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# “Being Flexible”: Reflections on How an Anthropological Theory Spills into the Contemporary Political Life of an Amazonian People

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## Introduction

Around Esaías’s house, the oil palm plantation stretches for several kilometers. Esaías appears from behind a palm tree with a string trimmer in his hand, mops his brow, and sits down in the shadow below his house to explain the political controversy that arose after the Secoya (or Sieko-pai),<sup>1</sup> living along the Aguarico River in northeastern Ecuador, decided to clear-cut part of their forested territory to plant African oil palms on their land. “In the time of my presidency [of the Secoya organization] I called for a meeting to discuss the cultivation of oil palms,” he explained. “I said, ‘We need to have something to live from when there are no more trees. The forest will come to an end.’” He had gained support for his proposal at the meeting, and twenty families had managed to get a loan from the public lending institution *Corporación Nacional Financiera* in order to clear the land and engage in commercial palm oil production as subcontractors to the neighboring plantation company, *Palmeras del Ecuador*.

But the Ministry of the Environment did not take their decision to clear-cut the land lightly, and in 2011 the families were fined \$375,000 USD by the Ministry of Environment “for destructive action in highly vulnerable ecosystems.” The fine—and an indigenous group allegedly violating the rights of nature—made national news.<sup>2</sup> “After that we had a meeting with the Ministry,” Esaías continued. “We told them that we have tried to be flexible but that we refuse to pay the fine because we also need something to live from.”

Esaías’s notion of flexibility echoes the work of anthropologist William T. Vickers, who worked among the Secoya from 1973 onwards with a view to describe and understand their strategies of adaptation to the forested environment (Vickers 1981, 1989a, 1989b). This article explores what Esaías and other Secoya leaders might mean when they talk about “being flexible” today or, put differently, how Vickers’s thesis on the Secoya’s flexible adaptation to their habitat has spilled into their contemporary political life. As I shall return to below, Vickers developed his ideas by carefully observing the Secoya’s practices in their forested environment, but theories do not always dwell only in books and dissertations. Forty years later, the Secoya have adopted the concept of flexibility from his work, and in so doing the notion has been extended to encompass relations to state entities and private company actors. Embodying Vickers’s theory, I argue, the Secoya’s concept of flexibility describes their ability to respond creatively to externally imposed circumstances, including their capacity to engage in processes of controlled transformation. Over the last years, several authors have described how members of Amerindian groups establish alliances across difference and cope with radical alterity (Cipolletti 2017; Killick 2008; Penfield 2016; Santos-Granero 2007; Viveiros de Castro 2012). In this “highly transformational world” (Rivière 1994:256; Viveiros de Castro 1998:471), the bodily metamorphosis involved in shamanism becomes the epitome also of a “trans-specific being” (ibid.:471), which is also called for when dealing with powerful others such as oil companies and state entities. In its current usage “being flexible” thus captures the understanding that efforts to retain autonomy entail changing, a process which paradoxically also implies that continuity and self-sameness hinge on the Secoya’s ability to engage in controlled

(self)transformation (cf. Holbraad et al. 2014).

Since the paper deals with topics such as transformation and adaption that in one way or another are exemplified by many, if not all, indigenous Amazonians, in order to make the case for a uniquely Secoya orientation towards flexibility it becomes essential to briefly introduce the history of the Secoya in Ecuador. In the course of this historical scene setting, I introduce Vickers's work with and about the Secoya. The Secoya's application of Vickers's anthropological portrait is then detailed through the description of two recent episodes: the process of negotiation with the Occidental Exploration and Production Company in 1999 to 2000 and the above-mentioned conflict with the Ministry of Environment in reaction to planting their lands with oil palms in 2010. In 2000, I conducted a six-month fieldwork stint in San Pablo Katëtsiaya, the largest Secoya village in Ecuador, located on the Aguarico River. My research focus was on how myth, legends, and historic narratives were articulated in the context of the Secoya's negotiations with Occidental over the right to search for oil on their territory. It was also a time, after the signing of the Ecuador-Peru peace accords in 1998, when many Secoya were eager to resume relations with kin on the other side of the border. In the following years I worked with them on a binational organization-building and land-rights project before embarking on new research concerned with the political life of trees, including the controversy over the Secoya's turn to oil palm cultivation. The two situations described below show that change, not equilibrium, is "the essence" of Secoya political cosmology (see also Pedersen 2014), and that displaying flexibility involves the ability to steer and control transformations happening on their land.

### Beyond Steady-State Equilibria

The Secoya belong to the Western Tucano linguistic group and have historically lived between the Napo and Putumayo Rivers in what is today the border area between Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia. Around 1941, a family group and several young individuals fled the Upper Huajoya River after a conflict with an abusive patrón, who had made them "work rubber" and cultivate his land for little in return.<sup>3</sup> In 2000, when I visited Huajoya with a large delegation of Ecuadorian Secoya determined to reunite with their kin, Delfín, son of the late shaman-leader Fernando Payaguaje, recounted one of the numerous stories from that place:

In the past the Huajoya River was called *Sotoya* [Clay River], but after the war with the *a'kë* [white outsiders] it was renamed Huajoya, which means River of War. Huajosa'ra, who defended the Secoya, lived on the left bank, I think it is just where the community is today. On the other bank lived a man called Sio'se; he had many conflicts with the Secoya living on this side. He allied himself with the *a'kë* to kill the people of Sotoya. He told them where they lived and the *a'kë* arrived upriver in their boats. But the Secoya were preparing themselves. In front of the houses was a hill and under the leadership of Huajosa'ra they built some ramps and stood by with big tree trunks. As the *a'kë* arrived they pushed the trunks down [the hill] and crushed the attackers. In this way they defended themselves. But afterwards they had to deal with Siose'e, the traitor. To be able to live peacefully they had to kill him, so they bewitched a chicha bowl while Siose'e was sleeping. When he awoke, he called his wife saying, "Bring me water." He drank, but he was very thirsty and asked for another, then another, and yet another bowl of water. His belly was full and when he fell back into the hammock his stomach exploded. The water ran all the way down into the river. This is the story about this place, where we defended ourselves against the *a'kë*.

The story about the Huajoya River, the site of the war against powerful outsiders, probably the soldiers of Pedro Teixeira,<sup>4</sup> where, according to the Secoya, they managed to restore peacefulness by the use of wit, ingenious deception, and even magic, is an example of a recurrent theme in Secoya storytelling (Krøijer 2003). Delfín's grandfather had lived along the

Algodón River inside the rubber concession of the infamous Casa Arana but escaped upriver to avoid the atrocities and extreme mistreatment directed at the indigenous population (cf. Barclay and Santos-Granero 2002; Casement 1913; Hardenburg 1913; Taussig 1987; Wasserstrom 2014). After another flight from Huajoya, the Secoya took up residence in Cuyabeno as the war between Peru and Ecuador closed the border behind them. The elders describe how their time in Cuyabeno was one of relative peace and affluence among their Siona affinal kin. In 1955 the Siona and Secoya were “contacted” by the evangelical Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), leading mainly the Secoya to convert to evangelical Protestantism. One woman recalled:

We got along well with the missionaries, but the Siona did not like them too much. There were three Secoya families and we got along well with them. We went out fishing and gave them fish just like that, no charge. They arrived with their airplane and they brought us medicine. We only had to give them a list of our necessities . . . . When I was 15, I started studying. They also took me to Limoncocha to learn to cook, to iron, and all that. They [SIL] also brought our things in the airplane when we moved here to San Pablo. Nothing was lacking.

In 1973, SIL convinced the Secoya to relocate to the community of San Pablo Katëtsiaya on the Aguarico River, which was within short flying distance of the mission station in Limoncocha. Around San Pablo there were vast forests for hunting and enough fertile land for cultivation, which had become in short supply in Cuyabeno, and particularly so for those most recently arrived from Huajoya. As the above quote indicates, the need for outside goods was provided for by SIL in exchange for modest work and the community’s acceptance of the word of God and attendant moral ideas about how to be a good person. Not all Secoya families were equally eager in their adoption of Christian beliefs, but the forest around San Pablo was abundant and at the time seemed sufficiently large to provide for future generations. “We were unconcerned,” Delfín said. “We felt that the forest would never come to an end.”

William Vickers commenced his fieldwork among the Secoya around this time. He settled in San Pablo and described the Secoya’s subsistence systems and the cultural technologies that allowed them to adapt to the tropical forest. Vickers engaged critically with the tools of cultural ecology and applied a widely held view of tropical forest cultures that came to frame anthropological discussions about Amazonian societies for half a century. According to this view, societies of the tropical forests were characterized by low-scale sociopolitical organization, egalitarianism, and weak cohesion, as well as frequent migration and warfare (Gross 1975, 1983; Meggers 1971; Steward 1963; see also Clastres 1977; Lévi-Strauss 1967). Several of these assumptions have since been rejected. For example, archeological research has indicated that cities of some scale existed prior to European conquest. The small, dispersed communities and seminomadic practices encountered by anthropologists have been shown to be historically contingent features produced by early contact and colonization, and the radical changes those entailed rather than environmental limitations (Heckenberger et al. 2003; Heckenberger 2005; Veber 2017).<sup>5</sup>

Vickers’s work spoke to the debate over cultural adaptation but also contested the tendency to hinge explanations on one single limiting factor to elucidate the particular cultural dynamics of tropical forest societies (Vickers 1989b:22). Where some authors argued for the adaptive significance of warfare (Chagnon 1992; Ross 1978) or held that the scarcity of animal protein was the main factor leading social groups to disperse (Harris 1979), Vickers showed how different factors at different times—such as the lack of land or shortage of game—could play the role as the limiting factor that made societies “move from one temporary steady-state equilibrium to another” (Vickers 1989a:249).

In his 1989 book, based on his PhD dissertation, Vickers also pointed to the role of cosmology, rituals, and life-cycle choices for balancing resource use and regulating their adaptation to the natural environment. In so doing, Vickers’s rigorous work also cast Secoya cosmology in relatively static terms—as concerned with the origin and ordering of the universe—and as a

holistic backdrop for action. He concluded:

The adaptation of the Siona and Secoya is marked by a high degree of flexibility; truth is that it is their most salient characteristic. They can adapt to a variety of different conditions and make decisions between various options. Their subsistence scheme is not rigid and various factors can produce a change of emphasis at different points in time and space (Vickers 1989a:254, my translation).

While Vickers's emphasis on flexible adaptation was a timely correction to the debate within anthropology, its impact among the Secoya was probably unforeseen. As I shall discuss further below, the idea would spill into Secoya life as the notion of flexibility became appropriated to describe their way of forging and managing relations to other social groups.

Any idea of steady-state equilibrium was soon abandoned, however, as Texaco Petroleum Company began its operations in what was seen as an unpopulated, yet resource-rich, hinterland (Hvalkof 2000; Reider and Wasserstrom 2013; Sawyer 2004; Whitten 1978, 1981; Wray 2000). A short time after moving to San Pablo, the Secoya found themselves caught up in the frenzy of oil extraction when Texaco, which had first discovered oil in the area in 1967, expanded its operations. At the time, the Ecuadorian government did not yet have a very significant presence in the Amazon, and foreign companies were therefore expected to establish their own working relationship with indigenous communities. According to the Secoya, Texaco's early strategy of community relations mainly consisted of giving food and gifts to prevent possible conflicts caused by their industrial practices. During the 1970s, many Secoya men worked for shorter periods of time as *macheteros* clearing the paths needed for seismic explorations as well as in other labor-intensive activities. Texaco's operations and the government's negligence in establishing and monitoring environmental and human rights standards led to heavy contamination of the area around San Pablo. Guillermo recalls:

Later, when we already lived here [in San Pablo], the river was black with oil. The Eno and Shushufindi Rivers were always very black. Once, I went up the Eno by canoe, quietly fishing and drinking the water. When I arrived further upstream I became aware that there had been an oil spill and that the river was full of oil. But at that point in time, we did not understand what was going on. . . . Texaco extracted oil from this area for twenty-five years, and it has never benefitted us; we only received the contamination of the rivers.

Another elder, Mathilde, who was among the first migrants from Huajoya, also recalled how Texaco turned their world upside down. Though the incident she described was a pipeline rupture caused by the 1987 earthquake, in her memory it was Texaco's doing:

Once [in 1987] there was a strong earthquake. The earth was shaking all night and all of the next day. The river turned upside down and entire trees were flowing downstream. The next day the Aguarico was black, very black, and all the fish and dolphins died. At first we just continued drinking the water, but people got ill. . . . My uncle went bathing and came out black. All his skin was itching, and washing again did not help. So I took a comb and scraped off his skin. Two Siona died because of this and my uncle also almost died. Texaco was truly killing us with their oil.

As Mathilde revealed, what was at stake for the Secoya was not only environmental degradation but also their physical existence. Yet they were not left completely paralyzed: in 1993 Secoya plaintiffs joined a lawsuit against Texaco filed in New York (Reider and Wasserstrom 2013). The question of whether the contamination was in fact caused by Texaco or PetroEcuador, which took over operations of the oil fields when the former ended its contract, continues to be debated in courtrooms and public media today. In Secoya memory, however,

these happenings are unequivocally tied to Texaco, and they continue to reaffirm their right to receive a just compensation in courts of law in both Ecuador and abroad.

Already beginning in the 1970s, oil exploitation entailed increased external pressure on the land; settler communities also cropped up in the area, and in 1978 the company Palmeras del Ecuador was given a 9,850 hectare (ha) concession on land considered community hunting grounds. Even though SIL was at the time considered an agent of nationalization and development (Vickers 1981:723–25), “they did not see it as their role to help us in politics,” as Esaías phrased it years later. Instead, he explained, it was Vickers, together with international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and human rights institutions who supported the Secoya in their efforts to organize and gain legal recognition of their land.

In 1976 the Siona and Secoya formed the Organization of the Siona and Secoya of Ecuador (OISSE), which joined forces with the nascent national indigenous movement in Ecuador. OISSE used this newly won strength to gain rights to communal land around the main villages and, by 1990, obtain an expanded area that now totals 42,614 ha along the Aguarico River and within the Cuyabeno National Park (NASIEPAI 2014:28). This represents just a fraction of their ancestral land. But even though the land on the Aguarico today appears exhausted, the possibility of migrating is not the same option it once was. During the past ten years, the Secoya in Ecuador have had an unresolved land claim concerning Bě’kēya (along the Lagartococha River) that would enable them to establish territorial continuity with the Peruvian Secoya and would represent a getaway for families seeking a life outside the immediate reach of oil companies and an advancing agricultural frontier. However, contrary to the myth about Amazonian “unoccupied lands” promoted by the Ecuadorian state for more than a century (Wasserstrom and Southgate 2013:31–2), the land claim has led to lingering conflicts with other indigenous communities and national park authorities.

The Secoya, as shown by this rapid historical overview, have experienced several moments of radical change over the past centuries (cf. Cipolletti 2017), and while this reveals an extraordinary capacity for adaptation, today there is little expectation of recreating a life in complete balance with their forested land. In a situation of change, it appears not to be the changes *per se* but the ability to steer transformations and creatively manipulate circumstances that is the main matter of concern and focus of Secoya self-understanding

### The Company and the Trickster

After Texaco left, several other national and transnational companies have prospected for oil in the area, including the controversial Occidental Exploration and Production Company (OEPC), whose contract was revoked by Ecuador in 2006 after it was accused of transferring part of an oil field without authorization. In January 1985, OEPC signed a contract with the Ecuadorian government concerning the exploitation of the concession known as Block 15, and in 1992 the company began its operation around Limoncocha. After an agreement with Petroecuador, the state-owned company, its exploration program was expanded to the rest of the block, including areas within Secoya territory. The Secoya were unaware of this until 1996, when a team of researchers preparing the environmental impact study visited their territory. The Secoya organization OISE (earlier OISSE)<sup>6</sup> sent letters to OEPC, as well as to relevant ministries and international NGOs, denouncing the lack of consultation.<sup>7</sup> In July, Occidental arrived in San Pablo, accompanied by the army, and had the organization sign a hastily prepared one-page contract authorizing all future oil exploration and exploitation on their land. However, OISE annulled the contract shortly after signing. Two subsequent contracts were similarly signed and annulled. In May 1997, Occidental returned to Secoya territory in order to participate in OISE’s annual congress. During the congress, OEPC “worked the needs,” as it was often phrased, promising to provide the Secoya with a variety of desired goods to be distributed directly to individual families. According to Vickers, company representatives played on people’s mistrust of their own leaders (Vickers 1998).

A young leader who would later be elected president of OISE and participate in the commission to negotiate a new contract gave his version of events:

During all the meeting there were threats. They said, “If you don’t give this [the permission], we will ask the state or Petroecuador to intervene, and they will expropriate the land. The territory you consider yours will turn into state property. Then you are finished.” They scared us. . . . The worst was that they said that the military would intervene. “We will arrest you and take you away,” and all that, right? We are a peaceful people and we do not like to go and fight with the companies, or even worse, the military; therefore, they [the community] will allow the company to enter. . . . We think, “We are hardly three hundred strong and they can put us all away.” People here, when such threats exist, people say, “Let them do it, we will go somewhere else.” When the company arrived, people were already scared, due to the settlers, other companies, Palmeras del Ecuador. And Occidental is the worst, because they will intervene directly on our land.

When I arrived in early 2000, the seismic and topographic studies had concluded, and the Secoya were invited to a new round of negotiations in Quito concerning the construction of exploratory wells. Vickers had been involved in the early stages of the negotiation process to, among other things, secure appropriate legal and economic support to the Secoya. As a result of this, OISE had signed a code of conduct with OEPC regulating all contact between parties, including the procedures for negotiating and interacting in a respectful manner. In the stories circulating in the Secoya communities at the time, Occidental was cast as a potential cheater and deceiver, an entity capable of aggression, though also as a source of material wealth. In this light, the code of conduct was meant to prevent the Secoya from being harassed and “fooled again.”

In the face of Occidental’s plans to stay on their land, the Secoya formed a commission that included a team of national and international advisors, empowered to lead the dialogue with the company. Here, a sketch of how leaders spoke of their strategy during the negotiation is relevant because it illuminates how flexibility and the ability to transform are linked. Unlike the flexible adaptation strategy bearing on the forested environment, which was described by Vickers in his work on cultural adaptation, flexibility in dealing with a’kë (powerful outsiders) implied only apparent accommodation and was mingled with ingenuity, slyness, and an element of what I call *magical power*, in order to permit engagement as equals—or at least to create a more level playing field.

After returning from the negotiations in Quito, Esaias gathered his family around him to recount what had transpired. In the fading daylight of the late afternoon, he vividly recounted how he had prevented the company from deceiving the Secoya by speaking so powerfully that he “almost killed” Occidental’s managing director:

The negotiations were tough. The head of community relations [at Occidental] was shouting that if we did not sign they were going to deploy the military. My nephew also became angry, saying, “If you want to send the military, do it. You can send whoever you want to. We will defend our territory.” We almost killed one of them during those negotiations. I convinced the others to present a solid proposal, not to let them cheat us. Therefore we loaded a powerful weapon; we almost killed one of them. I was very nervous, but I spoke and they were frightened. One of them jumped in his seat—the director—he banged his fist on the table and almost fell off his chair, holding his hand to his heart. His friends had to assist him out of there. Afterwards, we thought we had lost everything—that they would not negotiate anymore with us. We met, just between ourselves; Felipe [an advisor] was on the verge of crying, and my nephew was shaking all over. “We have lost everything,” we thought. But we reached an agreement and we signed. Afterwards, I apologized for frightening them, said that I did not want to kill them, but that the territory is the only thing that we have.

Esaías had been a leader of the Secoya for many years. His family was the first to convert to evangelical Protestantism under the influence of SIL, and he received an education as a teacher at the mission in Limoncocha (Vickers 1989a). In his story, Esaías presents himself as the prime mover of events, and that by crossing the line of good behavior he manages to stay in control. He hints at having had extraordinary powers at his disposal but leaves it open as to what these might have been. Through his ability to speak, the relationship is transformed. The negotiation meeting finalized a new contract concerning the right to drill three exploratory wells on Secoya land. As compensation, the Secoya were entitled to receive \$100,000 for a family fund, \$280,000 for development projects, and \$70,000 for an investment fund (all USD; OEPC 2000). Esaías concludes the story by confidently stating:

It was a historic negotiation. . . . In other places they [Occidental] have given very little money. In my speech I told them, “Here we will talk about dollars, the country is soon to be dollarized, *súcre* [the former currency of Ecuador] are garbage” . . . . For the first time we did not leave angry.

In the following days the story was told over and again, leading to discussions about whether they did in fact “win,” and if the managing director’s “heart attack” was an attempt to make them reduce their demand for monetary compensation. But the conclusion was that they did come out well, and that Esaías’s clever speech had overpowered the president of OEPC (probably Maston Cunningham) and transformed the relationship. In such debates over strategy and ways of relating to a’kë, the above-mentioned legend of Huajosa’ra and the defeat of the traitor Siose’e were often brought to bear on contemporary matters. These stories were helpful in carving out strategies for how to deal with powerful and potentially amoral outsiders (see also Hugh-Jones 1989).

Such narratives tie flexibility and peacefulness together with meanings associated with being a “good” Secoya person. The following testimony by Esaías’s brother exemplifies this. Educated as a teacher at the age of seventeen by SIL, he later became an active proponent of cultural reaffirmation and the provincial director of bilingual education. He links a flexible orientation with the need to revitalize Secoya culture, particularly the resumption of drinking of *yagé* (a hallucinogenic brew made from the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine), which had been given up under the influence of SIL.

We have always had relations with other people. We have understood how to value our own culture but also to adapt and take on the new in a flexible way, for example, to maintain the language by educating new professionals. I am not against the drinking of *yagé* and *yoko* [wine with a high caffeine content], which gives you power in the morning to work without fatigue. We are peaceful people, even though the settlers are invading our land from all sides, but we have also known how to be good defenders. Huajosa’ra was a superior, wise, and agile defender, using shields of tapir skin and spears of *guadua* [the largest neotropical bamboo] that cut like Gillette. We had powerful shamans, but Huajosa’ra was the elite; he could predict when to fight. Today, however, we prefer to solve these matters with peaceful means.

The quote also reveals a recurrent theme cutting across *ai’kokua* (ancient histories) and everyday storytelling exemplified by Esaías’s account of the negotiations: Secoya employ superior wit and sometimes even deceit and magic power in order to overcome disempowering circumstances and curb uncontrolled social transformation. In this way the stories resemble the many trickster or transformer stories found in the anthropological literature (Basso 1987; Hugh-Jones 1996; Levi-Strauss 1963; Radin 1956). These transformers or tricksters have an ambiguous moral character, and although potential helpers and sly deceivers, are often driven by selfish ends. To Secoya leaders such as Esaías, mythical transformers such as Nañë (also sometimes referred to as Baina) who made the world habitable for human beings (Belaúnde 2001; Cipoletti 1988; Vickers 1989a, 1989b) and legendary figures such as Huajosa’ra are

sources of inspiration for how to act in the face of change and create social transformation. Obviously, the strategies employed are specific to each historical circumstance. During the negotiations with Occidental, leaders stressed peaceful engagement, slyness, and clever speech rather than warfare and use of shamanic power.

Bringing together these stories of past and present highlights that indigenous peoples have significant impact on how they engage in relations with the other social actors. Change does not simply come from the outside, nor are the Secoya passive victims of the cycles of global capitalism with little choice but to endure and adapt (Hill 1988; Veber 1998). Flexible adaptation today, then, is understood not so much as a process of becoming better at living in a given habitat or restoring a steady-state equilibrium but as a particular way of managing and controlling change.

### Transformations of Continuity

After almost ten years absence, I returned to San Pablo in 2014 to 2015 and 2016 to conduct new fieldwork. Having read news coverage concerning the Secoya's engagements in palm oil production, I was curious to understand the dynamics behind the decision as well as its effects. During one of my first days in the village, I was shown NASEPAI's new management plan, which was developed and approved in 2014 with support from the provincial government. It is clearly an attempt to lay out a long-term and sustainable development plan for the Secoya, who, after having experimented and failed with different cash crops and cattle, had found it unviable to rely on the occasional funds flowing from government institutions and oil companies. The *Plan de Vida Siekopai* cites Vickers's work and explicitly refers to its thesis regarding flexible adaptation, interestingly under the section titled "relations to other social groups." The plan states: "The Siekopai nationality is marked by a high degree of flexibility while facing a variety of conditions, and is able to make decisions considered beneficial for themselves" (2014:35, my translation).

This not only confirms that the Secoya have read and appropriated Vickers's thesis as a valid theory about themselves but also that it has been changed in the process. Whereas the original thesis concerned their adaptation to the forested environment—having different production systems for different soil types, for example—it has now become a theory about how to relate to other social groups. As Esaias put it when describing the Secoya's position towards the Ministry of Environment, flexibility is a possible (and preferred, it seems) attitude when engaging with powerful outside entities.

The question is, then, to what extent is the notion of flexibility the same after the "native" appropriation of Vicker's theory? In Esaias's brother eloquent phrase, it concerns the ability to "take on the new in a flexible way" while simultaneously valuing Secoya culture. To this day it seems that flexibility concerns the guiding of transformations; in other words, the traditional role of the *inti'ba'ikē* (shaman-leaders) has at least partly been taken over by a new generation of leaders of indigenous organizations. This can be seen by examining the transformation of the forested landscape through the planting of palm trees and today's shamanic practices.

On returning to San Pablo, my first impression concerned the transformation of the landscape. Where before one had to reach the community either by river or by walking through the forest from the Shushufindi River, a new bridge and road surrounded by palm trees made for a smooth unimpeded journey. Most houses were larger than before, with either electrical hook-ups or solar panels, and were filled with modern utensils and appliances. While some families made good money from selling the palm fruits to *Palmeras del Ecuador* and had poor nonindigenous settlers working for them in their fields, others complained that there was not enough available land for the subsistence production of new young families and that the lack of powerful shamans made game scarce. "Soon we will have to eat our hunting dogs," one man exclaimed.

In addition to these visible changes, change had also taken place on a different plane. The death of *inti'ba'ikē* Fernando Payaguaje, the shaman leader (Payaguaje 1994), had led to a situation of "shamanism without shamans" (Brunelli 1996; Langdon 2016), resulting in complaints such as those above. In recent years some of Fernando's descendants and members of

a few other families had gone back to the drinking of yagé, partly in response to a booming interest from international tourists and middle-class Ecuadorians, who increasingly use the hallucinogenic plant in their practices for spiritual self-discovery. To some Secoya elders, like Fernando's son Delfín, yagé drinking provides not just a new source of income but also moral restoration and a chance to engage once again in the transiting of perspectives facilitated by yagé in order to explore and understand the world. After SIL's ban on the drinking of yagé was lifted in Secoya communities, several young adults had "experienced the visions," as Delfín put it, but without becoming regular yagé drinkers that would have been a prerequisite for apprenticeship to a shaman.

The decision to plant oil palms obviously went against policies aimed at incentivizing forest conservation, such as the World Bank and UN REDD+ programs, as well as Ecuador's own *Socio Bosque* initiative. In the face of the Secoya's refusal and inability in 2010 to pay a penalty equivalent to the cost of regenerating the forest cleared from their lands, the Ministry wished to compel them to adopt one of two courses of action to raise the necessary money. They could join Socio Bosque and pay the fine from the incentive income collected as a result of forest conservation on part of their territory or they could use any future compensation from oil companies operating on their land to pay the fine. The Secoya as a whole rejected these options, since either one would fundamentally undermine their sense of self-government and autonomy. Instead of fighting the ministry directly, however, they have been biding their time, and for the past three years the ministry had taken no further action on the matter. "For the time being we are living peacefully," Esaias phrased it, seeing it as a good example of what it means to be flexible. As previously mentioned, not all Secoya agreed that this was an ideal situation. Delfín found that the felling of the large slow-growing trees was leaving the territory empty. The new *poe'say'yo* (empty space) was not merely the result of land degradation and deficiency of game but also due to the tree-spirits moving away. In the view of Delfín and others, this diminished his ability to cure illnesses and to steer transformations, since this requires the guidance of the *watí* (spirits or beings of the forest). More worrisome still, as known *watí* moved out upon the felling of their spirit-houses, the planting of palm trees permitted the entrance into the territory of new and potentially malicious spirits (see Krøijer forthcoming).

The planting of oil palms and the resulting emptiness and disorder became my entry point for understanding more about Amazonian anthropogenic landscapes. Recent archeological research (Heckenberger 2003) has pointed to how since pre-Columbian times Amerindian groups have modified soils and created *terra preta* or dark earth (Glaser and Wood 2001; Neves et al. 2001), which would support intensive cropping and a large sedentary population. Before that, Laura Rival's research has demonstrated how human actions shape Amazonian forests, exemplified by the Huaorani in Ecuador, who have engaged in planting and management of forests across generations (Rival 1993, 2002). This points to how adaptation, even when conceptualized in a narrow sense, has always been a two-way street, as "the environment" in whatever form it exists has already been transformed by humans. Simply put, this renders forests *cultural* (Rival 2002:11). The choice made by the assembly of the Secoya organization in 2010 to plant palm trees on their territory can be seen as a new, more radical version of a cultural forest, entailing the replacement of a managed agroecosystem with a commercial one.

The Secoya share the general features of an Amerindian perspectivist cosmology as outlined by Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004) and vividly described in Kopenawa and Albert's *The Falling Sky* (2013). Perspectivism, in Viveiros de Castro's (1998:470) rendering, is

an indigenous theory according to which the way humans perceive animals and other subjectivities that inhabit the world—gods, spirits, the dead, inhabitants of other cosmic levels, meteorological phenomena, plants occasionally even objects and artefacts—differs profoundly from the way in which these beings see humans and see themselves.

Most anthropological analyses following this line of thought have focused on human–animal relations, describing the jaguar as a prime object of shamanic bodily metamorphosis, for instance, while trees, plants, and other beings of the forest have been described as playing a

secondary role. Among the Secoya, however, large slow-growing trees and the beings that inhabit them are equally important. These watí are transformational but, as Delfín describes them, are also “essentially the same.”

Whereas transiting various perspectives and layers of the universe has traditionally been the role of the shaman, today this is, albeit in a different sense, also the work of a new generation of leaders who find themselves in the rather different position of having to negotiate relations with corporate bodies and state institutions. The supernatural encounters in the forest, as Viveiros de Castro has phrased it, are “a kind of indigenous proto-experience of the State” (2012:37). In this context, cosmology is not so much a stable worldview entailing a set of rules and regulations for how to conduct oneself in relation to the environment and to other human persons as it is the practical realization that everything is transformational. Analogous to what has been suggested by Pedersen (2014:169), the core of Secoya shamanism and politics is transformation and flexibility itself.

In “being flexible,” Esaías, and probably many other leaders of indigenous organizations, perform a kind of cosmological politics. Only at the most immediate level do these politics concern the embracing of change and adapting to a new situation, as the Secoya’s tricksterish position during negotiations with Occidental described above illustrates. On a more abstract level, the conceptual and practical labor involved in the Secoya’s version of Vickers’s flexible adaptation thesis is a reflection of the assertion that the cosmos is in constant transformation. The possibility of remaining “essentially the same” (namely Siekopai or Secoya) such as other forest beings are capable of, according to Delfín, depends on the ability to transform and become different from oneself (in a world that is not in equilibrium). This indigenous theory of flexibility, encapsulated also in Esaías’s brother’s statement about maintaining culture by taking on the new, is particularly relevant to political relationships across radical difference, involving both difference of power and referential alterity. It is an example of how indigenous people’s sometimes take hold of anthropological theory and in so doing exercise a form of conceptual self-determination that is somewhat different from the “analytical recalibration” that characterizes the ontological turn (Pedersen 2012). The theoretical appropriation, or even arrogation, described here is often overlooked or ignored by anthropologists but may provide important new insights, for example by pointing to how it is not always the anthropologists who is in control of the cultural translations performed. Flexibility, then, today concerns the political and cosmological problem facing many indigenous peoples of Lowland South America: how to remain “essentially the same” through controlled transformation.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Secoya of Ecuador today auto-identify as Siekopai, meaning “the people of multiple colors.” The name refers to the river Siekoya, tributary to the Huajoya River, located in what is today Peruvian national territory. Siekoya is translated as “river of colors” or “river of drawings,” referring to the designs used in facial and corporal painting by the people living there in the past (Cipolletti 2017:238).

<sup>2</sup> The total population of Secoya in Ecuador is 614, of which 319 live in San Pablo Katëtsiaya. There are forty-one families in San Pablo, of which twenty have gained Nacionalidad Siekopai

(NASIEPAI)'s approval to cultivate African oil palms (approximately fifteen ha each) (NASIEPAI 2014:50, 149). In 2011, 176 ha were cultivated according to national media:

*El Universo*: <http://www.eluniverso.com/2011/07/31/1/1447/multa-375000-secoyas-talar-bosque-palma.html>;

*El Comercio*: <http://www.elcomercio.com/opinion/dilema-secoya.html>;

*El Tiempo*: <http://www.eltiempo.com.ec/noticias/ecuador/4/269743/secoyas-multados-por-talar-bosque-nativo-en-amazonia-ecuatoriana>;

*Noticias en Línea*: [http://noticiasenlinea.com.ec/actualidad/19205\\_sancion-a-secoyas-por-talar-173-hectareas-de-bosque-nativo.html](http://noticiasenlinea.com.ec/actualidad/19205_sancion-a-secoyas-por-talar-173-hectareas-de-bosque-nativo.html).

All accessed December 29, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> The river is known as Santa María in Spanish. Huajoya is often referred to as the heart of Secoya territory and its tributary, Siecoya, as the place of origin of the Secoya or Siekopai, as the Ecuatorian Secoya autodenominate themselves. This is after the Siecoya River, which is said to be in close proximity to Jupó, the mythological site where the mythological character *Nañe* (the moon) pulled the first people from a hole in the ground (see Belaúnde 2001; Cipolletti 1988).

<sup>4</sup> There is much evidence to indicate that this story concerns the journey of Portuguese explorer Pedro Teixeira who, in 1637, was the first European to travel up the entire length of the Amazon River with a large contingent of soldiers to explore the limits of the Spanish/Portuguese spheres of influence in the Amazon. The Secoya report that the explorer placed a *pai'kenapë* (stone head) on their land. The stone head or statue, which was placed by Teixeira to indicate the boundary between the Spanish and Portuguese empires, has not subsequently been found.

<sup>5</sup> Francisco de Orellana, the 16th-century explorer who was the first to travel down the Amazon River, reported densely populated regions, suggesting population levels exceeding those of today. The BBC documentary “Unnatural Histories—Amazon”, presents arresting visual evidence that Orellana was correct in his observations about advanced civilization flourishing along the Amazon in the 1540s: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0122njp>.

<sup>6</sup> OISSE (Organization of Siona and Secoya in Ecuador) was formed in 1976 and officially recognized in 1986. In 1995 the Siona and Secoya split into two separate organizations under influence of CONFENIAE (the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuatorian Amazon). OISE (the Indigenous Organization of Secoya in Ecuador) was officially recognized in 2000. In 2011 the organization changed its name to NASIEPAI (2014:37).

<sup>7</sup> According to International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169, indigenous peoples have the right to consultation on projects having an effect on their life and territories. The Convention has been ratified by Ecuador, but was not implemented as national law before the approval of the 1998 Constitution. According to ILO guidelines, the state is responsible for conducting the process of consultation, which should be based on free and informed consent. In Ecuador, as elsewhere, this responsibility is often handed over to private companies.

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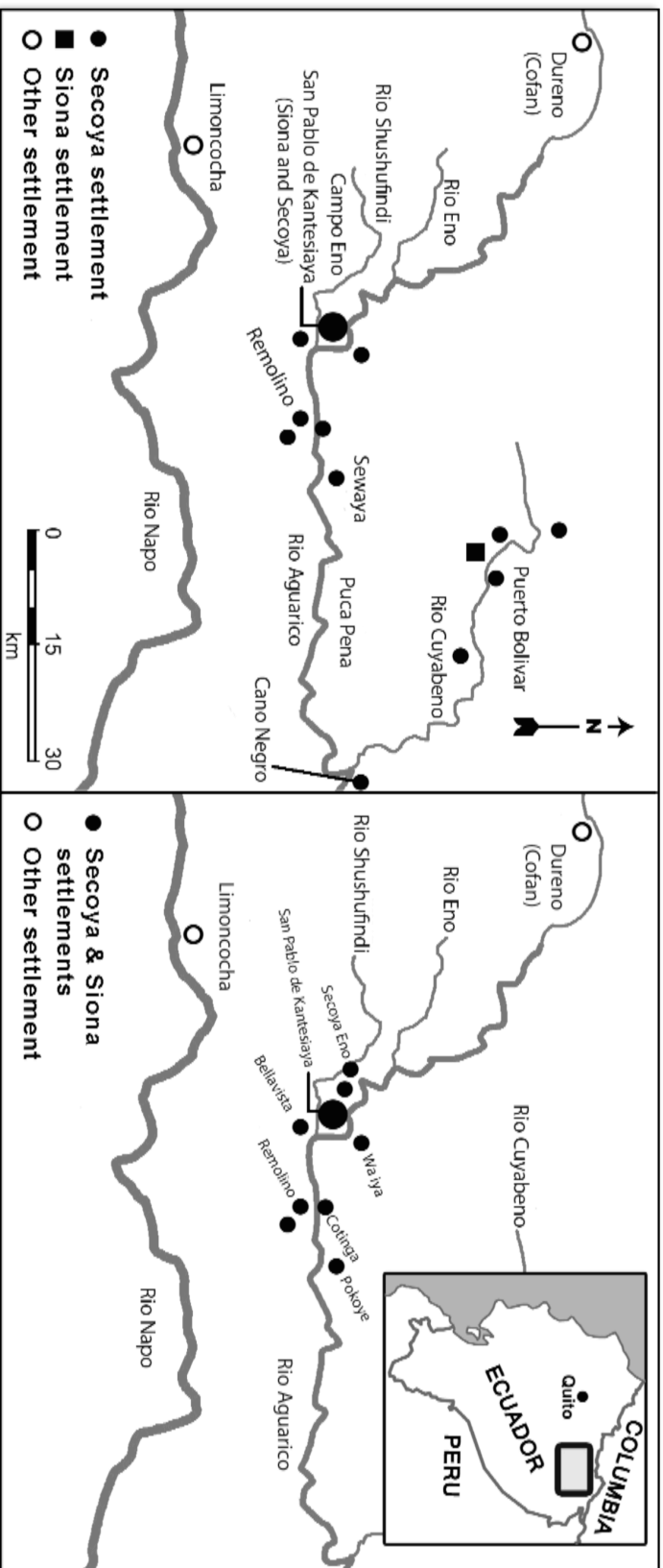
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## Siona-Secoya Settlements in 1973-1980 and Secoya Settlements in 2017



Source: William T. Vickers (1989), "Traditional Concepts of Power among the Siona-Secoya and the Advent of the Nation-State," *Latin American Anthropology Review* 1(2): 56; Organización Indígena Secoya del Ecuador, personal communication (2017).