

Chicha-Coronavirus: 1-0. On trust, natural disasters, and pandemics in the Ecuadorian Amazon

Chicha-Coronavirus 1-0. Sobre confianza, desastres naturales y pandemias en la Amazonía Ecuatoriana

Chicha-Coronavirus 1-0. Das relações de confiança, desastres naturais e pandemias na Amazônia Equatoriana

Leonidas Oikonomakis

Dossier: Reflexões e perspectivas sobre a pandemia de COVID-19.

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Abstract

Sarayaku is an Amazonian Kichwa community on the shores of Río Bobonaza, Ecuador. There is no road connecting it to the rest of the country no electricity and no telephone network. I happened to be there on fieldwork during the times of a double disaster: the COVID19 crisis, and the biggest flood in the community's living memory. This short article explores how the community managed both the flood and the COVID19 crisis, according to communitarian practices, as well as how relations of trust are built during sad "everyday life" events in the life of an Amazonian community, as well in not-so-everyday-life emergency situations that are more rare, yet more intense when they occur. While trust-building is crucial in any anthropological or sociological research that involves fieldwork, in the relevant bibliography trust-building during everyday life "insignificant" actions has only recently been attributed the value it deserves. At the same time, trust-building during emergencies has also gone largely unnoticed, maybe due to the rarity of events of disaster/emergency in the lifetime of an Amazonian community.

Keywords: pandemia; Amazonia Ecuatoriana; indigenous politics; Sarayaku; ethnographic trust

Leonidas Oikonomakis holds a Ph.D in Social and Political Sciences from the European University Institute (EUI). He is an affiliated researcher of COSMOS, Scuola Normale Superiore and in the past he has held research and teaching positions at Durham University's, Anthropology Department, University of Crete's Department of Sociology, as well as at the Scuola Normale Superiore and the Hellenic Open University. His research and teaching focuses on Latin American politics, social movements, autonomy, revolutions, and electoral politics. He is also a rapper with hip-hop formation Social Waste, and a member of the editorial collective of ROAR Magazine. He is the author of Political Strategies and Social Movements in Latin America: The Zapatistas and Bolivian cocaleros (Palgrave Latin American Studies Series, 2019). leonidas.oikonomakis@eui.eu

Resumen

Sarayaku es una comunidad Kichwa sobre los bordes del Río Bobonaza, Ecuador. No existe carretera que conecte Sarayacu con el resto del país, y tampoco hay electricidad ni red telefónica. Me tocó estar allí realizando trabajo de campo a lo largo de la época de un doble desastre: la crisis del COVID19, y la inundación más grande en la memoria viva de la comunidad. Este corto artículo explora la manera en la cual la comunidad manejó tanto la inundación como la crisis del COVID-19 según las prácticas comunitarias. Explora también cómo se construyen relaciones de confianza durante eventos tristes de la cotidianidad en la vida de una comunidad amazónica, y también durante situaciones de emergencia no tan comunes que las hacen más intensas. A pesar de que la construcción de relaciones de confianza en la cotidianidad sea crucial en todo tipo de investigación sociológica que incluya trabajo de campo, solo en los últimos años ha recibido la atención que se le merece. Al mismo tiempo, la construcción de confianza durante emergencias no ha recibido atención debido a lo mejor a la rara ocurrencia de dichos casos a lo largo de la vida de una comunidad amazónica.

Palabras clave: pandemia; Amazonía Ecuatoriana; política indígena; Sarayaku; confianza etnográfica

Resumo

Sarayaku é uma comunidade Kichwa da Amazônia nas margens do rio Bobonaza, no Equador. Não está ligada por estrada ao resto do país nem tão pouco às redes elétrica e telefônica. Por mera coincidência, o meu trabalho de campo em Sarayaku coincidiu com dois desastres: a crise do COVID-19 e as maiores cheias de que há memória na comunidade. Este breve artigo explora as formas como a comunidade geriu ambos os desastres seguindo práticas comunitárias bem como o processo de construção de relações de confiança, tanto durante penosos eventos que fazem parte do cotidiano de uma comunidade amazônica como perante a ocorrência de situações de emergência que são, simultaneamente, mais raras e mais drásticas. A construção de relações de confiança, em geral, é um aspecto crucial em qualquer pesquisa de cariz antropológico ou sociológico, mas os processos mais específicos relativos à construção de relações de confiança no decorrer de práticas quotidianas “insignificantes” não teve, até há pouco tempo, o destaque merecido. Para além disso, a construção de relações de confiança durante situações de emergência tem sido largamente ignorada pelos pesquisadores, porventura devido à raridade desses eventos no decurso da vida de uma comunidade amazônica.

Palavras-chave: Pandemia; Amazônia Equatoriana; política indígena; Sarayaku; relações de confiança e etnografia

Distrust

“**A**hora si que tienes algo para contar...” said Franco the night before we left Sarayaku in late March 2020.

We¹ had spent almost a month in Sarayaku, an Amazonian Kichwa community in Ecuador, where I had spent two months in 2019, some four hours by canoe away from community of Canelos and five from Puyo.

“Your body is always straight, and you always observe everything around, I’ve noticed! You can’t fool me! Plus, I don’t like those military pants you always wear! You leave your back uncovered though!”

He would often make such comments, sometimes after drinking *chicha* in his house, other times while sober. Franco is not just any other person in Sarayaku. He was the Governing Council’s (*Consejo de Gobierno*) President from 2001-2003, the most critical juncture (Collier and Collier, 1991, p.29) of its history, when Sarayaku had to confront the seizure by Argentinean

CGC petrol company of its lands for seismic exploration, conceded by the Ecuadorian government (Siren, 2004; Ruiz, 2018). The community resisted, eventually taking the case to the Interamerican Court of Human Rights in Costa Rica (Melo Cevallos, 2016) before it successfully expelled the CGC. “They couldn’t coopt me,” he says, “because I did not study, I am not an engineer to be promised a job for example, and I could lead my village with a firm hand!” he says proudly. Franco is also the son of Raúl Viteri, the mastermind behind the foundation of Centro Alama Saryaku (CAS) – the first community organization of the village which was later transformed into today’s Governing Council. In short, he is not a man to be disliked by and he is always suspicious of journalists, researchers, and military men.

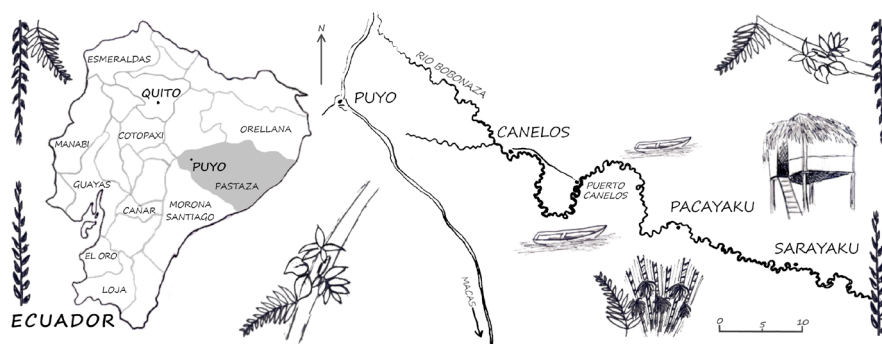


Figure 1: Map of Pastaza including Sarayaku.

Source: Map created by Danai-Maria Kontou

Trust

In any research that falls within the realm of social sciences and involves ethnographic fieldwork, but especially so in anthropological research, the creation of spaces of trust between the researcher and his/her interlocutors is crucial for the success of the research. One therefore needs to be particularly careful regarding the friendships one builds on the fieldwork site, not only because they have a significant effect on the level of immersion of the researcher in the life of a given community, but also because they can have long-lasting, but also unpredictable consequences. For that same reason, Vitebsky warns us that we should never forget that together with our friends in the field, we sometimes inherit their friends as well, but also their enemies (Vitebsky, 2006, p.50). When it comes to Amazonian communities Santos-Granero (Santos-Granero, 2007) speaks of the importance of creating spaces of trust in the life of Amazonian peoples, especially when it comes to the creation of non-kinship based relations. He argues that such spaces are often created around warfare, trade partnerships, shamanic alliances, as well as mystical bonds with other-than-human beings. Joanna Overing (2003) has also pointed towards the relations of trust that are built during the exercise of what she calls “the art of social living” in the everyday life of a community.

She refers to everyday life events that seem insignificant to anthropologists and often pass unnoticed, yet they help create spaces of trust as much as “big events” do. To Santos Granero’s list, and to Overing’s everyday life events, I would add spaces of trust that are built during and after the rare -yet very intense – experiences of mourning, emergency situations and natural disasters, such as the mourning of my host-family’s son’s loss and the flood I witnessed during my stay in Sarayaku in March 2020, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic that followed which strengthened my bonds both with my host-family and with the community to an unprecedented level.

Before arriving

And how about the coronavirus? Is it possible that you may have been infected? Because in Sarayaku they are worried about it.

Yaku, the *dirigente de relaciones exteriores* of Sarayaku² asked us in Puyo, while drinking beer and catching up after a year we had been away. At the time the coronavirus pandemic had not grown to serious dimensions globally. China was heavily hit, and Italy was just starting to have its first casualties. We told him that in Greece the first case was just announced but we had already departed two weeks earlier. We also explained that the Greek government was trying to take advantage of the pandemic by blaming it on refugees and immigrants in the camps on the islands, scaring the population in mainland Greece, even though the first case in Greece was a rather high-class lady who had just arrived back from a shopping trip to Milan.

Yaku and his family were going through tough times. His brother, Israel Viteri, one of the first pilots of the Amazonia and the first from Sarayaku had just died in a plane accident and that was a very tough blow for the community. Israel was not only making his family and his village proud, but he also had a very important role in the community’s life. He was a pilot who grew up in the Amazonia, knew how to judge the weather and take the right decisions, had 4000 flight-hours, and was an important messenger and people-and-products transporter to and from Sarayaku. He would also occasionally carry patients to Puyo in emergency situations; when it was impossible for them to reach it by canoe through the Río Bobonaza. I had personally witnessed one of these emergency flights when Israel landed on *sector pista*³ to pick up a small kid who was bitten by a *shinshin* snake (*Biothrops taeniatus*) – children regularly walk around barefoot in Sarayaku- and fly him to Shell/Mera, from where the kid would be transported to a hospital in Puyo. In that case, Dionisio (one of the community’s ex-Presidents) and the village’s doctor also had to persuade the kid’s parents that: a) traditional medicinal herbs would not save their child and he would die if he was not transported to Puyo within 12 hours, and b) that they wouldn’t have to pay for the flight themselves, which they couldn’t afford.

When in Sarayaku I normally spend my time and have breakfasts, lunches, and dinners at Yaku and Israel's mother Narcisa's house. She is a well-respected, very sweet elderly woman, member of the *consejo de los sabios* (council of the wise) that assists the *Consejo de Gobierno* as an advisory body and is responsible for *traditional justice*. This time however, her son had just tragically died and I wasn't sure it would be wise to intrude on her grief. We discussed it with Yaku, yet once we arrived Narcisa had a different opinion: "I am glad you came," she said, "with you around I will stop thinking of Israel all the time, it will do me good!"

So, we decided to enter Sarayaku the following day early in the morning. We went to Sarayaku's office at the agreed time, but Yaku never appeared. The journey was postponed until the day after but we were invited to CONFENAIE's *fiesta*, that would take place in Unión Base, a nearby community. It was the 8th of March, *el día internacional de la Mujer*, and everyone was excited because the headliner that night would be the legendary *Charijayac*, a band from Otavalo with a more than 30 year trajectory in the genre of Andean/Andean protest music and song. The leaders of CONAIE, Leonidas Iza and Jaime Vargas were there too- Leonidas Iza also sang a song together with Charijayac and also played the flute. Well, the excitement was such, that Yaku got drunk and was seen in the morning walking around Puyo we were told, when again he was absent from our appointment. He came though somewhat late, shared a taxi with us and we left. Halfway there, he decided to get out and not proceed as far as the community⁴; yet we continued to Canelos, and we got on a canoe to Sarayaku, one year after our first stay in the community.

Corona

When we arrived in Sarayaku, coronavirus was not considered a potential threat. Of course it was discussed in every house as "the global big news story" and there were jokes every time someone would sneeze, yet it was something that nobody expected would develop as it did. Of course, as foreigners we were a bit discriminated in that sense, as people would sometimes be scared to shake hands with us, or we would "catch" the word coronavirus in the air when people were obviously commenting on us while walking around the community. There was also a case in which an old lady complained at the Government Council's regular meeting that she was fed up of seeing "all these foreigners around" referring to the community's outward-looking policy, yet Narcisa intervened to say that we were her guests and that she was not annoyed by our presence at all. She reminded them that whenever Sarayaku needed help, "our friends from abroad did help us."

Every morning at 7:00 we were listening to *Radio Nina* from Puyo - whose signal could reach Narcisa's house-, reporting on the number of cases in Ecuador, and everyone was content that no case had reached Pastaza (and Puyo) yet- it made them feel safer.

So, are we banning chicha too?

On March 13, 2020, the *Consejo* met as it regularly does to discuss the issues on the agenda, including next day's village *minga*, which takes place once every 45 days. However, the topic that monopolized the discussion was *Health* and of course it evolved around COVID-19. At the time there were few cases in Ecuador and none in Pastaza region, yet the teacher Leopoldo informed the *Consejo* that the Ministry of Education had decided to suspend classes for two months. Now it was time to decide how to protect Sarayaku from the virus. Some leaders saw it as an opportunity: the community should start drinking *guayusa* again, something that many had given up on because... "...they hate waking up at 4.00am!"

Franco, was a very enthusiastic promoter of this idea. Lenín, the health promoter, proposed that all community members should drink a mixture of 12 medicinal herbs *and* aguardiente, which, would strengthen their immune system.



Figure 2. The mixture of 12 medicinal herbs.
Source: Photographed by the author

It was also decided that no locals or foreigners would be allowed in Sarayaku from that moment onwards, and if one left, then they wouldn't be able to return for fear of importing the virus. We were allowed to stay, because we were already there before the COVID-19 explosion. Sabine, a Belgian married to a Sarayaku ex-President who has been living there for years posed the crucial question:

If we suspend classes, ban visitors, and start taking traditional medicinal drinks, then we should also quit drinking chicha. We all drink from the same mukawa⁵, it is not reasonable to do everything else except for that!

Yet nobody was ready to accept banning *chicha*- anything else would be easier! *Chicha* is not only a drink that facilitates socialization in Sarayaku: it is also the main source of nutrition for the people there. It is made of *yuca* (manioc), and since most of the families have one or two meals a day, in the meantime they drink/feed on *chicha* (manioc beer). The same discussion took place on the day of the *minga*, after drinking a mixture of medicinal herbs and *aguardiente*. The consensus was that Sarayaku would *consider* banning *chicha* only if there were COVID19-cases in Puyo, the nearest city. Sarayaku people would prefer to have the sky fall on their heads than ban such a deep-rooted custom (and dietary need).

Chicha-Coronavirus

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Herbs and Purinas

Eventually, COVID-19 did reach Sarayaku unfortunately. On June, 11 2020 the Ministry of Health arrived at the community and did 93 random COVID-19 tests. Twenty-five of those resulted positive (Cárdenas 2020). A few days later Sarayaku mourned its first COVID-19 victim: Marco Fidel Santi Gualinga, also known as “Remigio”, “Chamaco”, and “Charles Bronson of Sarayaku”, father of Movimiento Pachakutik coordinator Marlon Santi, died of the virus. The small plane that normally transports emergency patients to Shell-Mera refused to transport him because it had only one pilot and it couldn't take the risk of the sole pilot being contaminated as well. In a personal communication through the internet with José Santi, the new international relations dirigente of Sarayaku, I was told that he suspects that at least 80% of the community is infected with COVID-19. “It doesn't affect us, the younger ones,” he said, “but we are worried about our elders.”

In order to cope with the new situation, Tayjasaruta decided to form “brigadas” of younger people, who are less at risk than the elders, who went into the jungle to collect medicinal herbs to produce remedies for the virus. They also regularly visit the elders, suggest them to drink hot water and gargle with special leaves. They also sniff natural tobacco produced in the village,

which is believed to clear the respiratory tubes, while others try bitter tree-wood which -they believe – can kill the virus due to its unpleasant taste. Of course, all the above are just experimental. At the same time, many families have moved to their *purinas* – the “countryside houses” many of them keep deeper in the jungle – and try to avoid contact with other families.

Drinking chicha from the same mukawa was banned.

On Floods

A few days later, the biggest flood in the living memory of the community took place: Río Bobonaza’s water reached four meters high in sector *pista* (15 meters from its basin) covering houses, schools, and destroying bridges. We happened to be there and we ran to the highest hill where we waited together with the sector’s families. Canoes were constantly arriving, with children, elderly, disabled (chickens, house-altars with saints- in this case the people saved the saints - dogs, mukawas etc.) and it all happened rather spontaneously within two hours. While we were all soaking in his mother’s house which was the highest in that sector, and while his own house was underwater, Franco took his guitar and started singing: “Soldadito Boliviano...” and other favorites of Latin America’s *canción social*. We stayed for a week more, helping people clean their houses from mud and then we decided to leave, because we had to rush to Quito to be repatriated: Ecuador’s borders had closed -only humanitarian/repatriation flights would now be allowed.



Figure 3. Sarayaku the day after the flood
Source: Photographed by the author

Leaving Sarayaku

The biggest problem was how to cross Pacayaku, a community upriver on the way to Canelos which announced that in order to protect itself from the virus, it would block the passage through *Río Bobonaza*. That was a problem for Sarayaku people too who were desperately trying to bring food and tents downriver. The *Consejo* decided to take three *canoes* and head to Puyo in order to demand assistance, the President Mirian Cisneros would lead the mission, and they would also negotiate passage with Pacayaku. We joined the mission and left. Fortunately, we explained the situation and were allowed to pass through – Pacayaku residents had blocked the river in two spots, with long ropes spanning its whole width. One more community road-block was expecting us on *kilometro 27* just outside Canelos: Canelos locals, wanted to ban *madereros* from Guayaquil (where COVID-19 cases were higher than anywhere else) from entering their community to extract *balsa*. After some negotiations we passed.

On Goodbyes

The dawn before leaving Sarayaku Franco invited us to drink *guayusa* with him. I grasped the opportunity to ask him whether he still thought we were spies and *milicos*.

Not any more. I trust you now. But the others shouldn't know that

He said and burst out laughing. Before embarking on the canoa, Narcisa rushed to bring us some pop-corn she had just made.

“Just in case you get hungry on the way” she said. “I don’t know whether I will still be alive when you come back, take this to remember me.”

Evans-Prichard (Evans-Pritchard, 1951, p.79) has famously written that an anthropologist has failed, unless, when he departs there is on both sides (both on his/hers, and that of the natives) the sorrow of parting. My fieldwork at Sarayaku had to be cut short this time, yet due to the intensity of the events I happened to witness even in this short time, I think that – at least – I didn’t fail in that. The sorrow of parting was there on all sides. A week later, while we were waiting for repatriation in a Quito hotel, I received Franco’s message:

Please check your mochila! I think, on the day of the flood, I put some of my rifle's bullets in it to save them from water and I forgot to tell you! You may have trouble at the airport!

I found no bullets in my backpack Franco. But yes, I now do have one or two stories to tell.

Notas

¹ I was there with a photographer friend, Vangelis Daskalakis, working on an ethnographic documentary/photographic project. All this was part of a comparative postdoctoral COFUND Marie Curie Project I started at Durham University Anthropology Department, regarding the experiences of two anti-extractivist social movements in Greece and Ecuador.

² Yaku Viteri was Sarayaku's dirigente of external relations until May 2020 when a new Government council was selected.

³ Sarayaku actually consists of several hamlets, some of which lie on sector pista, where the "airport corridor" also lies.

⁴ He would come to the community a week later, just before the biggest flood in Sarayaku's living memory.

⁵ A ceramic piece of pottery in the form of a cup, that is used to serve chicha in the Ecuadorian Amazonia.

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