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**COFÁN PRAGMATISM IN  
TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY**

Negotiating the  
Negligent Hegemonic State  
& Imaginary Oil

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## **GLOSSARY OF COFÁN, QUICHUA AND SPANISH WORDS**

**a’i:** a Cofán person; a person, in general

**A’ingae:** the Cofán language

**aiñan’cho:** pet

**atesuye:** learn

**buen vivir:** literally meaning ‘good living,’ this philosophy comes from the Quichua *sumak kawsay*, and is supposed to be a new form of national development

**chakra:** A Quichua term for a small horticultural field  
**cocama:** white person; outsider  
**cocoya:** a malevolent spirit that lives in the ceibo tree; devil/demon  
**colono:** Ecuadorian ‘colonists,’ mainly consisting of landless farmers  
**corifi’ndi:** money  
**cui’ccu:** banana drink  
**cunape’cha:** manioc beer (chicha)  
**ecchoen’cho:** mixed (ethnicity)  
**ega afa’cho:** bad talk  
**factura:** an invoice, which in Ecuador must be state-authorized  
**FARC:** Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), whose guerrillas are present along the Colombian border with Ecuador  
**fuesu a’i:** other people/outsideers  
**fuiteye:** help  
**FSC:** Fundación Sobrevivencia Cofán (Cofán Survival Fund) is an NGO created by Randy Borman to support the Cofán  
**in’jan’cho:** object of desire or interest; thought or idea  
**minga:** communal labor  
**na’su:** leader  
**NOA’IKE:** ‘Nacionalidad Originaria A’i Kofán del Ecuador’ is the Cofán ethnic federation, which was formerly known as FEINCE  
**ondiccu’je:** traditional male clothing  
**opa:** naïve; devoid of fear; tame  
**opatssi cáñseye:** to live a life of tranquility and peace (turned into a concept by Michael Cepek)  
**pajacco:** purple dye used for cleaning clothing  
**quini’cco’pa:** “possessor of the staff of authority which colonial and republican officials gave to indigenous intermediaries” (Cepek, 2012a, p. 225)  
**se’pi’cho:** prohibitions  
**tansin:** right  
**tansin’fa:** right hand  
**tansin’tsse afa’ye:** tell the truth  
**tsampi:** forest  
**tsampima coiraye:** take care of the forest (turned into a concept by Randy Borman)

**tsampini can'jen'sundeccu:** forest dweller

**yaje:** ayahuasca is a hallucinogenic beverage (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) that gives the Cofán access to their spirit world and is also used for healing

**yoco:** a stimulating bitter drink made out of a vine (*Paullinia yoco*), which is drunk in the morning like coffee

## ABSTRACT

The Cofán people of Zábalo, a community in the Ecuadorian Amazon, have always engaged pragmatically on an everyday basis with their forest-based lifestyle and relations with the government, corporations and outsiders (*fuesu a'i*). However, in recent years the community has been dealing with growing uncertainty, internal economic inequality, high unemployment, and an Ecuadorian state that extends governmental control, while also neglecting the needs of people in this region. A myriad of factors discussed in this paper, including the increased integration of outside commodities into the Cofáns' daily life, have led me to believe that unless the Cofán gain access to a steady source of financial income to purchase basic supplies and commodities (such as bullets, gasoline and salt), many people will have to look for work outside the community or allow oil companies to exploit their resources. The growing accumulation of wealth by just two families in the community, increasing dependence on money, lack of access to jobs, and internal political divisions have increased distrust and bad talk (*ega afa'cho*). Through a two-month stay with the community, where I interviewed 25 individuals (collecting 67 hours of semi-structured interviews) and produced 7 short films<sup>1</sup>, I mainly sought to answer the following three questions: What political and economic changes have these people encountered in recent years? What is the community's relationship with money, commodities and other sources of value? Can the Cofán maintain an ideal tranquil (*opatssi*) life and take care of the forest (*tsampima coiraye*), while simultaneously engaging with external influences, including restrictive laws, expansion of the capitalist frontier,

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<sup>1</sup> To see these videos, please click on the 'Updates' section on this site: <http://igg.me/at/amazonianstories>

commodities, the Socio Bosque environmental conservation government scheme, populist local politicians, and the potential of oil exploitation?

I conclude that Zábalo is currently a frontier of ‘negligent hegemonic control’ and is becoming more assimilated into the global economic market, creating a greater dependence on money and commodities, which is both changing people’s relationship to the concepts of *opatssi* and *tsampima coiraye* and also making them more likely find a pragmatic solution to their economic problems, such as allowing oil exploitation. Finally, this paper advocates for an engaged, activist anthropology in the context of a neoliberal world with increasing inequality, marginalized indigenous peoples, and increasing environmental degradation.

**Keywords:** Cofán, pragmatism, uncertainty, negligence, hegemony, state, frontier, capitalism, money, oil, politics, neoliberalism, neocolonialism, environmentality, governmentality, value, Socio Bosque





# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Mise-en-scène

Roaring down the Aguarico River in a motorized canoe with my Cofán host family, surrounded by the green foliage of the Amazon and with macaws squawking overhead, I gripped my camera and filmed the breathtaking surroundings<sup>2</sup>. I had been planning this trip for ten months, exchanging emails with Randy Borman<sup>3</sup>, a remarkable multicultural Cofán leader, but still only had vague notions of my mission ahead. However, I was clearly undertaking my anthropological fieldwork in the belief that contemporary anthropology should be activist and engaged, rather than focusing on purely academic research that only a handful of individuals will read.

A few days prior to the journey, I had gone to the offices of the Cofán Survival Fund in Quito, to speak with Randy Borman and offer him my English teaching<sup>4</sup> and filmmaking skills as a

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<sup>2</sup> It is helpful to know I was in Zábalo from July 12 to September 4, 2015 (only 55 days).

<sup>3</sup> Randy Borman is the son of translator-linguist missionaries from the U.S.-based Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) who arrived on Cofán territory in 1955 through an agreement with the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education. At the time, the then current leader of Dureno, Guillermo Quenamá, was competing with the Secoya to have gringos as part of his ‘zoo’ of foreigners, and was interested in using the missionaries’ float-plane to facilitate the influx of commodities (Borman, 1996, p. 189). Although Randy’s parents are American, he grew up with the Cofán and is widely recognized for being one, in spite of also being a tri-lingual, multicultural white man. He is their most important leader (*na’su*), having effectively fought for their land rights and created ongoing economic activities in the community. Anthropologist Michael Cepek has written extensively about Randy Borman (Cepek, 2009; 2012a), and although I originally attempted to focus on other Cofán leaders, Randy’s profound insights are so important that they feature prominently in this paper. See Appendix III for some fascinating interview extracts by Randy Borman.

<sup>4</sup> They decided films were of more importance because children were out of school during the summer. Also, films are a way of communicating their messages globally and thus taking control of both mediascapes and financescapes.

contribution to the Cofán people. At this meeting, I felt Vine Deloria Jr. resonate in Randy's words, as he commented on his disillusionment with BINGOs<sup>5</sup> and other international partnerships that, mainly due to the 2008 global economic crisis, have stopped much of their funding and support. It was clear that I would never have been allowed to visit the Cofán community of Zábalo, had I not also offered to make a series of films for the community.

Anthropologists, especially when dealing with indigenous people, must be committed to doing more than just fieldwork. The world today is riddled with multinational corporate elites, a widening inequality gap, and a relentless desire to extract resources that often coincide with indigenous land. I agree with Vine Deloria Jr.'s three main criticisms of anthropologists: 1) the "mass production of useless knowledge by anthropologists attempting to capture real Indians in a network of theories has contributed substantially to the invisibility of Indian people today" (Deloria, 2012, p.200); 2) "[b]y concentrating on great abstractions, anthropologists have unintentionally removed many young Indians from the world of real problems to the lands of make-believe" (Deloria, 2012, p.202); 3) indigenous people "should not be objects of observation for those who do nothing to help" (Deloria, 2012, p.205). According to Bruce Albert (Albert, 1997, p.58), anthropologists should engage in "observant participation," whereby research is both anthropological and activist in nature. Hence, when I first arrived, I described my purpose as being *fuiteye* (help) and *atesuye* (learn).

## **1.2 Choosing the research site**

Having grown up in Ecuador, I was constantly aware of three facts: our democratic political system was extremely unstable, there was tremendous socioeconomic inequality, and the country depended heavily on oil exploitation. Today, Ecuador remains extremely dependent on oil and there is a large inequality gap, which usually

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<sup>5</sup> Big International Non-Governmental Organizations (BINGOs) spend far too much money on sustaining themselves because of their corporate structure, Randy believes (R. Borman, personal communication, August 11, 2015).

leaves indigenous people marginalized and excluded from the rest of society. Between 1963 and 2007, Ecuador has had seventeen presidents, some of whom fled the country due to corruption charges. What has changed within this turbulent democratic system is that since 2007, President Rafael Correa has managed to remain in power and has allegedly been transforming the country with his ‘Citizens’ Revolution,’ which uses oil money for social programs and development, under the general philosophy of ‘post-neoliberal’ *buen vivir*. However, as seen in this paper, this new form of development still does not involve indigenous voices (Radcliffe, 2012, p. 245) and can actually be seen as a populist policy of neo-extractivism under the patriotic veil of post-neoliberal legitimacy.

From 1972 to 1992 the Texaco-Chevron Oil Company was active in Ecuador and used obsolete<sup>6</sup> technology, which led to 16.8 billion gallons of crude oil and 19 billion gallons of toxic waste<sup>7</sup> (Banerjee, 2011, p.335) being spilled in the Amazon, causing an ‘Amazonian Chernobyl’ which heavily affected the Siona, Secoya, Quichua and Cofán people living along the Aguarico River. Back in 1993, my mother was project manager of USAID’s<sup>8</sup> Ecuador Development Scholarship Program,<sup>9</sup> which sent fifteen Amazonian community leaders, including a number of Cofán, for training in the United States. USAID was surprised by the indigenous leaders when

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<sup>6</sup> The company took advantage of Ecuador’s lack of environmental regulations under the 1967 constitution.

<sup>7</sup> Back in 1972, 45% of Ecuador’s national export revenue came from oil (Valdivia, 2007, p. 45), because it held 63.5% of shares in the oil drilled in the Ecuadorian Amazon (Lyons, 2004, p.722) and made \$23.5 billion, or the equivalent of 9/10 of profits during the twenty years of Texaco extraction (Barrett, 2014, p.25). Currently, Ecuador’s economy still relies heavily on oil extraction.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)

<sup>9</sup> EDSP was part of the Caribbean and Latin American Scholarship Program (CLASP II), a follow-on to CLASP I, which was initiated in response to recommendations in the 1984 Kissinger Commission Report to counter increasing Soviet bloc activity in the region by increasing the number of U.S.-trained individuals from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

they presented a class-action lawsuit against Texaco, representing 30,000 people from the Amazon. Unfortunately, even though the lawsuit found Chevron guilty, the company claimed there was wrongdoing by the plaintiffs in corrupt Ecuadorian courts and the indigenous peoples still remain without a penny of compensation, while continuing to face contamination and oil-related health problems.

Thus my interest in the Cofán initially stemmed from growing up in Ecuador and hearing about this lawsuit through my mother's connection. This interest was developed further during my undergraduate History studies, as I continued to be concerned about the environmental and social consequences of a negligent hegemonic state which will exploit resources at any cost.



### 1.3 Crowdfunding campaign

The screenshot shows the Indiegogo campaign page for 'Amazonian Stories: Short Films and Anthropology'. The campaign is based in Quito, Ecuador, and is a video/web project. It has 268 backers, 5 updates, 4 comments, 94 funders, and 9 gallery items. The campaign goal is \$4,000 USD, which has been 100% funded by 94 people in 1 month. The campaign is 15 hours old. The current goal is \$4,000 USD, with a flexible funding option. Avery Morrow has funded the campaign. The page includes a video player showing a man with red face paint and a feathered headdress. Below the video, there is a description: 'Films that promote the Cofán people's projects and anthropological research on oil and politics.' The page also features a 'CONTRIBUTE NOW' button and a 'SELECT A PERK' section.

(Source: <http://igg.me/at/amazonianstories>)

After corresponding with Randy Borman in October 2014 about my research goals and budget, I was awarded a VLIR Travel Grant, which covered my flights between Ecuador and Belgium, but I still needed \$4000 to pay for two months of food, accommodation, transport and interviews. Hence, I raised the money through an Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign called ‘Amazonian Stories: Short Films and Anthropology.’ In addition to providing me with the funds to complete my research and to creating public awareness about the Cofán, I had hoped that the fact of my fundraising to pay for my trip would make the Cofán aware that many people are interested in becoming allies and that despite my many privileges, I’m not a wealthy foreign researcher. Nevertheless, I believe some participants were not aware of the crowdfunding campaign.

## 1.4 Research questions

As is typical for ethnographies, one's original questions quickly dissolve and are replaced by new ones, based on participant observation. I mainly focused my interviews around the following questions:

1. In which ways do the Cofán engage pragmatically with their environment and the outside world?
2. How is the Ecuadorian State paradoxically negligent and hegemonic?
3. Is Socio Bosque a form of governmentality and leading to the expansion of the capitalist frontier?
4. How do the Cofán manage to resist hegemony?
5. What is the Cofán's relationship with money and commodities?
6. What do the Cofán value and what sort of lifestyle do they desire? Assuming that the Cofán ultimately desire to be tranquil (*opatssi*<sup>10</sup>) and do so by continuing their forest-based subsistence, which requires forest conservation (*tsampima coiraye*), how do money and commodities affect these two concepts?
7. Do the Cofán desire/fear the oil company and a 'Millennium City'<sup>11</sup> and if so, why?
8. What are the effects of globalization on the community, as expressed by young people who have more ease of access to other towns and who watch TV?

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<sup>10</sup>*Opatssi* is a term used by the Cofán to describe their ideal life, which is calm, satiated, filled with energetic health (Cepek, 2008a, p. 335) and devoid of anxiety, nervousness, fear, anger, violence and selfishness (Cepek, 2008a, p. 341), which are qualities associated with the outside world. *Opa* is also used "as an adjective to refer to a 'satisfying' existence, a 'happy' community, and a 'good' person," and is often used to describe the *opa con'sin* or *opa woolly monkey* (Cepek, 2008a, p.335).

<sup>11</sup> The government of Ecuador has bulldozed communities and constructed the Millennium Cities (Ciudades del Milenio) in Pañacocha, Playas de Cuyabeno, Dureno, Bajo Alto and Tablada de Sánchez after these communities granted them access to oil exploitation.

9. In which ways is the perceived disunity related to changes in internal and external politics and economics?
10. Where did the concepts of *opatssi canseye* and *tsampima coiraye* originate, are they desirable forms of living, how are they experienced on a daily basis, and can they survive if the community runs out of money or decides to approve oil exploitation?



### **1.5 Thesis outline**

In the methodology section, I outline the different anthropological methods used and their limitations, question whether my impressions of ‘bad talk’ in the community were related to my alien presence, mention my limited access to certain community members and activities, explain the language problems and other difficulties faced in the field, and describe the role of filmmaking in my research.

Afterwards, in the theoretical framework section, I outline the history of Ecuadorian land tenure and the current state of alleged ‘post-neoliberalism,’ and explain why Zábalo is a frontier of capitalism and a frontier of control. Then I question the applicability of the ideas of the ‘environmentally noble savage’ and

environmentality to describe Cofán relations to the outside world and emphasize their pragmatism.

The main body of this paper is divided into two main sections: 'Politics in Everyday Life' and 'The Capitalist Frontier.' In the first section I describe the ways in which the state is paradoxically negligent and hegemonic at the same time, exemplify this through the mayor's populist local politics and the imposition of new restrictive gasoline and bullet laws, and then propose the term 'mindless domination' to explain this paradox. Furthermore, I look at how the Cofán resist this domination and how some interpret it through the spirit world.

In the second section, I outline the economic factors that have made people more dependent on money, discuss their current sources of income, and examine the 'dreamscapes' of youth. In addition, I argue that the community sees oil exploitation as inevitable and has become more divided for political and economic reasons. I also speculate on whether this may change their values and relationship to the forest.

Finally, in Appendix I, I present a discussion of reflexivity, where I question the role of anthropologists in the field, reflexively look at my impression management and relationship with the Cofán, discuss the limitations of deconstructing my 'doxa,' and question the nature of anthropological knowledge. Furthermore, in Appendix II I outline a brief biography of Cofán elder Mauricio Mendua and in Appendix III I highlight some interview passages from Randy Borman that may be of interest to the reader.





## 1.6 A postmodern Indian village

The Cofán are an Amazonian indigenous group, whose population in Ecuador currently numbers about 1,200 individuals, living in 13 communities<sup>12</sup> along the Aguarico and San Miguel rivers in the northeastern province of Sucumbíos, which borders with Peru and Colombia. The Cofán Community of Zábalo was recently founded in 1979<sup>13</sup> by residents of other Cofán communities (primarily Dureno<sup>14</sup>) seeking to escape from oil exploitation and internal colonization by landless farmers, in addition to looking for a location to bring ecotourists and ensure the availability of abundant game.

The Cofán Community of Zábalo has been previously described as a “postmodern Indian village” (Joe Hooper, 1991, as cited in Cepek, 2012a, p.4). This description is accurate, since the village doesn’t fit outsiders’ stereotypes about indigenous people. While still having some thatched roofs and maintaining a forest-based lifestyle involving hunting, fishing and small-scale farming, the Cofán are by no means ‘isolated.’ On the contrary, even though they are located close to the Colombian and Peruvian borders, a one-hour motorized canoe ride from the Quichua ‘Millennium City’ of Playas de

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<sup>12</sup> Cepek states that “Ecuador contains eight Cofán communities (Zábalo, Doreno, Dovuno, Sinangoe, Alto Bermejo, Chandia Na’e, Tayo’su Canque, Soquié), and Colombia holds eleven (Santa Rosa de Sucumbíos, El Diviso, Jardines de Sucumbíos, San José, Rancherías, Santa Rosa del Guamués, Yarinal, Campoalegre-Afilador, Nueva Isla, Villa Nueva, Bocana de Luzón)” (Cepek, 2006, p.13). However, Pisorié Canque, Bavoroé, Opirito, Totoa Nai’qui and Pakuya are also mentioned in Cepek’s video ‘Introduction to Ingi Canse’cho Ande (The Land Where We Have Lived)’: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SfFjH-5J6E>. Many of these communities do not have full legal recognition.

<sup>13</sup> According to an internal community document called the Socio Bosque ‘*Plan de Inversión 2014-2015*,’ Zábalo was founded in 1979 and currently consists of 38 families and approximately 186 inhabitants. I consider these to be the most up-to-date statistics about the community. As explained later on, the process of establishing the community was a slow one, since for a number of years most people commuted back and forth to Dureno, using Zábalo for Cofán-led tourist expeditions and hunting.

<sup>14</sup> Dureno is another Cofán community, located upriver from Zábalo.

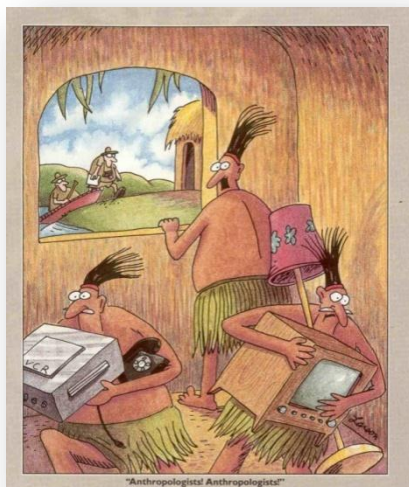
Cuyabeno, and a four-hour ride from Centro Unión (a recently built Ecuadorian outpost that has a road leading to the city of Lago Agrio), one can find Direct TV dishes, televisions, smart phones, laptops, gas stoves, freezers, chainsaws, and at least one washing machine. These commodities have become a part of everyday life, despite the community's diesel electricity generator working for only a few hours each day. Even though people still hunt, fish and work on their *chakras*, over five people speak English, they watch global news, and some young people even play computer games such as Grand Theft Auto San Andreas, Halo, Resident Evil, Call of Duty, and Plants vs. Zombies (Fieldnotes, July 25, 2015).

Michael Cepek, the only anthropologist to have written extensively about the Cofán, had mentioned the use of commodities<sup>15</sup> briefly in his study of the Cofán but without focusing

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<sup>15</sup> The commodities mentioned by Cepek include “clothing, pots, axes, matches, guns, ammunition, fishhooks, fishing line, Western medicine, chain saws, and outboard motors” (Cepek, 2012a, p.139), satellite telephones, solar panels, laptops (Cepek, 2006, p.2), salt and soap (Cepek, 2012a, p.85). While I was there, I also witnessed motorized weed-whackers, chainsaws, TVs, Direct TV dishes, pirated DVDs, mobile phones, freezers, generators, electric fans, brooms, mops, tupperware, some snack food in plastic wrappers, hammocks, plastic chairs, boots, bullets, black water tanks for collecting rain water, mosquito nets, gas stoves, etc. One house exceptionally also had computers, a wii, a solar panel and inverter, etc. Flora Lu et al. recognized that in 2012 there were “generators, stereos, pots, machetes, plates, televisions, refrigerators, metal roofs, bullets for the shotguns and things for personal consumption and for the children (clothing, shoes, watches and school materials)” (Flora Lu et al., 2012, p.177), so it's hard to ascertain how recent certain commodities are. Certainly, Socio Bosque has very recently allowed each family unit to have its own outboard motor and people said the prevalence of TVs is also new. Although some of these commodities are relatively new, in Tidwell's description of Zábalo in the early 1990s, he explains that even though Randy encouraged people to wear their *ondiccu'je dress*, he was also “selling to the community *Kachitos* cheese puffs and bottled sodas” (Tidwell, 1996, p.81), which the author finds contradictory. But is it? Am I less Ecuadorian if I drink Belgian beer? Why is it that so many people hold a double standard, which allows everyone worldwide to engage with

on them in depth (Cepek, 2012a, p.85 & 139). Outsiders will probably continue to be shocked by the contrast between these outside commodities and the traditional lifestyle of the Cofán, primarily because of the ethnocentric and racist portrayal of indigenous peoples through the media. Ever since returning from the field I have been confronted by countless people who assume the Cofán are a naked tribe who don't speak any Spanish and live completely isolated from the rest of the world. This popular view of indigeneity should be defined as “residual colonialism” (Guenther et al., 2006, p.17). As Bruno Latour stated in ‘We Have Never Been Modern’ (1993), the ideas of modernity and civilization are figments of our imagination. I often find myself explaining that even though the Cofán have smart phones, neither we nor they are more or less ‘civilized’ because of that (or perhaps in spite of it).



(Source: Gary Larson, *The Far Side*)

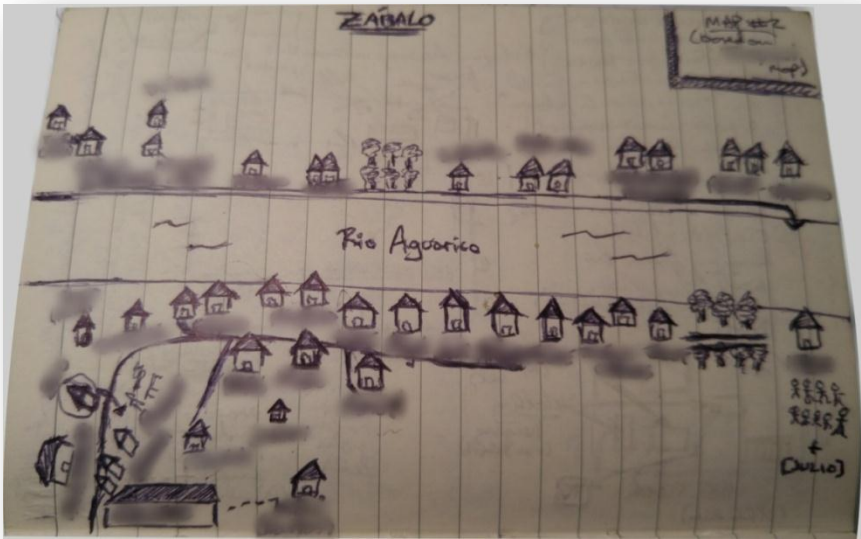
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globalized flows of products and ideas, but don't understand that indigenous people are now “wearing down coats instead of a single blanket and some bear grease” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015)?

Zábalo's residents are mostly from the Cofán community of Dureno, which was heavily affected by oil exploitation. Randy Borman and a few other individuals established Zábalo in the 1970s, but initially just used it for hunting and bringing tourists<sup>16</sup> while they kept Dureno as their home. As Randy explains, the Cofán usually live dispersed along the river and the establishment of communities beginning in the 1930s was because a "hunting camp becomes more and more permanent" (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015). In 1984 they established their first *chakra* fields, so "that's when theoretically we established the community" (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015). People continued to commute to and from Dureno, so sometimes Zábalo was empty and the residents used to joke that an *ai'ñacho* (pet) monkey was the *na'su* (leader) of the community. It wasn't until 1992 that the Ecuadorian government recognized the community, and currently there are approximately 15 houses in the main part of the community, although quite a few Zábalo residents live dispersed along the river, with the furthest point having its own school association called Pakuya.

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<sup>16</sup> The origin of tourism and canoes is entirely due to Randy Borman. In the case of tourism, Zábalo originally had community-built cabins for receiving tourists and nearly everyone benefitted. Now, these cabins have been abandoned and instead there is a small group of people who helped Randy build his own FSC-run tourist cabins and who benefit each time tourists come. Another group of residents have created the 'Asociación Yaicomún,' which is trying to finish its own cabins and find ways of attracting tourists, but lacks Randy's international network. Similarly, the fibreglass canoe business started out with Dureno residents learning how to make canoes and then competing with each other to make higher profits. In Zábalo, Bolivar and two other residents also make canoes (Daniel, personal communication, August 2, 2015). These two instances could be interpreted analytically as examples of Adam Smith's specialization of labor, competition and maximization of profit.



(My simplistic map of Zábalo, based on Tarquino's sketch)

## 2. METHODOLOGY

*"There are scientific methods and models appropriate to other ways of doing anthropological research, but ethnography, as I understand it, is not a science"* (Scheper-Hughes, 2012, p. 228).

*"We must remind ourselves that we tell our stories through others. Further, our self-reflexive stories need not be trivial"* (Steier, 1991, p. 3, as cited in Davies, 2008, p. 10).

### 2.1 Collecting data

I position my research within a 'critical realist' methodological perspective because it avoids extreme relativism and also positivism. According to Charlotte Aull Davies, "[s]uch a philosophical foundation...is to be found in Bhaskar's critical realism, which accepts the existence of a separate social reality whose transcendently real nature makes it a possible object of knowledge for us. In its recognition of the separation, yet interdependence, of the two levels of social structure and individual action, critical realism encourages a form of explanation that builds on the creative

tension between theoretical abstraction and descriptive detail” (Davies, 2008, p.26). In other words, critical realism accepts that both a social structure and individual action are complementary.

Due to the fact that my research was only two months long, most of my data and analysis relies primarily on 67 hours of semi-structured interviews of 25 Cofán participants. Although I have no doubt that my participants will be able to guess some of the individuals in this paper, to preserve people’s anonymity I have created pseudonyms for everybody except for Randy Borman, Bolivar Lucitante, Mauricio Mendua, Carlos Yiyoguaje and Mimi Yiyoguaje, who would not only be easily identified in my text, but also are either Cofán elders or powerful individuals within the community. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes stated, “I have come to see that the time-honored practice of bestowing anonymity on 'our' communities and informants fools few and protects no one” (Scheper-Hughes, 2012, p.226). However, contrary to Scheper-Hughes’ ‘Ire in Ireland,’ I hope my paper doesn’t alienate or insult the people I lived with, who were very kind to me in the summer of 2015.





While in the field I carried around a small notebook to jot down fieldnotes throughout the day, although I primarily relied on ‘headnotes’ (Jackson, 1990, p.5) due to the fact that the notebook is an alienating agent. I publicly carried the notebook and made notes while lying in hammocks or conducting interviews, so that the community was aware of my methodology, but I feared that the more prominent my reliance upon the notebook, the more people would feel judged by a stranger. To avoid creating tension, I wrote many of my notes as well as my diary under my mosquito net at nighttime. The reason for keeping a diary was to pick up on any details I had forgotten and also to differentiate between more objective notes and a more unbiased stream of consciousness.

Prior to each interview I would give a short summary of my general research interests and ask if they were willing to help me with this university project and didn’t mind being recorded. As Davies suggests, an audio recorder “is probably less intrusive and destructive of open and natural conversation than having an ethnographer taking notes, and is infinitely more reliable than

memory” (Davies, 2008, p.126). On two occasions the participants preferred that I just take notes, but the rest of the time I was able to persuade people to let me use an audio recorder so that their comments could later be anonymously transcribed. Obviously, the knowledge that they were being recorded probably led to some degree of self-censoring, but was much more efficient and reliable than taking notes. I believe asking people for verbal consent prior to interviews is ethical, since using a consent form would have frightened participants due to its legal/contractual nature, Spanish is not their mother tongue, and people’s degree of literacy is unknown (Cepek, 2012a, p.128). Moreover, I paid everyone \$10/hour for the interviews<sup>17</sup>, both because it had been recommended by Michael Cepek and Randy Borman, and also because I believe indigenous people should receive at least a little monetary gain for having an anthropology student in their midst. Only one individual in the community was opposed to speaking to me altogether. I also paid<sup>18</sup> for food and accommodation, transport to Playas de Cuyabeno,

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<sup>17</sup> Although I believe it was ethical to pay the individuals I interviewed for their contributions, I often wondered if my relationship with the community was mainly financial (Diary, July 19, 2015). In the first few days I wrote that “[w]hen unpacking the food that I brought them [my host family], I felt the initial discomfort of ‘power relations’” (Fieldnotes, July 12, 2015) and that conducting an interview “feels like a business transaction” (Fieldnotes, July 15, 2015). The ‘power relations’ were also evident in the fact that my host family father spoke to me with the formal you (usted), instead of the informal ‘tú’ throughout my entire stay, even when I spoke to him with ‘tú’. Although ‘usted’ is a sign of respect for people you don’t know, it is also used when speaking with an elder or someone in a position of power.

<sup>18</sup> The only thing I refused to spend money on was alcohol. At the two parties I attended [Tarapoa’s Día de Nacionalidades (17th anniversary of cantonization) took place on August 6/7, while the Playas de Cuyabeno parish anniversary took place on August 21/22], I was often asked to buy people beers. One or two times I acquiesced because my participants were persistent and told me to buy a drink to show other people in town that I’m a ‘nice guy.’ Although I do not mean to judge people for their partying habits, at both events there seemed to be a lot of reckless binge drinking and in one case I saw one of my participants sprawled out on a bench the next morning.



Tarapoa and Centro Unión, gasoline for fishing trips, and black-market bullets for hunting. As Davies states, “informants should not be exploited and a fair return should be made for their assistance” (Davies, 2008, p.59). My hope is that besides being an unnecessary inquisitive presence, I will have contributed something useful with my films and my actions in Zábalo will not be interpreted as unethical by my participants or my readers.

## **2.2 Bad talk and the ‘human variable’**

When I arrived in the community, one of the first things I noticed was a general sensation of disunity, distrust, individualism and a lot of bad talk (*ega afa’cho*). However, upon further reflection, it occurred to me that what I was witnessing was not so much cultural change based on interaction with the outside world or their internal political, social and economic world, but rather a response to my own presence<sup>19</sup>. Certainly, when I asked people whether the community was mainly united or becoming increasingly divided, most Cofán generally agreed that there were small divisions due to jealousy over those families that had more money and jobs or due to differential support of community presidents, but assured me the people were still very united (Eight anonymous participants, personal communication, July 28 & 31, August 2, 5, 9, 16, 21 & 28, 2015). There are a few problems in resolving this question: Firstly, to question people directly about their alleged ‘disunity’ may actually reify it in the minds of participants who otherwise don’t see much conflict. Secondly, even if there were internal conflicts, participants have no reason to ‘wash their dirty laundry in public,’ especially revealing anything to an outsider who they know will write an anthropological paper about them. Thirdly, my alien presence within the community may actually have produced the tension I was seeing, both in reality and in my perception of reality, which is exactly why reflexivity is so important (See Appendix I).

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<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, even if there was bad talk, this is part of Cofán culture and although it expresses certain tensions, it doesn’t mean people are fundamentally divided. This kind of gossip exists all over the world, especially in the context of small communities, but doesn’t mean people don’t get along.

Although the community was supposed to total 186 individuals, I actually only saw around 25-30 male adults on a daily basis, most of whom I was able to talk to and interview. In my first week I observed: “It’s a pity I have no way of interacting with children and women, as it really limits my participants to very few people” (Diary, August 17, 2015). My problem was threefold: 1) Most women didn’t appear to speak much Spanish; 2) When I visited houses, it was assumed I wanted to talk to the men; 3) On the three occasions I spoke to women they would say “I don’t know” or wouldn’t elaborate on many questions, demonstrating a timidity that may be common in the community, although I obviously cannot generalize from such few interactions and such short fieldwork experience. As Davies suggests, “[w]omen researchers were both more likely to study other women and better placed to do so” (Davies, 2008, p.46). Furthermore, I generally had few opportunities to witness certain central daily activities, such as working on *chakras*, going to church<sup>20</sup>, playing football/volleyball in the evenings<sup>21</sup>, running the fiberglass canoe business, conducting park guard trail monitoring, or drinking *yoco* stimulating drink<sup>22</sup> between 5-6 a.m.

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<sup>20</sup> Some people are evangelical, but not everyone is religious (M. Mendua, personal communication, July 18, 2015).

<sup>21</sup> I played football and volleyball once each, but I’m bad at sports, so I usually avoided this activity. The other activities weren’t avoided, but despite my interest in seeing those things, I never managed to get a Cofán to take me to these events. I was taken hunting only one time and only started going fishing more frequently near the end of my stay, probably because I gave away my fishhooks on land, rather than asking to go fishing and bringing my fishhooks along with us. Randy had warned that giving away fishhooks might be “viewed as a one-time gift” (R. Borman, email, April 14, 2015) and didn’t guarantee I would be taken fishing. Eventually, I was taken fishing a lot by one participant, because I would pay him for the gasoline spent and I was improving rapport with him.

<sup>22</sup> I was able to drink it one morning, but unfortunately I was late and everybody else had already drunk theirs. Often I would wake between 6-8 a.m. due to staying up writing fieldnotes the night before, so various times I showed up just as everyone had left.



### **2.3 Language barriers and interpreters**

Prior to arriving, Randy had recommended that I learn A'ingae, but despite my efforts prior to and during fieldwork, my knowledge remained very limited. Even though everyone in the community spoke Spanish to some degree, during various interviews and conversations I had difficulty understanding what was told in broken Spanish. Moreover, certain terms like *opatssi*, *in'jan'cho* and *tansin'tsse* were used without my full understanding of their meaning. Many words in A'ingae are polysemic and my comprehension of their nuances is extremely limited. In other words, much was lost by not speaking to people in their mother-tongue and instead forcing them to use Spanish or English. Furthermore, I relied on three different interpreters during my interviews with Mauricio Mendua<sup>23</sup>, meaning that in his case much was literally lost in translation.

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<sup>23</sup> Two young Cofán residents volunteered their time, in addition to my research assistant. I found their translations to be more insightful than my assistant's, making me question how much was actually lost in translation. The other question of reliability with Mauricio is that other participants doubted the accuracy of his memory.

It is vital to note that my research assistant throughout my project was a 16-year-old named Tarquino Yiyoguaje who luckily, possibly due to his young age, seemed to get along with most individuals. Although I owe much of my success in visiting people's houses to him, I must also be aware that his presence may have led participants to self-censor. Even though he primarily helped me with Mauricio, he also helped translate for a few other people. On many occasions he would simply phrase his reply as 'Yes' after Mauricio had just said a few sentences, leading me to believe that plenty of information was lost. However, I believe his presence helped me establish relations with many members of the community, especially at the beginning, when one of my only ways of finding an excuse to enter someone's house was to go buy handicrafts from them (starting five days after my arrival, on July 17, according to my fieldnotes).





#### **2.4 Torrential rain and the empty village**

During the first week, many people were absent from Zábalo because they were doing park-guard work in the Güeppí area of the Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve. Also, from July 24 until August 3, the river rose to the point that water reached the last step of our house on stilts and also flooded the path I used to walk into the village. I relied on Tarquino's canoe paddling skills<sup>24</sup> to get to participants' houses, which restricted my movement and ability to interact with people. Furthermore, after August 22 I found it very difficult to find anyone in the community to speak to, as participants had left for university<sup>25</sup>,

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<sup>24</sup> I didn't trust my own ability to paddle to the community, because I once sunk the canoe by leaning too heavily on one side. Furthermore, on other occasions I fell out of the canoe, stepped on a rotten log and fell into the water. On one occasion I lost my balance while crossing a fallen log, splattering into the mud. One might say I lack the *habitus* of canoeing, walking across logs and other essential forest skills, such as hunting and fishing. Fortunately, by laughing at the fact I only managed to catch one *sambiri* (sardine) and hooked a catfish through its side rather than its mouth, I built rapport. Tarquino was also helpful in fending off the aggressive hunting dogs with a stick at nighttime.

<sup>25</sup> One of my participants is attending Brown University.

business trips or hunting and fishing. During my last two weeks in Zábalo, I mostly focused on my filmmaking project with the help of the president of the community, Mimi Yiyoguaje, and only managed to conduct five more interviews prior to my departure. Usually, when nobody could be found, I would go talk to Mauricio Mendua, a Cofán elder, whose brief life history can be found in Appendix II.

However, on the whole, I feel my rapport with the community improved over time, especially after I helped in the planing of wood for two houses and went on many fishing trips and one hunting trip. Tarquino was vital for establishing connections with people in the community because originally I felt one of my biggest difficulties was “getting the courage to knock on people’s doors and bother them” (Diary, July 20, 2015). I ended up going to peoples’ houses originally to buy handicrafts and little by little established relations with all families in the main part of Zábalo. After a time, I realized people seem to have an ‘open-door policy,’ (Fieldnotes, July 15, 2015) tolerating people poking their heads through the window, calling them from outside or walking in directly. Unfortunately, many houses are dispersed along the river, so those people were mostly left out of the study, except for one or two exceptions.



## 2.5 Filmmaking and staged authenticity

When I first met Randy at the offices of the Fundación Sobrevivencia Cofán<sup>26</sup>(FSC), he had suggested a series of topics for short films that I could make about the Cofán, and later in the community Mimi and a few other people suggested additional topics. In the end, I decided to make films about the following topics: 1) Ecotourism with the FSC; 2) The FSC's Education Program; 3) Charapa turtle conservation; 4) Park guard program; 5) The ayahuasca (*yaje*) ceremony; 6) Funding tourist cabins; 7) Promoting community tourism; 8) Medicinal plants; 9) Fish farming donations; 10) Nature video. The last three videos are yet to be edited. My hope is that the videos will be used to promote Cofán messages and help with fundraising. I also gave a few sessions on film editing to two young Cofán so that in the future they can hopefully make videos on their own, as in the case of the Kayapó (Turner, 1992).

Although Randy Borman had originally suggested I get accustomed to the community before conducting interviews and that people would be less hesitant about making films, I actually found the opposite to be true. Even though I explained both projects every time I visited a house, people were more receptive to helping me with my university project and it wasn't until after I was officially accepted at the community meeting of August 12 that I got more active participation in the filmmaking project.

In essence, had I not proposed to make films, I never would have been allowed to stay in Zábalo. An interesting aspect of the films is that I never intended them to be ethnographic, but I learned a few things in the process. Firstly, when I asked community members to decide how to represent themselves, they always decided to switch out of their t-shirts and shorts and into their traditional clothing. Secondly, when I asked if I should film in front of a thatched roof or a tin roof, I was directed to the thatched roof. In other words, the Cofán have a clear idea of how outsiders expect to perceive them. They use their *ondiccu'je* (traditional dress) as symbolic capital

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<sup>26</sup> The FSC is an NGO created by Randy Borman in 1998 to make international alliances and raise donations for projects relating to cultural and environmental preservation.



(Bourdieu, 1977) in order to show their traditional culture<sup>27</sup>, but also to fit the image outsiders have about indigenous people, whether or not it actually coincides with their “own visions of themselves and their futures” (Conklin, 1997, p.726). Their using language of eco-indigeneity, dressing in traditional clothing, or presenting themselves to outside audiences in specific ways should not make us doubt their authenticity, but rather be interpreted as a pragmatic way of rallying support.



Although there is clearly “staged authenticity” (MacCannell, 1976, p.98), this does not invalidate the depth and authenticity of their culture. For instance, on one occasion Mimi Yiyoguaje asked if I could film the entire procedure of preparing and serving ayahuasca

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<sup>27</sup> For the sake of this paper, when I refer to culture I mean that it is “‘ideology-in-the-making,’ ‘rationalizations,’ developed to impart to the practical existence of everyday life an imaginary directionality” and its ongoing construction and reconstruction occur “within larger historical fields” that are affected by “modes of mobilizing social labor and by the conflicts these generate internally and externally, within and between social organizations” (Wolf, 2001, p.318).



(*yaje*), so I filmed them in the forest, but they had to take an alternate route through the forest to avoid crossing a path where a menstruating woman may have been. Later on, Carlos Yiyoguaje used a bee hive incense to scare away any malevolent *cocoya* tree spirits in the area and the pot of *yaje* was brewed. Since I had asked if I could participate in the ceremony, they agreed to postpone serving the *yaje* until the next day, so we could first do the filming. Since they weren't going to drink the *yaje* while I filmed them, I suggested they use chocolate powder to simulate the dark liquid drink for film. They agreed, but decided to use a separate bowl rather than the gourd which is reserved for *yaje*. In the end, Carlos was too tempted to resist drinking *yaje* and decided to use the correct bowl for it.



On the following night, the ceremony they had staged for film was repeated for real in exactly the same way and although it was hard to tell what people talked and laughed about in A'ingae, I heard the words *munda* (peccary), *pacco* (fish) and *ttesi* (jaguar), making me think they were exchanging hunting stories (Fieldnotes, August 28, 2015). Additionally, even though being viewed as a quasi-researcher-filmmaker-tourist may have caused some hesitancy, it also revealed some community tensions, such as the community's distrust of how the FSC is managed, since it ran out of funds in 2012 and people have little knowledge about what it does. People were afraid I would make films for the FSC, but since I arrived through Randy, I decided to remain neutral and tried to assure people I would be making films about the Cofán in general<sup>28</sup>. In a later section I explain the political and economic reasons for tension with the FSC. For a discussion on the ways in which filmmaking also was a hindrance to my research, see Appendix I.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 3.1 Context

##### 3.1.1 What is a frontier? Is Zábalo a frontier zone?

According to Danilo Geiger, frontiers are “areas remote from political centres, which hold strategic significance or economic potential for human exploitation, and are contested by social formations of unequal power” (Geiger, 2008, p.10). Furthermore, he claims that “frontiers are loosely-administered spaces rich in resources, coveted by non-residents” (Geiger, 2008, p.10). He criticizes Frederick Jackson Turner's original ethnocentric and racist thesis that the frontier was a place where civilization encountered savages and colonized ‘empty space,’ thus producing American exceptionalism and a particular ‘pioneer mentality.’ In contrast, he defines the post-colonial frontier as involving the following factors: “(a) low population densities; (b) absence of full-

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<sup>28</sup> In the end, this is why I uploaded five community videos and two FSC videos to a new ‘Comunidad Cofán Zábalo’ Youtube channel, rather than sending them directly to either the FSC or the community.

blown civil administration and routine state control; (c) pronounced presence of non-native private actors; (d) denial of indigenous inhabitants' ownership claims to land and natural resources; (e) indigenous people's exclusion from the moral universe by association with untamed nature; (f) wasteful and destructive resource management on the part of intruding outside actors; (g) exploitative/predatory economic relations between intruders and indigenous inhabitants; (h) failure to establish or assert state monopoly of violence" (Geiger, 2008, p.45).

These eight conditions apply perfectly to the Cofán of Zábalo in the north-eastern corner of the Ecuadorian Amazon rainforest, considering that:

- a) There is only a population of approximately 186 people surrounded by 137,500 hectares of forest.
- b) State officials rarely visit the community or invest in projects there.
- c) Oil companies are drilling nearby and will inevitably negotiate with Zábalo.
- d) Although 137,500 hectares are recognized as 'ancestral territory' by the government and the Cofán have an agreement of 'use, management and possession' (*convenio de uso, manejo y posesión*) for 87, 500 hectares, the government legally owns the subsoil, and there's always fear of a government land grab: "They've been doing it since 1492...Legally they can't, but effectively they can" (R. Borman, personal communication, August 27, 2015).
- e) "The Western view of us is that we're dirty. That's just not the way you should live...[and Ecuadorians say] 'you're savages, you're cannibals. Do you eat people?'"<sup>29</sup> (Gerardo, personal communication, August 9, 2015). In addition to confronting constant racism, the Cofán are also expected to be 'ecologically noble savages' (Redford, 1991).

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<sup>29</sup> "Throughout Ecuador, it is not unusual to hear people say, 'the Indians are backwards and dirty,' 'the Indians do not work,' 'the Indians need to change and become civilized' or 'a few Indians should not be allowed to stand in the way of national development'" (Kimerling, 2006, p.430).

- f) The Cofán have suffered from constant pressure of external agrarian colonization<sup>30</sup> by farmers, oil exploitation, mining and lumbering. The community of Zábalo was founded in 1979 by a group of Dureno residents who wanted to escape the pressures of outsiders exploiting oil at the resource frontier, establish a location for bringing tourists, and also grab land before the *colonos* did (Fieldnotes, July 13, 2015). Although the community of Zábalo has successfully prevented outsider intervention through their park guard program and by being on the peripheries of the state (near the borders of Peru and Colombia), there have been incidents of illegal incursions on their land. In other words, there is both a political and economic pressure expanding into this region.
- g) Though the Cofán community of Zábalo is not necessarily exploited directly, Cofán leader Randy Borman argues that “one of the biggest forms of exploitation that I’m seeing is this expectation that native peoples worldwide should continue to provide environmental services to the rest of the world for free” (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015). Additionally, most Cofán earn very low wages whether they work inside or outside the community, meaning they are ‘exploited’ by the dominant Ecuadorian culture.
- h) The Cofán are increasingly experiencing military and police control along the Aguarico River, including new requirements for licensed and matriculated canoes. Even though during the 1990s the Cofán successfully occupied and burnt down oil wells, nowadays people are much more fatalistic, asserting that they can no longer protest. This is

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<sup>30</sup> The agrarian frontier is mainly closed due the fact that the Ecuadorian government is no longer allowing colonization of Zábalo land, which is part of the Cuyabeno National Park. However, in practice this continues to be a threat. A Cofán community member witnessed how hundreds of invaders entered an area near the city of Lago Agrio, on the Aguarico River (Fieldnotes, August 5, 2015). There is always the threat of the government grabbing land or of landless farmers invading.

greatly due to having witnessed and participated in the 2008 Quichua protests at Playas de Cuyabeno against oil drilling, which led to a military confrontation and ended in the State going ahead with its plans. Thus, even though the government doesn't have a complete monopoly over violence, Correa's presidency has tightened control over its citizens and created "docile bodies" (Foucault, 1975).

The utility of using 'frontier' as a concept is that it allows us to interpret space in terms of "structures of domination" (Geiger, 2008, p.9). I focus primarily on frontiers of 'control' (political) and 'capitalism' (economic) because the community of Zábalo has been most gravely influenced by government policies and integration into the global market, rather than by being colonized overtly by outsiders. I shy away from applying the words 'agrarian,' 'settlement,' 'resource,' or 'extraction' to the term 'frontier,' since I believe they create an array of analytically useless concepts. The terms 'capitalist' and 'control' suffice to describe a context where people are afraid of agrarian settlers and fear resource extraction. In other words, the community of Zábalo is a 'frontier of control' because the Ecuadorian government is interested in "a pragmatic system of indirect rule" (Geiger, 2008, p.34) over a group of people who have retained much of their autonomy until now. It is also a 'capitalist frontier' because people used to require less money (*corifi'ndi*) but over the years have become more integrated into the global market economy, leading them to seek new ways of earning money.

Clearly, Zábalo and its surrounding land are examples of a frontier area where a small number of indigenous people live on a large area of highly coveted resources. At the moment, due to the low price of oil, there is little pressure for their resources, but many outside factors have influenced the community both politically and economically. According to Randy Borman, President Correa's government has been "very negative" for indigenous people and people are witnessing a "steady loss of personal liberties and the steady increase of state control" (R. Borman, personal communication, August 27, 2015). Although Randy is hopeful about the potential of indigenous land being given economic value for its

environmental services, whereby the Cofán could work as the ideal custodians of the forest, he also believes that the Correa government is trying to get “everybody fitting a particular cog in the big socialist system.” Highlighting the Cofáns’ inability to oppose the government, he stated that if he tried to make Cofán ancestral land recognized in an international court, “I would be put in jail for not having filed a tax return...each one of our leaders would be attacked individually on a completely other basis and taken out of action” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 27, 2015). Hence, Zábalo is witnessing the expansion of hegemonic state control (frontier of control) and greater integration into the market economy (frontier of capitalism).



### 3.1.2 Ecuadorian & Cofán history of land tenure

Ever since 1492, Latin America has struggled with numerous actors imposing Western notions of land tenure on the native populations, engaging in ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey, 2003) and expanding both agrarian and capital frontiers into the seemingly boundless Amazon rainforest. In Ecuador, as in much of the continent, Spain’s *encomienda* system was the original form of land tenure, whereby indigenous people worked on large plots of land for Spanish conquistadors in exchange for protection. The first Spanish settlements in the Ecuadorian Amazon were in Baeza, Achidona, and Ávila, where they primarily forced indigenous people to grow cotton (Vickers, 1984, p.11). An Indian rebellion in 1579 reduced Spanish presence until 1625, and was followed by another revolt in 1635. In the late 17th Century and throughout the 18th Century, Jesuit missionaries forcibly relocated indigenous people into *reducciones* (mission towns), because the natives lived (and to some extent continue living) scattered along the riverbanks. The concentration of people into communities facilitated religious conversion, exploitation of labor, and colonial control over their subjects.

Eventually, the *encomienda* system evolved into a “debt-peonage system” (Vickers, 1984, p.12), where labourers were exploited on haciendas and *obrajes* (textile workshops). However, as historian William Vickers points out, Amazonian Indians had more autonomy than Andean Indians because of the geographical barrier of the mountains. In the case of the Cofán people, who call themselves A’i and inhabit the north-eastern Ecuadorian Amazon rainforest, they first came in contact with Spaniards in 1536, actively resisted Spanish invasions in the 1570s and 1580s, were visited by Jesuit priest Rafael Ferrer in 1602 and, despite some success in Christian conversion, managed to resist further Spanish incursions. Unfortunately, mainly due to disease, the original population of approximately 20,000 was reduced to 300-350 in the 1930s (Borman, 1996, p.186).

After Ecuador’s independence in 1822, the *criollo* elite continued exploiting Indians on haciendas. Their dependency relationship to landlords ameliorated slightly due to a law passed in

1918 which prevented hacienda owners from jailing labourers who didn't pay their debts (Vickers, 1984, p12). In 1937 and 1938 two more laws were passed "which allowed indigenous communities to form agricultural production cooperatives and provincial federations" (Vickers, 1984, p.13) but "forbade resale and titling" (Wenner et al., 1996, p.15). However, it wasn't until the 1955 'Ley Especial de Oriente' that obligatory work relationships on haciendas were abolished and health facilities were required to be provided on haciendas. Fortunately, it seems that the Cofán people were spared from most of these colonial and neo-colonial land practices and weren't strongly affected by the rubber boom's adverse consequences (Borman, 1996, p. 186), as was the case elsewhere in the Amazon.

However, in 1945 the Royal Dutch Shell Oil Company started prospecting for oil on Cofán territory, without any prior consultation. Their entry also led to the construction of the first highway into the *Oriente* (Amazon), which would later facilitate internal colonization<sup>31</sup>. Although there were human rights abuses towards the natives, the Cofán didn't know they "had any rights to defend in the face of this invasion" (Borman, 1996, p.187). They simply hoped "the outsiders will eventually go away" (Borman, 1996, p.187). Although the Shell Oil Company did leave when the Ecuadorian government demanded a trans-Andean pipeline and a larger share of the profits, in 1964 the Texaco-Gulf consortium was given permission to prospect and they also built roads.

As occurs everywhere in the world, when roads are built people tend to build houses and farms on either side of them. This was also the case in the Ecuadorian *Oriente*, with a 5.6% growth rate per year and peaking at 15% per year from 1974 to 1982 (Gaechter, 2007, p.9), along with one of the highest deforestation<sup>32</sup> rates in the

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<sup>31</sup> Contrary to countries like Brazil, where Amazonian colonization was heavily influenced by government subsidizing of cattle ranching, Ecuadorian colonization was spontaneous (Murphy et al., 1997, p. 40).

<sup>32</sup> Wenner et al. suggest that deforestation in Ecuador is caused by specific forestry laws and energy policies. In addition to banning the sale of wood and forcing people to chop it down to get land rights, until 1992 Ecuador subsidized energy prices and gave credit to agricultural producers.



Amazon. This incredibly rapid land grab was due to the oil boom (Kimerling, 1990, p. 855). Also, the fact that the Ecuadorian government intended to establish economic cooperation with the US as part of John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress initiative led to the creation of the 1964 'Ley de Reforma Agraria y Colonización' (Law of Agrarian Reform and Colonization) and the 'Ley de Tierras Baldías y Colonización'<sup>33</sup> (Law of Empty Lands and Colonization), "which abolished traditional forms of debt peonage and established the Instituto Ecuatoriano de Reforma Agraria y Colonización (IERAC<sup>34</sup>)" (Vickers, 1984, p.13). IERAC, the Ecuadorian Institute of Agrarian Reform and Colonization, divided up estates that were previously owned by the state and the Catholic Church, in addition to granting land titles to landless peasants who were capable of colonizing *tierras baldías*<sup>35</sup> (empty lands) and chopping down 50%<sup>36</sup> of their land to demonstrate it was 'productive' (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015). In addition to reducing

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Furthermore, high inflation rates "stimulated investment in real assets such as land" (Wenner et al., 1996, p.13).

<sup>33</sup> In 1936 there was already a Law of Empty Lands, which was updated in the 1964 law to emphasize agricultural structural change through colonization of underworked lands (Gaechter, 2007, p. 4).

<sup>34</sup> In addition to IERAC, other entities such as the Instituto Nacional de Colonización de la Región Amazónica Ecuatoriana (INCRAE) and the Dirección General de Desarrollo Forestal (DGDF) also played roles in the creation and execution of land policy, although their exact roles aren't exactly clear to me.

<sup>35</sup> The lands were far from empty, as they were inhabited by indigenous peoples, who require large areas of land for hunting and fishing. This same excuse has been used elsewhere in the Amazon, like Brazil (Rivero, 2010, p. 9).

<sup>36</sup> Murphy et al. claim that "the 1978 land titling law may still be encouraging deforestation, although its stipulation that homesteaders clear 50 per cent of their land within two years of settlement to obtain a provisional land title (*certificado de posesión*) has never been enforced" (Murphy et al., 1997, p.39) Contrary to Murphy and Borman's assertion of 50% land clearing, Wenner et al. suggest that settlers had to clear 80% of their land or risk "repossession by the government" (Wenner et al., 1996, p.15).

demographic pressure<sup>37</sup> in the densely populated highland areas, by allowing both *mestizo* and indigenous settlers to migrate (Rogge, 1997, p. 241), the government wanted to expand agricultural production (Murphy, 1997, p.37) and protect national frontiers after having lost half<sup>38</sup> of its Amazonian land to Peru in the 1941 war, including roughly 20% of its oil deposits (Orta-Martínez, 2010, p. 207). In addition to the colonization, the entire region was heavily polluted by Texaco's oil exploitation, which dumped 16.8 billion gallons of crude oil and 19 billion gallons of toxic waste between 1972 and 1992 (Banerjee, 2011, p.335), not to mention the many oil spills that came afterwards from the state-owned Petroamazonas<sup>39</sup> Oil Company.

Randy Borman claims that until 1990, the process of landless farmers colonizing land, gaining land titles by deforesting half the land, turning it into charcoal,<sup>40</sup> and planting cash crops (mainly coffee) was prevalent. "As these lands lose fertility gradually over time...they tend to be converted to pasture. Apart from this, households desire to diversify agricultural activities by adding pasture for cattle and dairy cows" (Thapa et al, 1996, p. 1321). Despite these land-titling restrictions, Randy was able to secure a

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<sup>37</sup> Randy Borman describes colonization as a 'social safety valve' (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015).

<sup>38</sup> According to David Martin, not only was half of the Ecuadorian Amazon lost, but "[s]ince 1830, the country has lost more than seventy percent of its land to Colombia, Peru, and Brazil" (Martin, 1999, p.64).

<sup>39</sup> In addition to oil rig spills, there are 498 km of Trans-Ecuadorian pipeline called SOTE, 391 km of secondary pipelines, and 106 km of transfer lines (Kimerling, 1990, p.857-858), most of which have not been replaced since the 1970s and regularly break. At least back in 1990, "[s]pills from flow lines alone dump an estimated 17,000 to 21,000 gallons of oil into the Oriente roughly every 2 weeks" (Kimerling, 1990, p.865).

<sup>40</sup> "In an effort to curb the export of raw tropical hardwoods and encourage the development of a value-adding domestic wood processing and furniture industry, the government banned the export of logs...Commercial timber on many exploited plots is either left to rot or is burned because extraction to a neighboring market would cost marginally more" (Wenner et al., 1994, p.12).

series of land titles for Cofán territories starting in the 1970s, which are summarized in the following table:

**Figure 1: Cofán Territory**

| Land-holding unit  | Year of title(s) | Area (in hectares) |
|--|------------------|--------------------|
| Comuna Cofán Doreno  | 1978             | 9,500              |
| Comuna Cofán Dovuno  | 1978             | 4,500              |
| Centro Cofán Zábalo ( <i>overlaps with the Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve</i> )   | 1992, 1999       | 137,000            |
| Centro Cofán Sinangoe ( <i>overlaps with the Cayambe-Coca Ecological Reserve</i> )   | 1998             | 13,000             |
| Cofán-Bermejo Ecological Reserve ( <i>includes the communities of Chandia Na'e, Tayo'su Canqqe, Alto Bermejo, and Soquié</i> ) | 2002             | 55,000             |
| Cayambe-Coca Ecological Reserve ( <i>lower portion is managed by FEINCE</i> )  | 2003             | 150,000            |
| Total  |                  | 369,000            |

(Source: Cepek, 2008b, p.214)

In 1987, when Randy personally submitted a document to IERAC demonstrating that the Cofán forests brought in more money through tourism than through deforestation, the Ministry of Environment created an ecological zoning procedure that protected large expanses of forests from being chopped down (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015). Nevertheless, even until the present day, after “decades of (largely unsuccessful) agrarian reform, colonization programs, agricultural frontier expansion and land re-concentration, land distribution barely features in the constitution and the National Development Plan” (Radcliffe, 2012, p. 247). Additionally, the 2008 constitution focuses on land use, rather than on equitable land redistribution (Radcliffe, 2012, p.247) and both rural farmers and indigenous people remain marginalized and “subject to growing levels of violence and land-grabs” (Radcliffe, 2012, p.247). The Ecuadorian government is both “unwilling to cede autonomy and territorial rights to collective

citizens<sup>41</sup>” and reproduces “postcolonial<sup>42</sup> hierarchies of poverty, difference and exclusion...[through] postcolonial patterns of resource distribution, (mis) recognition, and violence (epistemic and physical in form)” (Radcliffe, 2012, p.248).



### 3.1.3 Oil politics: ‘Post-neoliberalism’ as neoliberalism in disguise

Allegedly, Ecuador is currently experiencing ‘post-neoliberalism,’ and has developed a new form of development according to the principle of *sumak kawsay*, or *buen vivir* (good living). Ecuador’s 2008 constitution established the rights of nature, in addition to advocating for social rights. However, as I’ve personally experienced growing up in Ecuador, no matter how well articulated laws and constitutions may be, there is a large gap

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<sup>41</sup> The idea of ‘collective rights’ was included in Ecuador’s 2008 constitution, but remains mainly in discourse.

<sup>42</sup>For examples of governmental and NGO neocolonialism, see Appendix III.

between discourse and practice. In a similar vein, it is hypocritical for President Rafael Correa to advocate for environmental and social rights while simultaneously increasing Ecuador’s mining and oil extraction sectors, especially in areas of high biodiversity and uncontacted peoples such as the Tagaeri and the Taromenane, who inhabit the Yasuní National Park.

Curiously, although President Correa repeatedly claims to have overcome the “long and sad neoliberal night” by using oil money on education, healthcare, infrastructure and other social programs, he actually seems to be perpetuating a new form of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is typically “associated with the deregulation of labor relations, increasing precarious working conditions and worsening income security, causing falls in living standards for the majority as well as the over-exploitation of natural resources” (Radcliffe, 2012, p. 242). The Cofán definitely interpret the *buen vivir* as living in greater harmony with nature, but this doesn’t seem to match Ecuadorian neo-extractivist policies. The government is currently creating various \$20-million ‘Millennium Cities’ for indigenous communities that allow oil extraction, allegedly giving back to the poor and bringing ‘modernity’ to the periphery of the state, but in actuality creating communities that suffer from high unemployment and eroding riverbanks (personal observations from Playas de Cuyabeno).



Young Cofán who have to study in Playas de Cuyabeno claim that the Quichua don't hunt much because the oil exploitation scared the animals away and so people have to 'buy to live,' and have to work all the time<sup>43</sup> to survive, something they would like to avoid in Zábalo by continuing their forest-based subsistence (Diego, personal communication, July 31, 2015). The short-term nature of wealth and employment related to the oil industry has been witnessed in other parts of the world, as evidenced by Hannah Appel's (2012) exploration of oil rigs off the coast of Equatorial Guinea, where oil companies act like 'modular capitalist projects'<sup>44</sup> that initially rely on local labor, but afterwards leave the community unemployed because they only need skilled technicians. This 'resource curse' has also affected Angola, whose offshore drilling doesn't benefit locals; the Republic of Sudan, where locals were driven off their land; and Zambia, where mining towns are transforming the social landscape (Ferguson, 2005, p.378-9).

Post-neoliberalism should also entail that the pluri-national state of Ecuador gives indigenous cultures "equal footing into a new form of national identity that rejects the boxes of neoliberal multiculturalism" (Radcliffe, 2012, p.244). In reality, the colonial trajectory of exploiting indigenous people and their resources continues and the creation of a new national identity with respect for indigenous diversity has never been the government's goal. On the contrary, it is attempting to assimilate indigenous cultures within the mainstream national culture. In the case of the diverse indigenous people living on the Aguarico River, Randy Borman observes that the government's "ideological agenda is to break the ties of the villages, create pseudo-mestizos as fast as you can and get everyone

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<sup>43</sup> Apparently, when they're not seeking employment elsewhere, they're "going back to their traditional cultural standby of growing corn" (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015).

<sup>44</sup> "Mobile technologies, infrastructures, workforces, and risk-avoidance regimes...[make the oil industry appear] self-contained, separate from the local conditions in which they are, in fact, so deeply implicated and on which they rely" (Appel, 2012, p.706). Another facet of the 'modularity' of oil exploitation is that companies attempt to minimize friction with locals, maximize profit, and move on to their next destination to repeat the process.

speaking Spanish as their primary language” by concentrating people into the same school at Playas de Cuyabeno. Zábalo is currently struggling to keep its local school open<sup>45</sup>. It appears that there is no significant break with the colonial past, as Randy compares such tactics to the *reducciones* (mission towns): “Exactly what the Capuchins did in the 1920s, exactly what the Franciscans did in the 1830s, all the way through exactly the same situation...it’s been tried in 1600, what padre Ferrer did was to try to concentrate everybody who was scattered along the riverbanks” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 27, 2015). Some worry that this may be separating the Cofán from their forest-based culture, although they at least are able to come home after school to learn from their parents (Daniel, personal communication, August 2, 2015).

Furthermore, indigenous conceptions of ‘development’ are “not generally recorded” (Radcliffe, 2012, p. 245) in the *buen vivir* debate<sup>46</sup>, although they have suffered from “low pay, heavy work, racial discrimination, poverty, and inadequate health and educational infrastructure” (Radcliffe, 2012, p.245). Even politically, the indigenous peoples’ lack of satisfaction with government commitment to their communities is evident, since after the 2008 constitution was ratified, “CONAIE<sup>47</sup> and other indigenous

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<sup>45</sup> President Rafael Correa gave a speech at the inauguration of the new Playas de Cuyabeno ‘Millennium City’ on October 1 2013, in which he stated that seven community schools had already been closed and the logic behind putting everyone in the same school is that really small schools can’t possibly have a library, dining hall, English teacher, etc. (Correa, 2013).

<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, Radcliffe argues that the government has imposed epistemic violence: “Recent events such as the unilateral closure of bilingual education, terrorism accusations against indigenous leaders, and delegitimation of diverse voices exemplify this epistemic violence” (Radcliffe, 2012, p.247).

<sup>47</sup> CONAIE stands for the ‘Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador’ and is the largest indigenous organization in Ecuador, famous for having led various uprisings in the 1990s and 2000s. Uprisings in 1990 and 1994 concerned the failure of the government to legalize land claims. In 2000 they protested against Jamil Mahuad’s conversion of the sucre currency to the American dollar and together with the military succeeded in toppling the government. Finally, in 2002 and 2005 CONAIE protested

confederations left President Correa's coalition government" (Radcliffe, 2012, p.246). Thus, Radcliffe argues that "modernity and progress continue to have the same values as they did under (neoliberal) developmentalism" (Radcliffe, 2012, p. 247), meaning that 'post-neoliberalism' is merely a government-controlled form of neoliberalism, or neoliberalism 'in disguise.' In essence, the culture of neoliberalism resides in a "*casino relationship* to the world" (Hilgers, 2010, p.353), in which people believe wealth can be produced by magic, but this actually occurs at the expense of indigenous people. Whether or not the market is privatized and deregulated or controlled by the state, the ultimate question is: in the eyes of indigenous people faced with the constant pressure of mining and oil exploitation, is so called 'post-neoliberalism' really any better<sup>48</sup> than its predecessor?

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against President Lucio Gutiérrez, who was eventually ousted. However, the Cofán are also neglected by this organization. As Gerardo observes, "have I ever seen, as long as I've lived here, any representative from our indigenous organization here to come see our community? Never" (Gerardo, personal communication, August 9, 2015).

<sup>48</sup> In theory, building a 'Millennium City' in Dureno, costing \$20 million, is significantly better than the 4 spoons and 50 meals of rice and sardines that the Cofán received for allowing approximately 2 million barrels of oil to be extracted from their land by the year 2000 (Borman, 2008, p. 29). However, the value of a Millennium City is still only a small percentage of the total oil revenue and the offer of these cities is essentially a tactic by the government to persuade indigenous people to give up their resources. Some Zábalo residents would like to have houses built for them and would accept such a massive investment, but as one participant said, "I think there are better ways of investing that much money...It's propaganda for oil extraction...[President Correa] is saying 'where there's oil, there's prosperity...the government has really figured out how to convince communities'" (Daniel, personal communication, August 2, 2015). When having infrastructure built in Zábalo (namely, the sidewalk, sports pavilion, latrines and teacher's house), it was always the case of accepting what the government offered and due to political connections, rather than proposing how the money should be spent: "you take it their way or you don't take it" (Daniel, personal communication, August 2, 2015). Gerardo argues that money should instead be spent on education (Gerardo, personal



### 3.2 Pragmatism and the birth of *tsampima coiraye*

Michael Cepek explains that when individuals are pragmatic, they “act purposively on the basis of imperfect information; they attend actively to the often unintended consequences of their actions; and they are fundamentally open to revising their modes of acting in and on the world” (Cepek, 2012a, p.17). I find his emphasis on human pragmatism useful in understanding the Cofáns’ relationship with their environment and the outside world. This is particularly helpful when contrasted with the two opposite extremes in understanding the ways indigenous people interact with nature: either they are ‘original conservationists’ or they have no free will and have been indoctrinated by the government. While the first essentializes indigenous culture, the latter denies people’s intelligence and adaptability, turning the Cofán into “passive, tragic, past tense figures” (Cepek, 2012b, p.400).

To understand the first misconception, we must refer to Redford’s famous essay (1991) on the ‘ecologically noble savage,’ where he claims that paleobiologists, archaeologists and botanists have found sufficient evidence from the Amazon forests to demonstrate that people had a damaging effect on the area prior to the arrival of Europeans, which goes against the mass-produced stereotype of indigenous people living in harmony with nature. He concludes that “[t]hese people behaved as humans do now: they did whatever they had to feed themselves and their families” (Redford, 1991, p. 46). This view was confirmed by Randy Borman, who stated:

*“One of the prime fallacies in a lot of the revisionist indigenous philosophical mainstream right now is the failure to recognize the pragmatism of human beings in general. I mean, human beings are always going to be pragmatic. They’re always going to take the most practical route to whatever they can get, given their technology and their population. And so something like conservation and ‘love for*

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communication, July 13, 2015) and Lucas suspected the construction contractors had been corrupt, which his son agreed with, based upon how little he had been paid as a laborer (Lucas & Nicolás, personal communication, July 31 & August 18, 2015).

*mother Earth' and all of this sort of stuff, while it existed in pretty much all cultures of the world in some sense, it was a very pragmatic relationship. It was not a theoretic or an esoteric relation...there's a turkey standing in front of me. I know it's the only turkey of that species left in the world and my family is hungry and if I have the money to go buy a chicken, I'll let that turkey go. If I don't have the money to buy a chicken, I'll whack its head off and take it home with me to feed my family"* (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015).



In other words, humans will always engage pragmatically with their surroundings and regardless of their connection to 'mother earth,' the primary question is one of survival, in which more money reduces pressure on forest resources. Instead of creating a dichotomy between forest subsistence and monetary subsistence, it's clear that the two are complementary. The residents of Zábalo engage in a complex system of prohibitions (*se'pi'cho*) to prevent depletion of forest resources so that they may have food for the long-term. However, neither was their mentality of forest conservation (*tsampima coiraye*) an ever-present cultural truth, as is assumed by

the idea of the ‘ecologically noble savage’, nor was it the product of Arjun Agrawal’s concept of *environmentality*<sup>49</sup>. Furthermore, it isn’t something that is likely to remain if it isn’t maintained, especially through economic incentives.

Michael Cepek’s brilliant article ‘*Foucault in the Forest*’ (2011) criticizes Agrawal by showing that the Cofán people of the Ecuadorian Amazon gained an environmental consciousness through evaluating their relationship with the forest and its limitations. He highlights that people have “critical consciousness” (Cepek, 2011, p. 501), which reiterates Randy Borman’s point that human beings everywhere creatively and pragmatically come up with solutions while engaging with their surroundings. He also states that the Cofáns’ pragmatic willingness to experiment is based on a division of knowledge and power with their leaders, meaning that people are willing to engage in projects because they believe in their leaders’ decisions (Cepek, 2006, p.49), something which I don’t see as very different from other leader-citizen relationships elsewhere. Moreover, he argues that “Cofán social structure is institutionally flexible and normatively weak, and Cofán people do not normally conceptualize their society as a fully structured totality” (Cepek, 2006, p.49). Although I agree with Cepek’s position and believe Cofán people creatively adapt to their circumstances, much of the credit for the creation of alternatives is because of Randy.

For instance, the environmental mentality of ‘*tsampima coiraye*’ (protecting the forest) is not something that always existed. Although some of my participants claimed that the Ministry of Environment imposed the idea or that they’ve always cared for the forest (Gonzalo & Ricardo, personal communication, August 9 & 13, 2015), Randy

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<sup>49</sup>According to Foucault, *governmentality* is when ideology becomes hegemonic and people become agents of the government, unwittingly imposing its rules upon themselves and others. Similarly, Agrawal’s *environmentality* suggests that individuals gain environmental consciousness through governmental brainwashing. In the case of the Cofán, they perceived that they had less land than they used to because of the invading landless peasants and oil companies and hence adapted their practices to care for their limited resources in a way that would be beneficial for the long-term.

has been widely credited for the introduction of this concept in the mid-1980s (Cepek, 2011, p.506) and admits to doing so himself. This doesn't mean that on a deeper level the Cofán have not always cared for the forest because they are *tsampini can'jen'sundeccu* (forest dwellers), but their explicit caring for the forest through *se'pi'cho*<sup>50</sup> (prohibitions), internal regulations and the park guard program are due to Randy's creation of the *tsampima coiraye* concept:

*"In the case of tsampima coiraye...we didn't need to take care of everything*<sup>51</sup>*...I became one of probably the two top hunters in the Cofán nation...So, when I start raising a flag and saying 'Ok. Listen, we haven't got as much forest as we used to. We just got our entire north side of the Aguarico taken away from us by the Ministerio de Ambiente*<sup>52</sup>*, by the Reserva Faunística Cuyabeno. We're not allowed*

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<sup>50</sup> The prohibitions are "mainly oral in nature" (Cepek, 2011, p. 506) and include restrictions on how many animals can be hunted during certain months, animals that are completely prohibited from hunting because they are of tourist interest (like the macaw), and a zoning system of areas where hunting is not permitted. The community keeps an eye on any trespassers and "even if he's your best friend, you have to report him" (Mauro, personal communication, August 15, 2015). At the community meeting I witnessed four people being fined \$50 for having violated the hunting rules and one individual had to pay \$400 for having stolen bullets (Fieldnotes, August 12, 2015). I spoke to Ricardo, who had shot a prohibited bird and seemed to accept that he had to pay (Ricardo, personal communication, August 13, 2015).

<sup>51</sup> The awareness of the importance of the forest emerged from the creation of community-based tourism and recognition of the damage done by oil companies and *colonos*: "The idea of owning It, protecting It, conserving It, had never occurred to us. Now, suddenly, we recognized that this was absolutely necessary if we were to survive as a people... Tourism caused us to begin to look at the Forest as our ultimate resource... as we presented the rainforest to our clients, we began to realize the degree to which this Forest truly was the root of our culture and that, without It, we were nothing" (Borman, 2008, p.24).

<sup>52</sup> The Cofán have signed coadministration agreements with the Ministry of Environment that overlap with the Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve, Cofán-Bermejo Ecological Reserve, Cayambe-Coca Ecological Reserve, and the Río Cofanes Territory (Cepek, 2012a, p.114).

*to hunt there anymore. We've got to start thinking about these things...Basically, 10 to 15 years before we could actually establish our first community-based rule of any form of conservation, from the time I started doing that...the concept was internalized enough so that nobody knew where it came from. It was part of the mentality of the people"* (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015).



And yet, the lack of money could potentially erode this mentality: *"right now, a big undercover point of discussion<sup>53</sup>, which*

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<sup>53</sup> On August 20, when I filmed the Cofán releasing charapa turtles, there was also discussion of why the Cofán continue to engage in this environmental conservation project when they don't have any program funding and the Quichua eat the charapa turtles that the Cofán release. This has been a complaint since the 1990s, since back then Randy said: "If all the people on the river don't agree to start protecting the turtles, it's crazy for the Cofán to. We'll just be raising the turtles till they're big, and sending them down the river for the Quichua to eat. Why would we want to do that?" (R. Borman, as cited in Tidwell, 1996, p.190). There is some tension with the Quichua, who are either aggressive and racist towards the Cofán or

*is making the rounds is ‘why should we keep not killing monkeys on the Zábalo [River]? There’s only a very small group of people who are benefitting directly from tourism...The conservation mentality as a whole is not so much a conservation mentality as it is a management mentality...if there were more money, it switched it over to a positive thing, not a negative thing...Right now the reason why you’re willing to accept protection of monkeys on the Zábalo [River] is because you’re going to shoot them on Juanilla [River], but if we had active tourism that involved the entire community, then everybody would view this directly as an economic plus and probably shut down on the Juanilla too” (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015).*



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restrict the places they can go fishing (M. Mendua & Diego, personal communication, July 18 & 31, 2015).





The lack of income has already led Mimi Yiyoguaje, with the consensus of the community, to remove the prohibition of fishing in the Aguarico River and selling it in Playas de Cuyabeno because “catfish doesn’t stay here permanently...it travels far” (M. Yiyoguaje, personal communication, August 16, 2015). People’s *chakras* have also been expanded by a few hectares to allow for more food and cash crops due to the lack of income (M. Yiyoguaje & R. Borman, personal communication, August 16 & September 10, 2015). Fortunately, the rest of *se’pi’cho* (prohibitions) still seasonally limit the amount of monkeys, peccary and other species that can be hunted, in addition to outright banning others completely, such as the macaw. However, these prohibitions are in direct pragmatic relation to maintaining their forest-based lifestyle and ensuring that certain animals are available for potential tourists. As soon as people are left with little income, this leads them to be even more dependent on forest resources and their conservation/management mentality erodes.

### 3.3 Examples of pragmatism

Another example of Cofán pragmatism can be seen in their relationship towards their material surroundings. When one travels down the Aguarico River, what is remarkable is how the houses, whether they be Siona, Secoya, Cofán or even *colono*, are very similar in style. One might assume this is ‘cultural loss,’ since the Cofán used to have circular houses, but it’s actually a slow process of people imitating and creatively engaging with new forms of construction:

*“You’re going to have a tremendous variety of people here. You’re going to have smart people and dumb people...and you’re going to have different levels of acceptance and interest...When my dad built the first board house with a tin roof in Dureno circa 1965, right about the time the oil companies started coming in, he built a more permanent house...[The community] had made the move in the 1940s from the round houses to the platform houses...and then they had modified those houses when Dad came in, in 55, they modified them to actually have walls because till Dad came in they hadn’t figured out how to make frames for the walls...when he built the wood house, they didn’t like it. Nobody liked it. There were several complaints: 1. The tin was too hot 2. The tin made way too much noise when it rained 3. The boards kept out the air and didn’t let the air in 4. You couldn’t spit through the cracks, which was a big issue at the time...it wasn’t the case where the culture was stuck on a particular house model. It was just the analysis by the culture that the wooden house came out negative...Today, that same analysis would be splintered...[between those outright opposed, those who accept some modifications, and those who decide to change house models]... not necessarily because they think it’s a nicer place to stay, but because they’ve seen it on TV” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015). Nowadays, almost every house is rectangular and has a tin roof because it lasts longer, needs less maintenance, and is less damaging to the forest.*

This pragmatic sentiment is reiterated by another participant: “Concrete posts, they can be wet all the time but supposedly they’re supposed to last, so we’re kind of experimenting...But in order to have a nicer home, my vision is to have solar panels strong enough to



power a fridge and light source. And for those who know how to manage a computer, they can take advantage of that...it really comes down to what works and what doesn't work" (Gerardo, personal communication, August 9, 2015). Related to this, I helped install the cement foundations to a house in the community. They are less likely to rot and this prevents people having to rebuild their houses as often and is also less damaging to the forest.



Randy states that pragmatism applies “not just [to] the house – it’s all the consumer goods that are out there” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015). For instance, only a few houses have freezers, but Randy believes this is the next commodity everyone should purchase because it would allow people to take pressure off forest resources when going hunting and fishing, rather than “scarp down on [fish] as much as you can and everyone gets sick of them and the last batch you throw out to the dogs” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015). Many households already have freezers and Bolivar reiterates Randy’s sentiment: “In the summer many fish move upriver. Having a

freezer, you can freeze many fish...Yesterday we got a deer...and we have to freeze a lot of it so that we don't have to destroy much from hunting" (B. Lucitante, personal communication, July 25, 2015).



Randy uses a washing machine at his house and explains the logic behind having this commodity brought into the community:

*“My mother was always a bit disgusted with ‘the missionaries came in and they changed the culture in all these awful ways’ and she says, ‘well, probably we did change the culture. We brought in a stable supply route for aluminum pots.’ The women would spend inordinate amounts of time just making clay pots because the clay pots would just shatter every time you just glanced at them wrong...then Mom introduced washing clothes and she said ‘well, if I really made a huge change to the culture it was providing aluminum pots for people, but then putting them right back into slavery of washing clothes.’ Because nobody washed clothes prior to that. You would boil the clothes in pajacco, which is a purple dye,*

*every six months...Soap<sup>54</sup> was basically introduced by my parents. So, she said that if they really wanted to get after her, they could get after her for having introduced the slavery of washing clothes. So maybe the cure for that is the washing machine”* (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015).

In this thesis I wish to highlight that the Cofán’s relationship with their forest (*tsampi*) and the outside world is essentially pragmatic, based on the basic logic of survival<sup>55</sup> and economic necessity. Evidently, it is not mutually exclusive for them to also care for the forest spiritually and ecologically, but these values can be eroded when both people’s survival and economic base is being threatened. As Randy stated long ago, his goal “is to save a people. In achieving that goal, the culture may have to change. That’s something we have to accept. The people have to survive first” (R. Borman, as cited in Tidwell, 1996, p.169). Furthermore, all cultures are in permanent change, so we shouldn’t expect the Cofán to be any different.



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<sup>54</sup> Mauricio claims that in the past they would rub the root of a plant and foam came out, which they would use as soap (M. Mendua, personal communication, August 17, 2015). Similarly, Gerardo claimed that the Cofán used to use a plant to clean their teeth, which had the side effect of staining teeth black (Gerardo, personal communication, August 9, 2015).

<sup>55</sup> Although I have used examples of material pragmatism, the Cofán have also been politically pragmatic. Cepek has a very good explanation of how Randy Borman used international alliances with scientists to gain control over land (Cepek, 2011; 2012a; 2012c)

### 3.4 A brief discussion of power, hegemony and governmentality

I agree with Eric Wolf that anthropology has suffered “because it has so systematically disregarded the problems of power” (Wolf, 2001, p.21) and I believe that his deconstruction of power will allow us to comprehend the relationship between the Cofán and external actors such as the Ecuadorian government and NGOs. Wolf proposes four modes of power: 1) Individual capability; 2) Interpersonal ability to impose one’s will on others; 3) Organizational ability to change “energy flows” of an environment; 4) Structural ability to change the environment itself through a more totalizing control of the “distribution and direction of energy flows” (Wolf, 2001, p.384).

Combining this understanding of power with Appadurai’s ‘scapes’ (1996), I believe the Cofán are struggling to negotiate Wolf’s third form of power, or more specifically, their ability to control flows: 1) Randy’s use of the FSC to network with donors and international allies has allowed for local control of financescapes, which is now undermined by the 2008 global economic crisis, but people are constantly finding new ways of making money; 2) the people of Zábalo are willing to sell corn and pigs in order to buy a TV (Pablo, personal communication, August 5, 2015) and other technology, thus engaging successfully with the technoscape, but also allowing the entrance of new ideologies through these mediums; 3) my involvement in the production of media for the Cofán can be interpreted as their attempt to take control<sup>56</sup> of mediascapes; 4) despite being extremely ethnically mixed (*ecchoen’cho*), people’s self-identification with being Cofán and desire to live a Cofán lifestyle signifies their control over the ethnoscape; 5) the people’s desire to emulate the Millennium City of Playas de Cuyabeno could be interpreted as the government’s successful expansion of ideology onto indigenous people, through the ideoscape. In other words,

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<sup>56</sup> The Cofán have also managed to attract media attention in the past, which has led to the production of ‘*Crude: The Real Price of Oil*’ (2009), ‘*Ai Guardians of the Rainforest*’ (2013) and ‘*Oil and Water*’ (2014). Moreover, in 1993 when they shut down the Petroecuador oil well, some American allies filmed the event and sent it to international media (Cepek, 2012a, p.56).

despite a tendency of expanding domination over the Cofán by external forces, they are still finding ways of negotiating and controlling flows of power through these ‘scapes.’ Unfortunately, the steady loss of control over flows of capital is the greatest threat to their livelihood and has greatly reduced Cofán power.

Similar to Wolf’s fourth mode of power, I generally find Antonio Gramsci’s (1971[1935]) ‘cultural hegemony’ and Michel Foucault’s ‘governmentality’ (1988) deficient analytical tools to understand the dominance of one group over another because they necessitate a government that is omnipotent, omniscient and rational in addition to subjects that are greatly lacking free will. Although Foucault does acknowledge the fragmentary nature of government power, Derek Kerr highlights that Foucault’s view of power is still top-down and it “not only beheads the King; it also beheads social subjectivity, and in the process gives rise to the notion that humanity can never escape from systems of power and governmentality” (Kerr, 1999, p.175). I argue that the Cofán have the ability to resist the government, but also that the government’s hegemonic expansion, while not necessarily intentional, is still harmful.



As is discussed in the following sections, the Ecuadorian State dominates in a fragmented, erratic and seemingly mindless way, but still has the effect of exerting large quantities of power by imposing restrictive laws, politicized education, military intervention, and the promise of benefitting from oil extraction through nationalized media and neighboring Millennium Cities. As Randy explains, there are just too few Cofán (1,200 people) for the government to really care: “you need some color, you bring in a couple of Cofáns...you invite them to a lunch and give them a sandwich and they get their picture taken...that’s all the Cofáns amount to...[for the State]” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 27, 2015). Most Zábalo residents also speak about rarely seeing any government agents in the community and when asked if the mayor, prefect or president has done anything for them, they consistently say ‘No.’ Occasionally they’ve been visited by intimidating military men with weapons who wish to speak to the president of the community or by people from the Ministry of Environment who “come to look around and then leave” (Gonzalo, personal communication, August 9, 2015). Hence, the Foucauldian ‘state effect’ on the Cofán is one of abandonment, although that is not to say the State has no effect.

Through a series of restrictive laws, river control, and populist political events, the State is able to interfere in the daily life of the Cofán. Moreover, the neglect that is imposed upon them by the government<sup>57</sup>, the collapse of their international partnerships with

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<sup>57</sup> Most participants spoke negatively about President Rafael Correa, claiming he has done nothing for the Cofán, except for creating the bullet ban, gasoline restrictions and increasing food prices. When asked about previous governments, people have little recollection of anything that they may have done for them (M. Mendua, Ana & Gerardo, personal communication, July 14, 21 & August 9, 2015). However, Mauricio did admit that Correa helped sign over some land to the Cofán and has at least done a little bit, such as giving Millennium Cities, contrary to previous governments (M. Mendua, personal communication, July 18 & 20, 2015). Daniel said that prior to Correa “it was pretty much the same as it is now” (Daniel, personal communication, July 2, 2015), meaning a state of neglect, either due to lack of funds at the parish and canton levels or due to a lack of political will.



external NGOs, and the virtual end of the FSC have created an economic vacuum in which the Cofán try to complement their forest-based subsistence with canoe manufacture, the occasional tourist that shows up, and the vulnerable Socio Bosque environmental conservation program. Since the people need money for bullets, gasoline and salt, in addition to other basic supplies, having absolutely no income isn't a viable option, even though some people say they would be able to get by<sup>58</sup>. Hence, I argue in the next section that through a combination of State interference and simultaneous neglect, together with the lack of economic opportunities, the government has established a different kind of control over the Cofán. Two terms I propose to better describe this kind of negligent hegemony are: 'cultural inertia' & 'mindless domination.'

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<sup>58</sup> Nobody would like to embrace the idea of returning to paddling the canoes and hunting with a blowgun. Most participants admitted they've hunted with shotguns their entire lives and no longer use a blowgun. One participant told me that he does still use the blowgun to hunt at night (Lucas, personal communication, August 18, 2015) and was going to show me, but plans fell through. Afterwards, at the festivities in Playas de Cuyabeno (August 21/22), he wasn't able to hit a grapefruit with a blowgun from a distance of three meters. Furthermore, people have used communal canoes with outboard motors since before the founding of Zábalo, although now people prefer individual canoes, especially when deciding to return from parties, since some people like to stay more days (M. Yiyoguaje, personal communication, August 16, 2015). Carlos Yiyoguaje, on the other hand, seemed confident that without money they would be able to survive: "We can live like we used to live, so many millions of years ago. My grandparents lived like that, without a motor, traveling by rowing...they drank *yaje*...in that time they didn't use bullets, but used a spear instead. They would kill a tapir with a blowgun" (C. Yiyoguaje, personal communication, August 30, 2015). Bolívar Lucitante also said that without Socio Bosque money they would be "the same as always. Tranquil" (B. Lucitante, personal communication, July 25, 2015).

## 4. POLITICS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

### 4.1 Cultural inertia & the paradoxical negligent hegemonic state

Although Ecuador has not had a coherent indigenous policy, its continued marginalization of indigenous peoples “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” (Vickers, 1984, p. 9). As Radcliffe puts it: “Ecuador, unlike many of its neighbors, has only a patchy and weak state which delivers low levels of social provision, leaving individuals and communities with informal welfare networks” (Radcliffe, 2012, p. 248). This neglect is not exclusive to indigenous peoples, since many policies such as the banning of bullets<sup>59</sup>, restricted sale of gasoline<sup>60</sup> and gas tanks<sup>61</sup>, and

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<sup>59</sup> One of my participants was once arrested for having a bullet in his backpack while traveling to Dureno by bus. He spent a few days in prison and was only set free after a man at the judicial offices was bribed by the Cofán with \$18 so he would listen to their case and free him (Pablo & Miguel, personal communication, August 5 & 11, 2015). The theory behind the bullet ban is that it will reduce crime in the country, but getting gun and bullet permits is expensive and bureaucratic, so the Cofán are forced to buy expensive \$3 black market bullets from Peru. Mauricio stated, “If I spoke Spanish well, I’d go speak to the president and ask him why he’s banned bullets... ‘We kill animals to eat, right? And your people are the ones that are setting the bad example and killing people...leave the native people in peace’” (M. Mendua, personal communication, August 17, 2015).

<sup>60</sup> Pablo explained the bureaucratic difficulties as follows: “Without a permit you can’t buy gasoline and without matriculation you can’t own a canoe and a motor...I had a permit, but it expired...To get the permit, first you need to matriculate your canoe and motor...then you need to get a permit in Lago Agrio...then they see the matriculation and give you a permit, with a monthly quota of 80 gallons or 60 gallons...It’s done to avoid taking gasoline to Colombia...to avoid selling gasoline in Colombia...but if you don’t buy the next month because you have no money, your quota goes down...You must go to a specific gasoline station in Sushufindi or Tarapoa. Can’t buy in Lago Agrio...we came without a *factura* [state-authorized invoice]. The marines are going to check you at the dock [and



obligatory matriculation and licensing of canoes<sup>62</sup> have affected rural populations. These restrictive laws, in addition to causing angst and making everyday life more difficult, have created a thriving black market in Playas de Cuyabeno, where all of these commodities can be obtained at exorbitant prices.



My research participants are unsure if the government knows of the effects of its laws and Mauricio claimed he would like to speak to President Correa if only his Spanish were good enough. Randy explains these policies as a lack of government understanding:

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fine you if you don't have a *factura*]" (Pablo, personal communication, August 5, 2015).

<sup>61</sup> To buy gas cylinders legally, it is necessary to undergo a bureaucratic process to get a card.

<sup>62</sup> Many participants complained about the marines who patrol the river and fine individuals \$200 if they don't have their papers in order or are not wearing safety jackets, which is 'absurd,' considering the fine could be between 2-4 months of pay for a Cofán and most people don't have jobs (Fieldnotes, August 8, 2015). One participant complained that if their papers expire and they're taking food upriver to family, the marines take away the food and must be bribed (Santiago, personal communication, July 28, 2015).

*“This government is [composed of a] primarily urban, academic core group...Out of the cities they do not understand their rural population...[They have] no comprehension that 45% of their population use shotgun shells to put food on the table. And if there was a little bit of comprehension, ‘Oh, but they’re killing animals.’ You know, from the academic urban [background], growing up on Bambi and Walt Disney...the guy sticking up a bus is using a very sophisticated 9-millimeter Taurus made in Brazil...[They have] no comprehension that the whole artisan industry out of Cuenca making the single shot shotguns was aimed at a guy out on his farm...the same thing occurs with the gas situation right now...they want to get into electric stoves, which is a phenomenal, brilliant idea for the cities...but they don’t understand that 45% of the population is rural and most of the time doesn’t even have electricity and if they do have electricity it’s because they have a generator out back and the generator needs gasoline and you can only buy 3 gallons [which also requires a special permit and specific purchasing location] ...45% of the population of Ecuador could be put in jail tomorrow...[for owning] black market gasoline, shotgun shells, unregistered guns”* (R. Borman, personal communication, August 27, 2015).

These government restrictions, although possibly due to the ignorance of the people in charge, do follow a particular trend in extending their control to the peripheries of the state. For the purposes of this thesis, I will not go into Gramsci’s idea of Cultural Hegemony, but rather use the term ‘hegemony’ to loosely refer to the state actions aimed at extending control to frontier zones like Zábalo. One might even label this form of hegemony as ‘mindless domination’ because it manages to ‘divide and conquer,’ without having a mastermind behind the process. Regarding whether these policies were consciously devised by President Rafael Correa or the government to turn indigenous peoples into agents of the state, supporting Foucault’s idea of governmentality, Randy Borman disagreed. For him, these policies weren’t intentional and he instead blames Western ‘cultural inertia’<sup>63</sup>:

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<sup>63</sup> Randy also refers to this as “social insect mentality rather than an actual individual mentality” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19,

*“Basically, people in the Western system are aware we’re on a downhill trend...But the mentality is frozen into the culture to such a degree that the idea of indigenous people controlling vast areas of land with all of those resources, short-term gain resources, you can’t let them do it...I don’t think the majority of people are brainy enough to come up with coherent evil agendas...I realized that there isn’t a conspiracy, a whole bunch of masterminds thinking this all through. This is an inertia, a cultural inertia, and it has nothing to do with the intelligence of the individuals”* (R. Borman, personal communication, August 27, 2015). Although I agree with Randy Borman that the government does not have a master plan to subjugate indigenous peoples and that both the global market and cultural inertia explain the expansion of the ‘frontier of control,’ it is striking that such a combination of factors and conjunctures has led the Cofán to become more dependent<sup>64</sup> on money and more inclined to allow oil exploitation.

Furthermore, a clear example of neglect was after the July 2, 2014 oil spill, in which oil contaminated the Aguarico River all the way down to Zábalo and it took the government a month to respond. The community was not considered ‘affected’ and got no money for the damage caused, even though they were “the most affected [by the spill]” (Fernando, personal communication, July 25, 2015). Some residents were content to have jobs cleaning up the spill, but on the whole it “was just ridiculous. It should have been a couple of days. It’s an emergency situation...I don’t even know if they provided them with the correct equipment for the cleaning” (Gerardo, personal communication, August 9, 2015). There was also a total silence from the Ecuadorian press, which is one of the reasons the Cofán would like to produce their own videos, so they can let the world know what is happening immediately. In the words of Gerardo, “The way that I feel is that the indigenous people are completely just kind of ignored...the government or the mayors are trying to pretend they

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2015) and compares the situation to ants on a leaf who haven’t realized it has gone bitter.

<sup>64</sup>In addition to education, healthcare, black market bullets and gasoline, people with outboard motors and other commodities will need to pay for maintenance.

have really good relationships with indigenous communities...But for the longest time we've been screwed over many times" (Gerardo, personal communication, August 9, 2015).



(Source: Luis Narvaez, Oil Spill in Cofán Territory, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGFr5H6Dry0>)

#### **4.2 Parties, beer and corruption**

Apart from interventions related to government control of commodities, most participants in the community claimed that they rarely saw any representatives of the state visiting Zábalo, so the 'state effect' through human interaction is minimal. When the mayor of the canton of Cuyabeno visited Zábalo for the first time during his term, on the last day of my stay, he offered the people bags of his own used clothing<sup>65</sup>, in addition to proposing to spend his own money<sup>66</sup> to hire a hairdresser to give hairdressing classes to

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<sup>65</sup> He also once gave a family some tupperware, hoping they would vote for him, which they found very insulting (Gerardo, personal communication, July 13, 2015). On the whole, the Cofán accepted the used clothing, but I left in the mayor's canoe the next morning and was not able to ask people if they were grateful or found this insulting.

<sup>66</sup> According to Randy, the 'legitimate cut' that the mayor gets in any infrastructure project is 10% and this system occurs all over Ecuador so that politicians can fulfill promises to voters who demand projects that are not within their political jurisdiction (R. Borman, personal communication,

interested members of the community, in an obvious attempt to integrate people into the national economy<sup>67</sup>. As Gerardo observed, “It feels like the government has just imposed this lifestyle. I mean,

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August 11, 2015). In other words, if someone provides the beer for a campaign in exchange for a politician building a road, the politician must later honor his promise and provide the road project to the supporter, who will hire someone else to do the project and make a profit. Also, people are constantly demanding outboard motors, parties, gasoline and other things which lie outside of political jurisdiction, but which the politician must fund if he wants to get votes (Daniel, personal communication, August 2, 2015). Also, the politician pockets a large portion of the money for himself. This kind of institutionalized corruption is normalized in the Ecuadorian political system. Randy stated that the mayor could be taking up to 12-14%. Although many participants claimed to not know if the mayor was corrupt, a few did have this suspicion.

<sup>67</sup> While waiting for my canoe to Zábalo in Centro Unión at the start of my fieldwork, I witnessed some Secoya waiting for their wives and daughters to return from hairdressing classes, so this appears to be the mayor’s sole idea for contributing to the indigenous economy along the Aguarico River. When the mayor asked for my opinion on how to solve the economic problems, when I left Zábalo in his motorized canoe on September 4, I told him to listen to the community and that he should support tourism, park guards and the charapa turtle project. Prior to leaving, he was surrounded by Zábalo residents and was describing to them the bureaucratic procedures for getting money for the ‘Asociación Yaicomún’ tourism group. He told them he had contributed 50 crates of beer at the last party and proceeded to bad talk the head of the parish, who is Cofán. He also insinuated that Socio Bosque money was being mismanaged and pocketed by someone in the community (Fieldnotes, September 4, 2015). I later found a Youtube video where the Ministry of Environment, probably in collaboration with the mayor, describe Zábalo’s charapa project and claim that the Ministry helps with technical advice and approval of the project. However, this video is probably just a publicity stunt and the community may still have no funding for this project. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzY8cYZYZjE>. Randy argues that the charapa turtle project alone, which could be restarted with \$20,000 a year, could “keep up a conservation mentality. Peanuts!” And yet, “the world can’t come up with \$20,000 for saving a species, saving a culture, providing jobs for people and keeping the conservation of an area” (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015).

that's the way the government sees development<sup>68</sup> in order for people to assimilate to their lifestyle. We're under huge pressure to contribute to the country. To be able to be paying taxes and as indigenous people we're living in this massive land that's considered unproductive, so we have to contribute somehow to the economy...My number one [priority for development] is education" (Gerardo, personal communication, August 9, 2015). Regarding the hairdressing classes, the mayor explained in a condescending manner, "While we're here doing nothing, let's learn something" (Fieldnotes, September 3, 2015). This is consistent with the stereotype that indigenous people 'don't work.' As Randy explains, global market forces are pushing people to integrate into the global economy: "There's this tremendous drive to get everyone inside the economic system. And I think that's part of the economic system, more than any individual philosophy or political structure" (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015).

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<sup>68</sup> If the Cofán do not follow the standard narrative of development, then they simply don't get projects from the government. Although the Cofán do have an interest in getting access to outside goods and commodities, they view development as "conserving, having a nice house and good water to drink. Not destroying the forest" (Pablo, personal communication, August 5, 2015) and "that indigenous people should take care of the forest and the prefects should give us some benefits" (Mauro, personal communication, August 15, 2015). Randy stated that in the future he "would certainly like to see the language still being there in a few hundred years, the forest still being there in few hundred years, people still being able to enjoy the better parts of living close to nature" (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015). Marshall Sahlins' idea of the 'original affluent society' (1972) is reiterated by Randy: The Cofán "have a lot more free time, a lot less expenses, a lot less necessity to push that hard for an average living. They're more laid back. They're more middle class attitude in spite of not having a lot of money" (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015). Hopefully the Cofán will not end up complaining like Andrés Nuningo Sesén, of the Peruvian Huambisa Indians, that their leisurely lifestyle has been compromised by 'development' so that "one or two millionaires can have the life we used to have" (Andrés Nuningo Sesén, as cited in Ramos, 1998, p. 196).

Even if there is a drive to integrate the Cofán into the economic system, the mayor of Cuyabeno apparently doesn't know how or doesn't care. My first impression of the mayor was at the town of Tarapoa, during the 'Día de Nacionalidades,' an event which supposedly honors indigenous people, but is actually a platform for getting votes. He was a garrulous, portly man in a panama hat, who gave people money for beer and was very concerned with self-promotion. My participants also described him as a corrupt, populist, disagreeable man<sup>69</sup> (Pablo, Francisco & Esteban, personal communication, August 11, 16 & September 3, 2015). At the event, he gave people money for beer and asked indigenous leaders to say "Mr. Mayor, you are a good person who works hard for the nationalities" (Francisco, personal communication, August 16, 2015). The event included a *chicha* (manioc beer) drinking element, blow gun competition, music and dance. Most importantly, at night they had organized a beauty pageant with one female representative of each indigenous nationality walking the cat walk, saying what her hobbies were (usually watching TV) and what she wanted for her community, so that a queen could be elected and be gifted a motorcycle. As I described in my diary, "The saddest part of the event was to see how the organizers turned this into an indigenous fair, by Western standards, with Enya music, ice cream cones, a guy dressed up in a mariachi outfit riding a horse, dancing girls in skimpy outfits, etc... It's no doubt a propaganda event by the sheer number of times they mentioned the mayor's name and how often he said he cares about them, knows their names and is doing things for them. What is he doing? He built a 'house for nationalities' in town, but was this really what the people had asked for?" (Diary, August 7, 2015). It was also fascinating to see how he tried to integrate and please everyone by speaking proudly both about the *colonos* and the

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<sup>69</sup> Some Cofán seemed either indifferent about the mayor, pleased that he gives them beer money, or hopeful that he would do something for them in the future (Lucas, Pablo & Enrique, personal communication, August 18, 28 & 28, 2015). Some also say the lack of support for Zábalo is due to the fact that the president of Zábalo, Mimi Yiyoguaje, hasn't been 'bothering' the mayor enough with demands for Zábalo (Daniel & Pablo, personal communication, August 14 & 28, 2015).

indigenous people, who were the cultural point of reference for the region (Fieldnotes, August 6, 2015).

At the next party, which was held at Playas de Cuyabeno, I was standing with the Cofán when the mayor came over to chat with us. He offered me a hunk of peccary meat from a bag, at which point Carlos Yiyoguaje joked that the mayor still needs to learn A'ingae and told him that they'd like to go hunting but President Correa has banned bullets. The mayor slyly put an end to that topic by vaguely saying that a little further up you can buy bullets, probably in reference to the black market. He quickly changed the subject and told everyone to go to someone's house because a crate of beers was waiting for them<sup>70</sup> (Fieldnotes, August 21, 2015). As I noted later on, the mayor "always seemed to be near beer, buying people beer (giving beer money) or avoiding serious discussion (bullets) by telling people where there's beer" (Fieldnotes, August 26, 2015). As Randy stated, "He's blunt, he's open, he's as openly corrupt as a politician can be...He had his salary raised to 7,000 dollars a month...and then the government cracked down on all the mayor salaries...He was furious...but he makes so much on the projects, it doesn't affect him much" (R. Borman, personal communication, August 11, 2015) and "he has no concept of what an indigenous person is. He's very wrapped up in himself...Buys the majority of his votes somehow. But he's also a fairly smart politician in that he doesn't waste time on areas that don't have a lot of votes" (R. Borman, personal communication, August 27, 2015). Hence, the mayor has a very indifferent and hostile attitude towards the Cofán, especially because he knows most of them didn't vote for him in the last elections. He is a populist leader and clearly seems to care little<sup>71</sup> about a few hundred indigenous people living downriver.

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<sup>70</sup> Admittedly, there is little the mayor can do about this nation-wide ban on bullets, but he still lacks the willingness to engage in serious political discussion.

<sup>71</sup> I also heard stories of him threatening to fire people or put them in jail (Fieldnotes, August 8, 2015).





### **4.3 The ‘anti-politics machine’ & Socio Bosque**

In James Ferguson’s ‘The anti-politics machine,’ he explains how in Lesotho, the government’s development projects failed, but the supposedly unintended or secondary effects of these interventions led to the expansion of “bureaucratic state power in people’s everyday lives” (Ferguson & Lohmann, 1994, p.176). Contrary to the consequences of Lesotho’s Thaba-Tseka project being the construction of a road and establishing new district administration, I argue that in Zábalo the government’s Socio Bosque program has led to the purchase of individual outboard motors, which though useful, integrate Cofán more tightly into the economic system due to the need to buy gasoline<sup>72</sup>. It also makes the wages of internal political leaders dependent on the government.

Zábalo luckily doesn’t have a road built to it yet, and most of my participants agreed this would be destructive because it would lead to

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<sup>72</sup> Eva, one of the few women I spoke to, claimed that the alternative of having to row to go hunting was a lot of work, so she says motors are both good and bad (Eva, personal communication, July 31, 2015). Also, Randy claims that “communal canoes never worked” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015).

invasion by *colonos* and put an end to an *opatsi* lifestyle because of the influx of thieves and murderers (Pablo, personal communication, August 5, 2015), but the community has been subject to an expansion of hegemonic control through restrictive laws. In terms of bureaucracy, the Cofán now find themselves needing to use *facturas* (state-authorized invoices) whenever spending Socio Bosque funds or conducting business transactions, but this transition occurred due to USAID funding of the FSC. As Randy states, “I would see USAID as an organization that covertly or overtly, subconsciously or consciously, certainly has had as one of its long-lasting effects bringing people into the tax structure and extending the tax base” (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015). I argue that what is most enduring about Socio Bosque is the fact that it has created a dependency relationship<sup>73</sup> with the government and the market.



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<sup>73</sup> If the Cofán were to find international donors again, this could be avoided.



(Source: Mimi Yiyoguaje)

Socio Bosque is an environmental services program that was originally devised by the NGO Conservation International and which the government adopted as a way of commodifying environmental services. According to this scheme, the government provides money to indigenous and non-indigenous people for taking care of forests, thus improving their quality of life and preventing deforestation, and has signed a 20-year contract with each participating community. Zábalo is currently receiving \$80,000 a year, which it divides up between paying the salaries of internal political leadership, pensions for elders, insurance in case of emergencies, school supplies, scholarships, diesel-generated electricity, travel to *mingas*<sup>74</sup>, their

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<sup>74</sup> Once a month, the Cofán of Zábalo get together to participate on a communal labor project called a *minga*. I participated in helping to build a blind man's house, where I spent the entire day drinking manioc beer

park guard program, and an array of useful commodities such as outboard motors and cement posts.

Most participants said they are happy with Socio Bosque, but they realize the program is vulnerable and could be shut down anytime by the government, even though they are supposed to honor the contract for 20 years. One Cofán stated that he thought the funding came from Germany and if other countries stop funding the program, then the government will just end it (B. Lucitante, personal communication, August 11, 2015). Another point of tension is that people distrust the government's intentions, since Socio Bosque seems like 'free' money and people think you can't get something for nothing: "Could it be because they'll ask for something in exchange?...It's not just to help" (Gabriel, personal communication, July 25, 2015) and "Maybe the government is really concerned about the environment, but I don't think that way. There's never going to be: here's your free money" (Gerardo, personal communication, August 9, 2015). Even though one individual worried about people stealing money with Socio Bosque, the rest of the community seemed content<sup>75</sup> that the accountant would come every six months to explain expenditures (Pablo, personal communication, August 5, 2015). Furthermore, in the community of Dureno the Cofán are exploiting oil and simultaneously receiving Socio Bosque money, which seems paradoxical, but has led people to believe that the reason indigenous people are being paid to take care of their land is so that the government can then enter and exploit resources (Gabriel, personal communication, July 25, 2015). As Randy says, "Socio Bosque payments become a means of keeping your mouth shut about your environment being destroyed" or "holding it in trust for the oil companies" (R. Borman, personal communication, August 11 & 19, 2015).

When I asked Randy if Socio Bosque was an intentional form of government control, he said: "Once again, I don't see the intelligence

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(*cunape'cha* or *chicha*) and pushing wood through a planer (Fieldnotes, July 27, 2015).

<sup>75</sup> There were some rumors that there is corruption in the internal politics of Zábalo, in addition to distrust of the FSC. Having an accountant come to explain makes people confident in the transparency of Socio Bosque.

to do that...but so far the stuff I've been seeing is just...we don't have any money" so the government makes bureaucratic problems to avoid paying the Socio Bosque partners or expanding the territory covered under the program (R. Borman, personal communication, August 27, 2015). On the other hand, in villages like the Cofán Community of Dureno, where a Millennium City is under construction, people may be hesitant to protest<sup>76</sup> out of fear of having their funding cut, because there's much more at stake (\$20 million). Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the Socio Bosque program has: a) led to greater access to commodities; b) caused greater dependency on money; c) made the Cofán more likely to obey the government rather than protest.



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<sup>76</sup> The ECORAE (Instituto para el Ecodesarrollo Regional Amazónico), a government institute for Amazonian development, also forced parishes across the country to sign a document stating that they support national oil policies, or else they wouldn't receive money. Randy argues this was used by President Correa to show parishes still support him (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015)

As I was in the process of writing this thesis, a Cofán participant living in Lago Agrio called me on Skype and informed me that Socio Bosque has been suspended for the next 6 months and probably on a permanent basis because the government has run out of money (Fernando, personal communication, April 20, 2016). Since this has affected all Amazonian communities that were receiving Socio Bosque money, he said that the people were going to get together to speak with President Correa and ask the government to honor the 20-year contract that was signed. However, he didn't seem hopeful of finding a resolution and explained that now the community of Zábalo is being left with absolutely no money. Sensing the abandonment by government and nongovernmental actors, he explained that members of the community are discussing the possibility of letting a gold mining company enter to extract resources from the Río Cofanes area and then using the money to either restart the FSC and fund the park guards, conservation initiatives and all the aspects that were previously funded by Socio Bosque or find a way to channel the funds directly to the community. Although he was more receptive to the idea of restarting the FSC, he explained that Zábalo residents want there to be a reduction of personnel and a restructuring of the NGO so that more money goes directly to the community. NOA'IKE<sup>77</sup>, the Cofán ethnic federation, will also soon be without money, making me wonder how they will be sustained in the meantime.

Once again, the Cofán are pragmatically adapting to the worst case scenario, one where the lack of money may lead to extractivism. What is surprising is that, partially due to Zábalo residents' own

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<sup>77</sup> NOA'IKE stands for 'Nacionalidad Originaria A'i Kofan del Ecuador' (Original A'i Cofán Nationality of Ecuador), which was formerly known as FEINCE. Unfortunately, even with current funding, Zábalo residents also bad talked this organization, claiming that it does nothing and only succeeded in giving them some chickens (Three anonymous participants, personal communication, July 18, August 4 & 9, 2015). Gerardo explained: "I feel like they're really slow, but they try to with whatever they can...They've given chickens, fish ponds, *malla* [mesh] fencing for the Charapa [turtle] Project" (Gerardo, personal communication, August 9, 2015).

understanding of the importance of protecting the *tsampi* and Randy Borman's opposition to environmentally destructive practices, the community of Zábalo has always preferred ecotourism and sustainable forms of subsistence. Contrary to Dureno, which has sold out to the oil company and reactivated<sup>78</sup> the 'Dureno Uno' oil well, which had been shut down by the Cofán in the 1990s, Zábalo remains true to the concept of *tsampima coiraye*. This may also be because Zábalo residents are able to compare themselves to other Cofán villages, such as Dovuno, which "kind of got wiped out because they sold all their trees<sup>79</sup>. They sold all the meat that they had from hunting, then they needed food so they sold their trees, and now they need things to build their houses with and they don't have any trees, so they sold their land...and it kept going down and down and down...and it all started out with the oil company" (Daniel, personal communication, August 2, 2015). In the case of Zábalo, it remains to be seen how they will find a way to obtain sufficient money to cover their basic needs and whether people can actually be *opatssi*. Interestingly, the proposed solution of allowing gold mining is not completely opposed to *tsampima coiraye*, because the money generated would go towards initiatives like the park guard program. As stated previously, it is not known if Socio Bosque is intentionally used to extend control over the Cofán, as in the case of Ferguson's 'anti-politics machine' or Foucault's 'governmentality', but the result is the same: a combination of 'cultural inertia' and 'mindless domination' leave the Cofán with few economic opportunities that do not compromise their natural resources and autonomy.

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<sup>78</sup>In 1998, the Cofán had successfully taken over the oil well and shut it down, after a standoff with the military (Cepek, 2008b, p.211).

<sup>79</sup> Gabriel, who is from Dovuno, explained how the president of the community secretly sold some trees and when the others found out, they decided it would be fair for everyone to cut that amount. The number of trees chopped down escalated, eventually enclosures were created, and now there are few trees left. The community spent its money and now has few jobs (Gabriel, personal communication, July 25, 2015). Zábalo residents hope something like this will never happen, due to their internal regulations.



#### 4.4 Resisting hegemony with Cofán pragmatism

Even though the Ecuadorian government has been promoting “ethnic assimilation and an emphasis on national integration and development” (Vickers, 1984, p.10) for decades, it hasn’t been completely successful. Although Cofán children will sing the national anthem in their local language, A’ingae, most of them remain deeply rooted in the community of Zábalo (Fieldnotes, August 27, 2015). They also continue to use traditional forest-based forms of medicine first, prior to using Western medicine (M. Mendua, personal communication, July 13, 2015). In terms of education, I heard the local schoolteacher was fighting to keep Zábalo’s primary school open, rather than having everyone sent to Playas de Cuyabeno’s schools<sup>80</sup>. Moreover, the Cofán engage in the black market or buy bullets directly from Peru, despite restrictive Ecuadorian laws, and either bribe or evade the marines patrolling the river. Politically and legally, the Cofán have resisted through the FSC and NOA’IKE, although currently both of these organizations are struggling to survive due to the lack of funding. Finally, locals criticize the regime on a daily basis, thus resisting the state ideologically. However, even though some participants wanted to join in the August 13 protests against President Correa in Quito, they couldn’t afford to buy gasoline to make the trip (Gonzalo, personal communication, August 9, 2015).

As discussed previously, contrary to being ‘ecologically noble savages’ (Redford, 1991) or environmental subjects indoctrinated by government rhetoric (Agrawal, 2005), the Cofán conserve their forests mainly because it is beneficial to them: their daily sustenance comes from hunting and fishing, so they have a series of restrictions (*se’pi’cho*) to prevent their resources from being exhausted. With

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<sup>80</sup> At these schools, as in the rest of Ecuador, children repeat phrases like “Hasta la victoria siempre” and “Que viva la revolución,” phrases copied from Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution, which have become a part of Socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The nationally distributed textbooks also have a strong political agenda, as they highlight the benefits of the Citizens’ Revolution and speak only favorably about Simón Bolívar. The Cofán are also told they must ‘progress’ and ‘move forward’ by their Quichua schoolteachers (Diego, personal communication, July 31, 2015).



their forest-based livelihoods, the Cofán are able to live more autonomously than other communities such as Dureno and require less money<sup>81</sup>, although the need for money is increasing, as will be described in a later section. Regardless, even Cofán methods for gaining access to money are clear examples of their pragmatic response to being more integrated into the nation-state and the global economy. The Cofán see the expansion of these frontiers as inevitable: *“We’re in the process of cultural dislocation. The magnitude of it is hard to underestimate...The Incas were easy, the Spanish were easy by comparison. All you had to worry about there was losing 99% of your population to sickness<sup>82</sup>. The fact that the Cofans have been able to survive for the past 50 years is pretty miraculous, really, given the size of the group and given the situation. I don’t see it getting any better. I felt very, very strongly and still feel very strongly that certainly the land, having a decent land basis, is one of the strongest stabilizing factors”* (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015). The Cofán also recognize that money is now needed for gasoline, food, education and healthcare, among other things, and are currently trying to find pragmatic solutions to acquire more money<sup>83</sup>.

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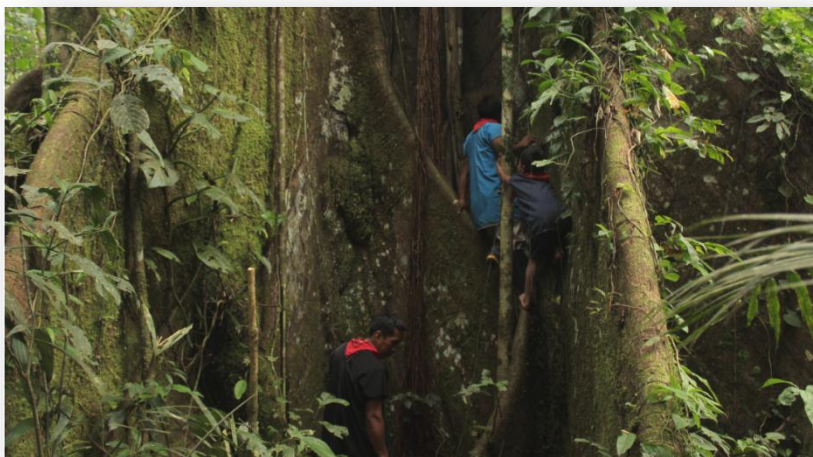
<sup>81</sup> However, game is moving “further and further away” even in Zábalo, meaning some families don’t always have meat and therefore drink only *cui’ccu* (banana drink), so they perceive themselves as being hungry (Gerardo, personal communication, August 9, 2015). Randy argues that if they wanted to, they could go hunting (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015), but Pablo states that people are going hungry because of the difficulty to purchase bullets and gasoline (Pablo, personal communication, August 5, 2015).

<sup>82</sup> In addition to sickness in the time of the Spanish Conquest, “[s]mallpox, measles, polio, whooping cough, cholera, tuberculosis, and malaria drastically reduced the Cofán nation, which hit a low point of less than 400 individuals after a 1923 measles epidemic. Thanks in large part to the vaccination campaigns of Summer Institute of Linguistics/Wycliffe Bible Translator missionary-linguists, the Cofán population rebounded to what it is today—and it continues to grow” (Cepek, 2006, p.14).

<sup>83</sup> Randy suggests that if environmental services were given their proper value or if donors were to provide a certain amount of unrestricted funds for a trust fund, the Cofán would primarily be able to work as park guards (R.

#### 4.5 The black hand of the devil and the end of the world

One of my participants, Javier, spoke to me regularly about the Cofán spirit world, which I do not fully comprehend, but involves: a) *cocoya* spirits that inhabit the ceibo tree, travel with the wind, can make people sick, and are sometimes sent by powerful shamans to attack people; b) *vajo*, the owners of animals, a type of *cocoya* who can be communicated with while drinking ayahuasca (*yaje*) and which were used by powerful shamans to call the game closer for hunting. For instance, the bocachico (*Prochilodus magdalenae*, a migratory freshwater fish), is ‘owned’ by the anaconda, so the anaconda is asked to call it near (M. Mendua, personal communication, August 29, 2015); c) invisible people, who are able to cure a shaman; d) *aya*, the spirits of people who have passed away.



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Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015). In general, he desires a way of gaining access to funds from NGOs or the government without losing indigenous autonomy and has even come up with the idea of the ‘Campaign for 5000,’ in which five thousand people donate regularly to the Cofán to protect their forest. See: <http://www.cofan.org/support-the-cause/>

He also stated that there is a lot of disunity in the community of Dureno because a former political leader, who allowed the oil companies to restart the wells in the area, was allegedly pocketing some of the oil money in addition to silencing local opposition. Other community members in Zábalo have also described how Dureno political opposition were beaten up, sanctioned or expelled from the community (Fieldnotes, July 19, 2015). This same leader has also been accused of being hypocritical, since he gave a talk at an American university about environmental conservation, but greedily accepted oil money, and his governance was like a ‘dictatorship’ (Fieldnotes, July 19, 2015).

Javier seemed convinced that these political problems were due to political tension and said that in Zábalo things are still fine because “for the moment people are united...Let us hope that moment [of strained relations] doesn’t come” (Javier, personal communication, July 22 2015). Another participant worried that Zábalo was copying the “Dureno disease...of separating themselves” (Mauro, personal communication, August 11, 2015). According to Javier, the aforementioned former leader of Dureno has hired a Quichua *brujo* (witch) to attack his opposition, which is protected by a Cofán shaman. In each case, the Quichua *brujo* tried to attack the Cofán shaman, who deflected the invisible spirit arrows and ended up killing three Cofán children: one fell to his knees, another kid drowned, and the third one was killed by a *cocoya* who was waiting for the child’s father at home, but ended up killing the boy. When I asked how the shaman knew it was *cocoya*, Javier said that the child was crying, vomiting, had diarrhea and when the shaman tried to cure him he realized the kid was “dead on the inside” (Javier, personal communication, July 22, 2015) and there was the black hand of the devil<sup>84</sup> on his throat. On another occasion, Javier told me that he “believes the end of the world is near and the Antichrist is on Earth because there are clues like the amount of disunity and fighting in Dureno. He says we will need the ‘666’ mark on our bodies to be given food and the government’s idea of paying everything with a

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<sup>84</sup> He used this term interchangeably for *cocoya* throughout the conversation.

card<sup>85</sup> is a step in that direction” (Fieldnotes, August 21, 2015). This spiritual explanation was not reiterated by others, but was reminiscent of Evans-Pritchard’s description of how Zande belief in witchcraft provides the “missing link” (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, p. 23) in explaining why misfortune has occurred<sup>86</sup>.

When I asked two of the elders, Mauricio Mendua and Carlos Yiyoguaje, about the relation between politics and the spirit world, they said there was no connection. In the community of Dureno, which also has a lot of political conflict, there are said to be many *cocoya* because the shamans, who used to be able to defend people from the tree spirits that cause sickness “have died” (M. Mendua, personal communication, August 29, 2015). However, this did not explain why there are so few *cocoya* believed to inhabit Zábalo. Mauricio explained that it’s because there are no more ‘real’ (fully trained) shamans alive<sup>87</sup> that they are not launching *cocoya* attacks on people in Zábalo.

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<sup>85</sup> The government wants to implement a form of digital money transaction called the ‘New Electronic Payment System,’ and there was the rumor that it would be necessary to pay using something like a debit card, rather than by cash.

<sup>86</sup> Michael Cepek, who has done anthropological research in Dureno, hasn’t heard about these supernatural events (M. Cepek, email, April 21, 2016), leading to doubt about the veracity of my participant’s account, but not invalidating the possible link between spirits and politics.

<sup>87</sup> The last ‘real’ shaman people remember is Guillermo Quenamá (Yori’ye), a powerful leader of Dureno who used to be able to do game calling. He had the ability of turning into a *tesí* (jaguar) and would eat Napo Runa Quichuas and sometimes also threaten the Cofán (M. Mendua, personal communication, July 21 2015). Tragically, he was “killed by the [Texaco oil] company” workers while he was drunk (or possibly because he was drinking). Apparently, his wife told them to kill him so she could marry a *cocama* (M. Mendua, personal communication, July 21 2015). When he died, a black panther, jaguar and a giant river otter *cocoya* (*sararo coco*) came out of the forest and both the panther and jaguar were killed because they tried to eat people. If Mauricio drinks yaje, he can still see Guillermo’s *aya*. Neither Mauricio nor Carlos are ‘full’ shamans, as they only have partial training and cannot call game.

Mauricio does argue, though, that the reduced indigenous power since the 1990s might be due to the fact people are drinking less *yaje* and *ishoa quini'cco*<sup>88</sup> and are now drinking beer instead (M. Mendua, personal communication, August 29, 2015). Furthermore, Carlos Yiyoguaje stated that in Dureno there are many *cocoya* because “there is too much beer...they drink too much and become stupid. They don't think about how they will live in the future, so there are many *cocoya* there” (C. Yiyoguaje, personal communication, August 30, 2015). Hence, it seems that political problems are amplified by shamanic warfare in Dureno and reduced by the lack of ‘real’ living shamans in Zábalo, while Cofán indigenous power is reduced through a steady erosion of the tradition of drinking *yaje*. In other words, although Javier may be an exception, it is possible that some Zábalo residents translate their political anxieties to the spirit world.



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<sup>88</sup> Javier claims that this drink comes from a tree, which strengthens and cures them. As a child he used to drink it every morning and this also involved vomiting regularly (Javier, personal communication, August 29, 2015).

## 5. THE CAPITALIST FRONTIER

### 5.1 The global economic crisis and imaginary oil

The Cofán economy has been heavily dependent on the Fundación Sobrevivencia Cofán (FSC), which was created by Randy Borman to raise funds for Cofán projects. Even though the Cofán mainly hunt, fish and grow crops, they can no longer get by with no money. At the very least, people must be able to purchase bullets for their rifles, gasoline for their motorized canoes, and salt for the meat. Over the last few decades, the community of Zábalo has made money from tourism, conservation projects, a park guard program, and the manufacture of fiberglass canoes, all of which efforts were originally devised by Randy. However, since the 2008 global economic recession, donations have largely come to an end and the community no longer knows or understands what the ‘fundación’ (FSC) is doing.

The effects of this economic recession are that there is an increased distrust by the community towards its leaders, reflected in the amount of ‘bad talk’ (*ega afa’cho*) about Randy Borman. Also, one of the most successful fiberglass canoe entrepreneurs has been heavily criticized for getting ahead. Randy describes this as follows: “Anytime anybody tries to get ahead of the rest of the group, there’s a huge social structure aimed at pulling them back...it’s not conscious...it’s just the normal reaction of the culture is to begin gossiping about that person, and decrying and inventing all sorts of rumors about how they got their wealth” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015).

Moreover, during the ongoing economic slump, some people have continued to work at making canoes and with the park guard program, which is now funded by the Ecuadorian government’s Socio Bosque program. This program has basically given value to environmental services and it pays the Cofán to patrol and clear boundary trails<sup>89</sup>. Most people in the community complain that they

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<sup>89</sup> When asked if this was an intentional form of government control over indigenous peoples, Randy said he doubted it in the case of Zábalo, because

are not earning enough money and that they are out of a job, so they need to look for work elsewhere. Remarkably, they seem to yearn for the arrival of the oil companies, even though in the 1990s they were fervently against them. Ironically, the oil itself may actually be imaginary, since Zábalo is located right between two oil fields: the Pañacocha formation and the Imuya formation (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015). As oil is held inside rock formations, trapped within the rock's porosity, it may well be flowing to either side of Zábalo, but not be present on their lands.

These observations about the potentially non-existent oil led me the following questions, which will be examined in the rest of this thesis: a) How do the Cofán conceptualize land ownership? b) Are the Cofán communal or individualistic? c) Are the Cofán content with a daily subsistence lifestyle or do they wish to accumulate capital? d) What are the current forms of employment and their vulnerability? e) What kind of life do Cofán youth desire? f) What are Cofán opinions about oil? g) Can the Cofán accept money and commodities as part of their everyday lives, while also embracing the values of forest conservation (*tsampima coiraye*) and living a life of tranquility (*opatssi*)?



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it's simply not enough money, but it could be the case in communities like Dureno (R. Borman, personal communication, August 27, 2015).

## 5.2 Individualism, self-interest and land

When referring to the Ecuadorian Amazon, Malcolm Rogge stated that “Given the widespread indigence in the region, many communities are willing to grant permission to an oil company to enter land in exchange for very basic, short-term material needs, such as medicine chests, chain-saws, radios, flashlights, tin-roofing, metal canoes, etc. In many cases, these ‘gifts’ of the company are given to influential people in the community, who use them for their own personal economic gain, thereby creating economic divisions and rivalries within the community itself. Sadly, the use of such ‘divide and conquer’ strategies by oil companies and their contractors is not rare in regions like the *Oriente*; it is, in fact, business as usual” (Rogge, 1997, p.261). Though seemingly inoffensive and intended as a defense of Amazon groups, I believe this statement is quite ethnocentric and perpetuates the “pervasive Western myth of [indigenous] communism” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015).

Firstly, Rogge suggests that the fact that these people are indigenous makes them easily manipulated by outsiders, but this certainly is not the case of Zábalo residents, who are waiting to negotiate the highest price with the oil company. Moreover, though the leadership of the Quichua community of Playas de Cuyabeno was corrupted by oil company money, there were widespread protests when Petroamazonas entered the area. Secondly, it is easy for us to essentialize the Cofán as being more community-oriented and egalitarian, when we forget that they lived scattered along the riverbanks and only recently have entered into community organizations. “Circa 1960, Cofans were entirely individualistic. Probably the tightest bond was man and wife, but even then you certainly had a certain division of goods...these are my beads...this tree is mine...so that individualism is a core value and a key value. The idea is you just live by yourself on the river” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 27, 2015). Thus, like the rest of us, the Cofán work for their self-interest<sup>90</sup>.

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<sup>90</sup> Although Bronisław Malinowski explained that Trobrianders are not solely motivated by self-interest and the “satisfaction of present wants” or





However, one central difference between western and Cofán worldviews is their intimate relationship to the land, without having strictly delineated land ownership. Whenever anybody wants to build a house or use a plot of land, they check around to see that “*nobody has a claim on it...basically, if it’s forest it’s open. And then your ownership refers only to what you put into it, what you’ve actually invested in making that place of land useable...the conceptualization of land ownership didn’t exist...there were 200 people and no land titles, but there had been no competition either for the last few hundred years at least*” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 27, 2015). Upon the entry of the Texaco Oil Company into the area, Randy worked to consolidate land titles and make agreements with the government to prevent further incursions on

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“utilitarian purposes” (Malinowski, 2002 [1922], p.46), in the two months I spent with the Cofán I witnessed no activities that seemed to fall out of place with neoclassical economic theory that people maximize their utility rationally and based upon the available information. The ‘*minga*’ may be the sole exception, as it isn’t self-interested work. If I had stayed longer, I might have been able to deconstruct the neoclassical economic model.

Cofán lands. Although the people currently do have a strong sense of the need to protect their 137,500 hectares of forest, in the immediate surroundings of Zábalo the system described by Randy remains in place. It seems plausible that predatory capital accumulation<sup>91</sup>, as described in Tania Li's book 'Land's End: Capitalist relations on an indigenous frontier,' has not occurred in Zábalo because out of Polanyi's (1944) three fictitious commodities (land, labor and money), land has not yet been commodified<sup>92</sup>. The Cofán of Zábalo still have plenty of land and internal regulations that prevent community members from exploiting too much of the forest. This invalidates Garret Hardin's (1968) 'tragedy of the commons' and the supposed benefits of private property, so long as the Cofán are still in control of the land.

### **5.3 Money & commodities**

The Cofán have always been traders, eventually transitioning from barter to money<sup>93</sup>. Mauricio still remembers in his youth having

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<sup>91</sup> I do not use Marx's term of 'primitive accumulation' both because the Cofán are not engaging in creating land enclosures and then selling them and also because the term would imply that the Cofán were pre-capitalist. However, clearly David Harvey's 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2003) does not apply either (Rivero, 2010, p.2-4).

<sup>92</sup> Locals do not have strict ownership of land, but rather on the basis of consensus. On a larger scale, there are a series of overlapping land title agreements with the government. Furthermore, the protection of their land has been given value under the government-sponsored Socio Bosque program. In any case, it appears as if the lack of ownership on a local level is what prevents people from dispossessing each other.

<sup>93</sup> This evolutionary economic model was described by both Randy and Mauricio (M. Mendua & R. Borman, personal communication, July 14 & August 19, 2015). During my time in Zábalo I witnessed the gifting of meat between relatives and Randy confirmed Marcel Mauss' theory of the gift (1925) by stating that reciprocity is expected afterwards (R. Borman, personal communication, August 27, 2015). Enrique took pride in telling me that the Cofán of Zábalo still share meat, drink manioc beer (*cunape'cha*) and have the most intact culture (Fieldnotes, August 28, 2015), contrary to Dureno, where "there is not enough meat to go around"

gone hunting for paca (*Cuniculus paca*) with his brother and selling the animal for five sucres. Mauricio chuckled as he described how the two of them cut the paper bill in two to split the money because it was the first time they had seen paper money (M. Mendua, personal communication, July 20, 2015). However, certainly since the very founding of Zábalo, having money for gasoline, salt and bullets has been important. In recent times, however, money has become more of a necessity, for three main reasons: the Cofán are purchasing increasing amounts of commodities (outboard motors, chainsaws, motorized weed-whackers, TVs, mobile phones, etc.); they need money for emergency health problems<sup>94</sup>; and they understand the importance of giving their children a good education<sup>95</sup>. Once again, their relationship with most of these commodities is pragmatic and

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(Cepek, 2012b, p.406) because it is surrounded by roads, oil wells and farms, so people sell meat rather than share it.

<sup>94</sup> Zábalo has no health center, but the Millennium City of Playas de Cuyabeno, which is located an hour away by motorized canoe has a fully-equipped health center. In theory, this would mean that in an emergency situation the Cofán would be taken there. In reality, however, the Cofán sometimes seek help from the Petroamazonas Oil Company because Playas de Cuyabeno's clinic has no permanent staff (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015). Otherwise, residents have to travel first to Centro Unión and later to Lago Agrio, which could easily take between 5-10 hours. I was told a story of a Cofán, presumably from another community, who had a hunting accident where he shot his hand and he could have died due to loss of blood, but luckily he made it to Lago Agrio in time and it was amputated (Pablo, personal communication, August 28, 2015). During my two months in Zábalo, multiple people got a fever, infections, headaches, a mild machete wound and a skin infection they call 'el chupo,' so practically all my medicines were used by my participants.

<sup>95</sup> Although education is supposedly free nationwide, parents must pay \$10 a month to ensure the children get breakfast at school when they are sent to Playas de Cuyabeno. Furthermore, ever since the development of Randy's education program and after one young Cofán was sent to study in the USA, people have realized the importance of giving their children better education. Ideally, there should be many educated professionals, because they're "fed up with someone else trying to represent the Cofán people" (Gerardo, personal communication, August 9, 2015).

they are used within the context of a forest-based lifestyle based on hunting and fishing, which most people are not willing to give up. However, this increased need for money, dependence on outsider production, and the expansion of the capitalist frontier does not imply that the Cofán didn't previously have an economic system:

*"In 95% of indigenous people worldwide, some form of economic system is already there. I leave the 5% open just because some anthropologists seem to think some indigenous groups never got involved in one. But there's always some economic system functioning...so the idea of trade, of buying things that you don't have, the idea of increasing wealth are pretty much part of the human framework, wherever you go. The way that it manifests changes from place to place. The Cofán were certainly traders way back when...So, the idea of trying to establish an economic surplus, or working for some sort of wage was integrated long into the culture, long before"*(R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015).

The fundamental difference, as explained by Randy, is between Western and indigenous mentalities. An outsider (*cocama*) "dedicates himself to making money"<sup>96</sup>...whereas the Cofán steps into the economic world briefly to gain what he needs for his own life" (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015). He claims this is also the case of other indigenous communities which, after a particularly good day of fishing and selling their catch, would spend the money on household improvements, school supplies and new clothing and then go out for a drink with friends, whereas a "*mestizo* would have been out there trying to catch three more [fish]" (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015). In other words, it appears that the Cofán are mainly interested in basic subsistence in the forest, making money to buy some commodities, but remaining within their forest-based lifestyle. Although I disagree with Max Weber's evolutionary perspective on capitalism, creating a

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<sup>96</sup> As Magdoff and Foster have stated, our relationship with money can be explained as follows: "Unconsciously, we learn that greed, exploitation of laborers, and competition (among people, businesses, countries) are not only acceptable but are actually good for society because they help to make our economy function 'efficiently'" (Magdoff & Foster, 2010, p.38).

dichotomy between traditional pre-capitalist labor and ‘modern capitalism,’ I do think Randy’s assertions resonate with Weber claiming that “A man does not ‘by nature’ wish to earn more and more money, but simply to live as he is accustomed to live and to earn as much as necessary for that purpose” (Weber, 2005 [1930], p.24).



So, are the Cofán interested in capital accumulation? This is a tricky question with no easy answer. Many Cofán remain basically at a subsistence level, but some Cofán are definitely interested in amassing wealth so they can give their children better education and improve their quality of life. However, this mainly only applies to two of 38 families in Zábalo. Arguably, the Cofán have only recently been experiencing the emergence of new capitalist relations<sup>97</sup> “by stealth” (Li, 2014, p.9) due to the fact that Bolivar Lucitante has set up a successful fiberglass canoe business and is providing

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<sup>97</sup> Tania Li defines ‘capitalist relations’ as involving: 1) unequal ownership; 2) non-owners being forced to sell their labor; 3) availability of capital to generate profit under competitive conditions (Li, 2014, p.8).

employment for many people. Nevertheless, even the Lucitantes seem to remain deeply rooted in the forest.

Thus, the economic gain of the Bormans and Lucitantes should be interpreted not as a form of unequal and exploitative capital accumulation, but through the lens of natural dispositions when people are competing on equal footing. Randy explains that when he was growing up there were some women whose “*houses were immaculate...their beads were exactly placed around their necks. I mean, everything was perfection and their kids reflected it...[Another group were]...laid back...living in little hovels. And that was in the milieu where everybody could have everything that everybody else had, because you were using materials from the forest. Nobody had any inborn advantage...You still had that tremendous gossip coming from the poor...and that was before anyone had any overt outside income tipping the balance*” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015). So, back then, it was “*a question of effort, discipline, outlook...nothing hereditary except for your [work] ethic...this next generation is dealing with a very different economic system...Bolivar took his advantages and turned them into a much more Western-style economic advantage, took advantage of educational opportunities for his kids, took advantage of job opportunities, and his kids are off to a far better start than other kids in the village. And the modality has changed*” (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015). Thus, the economic system has changed and made the Cofán less egalitarian due to the expansion of the ‘capitalist frontier.’ People have always looked after their individualistic self-interest, but now they must engage much more with global financial flows, as they are in need of more money.

Therefore, when asking whether the Cofán can pragmatically embrace money and commodities, while also living a forest-based lifestyle where they protect the forest (*tsampima coiraye*) and live in tranquility (*opatssi*), there is currently no evidence to the contrary. The question of whether capital accumulation will spiral out of control and lead to accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003), as in the case of Tania Li’s ‘Land’s End,’ remains to be seen, but it seems unlikely in a context where land is still abundant and ownership is ‘flexible.’ However, it is also possible that their ideal

life of tranquility (*opatssi*) is under threat from the expansion of state control, greater dependence on money, capital accumulation, the desire<sup>98</sup> for the outside world, and the craving for oil exploitation<sup>99</sup>.



#### **5.4 A fragile economy: canoes, Socio Bosque and tourism**

Often, Zábalo residents would speak nostalgically of better times, when they had more money: “There were many tourists, *corifi'ndi* and we were *opatssi*” (M. Mendua, personal communication, August 1, 2015). It is difficult to ascertain at what

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<sup>98</sup> In addition to being influenced by TV images of the outside world, most Cofán have traveled to Quito, Lago Agrio or Playas de Cuyabeno, where they see certain commodities and lifestyles that are attractive to them. As Li suggests, people are influenced by the “march of progress promised in modernization narratives” (Li, 2014, p.2).

<sup>99</sup> They are extremely jealous of their Quichua neighbors at Playas de Cuyabeno, who had a \$20-million ‘Millennium City’ built in 2013 after having given over their oil to the government.

point the amount of money entering the community decreased, but a number of factors were mentioned by participants:

- 1) Throughout the 1990s, the Cofán had somewhere between 20 tourists a day (Enrique, personal communication, August 28, 2015) or 80 tourists a week (B. Lucitante, personal communication, August 11, 2015) from the Flotel Orellana<sup>100</sup>, a floating hotel that brought tourists who would visit Zábalo and buy handicrafts from the village, have lunch and hike in the forest. In 1995, Ecuador's war with Peru affected community tourism, but people continued to make an income this way.
- 2) Ecuador's change from the sucre currency to the American dollar occurred in 2000, after the country suffered from high inflation, driving up prices of everyday goods.
- 3) That same year, President Clinton implemented 'Plan Colombia,' which involved an escalation of military intervention and coca fumigation in an attempt to end armed conflict and drug trafficking in Colombia, but which had the side-effect of destroying Cofán tourism in the area, since the area was deemed unsafe for American tourists. The floating hotel went away and tourists were/are<sup>101</sup> afraid to visit due to a perceived lack of safety.

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<sup>100</sup> It is also referred to as the Transturi Flotel.

<sup>101</sup> Even though tourists continue to be afraid of being kidnapped by the FARC guerrillas because the Cofán live on the border with Colombia and Peru, I observed many tourists at Centro Unión, who came through *cocama* tourism agencies. Thus, at the moment the lack of tourists seems to be due to the high competition between the FSC tourism and other agencies, rather than to the fear of kidnapping. Also, as Randy explained to me, tourism isn't very profitable because the government takes 33% in taxes (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015). He's hoping one day he could have a trust fund with sufficient money for the Cofán to no longer depend on external donors (who think in terms of short-term projects) and keep a permanent Cofán park guard program to protect the ecosystem upon which the world depends (carbon sinks, fresh air, water, etc.). Otherwise, funding park guards will depend on governments and NGOs eventually



- 4) Up until 2008 the FSC managed to raise funds for environmental conservation projects and the successful park guard project, which monitored and protected 430,000 hectares of forest. Back then, park guards were “scientifically trained, legally empowered, globally funded, and increasingly ambitious caretakers” (Cepek, 2012c, p.14) who would work one month on and one off, throughout the entire year. Currently, the park guards cover only 40,000 hectares of land surrounding Zábalo and only work for 2-3 months every year, because they only get \$19,500/year from Socio Bosque, compared to the \$420,000/year the FSC used to manage (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015). Also, before they used to have 30<sup>102</sup> park guards, but now they have only approximately eight for Zábalo, two in Dureno, three for Sinangoe, one for Chandia Na’e, two for Alto Bermejo and one for Dovuno (Lucas, personal communication, August 18, 2015). Zábalo’s Socio Bosque funds only cover their land, paying a salary of \$600/month, but one participant stated that because of taxes and food costs, his take-home pay was only around \$475/month (Samuel, personal communication, July 23, 2015).

However, this wage is seen favorably, compared to the range of \$150-350/month they used to earn with the FSC. There is plenty of bad talk (*ega afa’cho*) surrounding the FSC park guard system, claiming they were exploited, the park guard coordinator was too strict, they had to work in really rough conditions for too long, didn’t follow Ecuadorian labor laws of working 20 days and resting for 10, weren’t given social security, etc. (Samuel & Fernando, personal communication, July 23 & 25, 2015). Randy explains that their wages were

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waking up to the fact that long-term funding for environmental services is crucial for conservation work (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015).

<sup>102</sup> Another participant claimed there used to be 56 patrols (Lucas, personal communication, August 18, 2015).

calculated within the budget of the FSC and the reason for not covering social security was to maximize the amount of money going to the Cofán directly, rather than to the government (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015).



- 5) The global economic crisis of 2008 led to an end of funding for the FSC, which almost entirely ran out of funds in 2012. At the time of my arrival in the summer of 2015 most Cofán residents had no idea what the FSC was still doing, since it had supposedly ‘died.’ This is not very different to Michael Cepek’s observation that “Zábalo residents commonly declare their ignorance of the FSC. Few claim to know what it is, how it began, or what it is doing” (Cepek, 2012a, p. 133). However, the last few years of inactivity may have increased the bad talk about the FSC and Randy Borman.
- 6) Around 2010, Bolivar Lucitante created his fiberglass canoe business, which currently employs quite a few Cofán, but remains fragile because it depends on the irregular demand for canoes along the Aguarico River. Due to Bolivar’s friendship with the prefect of the

Province of Sucumbíos, he was commissioned to build 36<sup>103</sup> canoes (Daniel, personal communication, August 2, 2015), which will be distributed to communities along the river. Although a number of participants seemed upset that he had been given the job, because there are a few others who also can make canoes and some people wouldn't benefit from the canoe building, most people seemed happy about this source of income. Bolivar gets a lot of bad talk<sup>104</sup>, like Randy, basically because they are the two individuals who bring income to the community. In addition to all these economic changes, during Correa's presidency prices of ordinary goods have shot up and black market bullets and gasoline are also very expensive.



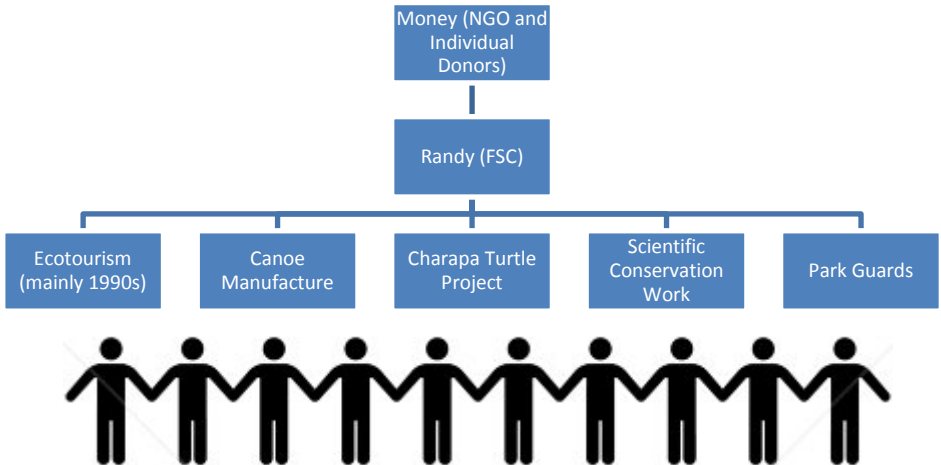
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<sup>103</sup> Another participant claimed they were 21 canoes (Javier, personal communication, July 21, 2015). It is important to note that Bolivar had built up the friendship with the prefect long before he was elected. As in the rest of the world, networking helps.

<sup>104</sup> In addition to questioning the origins of their wealth, people also question true 'Cofán' identity, by stating that Randy looks like a gringo or was born in Pastaza even though he grew up with the Cofán. Bolivar also gets accused of not being Cofán because only his mother was Cofán and people argue that descent is patrilineal.

To try to understand these economic conjunctures and why I believe they have created jealousy, bad talk and general disunity in the community, I have made the following diagrams:

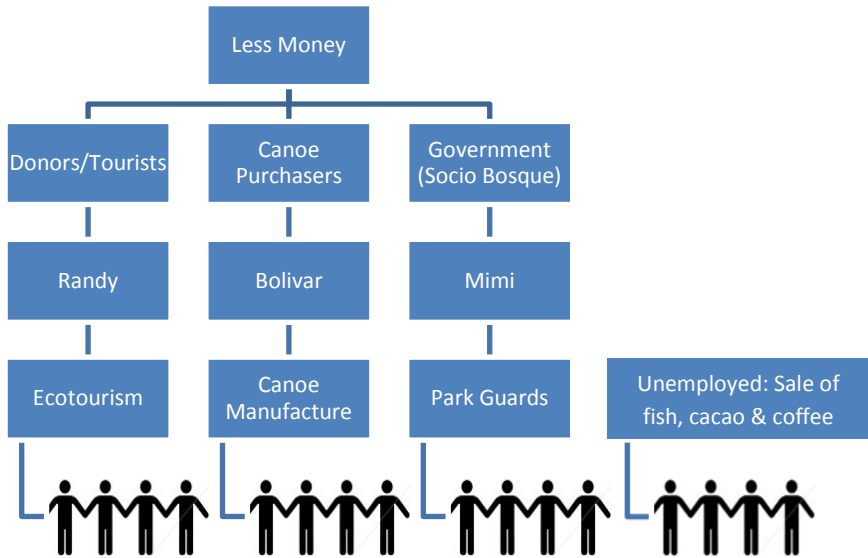
1990s and 2000s:



**Figure 2.**A united community: occasional bad talk about Randy Borman, but people are generally united because most people have an income, and from a single source, the FSC (Santiago & Gerardo, July 28 & August 9, 2015).



Summer of 2015



**Figure 3.** Economic division of labor: Canoes are the main source of income, only a few tourists come through the FSC each year, Socio Bosque funds the park guards and a few other initiatives, but these income sources do not generate much money and are seasonal. Economic division of labor has led to complaints about perceived nepotism and exploitation, in addition to jealousy by those who have less sources of income.

As can be seen in the diagrams, in the 1990s and 2000s money came in through one source (the FSC). Randy and the FSC successfully managed to get donors for many FSC-designed Cofán projects (canoes, ecotourism, turtle conservation, scientific conservation, and park guards) and because most people had a job, people were united. Now, the sources of income have diversified, leading to significant bad talk from those who don't feel they are earning enough money. This explanation for disunity is more plausible than disagreement over internal political leadership, because the change from a lifelong consensus-gathering leader to

short-term politicians occurred back in 2002, when they were more economically well-off.

Nevertheless, it is important to state that the reliability of my interpretation is based on only two months of fieldwork, in which time I am basing the analysis on two assumptions: a) the community actually perceives a feeling of disunity; and b) even though the community members were self-interested in the past, they have become more individualistic and oriented in a ‘time is money’ mentality in the present. However, this would appear to hold some truth, since when I asked Gerardo what was on people’s minds, he said “Money, which is a complete shift since the last 10 years...[Before] it was about providing food for the family...it was easier...it’s hard to get animals to hunt, you need fuel to go further, it’s all these little things that you don’t really think about that pile up” (Gerardo, personal communication, August 9, 2015). Nevertheless, it is still possible to get by with little money, as seen in the case of most participants who were either seasonally employed or unemployed and focused on making money from selling fish or coffee and cacao. I mainly witnessed people focusing on daily subsistence, meaning they would go hunting, fishing or work on their *chakras*. A few people also look for employment in Dureno, Lago Agrio or elsewhere.

All three sources of income are extremely fragile, since Randy’s tourism depends on the FSC’s ability to advertise itself and compete in the global tourist market, Bolivar’s canoes depend on the fluctuating demand for canoes, and the park guards are now exclusively dependent on Socio Bosque, which despite being a 20-year contract with the Ecuadorian government, could be unilaterally ended at any moment (Montse Alban, Conservation International Staff, personal communication, September 11, 2015). The unfortunate possibility of Socio Bosque funding coming to an end actually occurred while I was writing this paper, as mentioned earlier.

As we are all living in times of uncertainty, I am sure my participants and I are asking ourselves: How will the Cofán make money if these funding sources fall through? In the context of both governmental and NGO neglect of indigenous people, what

alternative income sources could they find? Considering they have expenses such as educational transport costs, food, bullets and gasoline, is it possible for people to survive without any money<sup>105</sup>? Will the park guard program continue<sup>106</sup>? If not, will the Cofán begin to either leave the community, exploit their forest resources, or negotiate with the state oil company?



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<sup>105</sup> Luckily, “at this moment, you can earn zero dollars per month but you can still survive...because you can go hunting, you’ve got bananas, your manioc...Everything you need is provided still” (Daniel, personal communication, August 2, 2015). Other participants argue that they would need a little money, at least to buy bullets, gasoline and salt. Everyone agrees this isn’t the ideal situation, though.

<sup>106</sup> Even though a few people said they would do park guard work for free because “it’s my land” (Lucas, personal communication, August 18, 2015) and that conserving nature is like getting “paid to take care of your dog” (Fieldnotes, July 15, 2015), it seems likely that without any money the Cofán would not patrol their land or clear the border trails. When I asked Randy if people would continue the park guard service without money, his response was: “Absolutely not!” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015) and this seems obvious, as nobody should expect people to do this work for free, especially when they need to go hunting and fishing for subsistence. This links back to Randy’s previous statement about indigenous people being exploited on a global scale by everyone who expects them to take care of their environment for free.



### 5.5 A divided community?

As stated previously, when I asked participants whether they felt the community was united or divided, people had mixed reactions, but generally agreed that Zábalo is mainly united and that divisions are primarily over economic and political issues. It appears that conflict has three internal sources: a) jealousy of those who are more economically well off; b) family rivalry; c) opposition and support for the current community president (pictured below).



Until 2002, Randy was the sole leader of Zábalo and his leadership was consensus-based, but ever since he stepped down, the political system has changed and people now vote anonymously for a candidate. This has possibly led to increased bad talk about leaders being corrupt or ineffective. A few participants said they wished they had good leaders and would like the more educated Cofán to return to Zábalo and become their leaders, even though they understand that those who have an education expect to make more than \$300 a month, so there is no incentive for them to assume the leadership of the community. Some can make more money by working in canoe manufacture. The adoption of a new political system has amplified family rivalry, and since the Yiyoguaje family is quite large, other families need to unite if they wish to oppose their political force



(Daniel, personal communication, August 2, 2015). However, participants agreed that most of the divisions in the community are caused by jealousy and economic inequality rather than conflict over political control, because political campaigning is not allowed until the day of the election (M. Mendua & Eva, personal communication, July 14 & 31, 2015). Unfortunately, if the Cofán do not find a steady source of income, this state of anxiety is bound to continue.

### **5.6 Mediascapes & the colonization of consciousness**

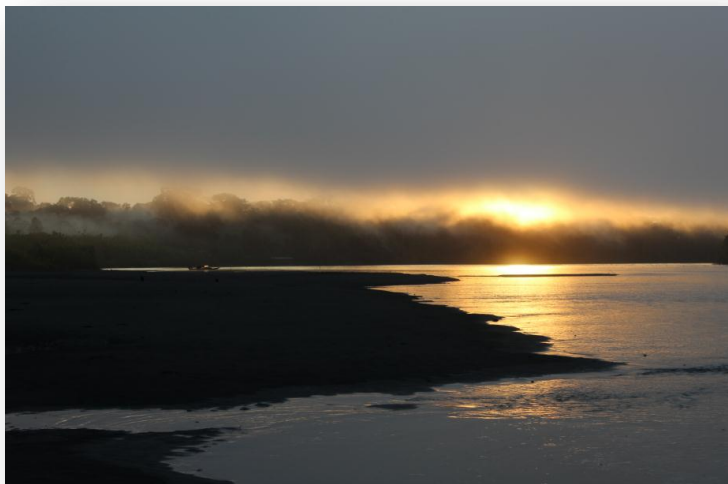
I think the term ‘colonization of consciousness’ is appropriate to describing how the media affects people worldwide, as it clearly affects us all. Although this is not something unique about the Cofán, I found it interesting that TV is one of the major pastimes of the community (and of other indigenous people along the river), as I witnessed every time the generator got switched on. Both children and adults who weren’t working, hunting or fishing would watch movies, many times until the generator turned off. Again, the appeal of the TV and hours spent watching it are a global phenomenon. However, these mediascapes<sup>107</sup> may well reveal the ‘dreamscapes’ of the youth, and it seems that the increasing influence of television could be another contributing factor leading some Cofán people in the future to abandon<sup>108</sup> their forest-based lifestyle or look for jobs

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<sup>107</sup> Out of Arjun Appadurai’s (1996) five “scapes” (ethnoscapes, ideoscapes, technoscapes, mediascapes and financescapes), I find that the most prominent for this paper are mediascapes and financescapes. In other words, I shall try to trace the flow of capital and ideas. Capital flows depend on donors for the FSC, buyers and political contacts for the canoes, and government money in the case of Socio Bosque’s funding of park guards. Flows of ideas and ‘dreamscapes’ occur through contact with the nearby towns of Playas de Cuyabeno and Lago Agrio, but also through the influence of television.

<sup>108</sup> For now though, every young person in the community spoke of staying in the community and living a forest-based lifestyle. In 2012, this was also confirmed by Flora Lu et al., who wrote, “Everyone prefers to live in the jungle, even if they have money” (Flora Lu et al., 2012, p.177). Also, Randy suggests this hasn’t happened yet because people recognize they have a high quality of life in the forest and also because in the city context they think “I’m coming in on the bottom rung of this. I’m never going to make

outside of Zábalo. Dreamscapes are important because the imagination is a “form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 31). As Randy states, “the desirability of that outside world is very high” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015).



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it” (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015). Nevertheless, Enrique said he would like to earn money as a construction worker and then return to the community (Fieldnotes, July 12, 2015). A young Cofán named Nicolás told me he would like to leave the community to do military service and become a policeman because they earn \$1000 and teachers only earn \$300, but he spoke of wanting to then return to the community (Nicolás, personal communication, August 18, 2015). The community is also concerned that the most educated Cofán will not return because there aren’t well-paying jobs in Zábalo. Pablo says four young Cofán have left the community already, searching for work elsewhere, and claimed that the Quichuas are losing their language and culture because they’re educated, implying that education is both good and bad for the Cofán (Pablo, personal communication, August 17 & 19, 2015). An older Cofán also said that in his youth people wouldn’t leave for jobs, but that now many people go to Dureno in search of jobs (Esteban, personal communication, September 3, 2015).

The perception that the outside world is better is also fueled by Cofán people comparing Zábalo to their Quichua neighbors at Playas de Cuyabeno or to the Cofán community of Dureno, both of which received \$20-million Millennium Cities in exchange for oil exploitation. In other words, although Zábalo was once perceived as more prosperous than its neighbors because of the large amount of land, animals and tourists, now Cofán residents feel that Zábalo needs to catch up with its neighbors (M. Cepek, personal communication, April 25, 2016). At the inauguration speech of Playas de Cuyabeno in 2013, President Correa had made statements like “This is the new Amazonia, which some do not want us to have, since they want us to continue living in misery” or “Our ancestral people do not live well. Communities without basic services...in the 21st century is not folklore, or even less so, culture, it's misery” (Correa, 2013) and promised to invest \$600 million in projects in Amazonia by 2014.



Although these initiatives may be well intentioned, President Correa fuels a discourse of Amazonian poverty which resonates with the Cofán, whose “sense of their relative poverty is also an aspect of

their negative identity” (Cepek, 2012a, p.76). Mauricio said one of the reasons he wanted Zábalo to have more money is that he doesn’t want rich people to assume the Cofán take care of their forest because of their poverty, when it’s actually their desired lifestyle (M. Mendua, personal communication, August 17, 2015). As Randy states, “we still exist: we are not extinct; we are not sliding into poverty and acculturation” (Borman, 1996, p. 200). Cofán are also proud of their culture, but I wonder if the growing sense of relative poverty, combined with the perception that ‘the grass is greener on the other side,’ produced by TV and interactions with outsiders, might be very damaging to the community.

A young Cofán in his twenties, Mauro, revealed to me that most of the other young people his age wanted to make money in order “to bring a boat with girls...to live partying every day. That’s how they think. Others want to be musicians. Others teachers. And they don’t think about this, about their land, about their *tsampi*” (Mauro, personal communication, August 11, 2015). He continued by explaining that they “want to have fun, go out over there on a yacht and get to know girls...They copy expressions and act like [soap opera<sup>109</sup>] actors...Yes, things are changing a lot, because some want to be musicians...if you’re popular you have many girls, you travel around the world. They watch *reggaetoneros* named Wisin & Yandel, Daddy Yankee, Hector and Tito ‘el bambino’ and they say, ‘I want to be a singer. I want to be like him.’...I would like a car...sometime in the future...because it would be easier to travel...from Quito to Lago [Agrio]...[Do people want a road?]...All the young people do. It would be easier to travel to Lago. Even the

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<sup>109</sup> Whenever I couldn’t find adults to talk to because they were off working, fishing or hunting, I would watch TV with children. At night, when visiting people’s houses, the TV was also prominent, as some people watched pirated DVDs and four houses have Direct TV. I ended up seeing everything from MTV, National Geographic, hunting channels, a boxing series called ‘Undisputed,’ Disney movies, religious films like ‘Marcelino, pan y vino,’ Argentine and South Korean soap operas, etc. Mauro seemed to like a lot of Scifi movies, although he said people were mostly influenced by soap operas.

elders want it<sup>110</sup>” (Mauro, personal communication, August 15, 2015). Mauro also suggested that Cofán youth don’t like traditional food and would rather be eating rice, pancakes and cake. The embodied changes that I witnessed in Zábalo were the widespread use of hair gel, blasting reggaeton and cumbia throughout the day, and the formation of a Cofán music group. Also, I was told that some young people were imitating<sup>111</sup> martial arts movies by doing backflips at a lake and saving money to make parties that imitate what they see on TV (Fieldnotes, August 26, 2015). Mauricio complains that young people are becoming lazy, don’t obey their parents, and wake up later because of TV. He also said people used to dance to the drums, but now dance to *cumbia*<sup>112</sup> and want to live like *cocama* (M. Mendua, personal communication, August 1, 2015).

The only TV series I noticed was present in four different houses was called ‘El Cholo Juanito y Richard Douglas,’ a Peruvian comedy show that involves a *cholo*<sup>113</sup> who in one episode is referred to as an ‘indio asqueroso’ (disgusting Indian) and portrays the stereotype of being ignorant, dirty, speaking Spanish incorrectly, dressing strangely, not knowing the law, getting easily cheated, not being paid, getting threatened with prison, etc. (Fieldnotes, July 21, 2015). Although I do not intend to psychologize, it seems apparent that the

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<sup>110</sup> Elders like Mauricio are actually against the road. Mauricio claimed that he’s worried because of a road that will be built to the nearby Lagartococha area (M. Mendua, personal communication, August 1, 2015). Another middle-aged Cofán, Pablo, also voiced his opposition to the road (Pablo, personal communication, August 5, 2015), but Mauro argued there’s a difference between what my participants admitted to me and what they actually want.

<sup>111</sup> Randy also told me the story of how when Texaco first arrived, the Cofán started imitating the ‘fashionable’ oil workers who had towels around their necks without understanding that this was because they were about to take baths (R. Borman, September 10, 2015).

<sup>112</sup> Fernando doesn’t find this problematic, since he has also produced techno cumbia songs in A’ingae, which he showed me on his smart phone (Fernando, personal communication, July 25, 2015).

<sup>113</sup> The term ‘*cholo*’ refers to a *mestizo*, an individual with mixed ethnicity with indigenous blood. It is a derogatory and racist term, although it can also be used jokingly.

reason this TV series is so popular in the community is that it may highlight some of the feelings the Cofán have whenever they visit cities and interact with *cocama*.

Mauro also stated that globalization “allows people to learn things from the outside” (Mauro, personal communication, August 14, 2015) but also can lead to deterioration of culture, such as a Cofán who spent some time outside the community and when he returned he no longer wanted to speak A’ingae. The Ecuadorian outpost of Centro Unión was only created a few years ago and its existence has definitely increased the amount of connectivity Cofán have with outside goods and influences: “Before we all had more limited access to stuff. We made one trip to Lago Agrio in a month. Now we’re moving back and forth, so it’s more globalized in a way” (Daniel, personal communication, August 2, 2015).

### **5.7 We must negotiate with the oil company**

A few years ago, the president of the Asociación Santa Elena in the Quichua community of Playas de Cuyabeno negotiated with the state-owned oil company without the agreement of the community<sup>114</sup>. When the military came to initiate oil drilling, the Quichua and Cofán stood together in protest, but eventually the military won and the drilling began. A participant describes the conflict: “To help the Quichua we went...with spears, blow guns and there the military embarked on a barge. And they have rifles, but we don’t. We only had spears. They were going up to pass over to Santa Elena. We fought with the spears...a Quichua got shot here with [tear] gas” (Miguel, personal communication, August 11, 2015). Other witnesses at the event stated, “They shot with [tear] gas, bullets in the air” (Francisco, personal communication, August 16, 2015), indicating that “nearly 500 military came...we took the guns and threw them in the river...we threw a wasp nest at the barge...put a

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<sup>114</sup> There is a worry that despite Zábalo’s internal regulations, future internal political leaders might be easily bribed by oil companies, but luckily Randy may continue to oppose oil exploitation or at least negotiate for higher prices (Gerardo, personal communication, August 9, 2015).

cable across the river to try to prevent the barge from advancing” (Alejandro, personal communication, August 4, 2015).



Due to these incidents, “there’s this fear that the government can basically do whatever it wants” (Gerardo, personal communication, August 9, 2015), and all the Cofán participants I spoke with agreed that there is no longer a way to fight the oil company<sup>115</sup>, but instead they need to find a way to negotiate<sup>116</sup>. Even Mauricio, who witnessed the destruction caused by oil companies in Dureno (Cepek, 2008b, p. 207; M. Mendua, personal communication, July 13, 2015) now says that he would accept oil drilling and they would “ask for a

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<sup>115</sup> Mike Tidwell’s *Amazon Stranger* (1996) gives a very good account of the ways in which the Cofán fought back against the oil companies in the 1990s after they entered Cofán territory and set up wells without their consultation or permission. Those times of overt resistance, including taking over the Paujil oil well, detaining Petroecuador oil workers, and burning a heliport now seem long gone with the state’s willingness to use military intervention in the case of conflict.

<sup>116</sup> The idea of negotiating with Petroecuador is pushed by factors like the oil conflict in Playas de Cuyabeno and people’s desire for easy money, but it is by no means a new realization. Back in the 1990s people had already realized they couldn’t be “flat-out against oil in the Cuyabeno” (R. Borman, as cited in Tidwell, 1996, p.52).

lot of money and will buy fiber glass canoes” (M. Mendua, personal communication, July 21, 2015), but he also stated that if the oil company tried to enter without paying they would fight back (M. Mendua, personal communication, July 17, 2015). Afterwards, he corrected his position by stating that they probably wouldn’t fight because he doesn’t want to die in the fight (M. Mendua, personal communication, August 1, 2015). Several participants spoke of being afraid and accepting the inevitability of the oil company coming in, but some also spoke of fighting it (Miguel, personal communication, August 11, 2015). Others claimed that Zábalo was already receiving contamination from the oil activity upriver. One participant saw these as excuses made by the majority who badly want the oil company to come: “That’s just excuses to let the oil company in...I mean, it’s true we’re getting some contamination, but our forests are preserved...it’s not a fear, it’s an excuse...[Zábalo residents]...are wanting it...They’re trying to convince everybody else that we have to negotiate our land or otherwise they’re going to take it. The other one they use all the time is the underground drilling [meaning the Quichuas nearby are sucking the oil from under Zábalo land].” He also explained that it’s “Easy money...money that pays you even though you’re not educated (Daniel, personal communication, August 2, 2015). The perceived inevitability of the oil company’s arrival is also highlighted by the number of times that oil company engineers have come to discuss with the community, but never coming to a consensus, especially now that there are low oil prices worldwide (Mauro, personal communication, August 14, 2015).

So, to some degree the Cofán both fear military intervention and desire the oil company to enter because of current high unemployment<sup>117</sup>. Carlos Yiyoguaje showed me a video on his

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<sup>117</sup> Since Zábalo is pretty far away from other cities, it is difficult to find ways of attracting capital. They have done so in the past, through the FSC, but it seems that the only alternative source of money is to seek jobs seasonally or permanently outside of the village. The problem of unemployment is common all along the Aguarico River, as I witnessed a man from another community stopping at a house along the river to tell a



handycam recorder of the 2014 December meeting at which Randy accused the Cofán of acting like ‘hungry dogs’ when they were recently approached by Petroecuador and were willing to sell their forest at \$42/hectare rather than \$60/hectare (C. Yiyoguaje, personal communication, August 4, 2015). The oil company eventually went away because Randy had been opposed to the deal they offered and demanded too high a price. Because of this, Randy gets accused of having pushed the oil company away at a time when people need money. The most active proponent of accepting oil extraction says the money would benefit the old people in the community, using the logic that they’re going hungry because of lack of money and if they don’t do it now, they’ll die without having gotten any benefit from the oil (Alejandro, Pablo & Ricardo, personal communication, July 29 & August 11, 13, 2015). This could be interpreted as shift in mentality by some community members from long-term planning to short-term gain.

The irony is that “20 years ago this was the group [of families] that was most antagonistic to the oil company...this generation, the second generation is very interested in opening up the forest to the oil company” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015). People are also jealous of the ‘Millennium City’ of Playas de Cuyabeno and would love it if the Ecuadorian government also invested \$20 million in building houses for them. However, most of them would like the houses to be made out of wood, not in a row and allowing animals to live near the house, since they complain that the Quichua community is too hot and animals can’t live near the houses, which are all in a line and too close to each other (Miguel, personal communication, August 11, 2015). Furthermore, people fear that the government may ask the Quichua community at Playas de Cuyabeno to pay for electricity and rent, later replicating this model in Zábalo if they were to build houses for them. It remains to be seen whether the oil company will enter or not, but people seem to think it is inevitable. Hence, it appears that in general Zábalo residents desire the oil company to enter and their fears are actually directed towards

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woman that her husband might get a seasonal job as a canoe driver (*motorista*)(Fieldnotes, August 5, 2015).

the possibility of *colono*<sup>118</sup> or governmental land grabs in the future (M. Mendua & Pablo, personal communication, July 18, August 5, 2015).



### **5.8 Opatssi, the pursuit of value and the danger of creating concepts**

When asking Randy about the meaning of ‘*opatssi*,’ he warned me that even though it is present in everyday life, “*it’s not a concept by itself...[and Michael Cepek]...tried to make it into a concept. And this is one of the things I have against anthropologists. The tendency is to create questions and answer systems that never existed and that can be constructive, but can be destructive too. And it’s very destructive when a person is not aware of the danger of it...Trying to isolate a concept, trying to make a concept out of it when it was never a concept, is extremely loaded and it’s extremely dangerous ground to be playing with*” (R. Borman, personal communication,

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<sup>118</sup>“Many Cofán people suggest that the most damaging aspect of oil production is not contamination but colonization” (Cepek, 2012b, p. 406).

August 19, 2015). Gerardo also explained that he finds it ‘offensive’ if people assume that all<sup>119</sup> Cofán are permanently *opatssi*: “I see myself as *opatssi*, but I feel that at the same time, in terms of talking to an outsider that I can be a little non-*opatssi*” (Gerardo, personal communication, August 9, 2015). In spite of Randy’s warning about investigating and creating concepts like *opatssi*, I found myself probing into philosophical questions for which I have no answer when asking them about myself or other societies, but which I hoped to pursue in my attempt to understand the people of Zábalo: What does an ideal utopian life look like for the Cofán? Is *opatssi* a changing state of being, like our conception of ‘tranquility’? Do they really seek to be *opatssi*, as Cepek claims?



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<sup>119</sup> Cepek explains that Cofán leadership and shamans are warrior-like (not *opatssi*) in order to preserve an *opatssi* lifestyle for the rest of the community (Cepek, 2008a; 2009; 2012a). However, I argue that ordinary Cofán people are *opatssi* to varying degrees.



When speaking to Cofán people, and especially to elders, I often had the sensation that there was almost a Buddhist-like calm about them, as they would lie in a hammock or chuckle contentedly while drinking *cui'ccu* (banana drink). I wondered if this tranquility was the embodiment of Cepek's *opatssi* concept. As Randy explains, Michel Cepek "was feeling a particular attitude and he was hunting for a word that expressed the concept. And there wasn't any because it was an attitude that was all the way around<sup>120</sup>...A person who is truly within the *opatssi canseye* concept never bothers with thinking about it...you're just living. And you have the things that you want, your desires" (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015).

Mauricio claimed that the Cofán of Zábalo were still *opatssi*, but that threats to this way of life included "drunkenness at parties because people fight" (M. Mendua, personal communication, July 18, 2015), powerful shamans, lying, stealing, conflict over women,

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<sup>120</sup> When I first met Randy at the FSC offices he explained that *opatssi* is a part of everyday life and people rarely think about it. He compared it to the word 'highway' in the USA because although people drive on a highway every day, they rarely think about it (Fieldnotes, July 9, 2015). Both Randy Borman and Michael Cepek warned that this kind of research would be difficult due to the fact *opatssi* is taken for granted.

*colonos* taking Cofán land, the oil company, etc. The greatest threat to peace in Zábalo is the proximity of *cocama* at Centro Unión, and multiple Cofán participants said they couldn't be tranquil because of the theft of outboard motors, which now need to be locked away in a storeroom every time people go partying (Fieldnotes, August 6, 2015). Mauricio also claimed to be less *opatssi* because before he used to be able to hunt anything and now *se'pi'cho*<sup>121</sup> prohibitions limit the quantity and type of animals that can be hunted (M. Mendua, personal communication, August 1, 2015).



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<sup>121</sup> However, another participant believed that *se'pi'cho* was actually beneficial to *opatssi* (Miguel, personal communication, August 11, 2015). Similarly, there are mixed opinions about oil. For some participants, especially those who have some income, oil would threaten *opatssi* (Bolivar, Daniel & Esteban, personal communication, July 25, August 2 & September 3, 2015), but most people strongly desire money and they say that oil exploitation wouldn't contaminate too much or be detrimental to *opatssi*, since without money they aren't *opatssi* either. Mauricio, though sometimes opposed to oil exploitation, seemed open to the idea and said that "if there are no animals [to hunt], I will raise chickens to sell" (M. Mendua, personal communication, July 21, 2015). It's also possible oil could damage the *tsampima coiraye* conservation mentality (Mauro & Nicolás, personal communication, August 11 & 18, 2015).

Generally, it seemed that people believed Zábalo was still *opatssi*, although this was deteriorating due to lack of money and jobs (Five anonymous participants, personal communication, August 8, 9, 11, 13 & 28, 2015). Some Cofán argued that *opatssi* is declining because now there is more theft, and one even told the story of a relative that was murdered and had his organs removed (Santiago, personal communication, July 28, 2015), while another participant spoke of having \$800 stolen from him by two men on a motorcycle with guns while he was trying to buy a chainsaw (Lucas, personal communication, July 31, 2015). Although both of these incidents occurred in Lago Agrio, there is the growing sensation that Dureno and Dovuno aren't *opatssi* because the presence of roads leading to them opens up the possibility of dangerous outsiders destabilizing the community (Pablo, personal communication, August 5, 2015). Furthermore, after attending the party at Playas de Cuyabeno I saw a Cofán with a black eye and when I asked how it had happened, he said that a Quichua had attacked him and when he went to the police, the policeman told him to 'go fight' (Fieldnotes, August 26, 2015). Mimi Yiyoguaje emphasized the fact that he can't be *opatssi* because he needs money to take care of his children's education<sup>122</sup> and predicted that in the future there won't be tranquil and friendly people because there is no shaman or cultural music anymore (M. Yiyoguaje, personal communication, August 16, 2015). In essence, *opatssi* seems to be affected by cumulative factors: the increase in bullet and gasoline prices, the end of FSC funding in 2012, lack of jobs and money, the worry of having to pay for more services in the future, and political rivalry, which started with the new internal political system in 2002 (Enrique, personal communication, August 28, 2015).

When I asked Mimi Yiyoguaje if money was a problem or a solution, he said "Both!" (M. Yiyoguaje, personal communication, August 16, 2015). As in other parts of the world, money paradoxically makes us free and slaves at the same time. Hence, I

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<sup>122</sup> Nationally, education is obligatory by law. "If the child doesn't study, the father will be arrested and will go to jail" (Fernando, personal communication, July 25, 2015).

tried to understand the ways in which money affected *opatssi* and generally concluded that even though long ago people could be *opatssi* without money, this was no longer the case. Money, combined with a forest-based subsistence, is now essential for being *opatssi*: “If I have money, I can buy things and won’t be missing soap, salt, matches and everything that we want and we’ll be *opatssi*” (Enrique, personal communication, August 28, 2015). Mauricio claimed that without money the Cofán can’t buy things or pay fines<sup>123</sup>, so they can’t possibly be *opatssi* (M. Mendua, personal communication, August 1, 2015). However, if they have a lot of money<sup>124</sup> they won’t be *opatssi* either because, unless they keep it in a bank account, they’ll be afraid of it being stolen. In terms of commodities, all of my participants agreed that they made people *opatssi*<sup>125</sup>, except for beer, which causes conflict, but is luckily not

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<sup>123</sup> If people are caught not wearing a life jacket or without a matriculated and licensed canoe, they can be fined up to \$200 or have their canoes confiscated, but they are usually able to bribe the marines with less money and/or some food. The Cofán recognize that increased patrolling prevents crime, but also explained how ineffective the control is by saying that even when the canoes are kept near the marines the motors get stolen. A frustrated Secoya took justice in his own hands by setting a motor as bait at nighttime and shooting the thief (Santiago, personal communication, July 28, 2015).

<sup>124</sup> The idea of having a lot of money seemed unlikely to most and as Randy says, “the only thing worse than having money is not having any” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015). One Cofán speculated that “millionaires do not sleep well like us. They have many workers and sometimes have an enemy” (Pablo, personal communication, August 28, 2015) and stated that he wanted money to live, but not too much. Two participants set their dream amount of money at \$10,000 (Pablo & Lucas, personal communication, August 5 & 18, 2015).

<sup>125</sup> The freezers, discussed earlier, are an example of this. If people can hunt and freeze food, then they’re more tranquil because they have food stored. Mauricio also stated that money was necessary for *opatssi* because it allowed people to purchase gas cylinders and zinc roofs, rather than having to laboriously chop wood and repair thatched roofs (M. Mendua, personal communication, August 1 & 17, 2015). Cepek also confirms this: “Cofán

allowed to be sold in Zábalo according to their internal regulations. However, if commodities get damaged, that reduces *opatssi* (Santiago, personal communication, July 28, 2015). Mauricio claimed to miss the old days when people used to speak to each other more, were on friendlier terms and there was less bad talk about money (M. Mendua, personal communication, August 17, 2015).

Although this was one interpretation of *opatssi* in the present, a few participants claimed *opatssi* was an idealized past or future. It is conceptualized as something long gone, as an ideal life before they interacted with *cocama* or an unattainable utopia. “*Opatssi* would mean...we’re cut off from all relationships with the outside world. We’re going to live *tranquilo* [calm] because we don’t need anything from the outside, besides small stuff like salt” (Daniel, personal communication, August 2, 2015). Bolivar stated: “I don’t understand very well what *opatssi* means because there are different meanings” and speculated that “before we were *opatssi*, but not anymore” (B. Lucitante, personal communication, July 25, 2015). Another participant stated that ever since the threat of colonization by landless farmers became an issue, the Cofán cannot be tranquil because they worry colonos will take their land (Gabriel, personal communication, July 25, 2015). Mauricio also nostalgically speaks of the past, when there were no *cocama* and people were calm because they weren’t afraid of their land being taken away (M. Mendua, personal communication, July 18, 2015). Finally, two participants believed that they were *opatssi* when Michael Cepek was last in Zábalo in the summer of 2013 (Santiago & Gerardo, personal communication, July 28 & August 9, 2015), but this has changed since then because there has been an increase in outboard motor theft and the perceived proximity of thieves and murderers, in addition to the fact that the FSC ran out of money in 2012.

Clearly, there is a variegated perception of this concept. Although I generally agree with Cepek’s discussion of *opatssi*, I wish to emphasize four points: 1) *Opatssi* is not equally shared by all Zábalo residents (M. Mendua, personal communication, August 29,

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people embrace many goods as tools that allow them to be more, rather than less, *opatssi*” (Cepek, 2008a, p.343).



2015); 2) *Opatssi* is not a fixed state of being, meaning that ordinary residents can be intranquil depending on the context, such as being in the city<sup>126</sup> (Pablo, personal communication, August 28, 2015); 3) *Opatssi* is not entirely unique to the Cofán, as people worldwide desire peace and tranquility<sup>127</sup> and it's more of a "human condition" (R. Borman, personal communication, August 27 & September 10, 2015); 4) *Opatssi* is not people's sole life objective (M. Mendua, Pablo & Lucas, personal communication, August 17, 18 & 28, 2015). This last point is something which fascinated me, possibly because I was reading David Graeber's 'Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams' and agreed with Clyde Kluckhohn that cultures are not "just ways of perceiving the world, but...different ways of imagining what life ought to be like" (Graeber, 2001, p.22).

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<sup>126</sup> City life, on the other hand, seemed to be viewed by all as the perfect example of the opposite of being *opatssi*. My participants confirmed Cepek's description (Cepek, 2012a; Pablo, personal communication, August 28, 2015) of how Cofán fear the thieves, murderers, dangers of crossing the street and of getting lost in a city: "For me, *tsampi* is life. For me, the city is a life of death. It's like a desert. For instance, there if you have no money, nobody gives you anything. You just die of hunger" (Mauro, personal communication, August 11, 2015); "The Cofán think that *cocama* live badly. They don't have time to rest. They are like slaves" (Mauro, personal communication, August 15, 2015). Furthermore, Enrique highlighted the undesirable life of 'buying to live': "The *cocama*'s life is more difficult...they have everything, but they live paying, paying" (Enrique, personal communication, August 28, 2015).

<sup>127</sup> An interesting future study would be to compare *opatssi* to other cultural forms of being tranquil, such as Buddhist meditation.



(Source: Cossío & Cabezas, 1998, p. 164)

During one of my many conversations with Mauricio, he told me that “Before they were *opatssi*, but now what makes them *opatssi* is money” (M. Mendua, personal communication, August 17, 2015) and explained that people want money for *in'jan'cho*<sup>128</sup>, which was loosely translated as “what you want,” but also “refers to understanding...[and] to love, desire” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015). Mauricio also said that people

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<sup>128</sup>In the Cofán-Spanish dictionary created by Randy’s parents, *in'jan'cho* means ‘object of desire or interest’ or ‘thought, idea’ (Borman, 1976, p.22).

cared about *tansin'tsse*<sup>129</sup>, which he translated as being morally 'firm,' as opposed to "cheating people, stealing<sup>130</sup> money. If you're 'firm', you indicate to people what you are doing [with the money] to not trick the people" (M. Mendua, personal communication, August 17, 2015). Another participant confirmed that *tansin'tsse* meant to "speak the truth" (Pablo, personal communication, August 28, 2015) and is opposed to stealing and lying. Could it be that people are now more interested in achieving that which they desire and being 'truthful,' rather than simply living *opatssi*? Or are *tansin'tsse* and *in'jan'cho* part of being *opatssi*? Or possibly, are all of these values being replaced by money as an end<sup>131</sup>, rather than a means to an end?

Although I am way out of my depth, especially due to my lack of A'ingae, Scheper-Hughes states that "[a]nthropologists are a restless and nomadic tribe, hunters and gatherers of human values" (Scheper-Hughes, 2012, p.229), and in this spirit I made the following speculative diagrams to explain what I see as a potential shift in Cofán values, even though it will no doubt be disputed:

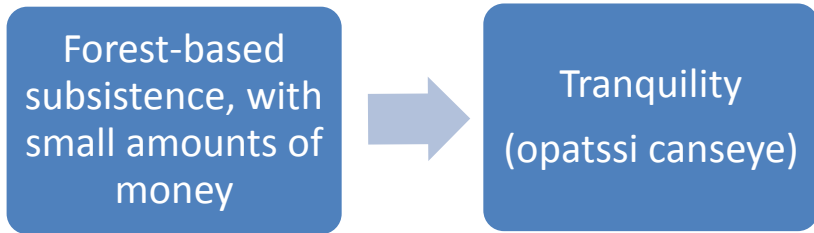
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<sup>129</sup> Similarly, in the dictionary, the word *tansin* is translated as 'right,' *tansin'fa* means 'right hand' and *tansin'tsse afa'ye* refers to 'telling the truth' (Borman, 1976, p.43).

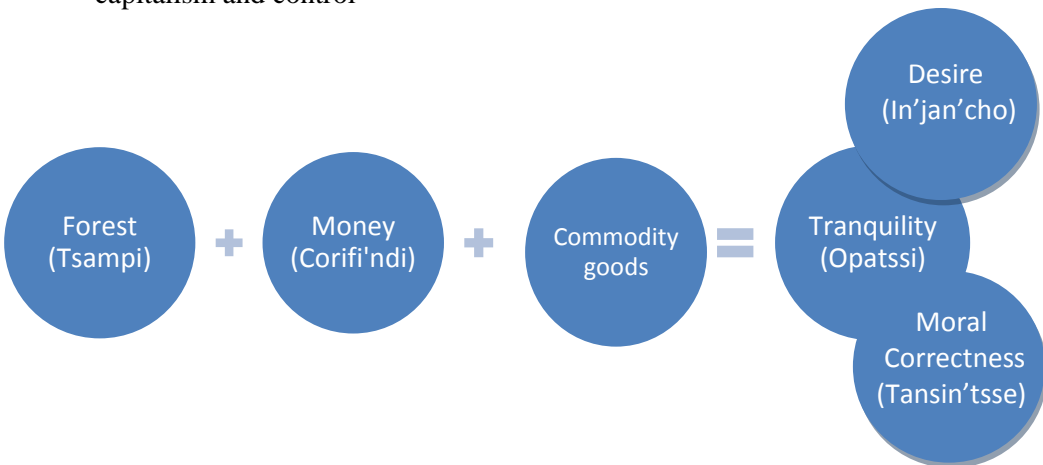
<sup>130</sup> Mauricio argued that Ecuadorians showed Cofán people how to steal and that internal political leaders learned from Lucio Gutiérrez, who was a very corrupt Ecuadorian president (M. Mendua, personal communication, July 21 & August 17, 2015). However, theft in the community is still rare and dealt with through fines at community meetings.

<sup>131</sup> Mauricio definitely worries that young people want money to buy alcohol and that they value money more than they do the forest. In addition, he worries there may be internal corruption and thinks that money leads to distrust within the community. Finally, he stated that money is being spent by parents on beer and only a little bit goes towards food for the family. However, he says this problem is inevitable because money is necessary and it's better to have some than none at all (M. Mendua, personal communication, August 17, 2015).

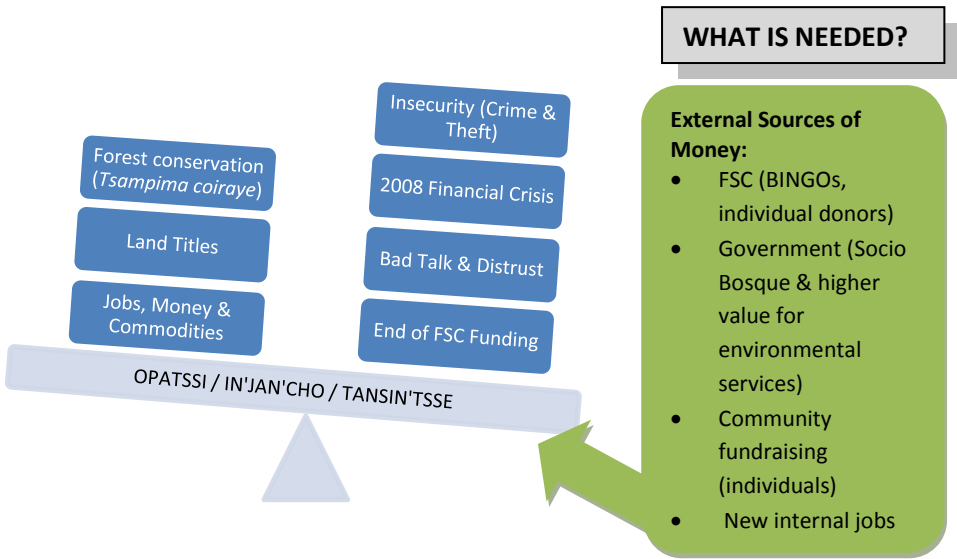
**Figure 4.** The means and ends of the Cofán prior to the oil companies, circa 1940



**Figure 5.** A possible change in values, due to expanding frontiers of capitalism and control



**Figure 6.** The factors that stabilize and destabilize an *opatssi* lifestyle



With these diagrams I hope to highlight that there might be a shift from having an *opatssi* forest-based lifestyle to a more complex present, in which people need commodities, money and a forest-based lifestyle (hunting/fishing/agriculture) in order to live a life of tranquility, desire, and moral correctness. Could it be that by referring to *in'jan'cho*, Mauricio was referring to the birth of a consumer mentality? And is the importance of *tansin'tsse* based on Mauricio's wish for more transparency in how community money is spent? Clearly, the shortness of my stay and the lack of A'ingae prevent me from fully understanding and properly interpreting these words, as my interpretation of 'changing values' may be due to a misinterpretation of my conversations with Mauricio. It is also possible that the conceptualization of the simple forest-based *opatssi* life of the past (Figure 4) is a myth and that the means and ends of the past were just as complex as those of the present. Furthermore, it is unknown whether money and commodities are means to an end or

ends in themselves. Do people really want to be *opatssi* or something else? Such questions remain unresolved.

These are just speculations and also a biased and uninformed interpretation, but this is what I understood from my two months living in Zábalo, as I sensed there might be a change in social relations and values since the *opatssi* times in which Michael Cepek visited the community in 2013. As seen in Figure 6, regardless of what Cofán goals actually are, they seem to be destabilized by the current social, economic and political conjunctures<sup>132</sup>. Also, the Cofáns' increased integration into the Western economic system seems inevitable, although they will continue to step in and out of it to some degree. Despite the possible flaws in the last three diagrams, the reason I find my interpretation beneficial is that it makes it crystal clear that there's no going back<sup>133</sup> to a time without money and commodities. On the contrary, a combination of jobs, money, commodities, land titles, international partnerships and maintaining the *tsampima coiraye* mentality may be one of the only ways of helping the Cofán achieve their goals, whatever they may be. The only way for outsiders to help the Cofán maintain their conservation mentality, protect the rainforest for the benefit of us all<sup>134</sup>, and

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<sup>132</sup> For more information on the approach of conjunctures, please see 'Land's End' (Li, 2014, p.14).

<sup>133</sup> Back in the 1990s, Randy had nostalgically said "Sometimes...I think all we need are these. Just machetes.Nothing more...To revert totally" (R. Borman, as cited in Tidwell, 1996, p. 204). Nowadays, most people believe there is no way back to a completely forest-based subsistence. Gerardo told me he was frustrated that the government says, "You're just indigenous people. You can just go back to the old days and use spears and blowguns. That's the kind of mentality they have because we're indigenous people...Times are changing...like right now, if we had trained people to do videos...and I wish we had Internet...Whatever problem, you just upload it, take videos, live information and just share with the world" (Gerardo, personal communication, August 9, 2015).

<sup>134</sup> Randy is frustrated that governments, NGOs and individuals fail to see the global interconnectedness of weather, finance and conservation. By paying Cofán to protect the rainforest, people would be investing in the only thing "that's left slowing down global climate change...[Big NGOs] have no idea how to do any type of community development work... Just give

achieve an *opatssi/in'jan'cho/tansin'tsse* lifestyle is by creating capital flow for the community. As discussed previously, their current sources of income are limited and very vulnerable.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Looking from a macro-perspective, it is evident that our economies and livelihoods depend on the Cofán protecting the rainforest, but which globally nobody is willing to pay for. There is also a fundamental divide between the Western form of conceptualizing the market, work, commodities and monetary gain and the much less environmentally damaging Cofán lifestyle. For Randy, this explains why there are usually short-term donors, rather than long-term solutions: “It’s fine for Moore to throw a million dollars into Cofán park guards, but if the system works, you know what, Mr. Moore might not be able to get his materials for his computers and the whole Western world may not be able to do what it wants to do in resource development” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015). As Norman Whitten stated, “These dependency processes generate degradation of the Upper Amazonian biosphere and exacerbate the asymmetric power system and ethnic prejudices and misunderstandings of national exploitation” (Whitten, 1981, p. 153).

Despite the fact that the Ecuadorian government is trying to expand control over its citizens and the Cofán of Zábalo are increasingly integrated into the global economic market, they have very successfully managed to retain a great degree of autonomy. To a large extent, this success is due to Randy Borman himself, who has devised numerous sources of income for the community and created international alliances to support and finance Cofán projects. Nevertheless, social relations are clearly changing within the community. There is an increased distrust of Zábalo’s internal political leaders and of families that are more economically well off,

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me the 5 million or 15 million and I create a trust fund and you guys don’t have to worry about us anymore. We’ll keep taking care of your air forever. But they cannot see that far” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 11, 2015).

in addition to uncertainties about the future. Moreover, the end of Socio Bosque, fluctuations in the prices of cacao, coffee and oil, as well as the vulnerability of the tourism industry and the demand for fiberglass canoes, will all affect the Cofán. As stated by Geiger, “[f]rontiers recede and advance in relation to changing demands for frontier commodities on regional and world markets” (Geiger, 2008, p.93). Ultimately, it remains to be seen whether or not the oil companies will enter, whether people will find sufficient sources of income to avoid needing to find jobs elsewhere, and whether or not the Cofán of Zábalo can retain their forest-based lifestyle while also engaging with increasing control from the government and greater need for money.





## 7. APPENDICES

### 7.1 Appendix I: Reflexivity

#### 7.1.1 Anthropologists as neo-colonial agents or activists

During some festivities organized in the neighboring Quichua community of Playas de Cuyabeno, I was sitting near a Cofán elder, Carlos Yiyoguaje, who was drinking beer with a Quichua man. Without the intention of eavesdropping, I overheard the Quichua saying “something along the lines of: foreigners spend \$1000 just to get here and they’re all millionaires, Europeans stole from us, they will go off and become rich while we shall remain permanently poor” (Fieldnotes, August 21, 2015). This incident was just one of many where I felt that even though I was seen as a source of income for the community and I explained that I had crowdfunded the money, there was no doubt that I am privileged. Although I like to think that people believed I had good intentions, there was also a great deal of skepticism, jealousy and unintended power relations.

In the words of Randy: “[K]eep in mind that, no matter how well-intentioned you are, you are an outsider who is viewed as someone who will exploit the community's knowledge and situation for your personal gain, be it financial, scholastic, or spiritual. Also keep in mind that you are not the first outsider to do so. The vast majority of students who have come through Cofán land have left nothing substantial in return<sup>135</sup>, and something like a video is always suspect, even at its best...Sorry if I'm somewhat brutal on this point, but switch perspectives and remember how often indigenous groups the world over have been exploited by 'nice people'” (R. Borman, email, November 10, 2014).

Although generally I felt rapport was good, people trusted me and I think I made a few friendships, there were many moments where I felt like a nuisance, an unwanted guest or yet another exploitative student. As Cepek explains, the Cofán are “sick to

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<sup>135</sup> I repeatedly heard complaints of other students who promise to help the Cofán, but never do. This was one of the reasons people distrusted me and repeatedly asked if I will return one day to help out (Santiago, personal communication, July 28, 2015).

death of five hundred years of unequal relations with Westerners” who they believe “will attempt to make money off them” (Cepek, 2012a, p.164). Even though anthropology has now expanded to all human contexts, when doing a study with indigenous people there is the possibility of romanticizing, exoticizing and essentializing people, which would be neo-colonial and I hope I have avoided doing so in this paper. On the other hand, there is also the possibility of focusing so heavily on deconstructing stereotypes and preconceptions that we lose track of our research topic or are afraid to express our limited, but insightful perceptions.

### **7.1.2 Quantum mechanics and anthropology**

A non-anthropologist is quick to note the subjective nature of our discipline and will chastise us for it, without noticing the same epistemic problems within other academic subjects. For instance, I believe the ‘observer effect’ problem I was confronted with among the Cofán of Zábalo is no different from quantum mechanics or any other scientific discipline. When electrons are fired through a single slit, they exhibit the properties of a particle, whereas when they are fired at two slits, they create a diffraction pattern. Hence, the electron exhibits ‘wave-particle duality.’ However, when putting a detector near the slits, the electrons go back to behaving simply as particles. Although I will not delve further into the complexities of this example, it seems that either the act of observation itself affects the results or that the detection device is a variable that modifies the experiment. In the case of anthropology, we are both the observer and the detection device, meaning that not only do our prior preconceptions cloud our analysis of the data, but also that the very fact of visiting a community alters the way that people interact with each other and with the researcher because they’re aware of his presence and both consciously and unconsciously modify their behavior accordingly. Consequently, these limitations and potential biases to my research must be taken into account.

When I first entered the field, I had to explain to community members that I was an Ecuadorian from Quito. In some cases this seemed to suffice, but I was told that I was a very odd Ecuadorian and it usually emerged that I’m the son of a Spaniard and an

American, as I typically need to explain anywhere else in the world. The father of my host family did not seem perplexed by this and said “Like me! I’m half Siona and speak their language too” (Fieldnotes, July 12, 2015). Oddly, I felt more at ease with being *ecchoen’cho* (mixed) than in most other contexts, probably because, as Cepek observes, virtually all Cofán have mixed ethnicity<sup>136</sup> (Cepek, 2012a, p.62). This is also one of the reasons why Randy Borman’s whiteness does not invalidate the fact he is Cofán<sup>137</sup>.

However, I soon heard that people in Zábalo were referring to me as ‘el gringo’ (Fieldnotes, July 15, 2015) because I’m white and I speak English. However, I was never called that directly to my face and instead people would call me ‘*cocama*,’ which is a term reserved for any Spanish-speaking outsider<sup>138</sup>. Little children used to yell ‘*cocama*’ at me when I would walk around the village and the host family children also used it when I was around the dining table, often followed by laughter or whispering. Sometimes I doubted “if anyone knows I am actually Ecuadorian” (Fieldnotes, July 13, 2015), but this may have been to my advantage, since gringos are seen more favorably than Ecuadorians (Cepek, 2012a), who are perceived as more exploitative and might sell photographs taken in Zábalo (M. Mendua, personal communication, July 18, 2015). It is difficult to speculate on the effects that these categories had on my interactions

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<sup>136</sup> Some of my participants had Siona and *mestizo* heritage. Young Cofán have married with people from all over Ecuador and one participant has an American wife.

<sup>137</sup> Michael Cepek focuses quite a lot on the multicultural aspects of Randy’s identity (Cepek, 2009; 2012a) and this continues to fascinate people. Mike Tidwell, for instance, says, “I was beginning to feel seriously off balance around this man. Forget the Des Moines face and the American accent. This guy was different. *Foreign*” (Tidwell, 1996, p. 22). I found Randy remarkable because of how eloquent and knowledgeable he is in addition to everything he has achieved for the Cofán, but do not find his multicultural background odd or ‘exotic,’ potentially because of my own tri-national background. The Cofán generally seem accepting of community members, regardless of their ethnicity, though people do comment on people looking more or less ‘Cofán.’

<sup>138</sup> Outsiders are seen as violent, angry, disruptive and stingy (Cepek, 2012a, p.65).

with the community, but I assume carrying around a camera, constantly visiting people's houses, and paying for interviews made me stand out more than my national or ethnic identification.

I believe people were 'hesitant' about my presence for the following reasons:

- 1) Randy Borman claims to have mentioned me at Zábalo's December 2014 annual assembly, but the community has no recollection of this. I wasn't able to verify which version of the story was right or whether their apprehension could have been avoided. This was Randy's explanation: "*Go tell the mayor of the city that you're coming and go out onto the street and see how many people know anything about it...Don't be disappointed in your lack of importance if it doesn't even come up in the meeting tomorrow...you have to understand that this community has received countless people coming through, doing all kinds of different projects...there is a distrust with anything to do with films or pictures...through the years we've had a lot of exploitation as well as some good things...but the importance to the community of your presence is 'there's a few extra bucks, you're kind of fun' and that's about it...that said, it sounds to me like you've been able to do very well...Overall, people are Ok with you. I haven't gotten any negative feedback. Everybody kind of laughs*" (R. Borman, personal communication, August 11, 2015). Until the August 12 meeting, when I was accepted, I was an 'unannounced visitor.'
- 2) The president of the community, Mimi Yiyoguaje, didn't convene a meeting to formally introduce me to the community until a month had passed and most people in the main part of Zábalo had already met me. I did my best to explain my anthropological research and filmmaking project, but there was a lot of confusion, distrust and worries that I would exploit them. As one participant stated, "I am a bit confused about your situation, to be honest. Why wasn't anybody introduced

about what you're going to do here?...[If you had been introduced previously] people would know who you are, what you're doing here and not feel questioned by a complete stranger...Randy's suggestion of you just sort of just hanging out for a month might have gone more smoothly" (Gerardo, personal communication, August 9, 2015). In response to this final statement, I explained that I had limited time constraints, but would obviously obey the verdict of the August 12 community meeting<sup>139</sup> if the community no longer wanted me to stay. Until I was formally accepted, I feared not being accepted and also felt a greater degree of hesitancy by my participants.

The hesitancy was also fueled by the fact that I came to the community through Randy Borman, who is president of the FSC, which has been very important for directing funds towards the community and creating

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<sup>139</sup> During the meeting, I was just one of a number of different topics covered by the community. Other topics mentioned involved purchasing gasoline for the community to resell amongst residents, fining people \$50 for violating internal regulations by hunting prohibited animals or stealing bullets and gasoline (\$400). The decision to accept me was made by consensus, after a few individuals voiced their concerns that the videos I made wouldn't be useful. Eventually, with the persuasion of Mimi and Randy, people agreed that allowing me to make films could be beneficial to the community, especially since Mimi can't disseminate Cofán messages internationally. There is also the expectation that I will return to the community and continue to support them after I have graduated and that I won't go to other communities like Michael Cepek, who is criticized by some for doing research in Dureno (Fieldnotes, August 12, 2015). As I understand it, the community of Zábalo meets twice a year, once in August and once in December. At the end of the meeting, Randy claimed that the FSC and the community are the 'same thing' and Mimi stayed quiet, but later explained that this is not true. Most people seem to have established a dichotomy between the community and the FSC, with only a few exceptional people among those I interviewed still supporting the FSC, although even they too would like future funding to go directly to the community (Three anonymous participants, personal communication, July 31, August 5 & 11, 2015).

projects in the past, but is currently being heavily criticized because it has run out of funding and yet still exists. There was a lot of bad talk, especially when people thought I would be making films for the FSC, since many people would like funds to go directly to the community and not be mediated by the NGO, which they no longer trust and whose current role is not clear to them.

- 3) It's doubtful that two months is sufficient time to establish an open and trusting relationship. Clearly, participants altered their responses to my questions based on who they interpreted me to be. It is hard to ascertain how I was perceived, but I believe it could be summed up as: a) a privileged outsider; b) a source of income; c) a student asking questions to be able to graduate from university; d) an intimidating cameraman/photographer; e) an anti-Correa left-wing environmentalist who distrusts governmental and corporate elites; f) a potential long-term ally.

The clearest example of an ongoing negotiation of a participants' position was with Pablo, who had claimed that he was against oil exploitation and that in the community only two people wanted it. However, on one occasion when Bolivar was also at his house overhearing our conversation, he interrupted and said "To tell you the truth, everyone wants it" (B. Lucitante, personal communication, August 11, 2015). Pablo then rectified his position, stating: "I'm not going to ask Petroecuador to come, but we're here waiting. Later we need to negotiate well" (Pablo, personal communication, August 11, 2015). Furthermore, Randy claimed that Pablo is "also the one who most wants the oil to come in" (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015). On two other occasions, Mauricio told people to say that oil was bad while I was interviewing them. Hence, due to the constant changes in impression management and my inability to 'unmask' many of the masks that were

being presented to me, according to Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach, my data and conclusions are greatly limited.

- 4) At the end of my stay with the Cofán, Randy also argued that one of the reasons there was initially tension about my presence was that one of my host family's brothers would have wanted to have me pay to stay at his house.

Still, I must be clear that despite people's initial hesitancy and confusion at my presence in Zábalo, they were always kind and open to talk to me. I am very grateful for people's willingness to help and hope to keep up the friendships I developed. Although it is unknown when I will return, I remain committed to the Cofán cause.

On a personal level, it was difficult to deal with: the insects<sup>140</sup>, humidity, sweltering heat, bucket showers, heavy rain<sup>141</sup>, inability to have a daily routine or execute a plan, threatening hunting dogs, usually eating one or two irregularly spaced meals a day, falling out of the canoe multiple times, wading through the water during the flooding, having no Internet or cell-phone reception<sup>142</sup>, accepting lack of productivity ('down-time'), especially when the flooding came, etc. On the whole, it was a privilege to live in a place with such a rich culture and enormous biodiversity. I really enjoyed trying

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<sup>140</sup> My worst enemy was the *ocu* summer fly, which often bit me in spite of using repellent. I encountered quite a diversity of insects that I don't know the names of. Although I was afraid of spiders (*ccayaju*), scorpions (*tini*) and snakes (*iyó*), they were less problematic.

<sup>141</sup> The rain was my greatest obstacle to planning the filmmaking side of my project. However, sometimes it also prevented me from going into Zábalo and talking to people, since a simple raincoat wouldn't be sufficient to keep from getting drenched. Also, during a few of my interviews I am unable to hear parts of the recording because of the downpour.

<sup>142</sup> Although I found it relaxing to be out of touch with the rest of the world, I did try to send an occasional text message to my family whenever I went to Playas de Cuyabeno. However, I was confronted with huge methodological doubts: "In general, I get the feeling I have no idea what I'm doing, but I am doing my best considering the circumstances" (Diary, July 31, 2015).

over 10 types of forest meat<sup>143</sup>, going fishing and hunting, filming cute animals and having the opportunity to talk to so many people.



The perceptions of me by the community, which were mentioned previously, are highly accurate and should be taken into account both when analyzing participants' statements, but also throughout my analysis, which remains a critique of both state and corporate power. I hope to have been able to partially deconstruct my 'doxa,' but clearly my lack of time and knowledge of A'ingae (Cofán language) may have led me to speak through my participants, rather than retaining their voice and allowing the reader to decide. When asked about his opinion of anthropologists, Randy stated that "The tendency that I've observed most frequently is somebody comes in with an idea, mindset, political position, ideological position and tends to discard what doesn't fit" (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015). I hope to have kept the anomalies.

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<sup>143</sup> I ate chanage (*Cuniculus paca*), quiya (*Dasyprocta aguti*), munda (*Tayassu albirostris*), saquira (*Tayassu tajacu*), iji (*Dasyprocta novemcinctus*), shan'cco (*Mazama americana*), tuntun (*Psophia crepitans*), a'cho (*Alouatta seniculus*), con'sin (*Lagothrix lagotricha*), yovuru (*Hydrochoerus capybara*), tutucco'cho (*Chelonoidis denticulata*), and a few varieties of fish.



### **7.1.3 Filmmaking as a hindrance**

Contrary to the example I mentioned earlier of the *yaje* ceremony film project allowing me to gain insights into Cofán culture and the fact that filmmaking revealed tensions between the community and the FSC, I often felt that the filmmaking aspect of my research interfered with anthropological method. “Getting into the filmmaking role made me uncomfortable, as it involves telling people what to do, where to stand, when to talk, and even what to say” (Fieldnotes, July 13, 2015). “The ways of film are not the same as the ways of Anthro...more or less you already know what they should say if they want to attract donors or to inform people about the project. I find this paradoxical” (Diary, July 16, 2015). Even though I didn’t specify what they needed to wear, when determining what they needed to say for a film, I would ask them for the background knowledge on the topic and then suggest the way they should word it. This is primarily because many have difficulty speaking Spanish without making grammatical mistakes, in addition to having it sound convincing for the film. This is why in many films I filmed participants speaking in A’ingae and later had Tarquino help me make the subtitles. A number of times, I felt that the procedure of filming them saying the same sentence over and over until it came out perfectly had the effect of alienating them, although I find people usually get tired of having to repeat scenes in any cultural context. However, this may have had the effect of harming the anthropological side of my project.

### **7.1.4 Deconstructing perceptions of time**

One of the central drawbacks in my fieldwork was all of the ‘down-time’ I faced, both due to extreme weather and my inability to predict Cofán daily activities. Michael Cepek had let me know this was likely to happen prior to my arrival. As can be seen in the following extracts from my diary, I eventually learned to enjoy the unpredictability.

*Diary Extracts:*

- 1) “I am finally getting used to the...unexpected insects, irregular time<sup>144</sup> schedule and the unpredictability of the days” (Diary, July 18, 2015)
- 2) “Today, meals were at 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. Always so unpredictable<sup>145</sup>...Everyone was busy so I went home and took a nap. Was lucky that Alejandro came by and I interviewed him” (Diary, July 29, 2015)
- 3) “I basically just did film editing and helped Gerardo build his house” (Diary, July 30, 2015)
- 4) “Ever since the water rose, Enrique left, people are working on Gerardo’s house and are not to be found. I find it harder and harder to find people to talk to” (Diary, July 31, 2015)

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<sup>144</sup> On multiple occasions, Randy told me I would need to adapt to not having a plan and going with the flow. As he explained to Mike Tidwell in the 1990s: “When you’re hungry you check your nests or you hunt a peccary. You just do it. There aren’t schedules for anything here. Sometimes the whole village loses track of what day of the week it is and we have to have a meeting just to try to figure out what it is” (R. Borman, as cited in Tidwell, 1996, p. 21-22). This was also a limitation when trying to figure out when any events actually happened, since people would either say it was recently, a while ago, a few years ago or *tayópi* (long ago). However, nowadays many Cofán seem to have also adopted the notion that ‘time is money’ (Fieldnotes, July 19, 2015).

<sup>145</sup> Since the Western three-meal-a-day schedule is a product of industrialization, this explains why the Cofán eat only one or two times a day and at irregular times. One participant told me that they do have three meals a day (Mauro, personal communication, August 18, 2015), making me wonder whether my host family was different. It is also possible my host family was different because the host father went to Quito to take care of his wife and newborn child at the hospital, leaving the eldest 16-year-old son to do some hunting and the eldest daughter, aged 13, to take care of cooking for most of the time I was in Zábalo. Although I’m unable to say with certainty, it appears that Cofán eat when they’re hungry and make decisions on a day-to-day basis, making it impossible for me to plan anything in advance. Even though I believe their conception of time to be different, they can also follow ‘Western time,’ as most people have watches and some arranged times to meet me for fishing or interviews.

- 5) “It’s good to also realize my project will have flaws and is superficial due to the 2 month nature” (Diary, August 5, 2015)
- 6) “People are very silent and unavailable” (Diary, August 8, 2015)
- 7) “I have finally been accepted by the community and I believe the next few days will be more film oriented” (Diary, August 12, 2015)
- 8) “I am a bit irritated that even when I get to town at 6:00 a.m. or 6:15 a.m., people are already gone or going. Why can’t I go hunting/fishing with them? Or see the canoe business?” (Diary, August 18, 2015)
- 9) “How is one supposed to do an ethnography if nobody is around?” (Diary, August 25, 2015)
- 10) “I like how unexpected and fluid the days are here. Really, although people have to hunt and fish to survive, they’re their own bosses and can decide what to do each day and when to do it<sup>146</sup>. They can spend hours relaxing in a hammock and chatting, although this is now replaced greatly by the TV” (Diary, August 27, 2015)

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<sup>146</sup> As Mauro describes, the “Cofán don’t plan. They just say ‘What do I do today?’ If we want to go fishing, we go fishing. Or hunting” (Mauro, personal communication, August 15, 2015).

### **7.1.5 How do we know that we know what they know?**

Although I agree with Fabian that “abandoning scientific and positivist positions and recognizing relations between researcher and researched as intersubjective and coeval makes ethnography not less but more objective” (Fabian, 2012, p.443), and that by admitting our own reflexivity we may achieve more valid and reliable empirical data, I disagree that anthropological knowledge can be described as: “what we know about *how* they know what they know” (Fabian, 2012, p.443, emphasis added). Frankly, we can’t ever know *how* people know what they know, let alone *how* we know what we know. We don’t know! I believe it is more appropriate to say that what I have attempted to do in this thesis is explain that which I think I know about what my Cofán participants have told me they think they know. Maybe neither of us actually knows, but this is an attempt to elucidate an empirical reality through my own limited perception. So, can we be sure we know what they know? Of course not.

Despite anthropology being the most empirically grounded of the sciences, due to the subjective nature of trying to understand human relationships it is not only clear that the researcher influences his context and speaks through his participants, but also that no matter how accurately one takes fieldnotes, transcribes interviews and analyzes the data, there is a large gap between what the anthropologist writes and the ‘real world.’ We may merely attain ‘approximate’ empirical validity. Even though more time would have been beneficial to this project, there is no replacement for indigenous people speaking for themselves. Contrary to Gayatri Spivak (1988), I believe the subaltern can speak and there are just ways of amplifying their message. The Cofán have not only been involved in politics, but have managed to rally international support from NGOs and individuals through the Fundación Sobrevivencia Cofán (FSC).

However, it must also be stated that not every indigenous community has as talented a leader as Randy Borman and the success of the Cofán depends on their successful educational development of future leaders: “*In the specific case of the Cofáns, I need thirty of ‘me’, people who are fluent in English and Spanish as well as Cofán, who can handle a machete and hunt a monkey and build a thatch-roofed house but can also handle a computer and deal*

*with an intransigent and racist Ministry of Environment and can run an office. But this means educations in at least two very different worlds”* (R. Borman, email, June 1, 2011). It is my hope that the few more highly educated Zábalo residents will continue to pursue the Cofáns’ best interests with their own conception of what ‘development’ means, in spite of influence from government and NGO actors. Furthermore, in the future I look forward to reading Randy’s autobiography (Cepek, 2012a, p.48), which I hope he publishes, as we need more and more Cofán transmitting their messages themselves, through writing and film, rather than having outsiders like myself attempting to make sense of the cursory data collected during a two-month project or making short films from an outsider’s perspective. At best, this paper has tried to elucidate a time-slice of history in Zábalo, with limited empirical understanding in a time where globalization permeates the bounded village and nobody is quite clear what ‘identity’ or ‘culture’ even mean anymore.



## 7.2 Appendix II: A brief biography of Mauricio Mendua



Mauricio Mendua is approximately 71 years old. He was born in the Cofán village of Tururu and was raised solely by his father<sup>147</sup>, Segundo Mendua, and uncles because his mother, Virgina Quenamá, died when he was eight years old. He moved to Puca Peña (also located in Sucumbíos) when he was really young because his aunt married a Quichua and his father was fighting a lot with Guillermo Quenamá<sup>148</sup>. Back then, the Quichuas of Playas de Cuyabeno weren't around and the Cofán would exchange shamanism practices with the friendly Siona. There was plenty of game prior to the arrival of the

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<sup>147</sup> His father metamorphosed into a jaguar and would eat people after he passed away. This was also the case with Carlos Yiyoguaje's father. One elder in the community may possibly turn into a boa when he passes away (Fieldnotes, July 22, 2015).

<sup>148</sup> Republican officials gave a special staff of authority to Guillermo Quenamá, a powerful shaman, which granted him authority and made him the *quini'cco'pa* of Dureno. Currently, this staff is used for when people get married, but it is no longer used to assert one's leadership. Before there were life-long consensus-based rulers, but now communities have adopted a Western-style voting system and political positions like president, vice-president, secretary, accountant and spokespersons.

oil company. People moved along the Aguarico River, camping for a week or two. As a teen, he grew up in Dureno and drank *yaje*<sup>149</sup> (ayahuasca) as part of shamanistic training and learned about medicinal plants, but he never became a ‘full’ shaman. In those times, young people would drink *yaje* because they wanted to be like the shamans, but now people are more afraid of drinking *yaje* and drink beer instead. Mauricio recalls having traded gold and peccary skin for cloth, salt, alcohol and machetes, and he witnessed how both Colombians and Ecuadorians came to chop down rubber trees. He witnessed the Shell oil workers, who he said offered him chocolate and cheese, neither of which he liked. They also gifted the Cofán coffee, lard, machetes, clothing and salt. At around the age of 20 (later than most Cofán), Mauricio married Guillermo’s daughter and later had two children, one of whom is still living in Zábalo. Also, Mauricio blames the oil workers for introducing measles into the community, which made his children sick, even though they survived.

He says that the Texaco Oil Company gave the Cofán nothing, but regularly contaminated the rivers during frequent spills and broken pipelines. The city of Lago Agrio slowly began to emerge, together with roads and oil wells. Many people got sick from bathing in the river or eating contaminated food and died. Because these diseases couldn’t be cured by the shamans, the Cofán would go into Lago Agrio to get medicines, but the language barrier and lack of money made this problematic. Then the oil company workers allegedly murdered Guillermo Quenamá with alcohol so that his wife could elope with an oil worker.

Once Randy decided to establish Zábalo and work there with tourists, three families accompanied him and the village was slowly established with Randy as its leader. One of Mauricio’s sons was interested in working with Randy, so Mauricio moved to Zábalo to

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<sup>149</sup> After going through proper *yaje* training, one is supposed to be able to see animals, communicate with *vajo*, call game closer, see the *aya* of Cofán that have passed away, and walk with the invisible people, usually described as *me’ndetssi pushesu* (pretty women). This training also gives shamans the ability to cure people who have been attacked by *cocoya*.

help him build a house. Eventually he decided to stay in Zábalo because there was more game, tourists would visit, and there wasn't oil contamination. However, Mauricio stated that his wife passed away recently from a lung infection and he argues it was due to bathing in contaminated water from the Zábalo area. Many community members comment on how Mauricio is currently sad because he is still mourning his wife.

Many of Mauricio's memories revolve around the everyday life of hunting, fishing, planting bananas and manioc and drinking *cui'ccu* and *cunape'cha*. I had no clear conception of how things happened chronologically, as many things just happened *tayópi* (long ago). At some point in his youth, the trading shifted from barter to money and the Cofán would mainly sell animal skins, jaguar teeth and gold to buy things like blowgun poison, salt, clothing and sugar. He also complained that traditional knowledge is being lost because children go to school and don't engage in Cofán practices, like making string (*tuinfa*) for hunting bags (*o'va*) (M. Mendua, personal communication, July 13, 14, 20 & 21, 2015)<sup>150</sup>.



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<sup>150</sup> This brief biographical account was based on only a few conversations with Mauricio. Due to the scarcity of the data and the language barrier, this interpretation probably isn't completely accurate.



### 7.3 Appendix III: Randy Borman interview excerpts



(Source: [www.cofan.org](http://www.cofan.org))

- 1) On the *tsampima coiraye* conservation mentality: “A conservation ethic is creatable from an indigenous cultural background. But it is neither automatic, as revisionist people in the US would like to say, nor is it possible to maintain in the face of major economic reprisals against it...Basically, unless you have an economic incentive...sooner or later it’s going to squash you, no matter how conservation oriented you want to be. And that’s what’s happening here. I mean, the erosion of the conservation ethic here is because people don’t have very many economic outlets” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 11, 2015).
- 2) On indifference and selfishness: “Take what I say with a grain of salt, but the bottom line is ‘nobody cares.’ I mean, basically human beings are totally selfish 99% of the time and serve short-term interests, especially when fueled by strong economic incentives...Right now, the world wants our oil. The world wants our gold. The world wants our water. They don’t realize they can’t have everything...but

most of the world doesn't get it. If you're in California, why save water in the Amazon, especially when we need your oil...all of these things are things nobody is really coming to grips with... Nobody can think in terms of 'let's put 6 million dollars in a preventative fund and guard a million acres of rainforest as part of our prevention system' [against hurricanes and natural disasters that are a product of climate change]... and it could probably be funded with investment fund, trust fund type situations for under 1 billion dollars...but there's no way that's going to happen...disasters are just going to get worse and worse" (R. Borman, personal communication, August 11, 2015).

- 3) On Amazonian park guards: "And the frustrating thing for me personally is the [park guard model is something] that indigenous people love because you're out there in the forest. You're doing exactly what your whole cultural background has trained you to do...and the ideal job for Cofán, Secoya, Siona, Shuar, Quichua...as long as you make some money on it, enough to satisfy your immediate needs, you're happy...people could get a \$600 job in the oil company or lumber company and they could get \$300 for the park guard program and they would much rather go for the park guard program, because there is a sense that this is for us, but it's also my ideal work. In the other case, you're stuck with somebody who wakes me up at 8 o'clock...It's something that can be translated to hundreds of other groups, certainly through Amazonia and maybe even at a world level. And it's cheap, much, much cheaper than the programs the USAID, TNC<sup>151</sup> and WWF<sup>152</sup> are trying to fund with their workshops that never work" (R. Borman, personal communication, August 11, 2015).
- 4) On educational repression: "We've been able to pull things off that have scared the living snot out of the *mestizo* bureaucrat system...There's a program called 'the bilingual

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<sup>151</sup>The Nature Conservancy (TNC)

<sup>152</sup>World Wildlife Fund (WWF)

school program' that has been paid by the government for many, many years. For thirty years or so. It was funded by the Instituto Linguistico de Verano [Summer Institute of Linguistics], which of course everyone conveniently forgets...The first batch of teachers, for the first ten years of operation, were good teachers and they taught people well. Well, government couldn't have that. The last thing that they needed was a bunch of smart Indians out there being able to make problems for them. So, they took over the system, emasculated it, sent in one graduate student after another to teach in whatever experimental way might be thought of as working and they kept funding it. And for the last 30 years it's been running and it produces people who leave high-school with between a 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade normal level of education. And the government loves it. They'll pay for that forever...We've got thirty years of repression, subtle repression, mind you. Repression by means of doing things like constantly changing the alphabet and keeping people occupied...The alphabet changes are all silly, looking at them from the linguistic standpoint. They're political, entirely politically driven...You know, so you keep on doing these little subtle things that keep the people down" (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015).

- 5) On governmental neocolonialism: "So...we get the park guard program going and all of a sudden you have my park guard on public TV, standing by the coca field and the military are pulling up all the coca that they discovered and the guy says 'Why didn't the Ministerio de Ambiente [Ministry of Environment] take a hand in this?' and he says 'They're good for nothing. They sit around back in their houses. They don't know anything about what's actually happening in the *campo* [countryside]...All of a sudden we've got a [park guard] program that is not only working, it's working 100 times better than their system does. And actually doing what they said that they want to do, what they don't really want to do, mind you. I mean, the Ministerio [Ministry of Environment] is part of a government...that

wants the oil, wants the mining, wants the social safety valve of colonization. Don't have people out on the streets rioting or looking for jobs. Have them working at a field and keep them occupied. There's a government setup that doesn't want success for indigenous people. The minute you have success going for indigenous people of any sort, you know, 500 years of guilt comes crashing back down on top of you and you're all of a sudden afraid that your head is going to be shrunken down to this size and that they're going to come into Quito and raid it" (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19 2015).

- 6) On NGO neocolonialism: WWF Colombia and WCS<sup>153</sup> Peru, together with USAID and a German partner were going to fund and manage the establishment of an international reserve, uniting indigenous conservation of the Ecuadorian Cuyabeno, Peruvian Güeppi and Colombian La Paya reserves under 'La Reserva Tripartita.' However, nothing has been done so far. "They've had a number of big fancy meetings in big fancy hotels in Bogotá, Lima and Quito and that's about the size of it...I went down and talked with the Secoya and Witoto, got things going, brought a group up and did a course for 20 of the leaders in Quito, showed them how ours was working and everything...we were right at the height of our success with patrols out every month and things going really well. So, everyone was really excited about it. They've got a million and half hectares. We've only got 400,000...And their huge headache are the Colombian lumbermen. They've had shootouts.

But basically, they don't have the means to create a patrol system to keep their land intact... So I figured all the money things and...we could add another 30 park guards per month to patrol their whole area...for about somewhere around \$250,000 for the first year and then around \$200,000 for the following years...They were ecstatic about it said 'let's do it.' And up to that point we had interest. WCS was

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<sup>153</sup> Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)

interested in pushing funding for the initial program and everything like that.

The Ministerios [Ministries of Environment] in both Ecuador and Peru were guardedly interested until the Secoyas, bless their hearts, they were thinking ahead...they said ‘Oh yeah. We want to have the same uniforms’...and I was sitting there and I got this, all of a sudden these visors came down over these guys’ faces and I was kind of like ‘I’m misreading body language or something.’ All of a sudden I had a tension among the WCS people and the Ministerio people that I picked up...and that was the end of it. We never got any funding from them...I think what they realized was that all of a sudden they’re going to have a body of indigenous people handling a large tract of land with no real ties to any government and very little control from the Ministerios. But on the other side of things, they’re the ones who are going to be in control...It just scared them to death...The government has done everything possible to destroy indigenous unity, indigenous models that work...I think they’re scared to death. I think it’s a carryover from colonial times...And if you had a one hundred million dollar trust fund, you could [protect the entire Amazon rainforest] forever, without having to bother the rest of the world. But it will never happen, because this is exactly what the rest of the world does not want to happen” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015).

- 7) On the differences between Western and indigenous models: “It’s not just colonial vs. indigenous. It’s two cultures clashing...Certainly, the Romans and the Greeks had a tremendous clash...And the problem with the Western World and the way it’s gained so much success is because on a short-term basis it does give you access that the indigenous worlds have never done. The tremendous success of the Western world has been: it’s figured out transport, everything from plumbing to vaccines to glasses to watches, it’s figured out a tremendous body of material goods that certainly give you a place to jump off from. It’s also created

along with those a tremendously volatile situation for the planet. It's created lots of food, liberation from a lot of sickness, so populations have grown tremendously...there's not enough resources to go around. If you go back to the epidemic version which will kill itself off eventually and the question is whether there will be anybody left at the end of it because it's killing itself off...if it doesn't modify itself tremendously...[Indigenous peoples'] move from the world that allowed a stable relationship with the environment is now total. They are now part of the problem...You do need a certain amount of money to survive. If we are providing a benefit to the world in terms of ecological services, we should be paid for that benefit. How we figure out how to use the money is our problem. I've run into this how many number of times: 'Oh. Don't give people the money. It'll just ruin them.' Well, the only thing worse than having money is not having any" (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015).

- 8) On the loss of the oral tradition: "What my generation experienced in the 60s and 70s [with the arrival of the oil companies] is something that the younger people have no experience of at all. And oral transmission of values is one of the things that has been very strongly lost due to Western education coming in. You know, parents don't tell their children anything. So we've got a whole generation that has grown up without the stories of past times and without the stories of...you know, people get together to talk and they gossip about their neighbor rather than tell hunting stories now...A whole breakdown of the oral tradition...it's not totally, but it's in part driven by the Western education system...The upshot of that is that we've got a whole generation that doesn't have any concept of how damaging the oil is...The desperation for the oil company money is at least 70% because there's no other money around. You would drop the number of people who would like to let the oil company in if we were able to start up the park guard

program” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 19, 2015).

- 9) On active and passive land use: “When we had our first bump with the outside world, a big part of our problem was that we didn’t understand that what we considered to be the immensity of open forest was actually an active part of our land use. We were hunting it and fishing it. And in spite of the fact it was intact and we weren’t in any way degrading it, it was in use...Western culture comes in and says ‘we have to turn this into active land. This is passive land right now. It’s not doing anything. It’s not doing any good. It’s just there.’ And so we need to turn it into active agricultural land or industrial land or mining or whatever, but we need to turn it into something active that’s actually producing some economic benefit for everybody. And we fell for it at the time...We had no concept of communal ownership...when we were growing up, we were the Aguaricos, then there were the San Miguels and the Napos” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 27, 2015).
- 10) On the future: “My hope would be that in spite of the low price of petroleum and China having palpitations in their money market and all the rest, that there would come a day where we’d have a recognition of the value of the land’s environmental services, at which point indigenous people are the ideal custodians because it’s what they’ve already been taking care of for millennia...and if you get money in the system, they will take care of it for many more millennia on a worldwide level...otherwise, your other alternative: eventually Ecuador goes from 16 million to 50 million and they say ‘we want your land’” (R. Borman, personal communication, August 27, 2015).
- 11) On Life: “[I had] just finished off a running battle with a herd of pigs [*munda/peccary*]. I was by myself, with a bunch of shells but half of them weren’t going off and they kept running me up trees and surrounding me and going away. And finally I’m done with the hunt...and I’m carrying the pigs that I did get back to the shore. My adrenaline level

during this fight was going way up there. The physical intensity of the hunt, of being hunted, climbing up the trees and all that and the satisfaction at the end with having a good stack of pigs and I'm carrying them back out...and then a jet plane is flying overhead and I'm thinking of the contrast between my full integration with life in capital letters as opposed to the average person up there with their little glass of Coca Cola watching the TV or typing something on a computer...We spent at least 100,000 years as humans as hunters. You're going to chuck that in 100 years to become a factory worker?...Can we change essential parts of our evolutionary background in such a short period of time?...I would love for Amazonia as a whole to still be part of Cofán heritage hundreds of years from now" (R. Borman, personal communication, September 10, 2015).

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