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Bill Vickers' Modern Political Transformation

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I first met Bill Vickers in the late 1990s when I was working for Occidental Oil and Gas Company (Oxy) in Block 15, north of the Napo River in Ecuador. We were introduced by a mutual friend, Ted Macdonald. Eventually, Oxy asked Bill and Ted to help draft the “Code of Conduct” it signed with Secoya people concerning oil exploration in their last major hunting territory (Vickers 2003). Oxy hadn’t wanted to work in that area, but the Ecuadorian government insisted on it as part of Oxy’s contract in Block 15. Bill later told me that the Secoya were pleased with the Code of Conduct, and I know that Oxy was quite proud of it.

As a nonacademic, it is not my place to evaluate Bill’s contribution to anthropological scholarship. Instead, I would like to focus on a different, less familiar aspect of his work. During the early 1970s, Bill was one of very few observers to witness and describe firsthand the impact of Ecuador’s resettlement policies on native Amazonians. I can think of only two other people—Henri Barral, a geographer on loan from the French government to Ecuador’s Ministry of Agriculture, and the North American geographer Ray Bromley—who wrote about resettlement at that early date and chronicled its supposedly unintended but entirely predictable consequences.

Bill’s first contacts with Secoya families took place in 1972, just as oil production in Amazonian Ecuador (the *Oriente*) was beginning. In what may have been his earliest published article (1972), he described how Ecuador’s military government (1972–79) assumed “tight control” over the country’s oil exploration program and then used it to speed up colonization (one example: we now know that it ordered Texaco and Gulf to build \$50 million of infrastructure exclusively for resettlement, unrelated to oil). Following these roads, migrant families poured into the Oriente and laid claim to “vacant land” (*tierras baldías*) that was in actuality occupied by indigenous groups.

At first, Bill reported that Indians and settlers (known as “colonists”) mostly avoided each other. Indians lived along remote rivers and planted their gardens in far corners of the Aguarico Valley. Colonists stayed as close as possible to the new roads and shipped their crops to market. Yet Bill quickly realized that future conflict was inevitable. “Even if the oil companies and colonists do not exploit the native groups directly,” he noted (1972:4), “their presence in the Oriente may upset the balance of traditional Indian subsistence patterns. . . . It appears that the Indians of the Aguarico Valley are in the process of being forced into an ever decreasing territory with declining natural resources and limited access to new settlement sites.” Meanwhile, he wrote, the government had set “no uniform policy” to safeguard indigenous livelihoods or even decide how much land they might claim.

As he completed his doctoral research (1973–75), Bill’s view of Indian policy grew darker. Through the 1970s, Ecuador’s government pursued three policy goals in the Oriente: securing the country’s borders with Colombia and Peru (the so-called “living frontiers program”); easing land pressure in highland and coastal regions; and expanding the agricultural frontier for commercial crops, particularly cattle (Uquillas 1986:359–83; see also Uquillas 1985). At first, colonization in the Oriente was administered by IERAC (*Instituto Ecuatoriano de Reforma Agraria y Colonización*), the land reform agency. In 1973, a new Agrarian Reform Law required settlers to put at least half of their fifty-hectare parcels into production within five years. The result was massive deforestation. A rising tide of new migrants quickly overwhelmed IERAC’s plans to implement small, controlled settlements. Bill’s colleague Jorge Uquillas (1984:276–77) described the situation:

Spontaneous settlements may be found over most of the petroleum zone. . . .

Since 1968, as quickly as penetration roads were constructed into the [north-east], colonists began to settle along their margins. . . . In spite of the fact that the Law of Amazon Colonization stipulates direct control of the occupation process, official policy also promotes noncontrolled spontaneous colonization. The fact that large portions of land are considered “fallow” or have no owner other than the state (frequently ignoring prior rights of possession of indigenous inhabitants) has incited the unrestrained taking of lands by immigrants to the petroleum zone. In areas of highway construction (or projected construction), colonists take possession of the land and commence deforestation. Shortly thereafter they plant such crops as maize, bananas, and pasture.

In 1977, military officials, dissatisfied with IERAC, created a second agency, the *Instituto Nacional para la Colonización de la Región Amazónica Ecuatoriana* (INCRAE). Over the next few years, INCRAE awarded extensive tracts of native territory to private companies and large landowners. In 1981, for example, Bill reported that “a prized hunting ground on the south bank of the Shushufindi River was being destroyed by a multinational firm named Palmeras del Ecuador, which was bulldozing 9,850 hectares of forest to create an African palm plantation to produce cooking oil for the domestic market” (1981b:726). Few Indians were hired even as temporary laborers to help clear the land.

By 1980, Bill had completed four research trips to Amazonian Ecuador (Vickers 1984:8). As he foresaw, land pressures in northeastern Ecuador were becoming acute: settlers hemmed in Cofán, Secoya, and Siona communities by surrounding them and squatting illegally in the Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve (Vickers 1980; Uquillas 1982). In September, INCRAE dispatched a group of experts, including Bill and Uquillas, to survey the region and propose alternatives. They argued that indigenous communities needed larger communal land grants—not fifty-hectare homesteads—to maintain their way of life. “[I] spent nearly two years defending the objectives of the study and arguing for the feasibility of the recommended solutions,” Uquillas (1985:93) recalled. “At the beginning, the project was heavily influenced by technical participants (four anthropologists, a sociologist, three biologists and an engineer-agronomist). In the final stages, high ranking officials from participating public institutions, most of whom were agricultural technicians with political considerations high in their minds, determined the outcome.”

Unswayed by the case for preserving native livelihoods, INCRAE approved only modest exceptions to the fifty-hectare rule. Eventually, the Secoya and Siona received title to around 40,000 hectares, while the Cofán were awarded 34,000 hectares (later increased to 69,000). As María Susan Cipolletti mentions in her piece, Bill then helped the Secoya survey and measure their claim. For the Cofán, Secoya, and Siona, such grants ensured the survival of major communities but generally excluded their hunting and gardening territories. The government had decided that they must become farmers or find something else to do.

In 1981, Bill turned his attention to another major influence on Siona and Secoya people: the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). Under its contract with the Ecuadorian government, SIL had provided bilingual education to small, isolated ethnic groups in the Oriente since 1955. Bill described how SIL used its enormous hold over Siona and Secoya communities to restructure and administer them, primarily through native school teachers chosen among apt young converts. “It is no coincidence that the senior teacher also serves as a Christian leader of the community,” he wrote (1981a:56). “A conscious effort has been made to erode the constituencies of the remaining headmen-shamans in the Aguarico Basin and to promote the teacher-Christian leader as the de facto headman of the native community.” Other SIL policies undermined the foundations of native social organization. “The missionaries have established the doctrine that believers should not marry non-Christians. In effect, those who follow traditional beliefs have been stigmatized as an unmarriageable class” (Vickers 1981a:59). Elsewhere, (1981b), he described the erosion of traditional beliefs and authority under SIL’s onslaught. And he quoted an SIL pamphlet that disturbingly echoed the triumphalism of missionaries a century earlier in North America: “One hundred Indian bilingual schools will be necessary to give the jungle Indians the opportunity to leave their ignorance and illiteracy for a level of life that they need in order to be useful Ecuadorian citizens” (Vickers 1983).

In the early 1980s, Bill's view of the Oriente seems to have reached a turning point. Even though civilians now ran Ecuador's government, old problems grew worse. "Today," he noted (1984:9), "the native peoples of eastern Ecuador, like other Amazonian Indians, are involved in a difficult struggle to defend their land and resources against a rapidly expanding economic and social frontier, which threatens to overwhelm them." Now, however, he recognized that "the inattention of Ecuadoran governments to formal Indian policy actually constituted a de facto policy of neglect, which supported the traditional and exploitative economic and social patterns of interaction between non-Indians and Indians . . . Ecuador has always had a de facto Indian policy and always will (insofar as native peoples survive)." This policy included what he labeled the "bankrupt process" of *peregrinaje* (pilgrimage), the constant demand to send "countless delegations of Indian representatives to Quito or lesser seats of government" with little result (1984:10).

In his view, SIL shared a large measure of responsibility for their disappointment: "Missionaries, who were in a position to lobby for indigenous land rights, did too little and too late" (1988:241). Ultimately, he wrote, "the defense of native land would depend on many intelligent and articulate [younger] leaders who are ready to and able to engage in the struggle." He was enthusiastic when Secoya communities formed their own political organization in 1983 and affiliated with a major regional group, the *Confederación de las Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana* (Vickers 2003). The rise of indigenous political federations," he wrote (1988:241), "gives hope that some of these battles will be won." And as Cipolletti points out, he remained optimistic even as conflicts within native organizations came to the fore.

As indigenous politics became messier, Bill admitted that he felt uneasy writing about what he called "unscientific" issues. Still, his accounts provide a unique record of Secoya households faced with oil development and colonization in the 1970s and 80s. More recently, he focused on another threat to their way of life: Colombia's haphazard spraying of herbicides along the international border (Whitten et al. 2011). In our conversations, I often had the feeling that Bill was two different people in the field: a scientist, carefully recording dietary intake, hunting practices, and plant inventories; and an old family friend who watched with foreboding as Secoya and Siona communities faced their difficult and uncertain future. Small victories, like the Oxy Code of Conduct, were easily undermined by Ecuador's 21st-century resource grab.

Even in disagreement, Bill remained an exceptionally fair-minded and generous colleague. Over the past decade, I have written that Siona, Secoya, Cofán, and other Amazonian groups were affected by forced labor since at least the mid-19th century. They were profoundly disrupted by the Rubber Boom (1885–1930) and earlier waves of resource extraction, as indeed they have been since 1964 by oil development and colonization. It follows, then, that modern indigenous identity cannot be assumed as something that was passed down largely intact through generations but must instead be explained as an active, living creation of each generation. How did such people reconstitute themselves in the mid-20th century, during what Randy Borman has called the brief moment of their "Golden Age"? Bill thought that I had gotten the question completely backward. And yet, he was always helpful. To him I owe the startling account (published in *Ethnohistory*) of a Siona raid against the Tetete in the 1930s that illustrated how unequal trade relations provoked deadly violence among supposedly isolated and unaffected groups. Beyond such differences, we shared a commitment to understanding and strengthening the forces that have allowed indigenous people to survive in the face of often overwhelming odds.

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