movement has clearly succeeded in asserting a political identity, converting the Ecuadorian environmental governance system into one characterized by the inclusion of PAEM as a political subject.

Finally, this case study suggests that the combination of natural resource depletion and the special legal status of indigenity in Ecuador, which entails rights to collective land, may be encouraging the deployment of novel claims to indigenity. This question about indigenity has relevance in modern times, as many marginalized groups across lines of race, geography, class, culture, and gender are framing their demands for social justice in terms of indigenity. However, the ways in which we might understand this “multiracialized indigenous ecosystemness” in relation to the normalized model of indigenity is a question for another paper.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The “rubber fever” refers to the large demand of the natural rubber latex that occurred between the second half of the XIX century and the Second World War. Due to the emergence of the automobile industry and other industrial sectors in Europe, rubber became a valuable and internationally traded commodity which was extracted from rubber trees until the advent of synthetic rubber.

<sup>2</sup>The Pueblo Montubio is located along Ecuador’s inland coastal zones, where approximately 50 thousand Montubio families rely on the agriculture for their livelihood.

<sup>3</sup>The collection of wild shrimp brood stock and postlarvae specimens, which are needed for stocking the ponds, uses a line net system that also collects other species.

<sup>4</sup>The Ramsar Convention, adopted in 1971, enforced from 1975, was the first global, intergovernmental conservation treaty dealing with one specific type of ecosystem. It provides the framework for international cooperation for the conservation of wetland habitats, and aims to stem the loss of wetlands and to ensure their conservation and wise use. The convention currently has 135 contracting parties; 1,235 wetlands have been designated for inclusion in Ramsar’s List of Wetlands of International Importance, covering some 106 million hectares (see [www.ramsar.org](http://www.ramsar.org)).

<sup>5</sup>“Nosotros no pedíamos solo la figura legal de ‘uso y custodia’ (as Executive Decree 1102 does), sino su ‘administración’, esta figura (uso y custodia) garantiza que esa comunidad está encargada de la custodia y cuidado de ese terreno y eso le daba más mecanismos legales a las concheras para enfrentar los camareros. Por eso lo vimos como un buen avance, a pesar de sus limitaciones.”

<sup>6</sup>Once the Episcopal Conference of Ecuador announced its support for national agrarian reform, the liberation theology was put forth by the progressive sectors of the Catholic Church. This progressive measure was immediately supported during the Second Vatican Council (1963) and The Second Conference of Latin American Bishops, Medellín, 1968.

<sup>7</sup>“Muisne tiene una larga tradición de lucha. Empieza con la experiencia de la teología de la liberación. Primero la lucha era campesina, con la OCAME, y luego con el gobierno de Febres Cordero se dispersa, hubo muchos asesinados. Entonces, unos cuantos de nosotros nos abrimos para estudiar a Chimborazo por los vínculos con Monseñor Proaño, pero otros siguieron peleando. Después muchos regresamos y nos juntamos a la lucha, de ahí sale FUNDECOL.”

<sup>8</sup>“La pérdida de territorio, para las comunidades de asentamiento ancestral significa la pérdida de un espacio a donde se pertenecen, en el que se identifican y reconocen, en donde se reproducen y en el que trascienden.”

<sup>9</sup>It is conceptualized as the escapes and the strategies of escape of the slavery regime. These people, immersed in the dense jungle, settled communitarian and autonomous spaces called Palenques, where they developed and strengthened their identity and collective action (Walsh et al. 2005).

<sup>10</sup>“En un momento cuando se inició la discusión del negro en Ecuador sí que hubo esto de apartar, el negro es negro y el blanco blanco, pero en un momento se dijo esto no va por ahí y nace todo esto del manglar que es donde realmente el pueblo estaba viviendo y se empezó también a discutir, que sí somos pueblo negro pero y también pueblo manglar donde también hay otros, y en ese otro tenemos que juntarnos y lo hemos hecho bien hasta el momento en Ecuador.”

<sup>11</sup>IsaNet is an international action network opposed to the shrimp-farming industry; it consists of organized groups from both producer and consumer countries. FUNDECOL ended its relationship with IsaNet in 1998 because of a difference in points of view. This experience was the starting point for the formation of the next international network, this time at the Latin American level (Fajardo and Torres 2004).

<sup>12</sup>“Era importante que las comunidades dijeran al mundo qué pensaban y sabíamos que Greenpeace tenía un sistema de comunicación fuerte, y había un Greenpeace Latino América . . . y esa alianza nos dio el resultado esperado porque Greenpeace viene con el barco, llegan a Muisne y nos reunimos, todas las teles lo cubrieron, era la primera vez que llegaba Greenpeace. El objetivo era levantar la voz en un frente contra la industria del camarón.”

<sup>13</sup>“Nosotros presentamos una propuesta al Estado donde pedíamos la ‘administración’ de los manglares. Esta figura no sólo te da el derecho de uso y cuidado sino también el derecho a controlar y acceder a la justicia para que se haga cumplir la ley. Además también reconoce nuestra territorialidad.”

<sup>14</sup>“Pero la C-CONDEM fue creada de hecho y FUNDECOL la seguía liderando, queríamos hacer esta apuesta nacional, y se empezó a motivar . . . quién quiere apostarle, esto es una organización radical, política y de defensa, y no es de proyectos, eso lo hacen las organizaciones locales. Ese es su rol. En el 99 volvemos a traer a Greenpeace para reafirmar el trabajo, ratificamos nuestra presencia nacional, ya hacíamos intercambios de experiencias entre organizaciones, contábamos nuestras experiencia.”

<sup>15</sup>Los pueblos y comunidades ancestrales del ecosistema manglar de la costa ecuatoriana, en el marco del Primer Congreso . . . decidimos: reafirmar nuestra condición de Pueblos Ancestrales a la luz de la Constitución Política del Estado Ecuatoriano y del Derecho Ancestral, con plenos derechos derivados de nuestra condición (Derechos Colectivos, incluidos los Territoriales); exhortamos la consideración inmediata en todas las Políticas Públicas de la necesidad del pleno reconocimiento de Nuestros Derechos Territoriales como Garantía Fundamental e Ineludible para Nuestra Continuidad y Trascendencia como Pueblos Ancestrales. La destrucción del ecosistema manglar es la principal amenaza contra Nuestros Derechos y Nuestro Territorio, exigimos medidas para parar la actividad industrial de Acuacultura de camarón.

<sup>16</sup>“El manglar se ha constituido, a través del tiempo, en un referente cultural y un elemento de cohesión e identificación de culturas que allí se asientan, así a través de las faenas diarias de pesca y recolección en estas áreas se ha determinado la forma de vida de estas culturas. Faenas que se expresan en los cantos, en los bailes, en los cuentos y leyendas que alrededor del manglar se han desarrollado.”

<sup>17</sup>“Sabia y harmónicamente los PAEM han manejado su territorio, donde se forja su historia, donde se teje todos los días su vida. Han establecido con él una íntima y absoluta relación de pertenencia. Formas de organización y economía propia, autosuficiente; pesca, caza y recolección hacen que estos pueblos no se entiendan fuera de este ecosistema.”

<sup>18</sup>“Hoy nos denominamos PAEM, ahí estamos indígenas, estamos cholos, afros, montubios, mestizos, y los denominados blancos también, estamos ahí, vivimos ahí, ese es nuestro hábitat, territorio, nuestra casa, nuestra empresa natural que dios nos ha dejado.” See Palabra Suelta, Ecuador TV (April 27, 2010). <http://www.ecuadortv.ec/ecutopnw.php?c=3621>.

<sup>19</sup>Alberto Acosta was the most important member, and widely supported the environmentalist sector. However, there were other members such as Lucy Ruíz and José Serrano who also had close ties to this group. On the other hand, the AP Government Plan incites a search for a new relationship between humans and nature. That new relationship should be based on the principle of harmony and would not have a place for the commoditization of nature. See [http://www.rafaelcorrea.com/docs/Plan\\_de\\_Gobierno\\_Alianza\\_PAIS.pdf](http://www.rafaelcorrea.com/docs/Plan_de_Gobierno_Alianza_PAIS.pdf).

<sup>20</sup>“Queríamos sentar un precedente para evitar que los camaroneros pudieran legalizarse. Ya hubo varios intentos en anteriores gobiernos.”

<sup>21</sup>“Yo creo que la gente se siente orgulloso de lo que es, yo soy conchero y me siento orgulloso y no soy menos que el otro, hemos logrado esa identidad, ese respeto a su derecho, a ser una persona digna y punto, somos igual, en ese caminar la gente se va sintiendo bien.”

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