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In the Oil Fields of Ecuador

by RICHARD WARD

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I travel from Quito to Lago Agrio, just south of the Colombian border, to see for myself the destruction the oil industry has wrought in this part of Ecuador. On the way the bus rolls through a soggy, green landscape, at one point on a road that snakes alongside the Rio Saludo, where Chinese beavers, guests of the Ecuadorian government, are busily constructing yet another massive work, a hydroelectric project that will be completed in a few years. The company is called Sinohydro, one more tentacle of the neo-Maoist dynasty of glorious Chinese state capitalism that is competing with the more established western industrialized countries, together collectively taking down what is left of the world's ecosystems, replaced by more dams, cities, cars, pollution, wars, mass insanity and other wonders of the age.

As much as I love Ecuador there is no question that it is a country eager to replicate as quickly as possible the western techno/consumerist model, the only difference being they are going to do it their way, with no interference from or domination by the bloody giant from the north. No, they have invited the Chinese and get a slightly better deal for the shiny marvels of development and decimation of their environment, the Maoist-yuppies all too willing to oblige. The *oleoducto*, the oil pipeline that bisects the country carrying crude from the Oriente (Ecuadorian Amazon) in the east to Esmeraldas on the coast, slithers into view alongside the road like a fat rusty serpent, undulating, dipping out of view, reappearing, inexorably rushing along.

I am meeting Chris Jarrett, at the time a Fulbright grantee, now a doctoral student in anthropology, at the Hotel Lago Imperial in the afternoon, where we will spend the night and rendezvous the next morning with Martín Criollo, who will guide us the next few days to some of the places around his home fouled by the oil giants Texaco/Chevron. Martín is a Cofán from Dureno, a community east of Lago Agrio. This situation, the plunder of the environment by Texaco/Chevron decades ago, and the criminally irresponsible toxic mess left in its wake (chronicled in the documentary *Crude*), has become an international cause célèbre, pitting impoverished indigenous communities in the Amazon against a billion dollar oil giant backed by the cleverest, most ethically-challenged lawyers money can buy, with western governments hardly disinterested observers.

The irony here, if not blatant hypocrisy, is that while Chevron is now out of Ecuador and the Ecuadorian government is supporting the ongoing legal battle against the company, oil extraction from the Oriente continues unabated, carried out by Petroamazonas, the national petroleum industry, aided and abetted by Chinese companies and other worthies, most notably old Mr. Cheney's Halliburton. When it comes to oil all the high rollers are up to their elbows, including the smooth-talking, charismatic Mr. Correa. It should be noted as well that it was the Ecuadorian government that willingly allowed Texaco to come in and begin the exploitation of the Oriente and its people in the first place, so the sort of righteous huffing and puffing by the government now plays just a tad cynically, like the parent who sells his daughter into sexual slavery and is later outraged at the treatment she has received. To be fair to Mr. Correa, it was not his administration that let the US oil company in, but of course it is the Chinese now given the red carpet.

I have heard a lot about Lago Agrio and am interested to see it. Originally called Nueva Loja, it was established in the sixties as part of the government's land reform program that gave incentives to mestizo poor scattered about the country to settle in different parts of the Oriente and turn "non-productive" land into something generating more cash, part of a larger, global developmental trend encouraged and financed by institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, with the usual pound of flesh in return. It meant money for governmental and business elites, a bit of land and a marginally better life for the settlers ("los colonos"), environmental destruction, conflict and radical transformation for the traditional inhabitants.

All of this was around the time of the discovery of oil in Nueva Loja by Texaco in the late sixties, which turned a bad situation into something much worse. With the oil bonanza the gringos informally renamed the town Lago Agrio ("sour lake") after the Texaco headquarters in Texas. The name stuck. Lago Agrio has a notorious reputation as a boomtown with all the attendant vices of such places and, as it is next to the Columbian border, has the added elements of being a hub for drug trafficking and safe haven, of sorts, for guerilla groups, including the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), a Marxist-Leninist group that has been fighting the Columbian government since 1964. The two, drug trafficking and guerilla groups, are inevitably intertwined. It also has a large refugee population forced to flee the country as a result of the decades-long conflict.

Lago Agrio is a fascinating place and much safer than it was ten years ago when murders were commonplace, usually drug-related. Now Lago is assuming the trappings of respectability, with a new mayor determined to clean things up, small businesses, restaurants, better lighting, cleaner streets, improved schools, more cops, more churches, etc., so that the city is less the wild Amazonian frontier outpost and more the ordinary thriving company town with all the unremarkable appurtenances. This is completely relative of course because driving into Lago I am wide-eyed at the sight of prostitutes lounging in their sidewalk cubicles, the *tiendas* selling all manner of things, fruits, vegetables, plastic goods, clothing, tools, mechanical parts, the majority of course centered around the oil industry, the *carnicerias* with their hanging, fly-infested slabs of meat and pigs heads, the colorful mix of people crowding the streets, many of whom you know are from Columbia and other parts, all on the make in their modest but fevered way because this is still a boomtown, a wild town.

I get off the bus and take a taxi to the hotel, less seedy than I imagined, in the middle of a busy intersection. The concierge, a friendly young woman, buzzes Chris and he comes down to greet me. Our room is on the second floor, two small beds, questionable bathroom, the ubiquitous television. We rest for a while, watch a couple of lunatic game shows on television, then hit the streets to buy some food for our stay in Dureno. I also need to buy a pair of cheap pants for our tour, which is likely to take us to some messy places. Chris has brought rubber boots for both of us.

The sidewalks are crowded with all manner of colorful, wild-looking characters, roughnecks, mechanics, indigenous women with children in tow, more blacks than I'm used to seeing in Quito, hustlers of all stripe and persuasion. Lago may be inching towards respectability but it is still a crazy scene with a restless, anarchic energy, and Chris and I are both on our toes. Occasionally we see a westerner dressed in clean, casual clothes of the sort you would imagine a petroleum engineer might wear, an employee, perhaps, of Mr. Cheney's company. These types have an undeniable cachet and invite a certain curiosity and grudging respect, but my favorite character is an old one-legged mestizo carrying a machete, its blade, presumably newly sharpened, wrapped in newspaper. He is leaning on his crutch intently staring at tools in an open-front hardware store. I imagine him a guy who came to Lago decades ago, one of the original settlers, or someone who came after the discovery of oil. How he lost his leg I can only wonder, an industrial accident, a festering knife wound suffered in a bar fight. This doesn't deter him, the lure of money, or something, keeping him in Lago. Probably there is nowhere else to go. He has a skill, a specialty, but what is the machete for? I see him a half hour later in a dark, crowded indoor *mercado* where Chris negotiates a pair of pants for me for ten dollars. The guy's face is intent, serious. He holds the machete with his crutch hand and fishes some crumpled bills from his pocket. He buys two red t-shirts. Chris and I go back to the hotel with our supplies, rice, noodles, canned beans, drinks in plastic bottles, a few packets of powdered drinks. Tomorrow we will meet Martín and go to Dureno.

* * *

After breakfast in a restaurant down the block from the hotel, Chris and I meet Martín, our Cofán guide, a handsome, affable guy in his mid-thirties. We shop for more supplies and then get on a rickety bus filled with local people and travel to Dureno, which takes about 40 minutes. All

along the highway the landscape is cleared for the workings of oil, with pipelines of different sizes running parallel to the road. Beyond is jungle. The small businesses and homes that appear here and there are poor and shabby. Much of the traffic is Petroamazonas, but I see other vehicles related to the industry with different, gringo-sounding names. I see one truck with the red and white Halliburton logo.

At Dureno an old, faded billboard advertising eco-tours stands at the head of the dirt road leading to the community. We get out and walk down the wet road, surrounded by jungle, to the river, the Aguarico. Along the road are signs alerting you to the oil and gas pipes that run next to it. The Aguarico is the biggest river in Sucumbíos province and eventually empties into the Napo. At the river's edge is an open building where a relative of Martín's makes a long fiberglass canoe of the type that navigates the river. Martín uses his cell phone to call someone from the other side to ferry us across to the community. A few scruffy chickens scratch the ground. A skinny dog appears from around the building, eyes us warily and starts to bark.

The Aguarico does not have the feeling of a wild river. There are places along the shore that have been cleared for various purposes, no doubt related to oil. At one place a pipeline crosses high over the river. At another there is a high-tension wire holding the large red plastic balls used to alert low flying aircraft. Martín says that several years ago, before the balls were installed, a helicopter from Petroecuador (now Petroamazonas) hit the wire and crashed in the river. The Aguarico was polluted for decades after Texaco discovered oil in 1968. Communities that lived along its shores and whose lives were sustained by its clean waters were devastated. For a time it was so bad people could not even bathe in the river, much less eat the fish that were such an important part of their diet. Now the Aguarico is somewhat better. People swim and bathe but still don't eat the fish, and parents don't allow their small children to go in the river. The Aguarico empties into the Napo, the Napo into the Amazon. Aguarico means rich water.

On the other side we clamber out and commence the short climb to Martín's village. Dureno has received some financial help from the government but it is a very poor community. The main evidence of governmental aid is an open gymnasium with a concrete floor and metal roof that stands more or less in the middle of the village and which serves as a meeting place as well as for recreation. When we arrive teenagers are playing a spirited game of Ecuadorian volleyball. The village houses are made of wood and in various states of dilapidation, reminding me of houses in the Mississippi Delta I saw decades ago.

Chris and Martín talk about what we can see this afternoon and it is decided we will head back across the river and hire a local cab to take us to a few places that have been suffering because of the pollution. We cross the Aguarico and pay the ferryman 75 cents. A taxi is waiting. The driver used to work for Petroecuador and knows all about the industry. We visit the community of Aguas Blancas, next to a small tributary of the Aguarico, and talk to a woman who tells of the health problems caused by the contamination, how they cannot drink the water and how her children cannot bathe in the river without getting rashes. Aguas Blancas is a very poor community and the few people we see do not look healthy.

Back in the canoe we head to a small community where Martín's grandfather lives, taking a tributary of the Aguarico through dense forest, a typical Amazonian waterway full of silence and mystery. Reaching our destination Martín ties up the canoe and we climb the embankment. The community is no more than a few mean dwellings surrounded by jungle, mud, dogs, chickens, and barefoot children. Martín's grandfather is resting in a hammock in an open *choza*. He seems a content and peaceful fellow, very friendly, and immediately tries to sell some things he has made, very nice little combs and necklaces from natural materials, and I get the feeling Martín has brought us here for this very reason. Gringo equals money and that's just the way it is. This is our purpose and distinction. Under the circumstances, it is best to smile and accept it. We buy some things for a few dollars. We bid the man farewell, our usefulness exhausted for the moment, and head, somewhat sheepishly, back to the canoe. But if we feel slightly diminished and used for the superficiality of this interaction one can only imagine what the indigenous must feel after centuries of murder, pillage, arrogance and cultural and environmental destruction at the hands of the Europeans and their North American cousins.

There is a little rain and wind back on the Aguarico, with enormous clouds on the horizon, restoring some wildness and drama to the river. At the village Martín takes us on a tour. There is an animal pen holding ducks and geese and also a capybara, a startling sight. The capybara will be eaten of course but Martín says that it is not so tasty. He shows us the place where ayahuasca rituals are performed, an open *choza* in a clearing next to a stream, an idyllic setting. I think that I would like to take ayahuasca with the Cofán.

The next day we take the same cab and drive around to look at a few small wells, some active, yellow flames from the burn-off garishly illuminating the cloudy afternoon, incongruous midst the surrounding forest. Then we go to the site where Texaco first drilled for oil in Cofán territory, in 1968, the infamous Dureno 1, shut down by the Cofán after a two-month occupation in 1998, disgusted and outraged by the ruination and poisoning of their land. The old well is capped and there is a sign commemorating the action. The thick, dark, obdurate metal of the well pipe and cap stick more than four feet out of the ground, a symbol of arrogant exploitation and subsequent small victory for the indigenous population, almost forgotten. But not quite. Martín informs us that Petroamazonas is lobbying to reactivate the well. All around Dureno 1 are dozens of pools of toxic petroleum waste, covered with dirt. Texaco pledged to empty the pools and restore the land but never did. The waste remains under a few feet of dirt, leaching into the nearby tributaries to the Aguarico and the Aguarico itself. Very little grows in these places compared with surrounding areas. There are thousands of these pits in Sucumbíos province, many unburied.

That evening in Martín's house we have a simple meal and afterwards, Martín, who loves to tell stories, speaks for over an hour about his family history. It is rather an amazing story, and though my Spanish is not good I understand much of it, upheavals, craziness, alcoholism and violence. He talks about the circuitous path to becoming a teacher, his occupation in Dureno. Martín is an exceptional guy and we are duly impressed. We sleep on the floor next to an exterior wall and in the middle of the night something sprays from the outside, as if a garden hose, coming through the cracks in the wall, and we are awakened in a puddle of liquid. Everything is wet. It is impossible to comprehend what has happened. Perhaps it was a

monstrous jaguar, a totem animal marking his territory. But the liquid has no smell, which only deepens the mystery.

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The next morning Chris discusses expenses with Martín and, not surprisingly, they are more than we had anticipated. We can't afford Martín's services after today so this will be our last few hours in Cofán territory. It is decided that we will meet Martín's father, Emergildo, and tour some of the oil fields around Lago Agrio. Emergildo has been one of the leaders in the fight against Texaco/Chevron for many years, a struggle that has consumed his life, and one to which he has given himself gladly. Before we leave Martín shows us some of the community buildings in the village, including his school. Martín teaches A'ingae, the native language, and Spanish to the children of the village. As one might expect, the facilities are rudimentary, but one can also imagine that the quality of the man and his passion for teaching more than compensate for the material shortcomings.

Leaving the village we once again cross the Aguarico. The morning is warm with few clouds. We take the bus to the outskirts of Lago Agrio and walk down a dirt road to Emergildo's house, where he is sitting outside, waiting. His face is painted in the traditional way and he is wearing a necklace of jaguar teeth. I wonder if this is usual or if he has prepared himself for our benefit. He greets us formally and we sit down. Emergildo has met many people like us and is obviously not easily impressed, but we have not met many people like Emergildo. After a while I don't notice the face paint and jaguar necklace but rather the strong and passionate qualities of the person. He talks at length about the struggles of the Cofán and other groups against Texaco/Chevron/Petroecuador, how he has been to the United States many times to testify before various groups and committees, how an allegiance has been formed among indigenous groups and some *colonos* to fight this very difficult and, at least for the moment, losing battle.

He describes the ways things used to be for the Cofán, daily activities centered around the rivers, especially the Aguarico, the rhythms and rituals of life, the relationship to a healthy and sustaining environment, and how, some time in the late 60s, Texaco came to their home. He tells the story of the first encounter with the oil company, of people in the village hearing explosions and other strange sounds coming from the forest and a contingent of elders going to investigate, finding white people with machines. The white people were friendly and gave them sandwiches and Coca-Cola. They explained that they were looking for oil and would soon be gone. The Cofán knew about oil but had no experience with it and believed what the men told them.

Finally the men did go but returned a year later and began clearing the forest and making roads. This time the gringos were not so friendly. Shortly after that they began drilling for oil. This was Dureno 1. As time passed people began to be sick and they realized that something was wrong with the water. They developed rashes and began having terrible headaches and intestinal problems. The old and very young were the most sick. The bright light from the flare cast its unnatural glow on the village, illuminating the night and frightening away the animals. The constant noise of the drilling, the heavy machinery, the trucks, the fabrication of the pipeline, the hammering, cutting and welding, changed a peaceful, quiet environment into

something alien and disturbing. The Texaco people were indifferent to the complaints and entreaties of the villagers.

Then the company began to drill more wells around the area, with an accompanying increase in roads, trucks, machinery, noise, pipelines and, above all, contamination of the environment, especially the Aguarico and its tributaries. The company left its bubbling, tarry, toxic wastes in hundreds of open pools that emitted membrane-searing fumes. By this time there was no confusion about why the people were sick with skin diseases, birth defects, mental retardation, neurological disorders and cancer. The Ecuadorian government offered no help, instead taking the side of the company, Petroecuador building the pipeline, the *oleoducto*, and working alongside its Texas big brother. Nueva Loja became Lago Agrio. The oil frenzy grew and more outsiders came.

The new economy not only created material conditions of poverty for indigenous people, with the destruction of the environment and traditional way of life, but also gave rise to a condition of psychological poverty and dependence. Because of the dire economic conditions some of the indigenous people, including the Cofán, began to work for Texaco/Petroecuador. An ancient way of life was essentially destroyed. Psychological problems, despair, alcoholism, violence and social dissolution beset the people. In the 1980s the Cofán and other indigenous groups, with help from international sympathizers, began fighting back, with protests and legal maneuvers. In 1990 Petroecuador assumed all operations in the Oriente, with Texaco lowering its profile, though the relationship between the two remained strong, Texaco providing technical help and equipment, still taking its share of the profits.

Texaco finally left the country in 1992 without cleaning its wastes, which, technically, was in compliance with existing, marginal Ecuadorian regulations, leaving the environment and the people to sicken and die. In October, 2001 Chevron bought Texaco, creating a mega-company with billions in assets, but in a legal nicety the bolder, richer corporation has absolved itself of the responsibility for the toxic cesspools its swallowed fish created, the endearing partnership of lawyerly slime and deep pockets causing history once again to disappear. The Ecuador Supreme Court has ordered Chevron to pay \$9.5 billion in damages to the local communities, but naturally the company will fight this ruling until hell freezes over. Emergildo exhibits a stubborn will to continue the fight and no matter how bleak things seem gives the impression that some day justice, whatever form it takes, will prevail. His attitude, his faith, runs counter to my deep skepticism. I hope he is right.

We call the same cab driver and go on a tour of more wells directly around Lago Agrio, including the first well ever drilled here, by Texaco, in 1967. It is preserved as a kind of museum piece, memorial, or testimony. I experience a mixture of feelings, something like hopelessness after the fact, a symbol of lost cultural and environmental treasures, but also a tinge of optimism as the well is no longer functioning: this nightmare shall also some day pass. Emergildo takes us to another place where there are large waste pits barely covered with dirt. The vegetation all around here is stunted and sparse. In one large area the tar is exposed. We scoop pieces with our fingers, the pure stuff, residue of the black gold, the smell of money. This also elicits different associations, not altogether unpleasant. I think of the tar balls on the beach when I was a child, cleaning my feet with turpentine when I stepped on them, the

smell of roads on hot summer days. But these pools of waste, vast and numerous, recall anything but childhood idylls for the people of the Oriente. We return to Emergildo's house and bid him goodbye, thanking him for his time and, of course, paying him. Everything has its price. For the Cofán the price has been very dear.