

Remaking Indigeneity: Conversion and Colonization in Northwest Amazonia

by

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*A la memoria de Fernando Coronil*

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation is a historical ethnography of colonization and conversion in Northwest Amazonia and their relationship to emergent notions and practices of indigeneity in the region. I trace the historical configuration of the different modes of colonization and evangelization through which the indigenous peoples have been incorporated first into the rule of empire (Spain and Portugal) and later into the body politic of nation-states (Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil). Catholic missions were the main frontier institution in the region until the end of 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when they started to compete with capitalist forms of colonization, and later in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century with other forms of evangelization, most notably evangelical Christianity. In the latter case, capitalist colonization and evangelization did not map directly onto each other given that evangelical conversion of indigenous communities was conceived as a threat to the sovereignty and authority of the state, which was previously mediated by Catholic missionaries. While the predominant interpretations of the massive conversion of Puinaves and Curripacos to Christianity emphasize these changes in terms of assimilation to settler society or as the outcome of messianic traditions, this historical ethnography emphasizes the role of indigenous agency in regional processes of conversion and colonization. New forms of Christian indigeneity since the 1940s thus emerged both in relation to other colonial projects and in opposition to them, transforming social relationships within indigenous communities as well as between natives and white settlers. Indigenous appropriation of evangelical Christianity brought changes in ideas and practices related to the their past, culture, civilization, self, community, modernity and

indigeneity. Conversion became a mode of subjectivation through which moral selves and communities were produced. New forms of development promoted by the state contributed to the emergence of new forms of indigenous leadership and community organization. State developmental projects and programs in the region articulated new forms of indigenous leadership and correlated ideas of what an indigenous community should be. The dissertation concludes by analyzing the political conflicts that have taken place in the region between environmental NGOs, indigenous political organization and the regional government regarding the implementation of multicultural legislation approved in 1991.

## Introduction

In the introduction to an edited volume entitled *Globalización y Cambio en la Amazonía Indígena* (1996) [Globalization and Change in Indigenous Amazonia], Peruvian anthropologist Fernando Santos Granero makes reference to a note about “Adopted elements in culture” from the 1929 edition of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, to argue that Amazonian anthropology continued to be overdetermined by ethnographies concerned with “traditional life or thought” of specific indigenous groups.<sup>1</sup> Santos Granero complains about the fact that anthropologists in Amazonia are prone to “traditionalize” contemporary indigenous life, dismissing any external influence upon indigenous culture. In recent years, neo-structuralist perspectives that focus on Amazonian native cosmologies and ontologies have dominated ethnographic production, leaving little space for critical histories and ethnographies that explore other venues for understanding indigeneity in Amazonia.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The note refers to two common “mistakes” made by anthropologists: taking as native, ideas from Europe that had been incorporated into the indigenous repertoire in such a way that they became almost indistinguishable from the latter and leaving out of ethnographic reports any element that might suggest European influence. Despite the contradictions that both “mistakes” entail (i.e. if it is impossible to make an absolute separation between indigenous and European elements; where should one draw the line between what is traditional and what is not?), Santos Granero uses the second “mistake” to critique Amazonian anthropology.

<sup>2</sup> In a recent article entitled *The Politics of Perspectivism*, Alcida Ramos argues that: “In the past two decades perspectivism has dominated a certain kind of ethnography both in Brazil and abroad, influenced a growing number of professionals and students, and projected Brazilian anthropology beyond its borders” (Ramos 2012:482). Ramos finds to be problematic the way in which perspectivism “bypasses the political reality of interethnic conflict to concentrate on the principles of ontology and cosmology internal to indigenous cultures” (Ramos 2012:482). In an earlier article, Terence Turner argued that: “Both animism and perspectivism (...) take as their point of departure a reconception of the relation of nature and culture through an exploration of

This dissertation is conceived as a historical ethnography of conversion and colonization in Northwest Amazonia and the influence of these processes on emergent notions of indigeneity (See Map 1).<sup>3</sup> This dissertation also examines how Curripacos and Puinaves appropriated Christianity and through this process produced new ideas about their past, culture, tradition, self, community and indigeneity. Since the 1940s, when American missionary Sophie Muller (of the New Tribes Mission) travelled to the region, learned indigenous languages and translated the New Testament into these languages, taught elders how to read and write their own language, and trained indigenous pastors and missionaries, several indigenous communities have participated in a massive process of conversion to evangelical Christianity that continues until the present.<sup>4</sup> Predominant explanations of their conversion have attributed all the agency in their

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indigenous conceptions of the common subjectivity of cultural and natural beings, while diverging on a series of philosophical and theoretical points. Both tendencies have moved away from basic aspects of Lévi-Strauss's thought, as well as from each other, but both have continued in different ways to work within the framework of Lévi-Strauss's master concept of the categorical opposition of nature and culture as the basic concern of Amazonian, and more broadly Amerindian cosmologies, despite their otherwise heterodox reformulations of its terms”(Turner 2009:11).

<sup>3</sup> Northwest Amazonia was initially defined in geographical terms as the region bounded on the south by the Amazon River, from where it is joined by the Rio Negro (where Manaus is actually located) up the mouth of the Napo River in Northeast Peru, on the north bounded by the Guaviare River in Colombia, the Andean cordillera marks its boundary to the west and the Rio Negro to the east (Goldman 1963:8). The region also includes part of the Upper Orinoco River basin. More recently Hill (1996) proposed a more restricted delimitation of Northwest Amazonia focused on the triple border between Venezuela, Colombia and Brazil. Northwest Amazonia has usually been represented in anthropology as a “culture area” inhabited by indigenous groups from different linguistic families, including Arawak, eastern Tukano, Makú-Puinave and Carib. According to traditional ethnographic accounts, indigenous groups in Northwest Amazonia are related to each other through marriage networks and the exchange of ritual and material objects. These indigenous groups are said to share traits that include patrilineal and exogamic phratries that are hierarchically organized, patrilocal residence, dravidian kinship terminology and the use of long houses known as *malocas* (Koch-Grünberg (1995 [1909]), Steward (1943), Goldman (1968 [1963]), Jackson (1983), Wright (2005).

<sup>4</sup> The New Tribes Mission (NTM) was created in 1942 by Paul Fleming, a pastor from Los Angeles, and three of his friends. The Mission specialized in unreached tribes (groups that had not been proselytized) and the missionaries were chosen “upon evidence that they have a

process to Muller, including the suggestion that the indigenous communities in the region received her as a messiah. For instance, the anthropologist Robin Wright notes that all of “the observers of the Baniwa [the name by which the Curripaco are known in Brazil] since the decade of the 1950s have noted that their conversion to evangelism was compatible with a long tradition of millenarian and messianic movements that go back to the mid 19th century” (Wright 2004:158). This hypothesis mystifies the process of conversion, denies any agency in the process of conversion to the natives and seems to be part of a larger myth model, followed by Muller herself, of the European cum-civilizer who becomes a god to the natives (Obeyesekere 1992). Other interpretations of indigenous conversions to Christianity emphasize how it consisted of “becoming white, half-civilized” (Wright 1998:97). This project questions explanations about indigenous conversion as false consciousness or as a simple process of assimilation (“becoming white”), revealing how ideas and practices of conversion articulate new forms of being and becoming “Indian” in Northwest Amazonia. This process shows that there is no historical evidence to establish a direct connection between contemporary conversions and “millenarian and messianic movements” of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century or even between the arrival of Muller and contemporary conversion. Recent conversions tend to be multifaceted,

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consistent passion for souls, are soul-winners at home, and have a firm grasp of the fundamental doctrines of the Word of God” (Johnston 1985:29). The project of “reaching the unreached” became the leitmotiv of New Tribes missionaries around the world. Fleming and most of the members of the first Executive Committee of NTM had been “touched by Paul Rader’s ministry” (Johnston 1985:5). Rader was an evangelical preacher who founded the Chicago Gospel Tabernacle in 1922 in Chicago. He had once invited Fleming once to join him in Indiana, and Fleming was attracted by Rader’s concern for “world evangelization”. Like other institutions such as the Summer Institute of Linguistics, NTM was a product of American Midwest evangelicalism and “its project of bearing the Good News to the last unreached people in the uttermost parts of the earth” (Gow 2005:216). The fact that the NTM was thought conceived of as a project that was global in scope reveals the “world-building aspect” of Christianity (Hefner 1993:3) as well as the emphasis of North American Christianity on evangelization and missions (Anderson 2004:42).

usually triggered by personal events, generating processes of “self-estrangement” from people’s own past and culture, as well as producing new forms of self and social recognition (Keane 2007).



Map 1. Northwest Amazonia



For most indigenous Christians, becoming Christian is associated with a learning process as well as a “civilizing” process that brings changes in different spheres of life. Conversion is also associated with changes in housing patterns, morality, social and political organization, and ideas of personhood and community. Many of the indigenous Christians of Northwest Amazonia regard conversion as a total social fact that involves changes in all the realms of personal and social life. More recently, for some indigenous leaders, Christianity has become a sort of “hinge” or device that mediates relationships between native Amazonians and the West, to the extent that it enables new ways of being and becoming indigenous.

During the last decade, Christianity and conversion have become topics of anthropological inquiry, and some authors have expressed the need of establishing an anthropology of Christianity (Cannell 2006, Keane 2007, Robbins 2004). While there has been debate about the specificities that make Christianity different from other world religions, several of the anthropologists who work on Christianity show how easily Christianity travels around the world and how it is always subject to local interpretations and appropriations (Keane 2007, Cannell 2006).<sup>5</sup> This entails recognition that there is no pure or universal form of Christianity; to the contrary, the Christian worlds of missionaries are transformed and remade through different encounters throughout the world. In this context, local encounters with “missionary Christianities” become a privileged site in order to understand how Christianity travels and how

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<sup>5</sup> According to Fanella Cannell the idea of transcendence is at the center of Christianity as well as related ideas of radical discontinuity. Cannell points out that Christianity is based on a paradox derived from the 2 central doctrines of Christian faith: “the Incarnation (by which God became human flesh in Christ) and the Resurrection (by which, following Christ’s redemptive death on the Cross, all Christians are promised physical resurrection at the Last Judgment)” (Cannell 2006:7). In a similar vein, Joel Robbins points out that the tension between the world of daily life and the world of ultimate religious meaning is found in several versions of Christianity, and this echoes a more encompassing tension between the mundane and the transcendental order in Christianity (Robbins 2003:196).

it has been indigenized or customized by different social groups.<sup>6</sup> Out of the different topics and issues explored by anthropologists of Christianity one of the most salient has been conversion. Webb Keane argues that “radical conversion” among Christians tends to foster a “heightened sense of history,” but this “sense of history can take as many forms as there are kinds of Christianity” (Keane 2007:113). For instance, Pentecostal and evangelical conversions tend to emphasize a clear cut-break between past and present, synthesized in the idea of being “born again.” Several authors have addressed how this “heightened sense of history” is produced, as well as the analytical and theoretical implications of taking seriously claims that Christians make about conversion as a clear cut-break with the past. Some authors have focused on the limitations of anthropology to develop theoretical models of discontinuity or radical cultural change to account for what happens in most of the indigenous societies that have embraced Evangelical, Pentecostal or Charismatic Christianity (Robbins 2007). From a different perspective, other authors have questioned directly the claim that it is possible to make a complete break with the past. Webb Keane shows how new senses of history are not just a “matter of imagination or memory in the abstract,” but they are produced through “concrete practices, texts, and material things whose historical implications depend on specific semiotic

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<sup>6</sup> Writing about indigenous politics in Peru, Shane Greene argues that *customization* refers both to “*specific acts* and to a *structural process* of constrained creativity” (Greene 2009:17). Greene defines customization along three different lines. First, customization has to do with “the interdependent nature of social values and social actions, which are in turn dependent on the dialectic of structural repetition and practical transformation (...) it indexes the dynamic relation between those things we do without thinking and those things we do with purpose” (Greene 2009:17). Second, customization refers also to a “stage of *getting accustomed* to something that at first appears to be foreign but becomes a bit more familiar over time,” involving a “process of domestication in which social actors are both forced into and desirous of establishing a proper relationship with a foreign object that has appeared or imposed itself on them” (Greene 2009:17). Third, any project of customization is “constrained by the politics of customization in which it is enmeshed” (Greene 2009:18). In this sense, the reach and creativity of specific acts of customization depend “heavily on the structures of power that inevitably constrain them” (Greene 2009:18).

ideologies” (Keane 2007:114). Consequently, perceptions of continuity and rupture tend to be mediated by the different ways in which people relate to texts, objects and specific practices (Keane 2007:114). In a similar vein, Birgit Meyer argues that notions of rupture and continuity are defined in relationship to each other. The break with “the past,” as it were, presupposes its prior construction through remembrance and through Pentecostal discourses of the past as pagan (Meyer 1998:318). Pentecostalism, according to Meyer, “seeks a rupture from a “tradition” or “past” which it has previously helped to construct” (Meyer 1998:318). I draw on these debates, trying to show how conversion to Christianity changed the ways in which Curripacos and Puinaves represented the past and meanings of “traditional practices.” Specifically, I look at how the past is also embedded in practices such as sorcery or in the presence of objects and material things associated with sorcery. The impossibility of making a complete break with the past acquires importance when Protestant notions of conversion are based on a “moral narrative of progress” that puts at its center “human emancipation and self-mastery” (Keane 2007:7).

While it is crucial to look at how specific forms of Christianity inform and shape local senses of history, it is equally important to analyze how the meanings of conversion change historically and vary among different social actors. Here I follow contemporary discussions regarding indigenous conceptualizations of change, temporality and historicity in Amazonia (Fausto and Heckenberger 2007:4). In this sense, I attempt to historicize and problematize conversion, paying close attention to how its meaning has changed over time for both missionaries and indigenous Christians.<sup>7</sup> This entails analysis of previous attempts at evangelizing indigenous communities in Northwest Amazonia, along with how notions of

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<sup>7</sup> The word used in Spanish when people refer to Christians is *evangélico* (evangelical). The term *evangélico* has a negative connotation in Latin American countries where most of the population is still Catholic.

indigenous conversion and evangelization have changed for both Catholic and evangelical missionaries, as well as for indigenous Christians across generations. Despite the claims of Christian missionaries of having made contact with previously “unreached tribes,” Catholic missions were established in Northwest Amazonia since the 17th Century by Spain and Portugal in the midst of territorial disputes regarding the jurisdiction of both empires. Catholic missions became the main frontier institution through which natives were converted, “civilized,” and exploited; they played a critical role in the colonization of these areas (Bolton 1917, Langer 2009). The work of Catholic missionaries was based on the idea of “*reducción*” as a way of bringing natives to civilized life.<sup>8</sup> According to Herbert Bolton, Spanish authorities soon discovered that: “in order to properly convert, instruct and exploit the Indian, he must be kept in a fixed place of residence (...) it soon became a law that Indians must be congregated in pueblos, and made to stay there, by force if necessary. The pueblos were modeled on the Spanish towns,

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<sup>8</sup> The notion of “civilization”, according to Norbert Elias, was coined towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by European nations as an element of national self-consciousness which was thought to distinguish Europe from non-European nations and peoples. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, European nations started to see themselves as “bearers of an existing or finished civilization to others, as standard-bearers of expanding civilization” (In Rojas 2002:xiii). According to Raymond Williams, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century civilization became a “specific combination of the ideas of a process and an achieved condition,” expressing a sense of historical process (inspired by the spirit of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on secular and progressive human self-development), but also celebrating the “associated sense of modernity: an achieved condition of refinement and order” (Williams 1976:58). In the case of Latin America, the dialectic between civilization and barbarism has been described as the “central conflict in Latin America culture” (González Echavarría 2003:2) which shaped different projects of nation making and “internal colonization.” During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, literary production in Latin America associated the notion of civilization with modern European ideas and practices, and based in the cities, while barbarism came to represent the “backwardness of the countryside” (González Echavarría 2003:12). In Northwest Amazonia, the idea of “civilizing” indigenous populations became closely associated with ideas of government and *reducción* (i.e. reducing natives to civilized life). At the same time, indigenous meanings of “becoming civilized” tend to associate it with the material and personal transformations that include: living in a community where single family houses (with separate rooms for males and females) are organized around a church and community hall, acquiring the appropriate manners, treating people with respect and living a Christian life.

and were designed not alone as a means of control, but as schools in self-control as well” (Bolton 1917:44). While Catholic missionaries enacted a top-down model of conversion, drawing on assimilationist models of conversion and using Spanish as the main language of evangelization, Christian missionaries usually based their evangelical work on the idea of “going native” (Muller 1963). Evangelical missionaries usually live for several years among natives, learn the local language, teach natives how to read and write their own language, and train native pastors and missionaries. The first evangelical missionaries that came to the region after the 1940s saw conversion as a process of replacing pagan and idolatrous customs with Christian practice and belief, and of replacing the worship of the devil with the worship of God (Muller 1963). More contemporary evangelical missionaries tend to make an ontological separation between culture and religion, arguing that conversion is the product of a personal decision that takes place in the interiority of individuals and brings no further cultural changes. Some of the evangelical missionaries argue that translations of the Bible into indigenous languages are in fact reinforcing indigenous culture. However, the first generation of native Christians was quite young when their parents became Christians. Muller taught the elders how to read and write their own language and then to read the Bible, assuming that they would later do the same with their children. In this sense, the first generation of Christians tends to associate conversion with learning how to read the Bible. Furthermore, becoming Christian is associated with a learning or “civilizing” process that takes place in different spheres of life. Among elder indigenous Christians, conversion is associated with becoming civilized, placing them on an equal level with white settlers, who usually depict them as savages or animals. Both elder and young indigenous Christians tend to think of conversion as the outcome of a clear-cut break between a pagan past and a Christian present. The last two generations of indigenous Christians

emphasize that conversion has made them better persons, involving changes in all realms of personal and social life. Conversion is usually the result of an individual epiphany that is triggered by a specific event or situation. In this sense, conversion emerges as a mode of subjectivation produced out of the colonial encounter between evangelical missionaries and natives (Bayart 2008).

Another thread of analysis of this dissertation is concerned with processes of colonization in Northwest Amazonia. *Colonización* among Spanish speaking countries in Latin America usually refers to “the expansion of agricultural frontiers and the creation of settlements in previously uncultivated lands” (Appelbaum 2003:12). However, as historian Nancy Appelbaum has pointed out, translating *colonización* as “colonization” is somewhat misleading, because “the strictly agricultural definition of colonization is no longer the most common one used in English” (Appelbaum 2003:12). Frederick Cooper argues that the Greek and Roman origins of the word colonization, which is derived from the Latin word *colere*, meaning “to cultivate” or “to put to use,” has retained significance into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the “principal meaning of colonization has come to involve people rather than land: coercive incorporation into an expansionist state and invidious distinction” (Cooper 2005:27). I want to take advantage of the different meanings of the word colonization in Spanish and English and to associate the term with both the expansion of the agricultural frontier and the incorporation of marginal populations under the rule of “expansionist states.” The “colonial situation” also produces specific modes of rule and domination that make it different from other modes of domination. As Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano has pointed out, “coloniality is one of the constitutive and specific elements of the global model of capitalist power,” and it is based on the “imposition of the idea of race as an instrument of domination” (Quijano 2000:342,569). In this

sense, colonialism works through the production of difference (through racial or ethnic categories), and this includes the coercive, administrative and cultural work that goes into the establishment of hierarchies and policing of social boundaries (Cooper 2005:27). Colonialism is as much about the production of difference as it is about the government of difference. John Comaroff argues that the purpose of the anthropology of colonialism is to “interrogate the construction, objectification, and negotiation of *difference*” (Comaroff 1998:321). However, colonialism should never be understood solely as a top down process of imposed submission, given that “effective colonizing has historically involved the participation of the colonized, who have simultaneously resisted and adapted to colonization, thus shaping the different colonial systems that resulted” (Appelbaum 2003:13).

During the last few decades, a division of intellectual labor among the social scientists studying Amazonia has emerged. At least in Colombia, sociologists have generally focused on peasant colonization in the region, while anthropologists have conducted ethnographic research of indigenous cultures, often ignoring broader processes of cultural change, including colonization and evangelization. This project attempts to break here these analytical and disciplinary boundaries by showing not only how colonizer and colonized should be understood in relation to each other, but also by recognizing that this dichotomy is a “Manichean conception” that does not reflect or take into account how colonialism works on the ground (Cooper and Stoler 1997:3). For this purpose, this project draws on critical scholarship of colonialism that emphasizes the heterogeneity of colonial experiences and subjects, as well as the disjunctions between colonial policy and colonial practice (Steinmetz 2007).<sup>9</sup> This

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<sup>9</sup> In his work about the German colonial state, sociologist George Steinmetz illustrates the enormous variability of projects and experiences that can be associated with modern colonialism, challenging “hasty generalizations about colonialism per se” (Steinmetz 2007:xxi).

dissertation looks at how indigenous societies have transformed and have been transformed by multiple dynamics including the expansion of capitalism and processes of state formation. At the same time, attributing colonization solely to the work of *colonos* (white settlers) contributes to the reproduction of images of Amazonian indigenous societies as ahistorical and lacking agency in the making of history in the region. The emphasis of anthropologists on indigenous societies has also led the discipline to produce a negative image of *colonos* seen as a threat to the environment and indigenous culture. Michael Taussig (1986) points out that in Amazonia the colonizer and the colonized have constituted each other at different historical moments. In Amazonia, there have been multiple colonizing and colonized populations, which make colonization a textured and heterogeneous experience for *colonos*, natives and missionaries. In addition, indigenous groups have historically sustained relationships of domination, alliance, war and subordination among themselves. While most of the *colonos* initially came to the region as landless peasants, escaping from bipartisan political violence, or looking for a better future, during the last few decades power relationships have developed among *colonos*. Some of the *colonos* have become working force for powerful social actors in the region such as *guerrillas*, landowners, merchants and drug traffickers, among others. In this sense, colonization entailed both the “spontaneous” migration of landless peasants to frontier regions as well as the efforts to incorporate these regions under the rule of the state through the establishment of new provinces, towns and boarding schools.

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At the same time, Steinmetz questions the idea that European colonialism responded to the “pressures of capitalist overaccumulation and the quest for new markets, cheaper labor, and raw materials” (Steinmetz 2007:xix). In the case of German colonialism, the centerpiece of the colonial state was not economic extraction or trade, it was native policy (Steinmetz 2007:xix). According to Steinmetz, the modern colonial state was “permeated by the assumption of an unbridgeable difference between themselves and their subjects and of the ineradicable inferiority of the colonized” (Steinmetz 2007:36). In this context, the rule of difference emerges as a defining characteristic of modern colonialism.



In addition to recognizing both meanings of colonization, the expansion of the agrarian frontier and the extension of the state in these same areas, I focus on how the processes of state formation have shaped political and indigenous subjectivities. Specifically, I am interested in exploring the historical constitution of what Veena Das and Deborah Poole have called the “margins of the state,” understood as sites that are not merely territorial, but also “sites of practice on which law and other state practices are colonized by other forms of regulation that emanate from the pressing needs of populations to secure political and economic survival” (Das and Poole 2004:8). In Latin America, frontier regions have historically been represented as lawless lands, which constitute simultaneously a threat and a challenge to the state (Coronil and Skurski 2006:17). The town and region in Northwest Amazonia where I did my fieldwork is one of those “out-of-the-way” places where “state authority is most unreliable, where the gap between the state’s goals and their realization is largest, and where reinterpretation of state policies is most extreme” (Tsing 1993:27). However, I want to question visions of the state that conceive it as a “rationalized administrative form of political organization that becomes weakened or less fully articulated along its territorial or social margins” (Das and Poole 2004:3). In fact, national borders and peripheries become places where different state and non-state agents converge and dispute the rule and sovereignty of these regions and their residents. Therefore, frontier regions should not be necessarily understood as stateless or lawless places, but instead as places where state power acquires unexpected materializations as it competes with other forms of power. It is possible to think the production of peripheries and margins as part of how the nation state constructs its own hegemony (Das and Poole 2004, Serje 2005). Therefore, centers and peripheries should be understood in relation to each other and within a single frame of analysis (Cooper and Stoler 1997).

In this sense, I examine how colonization in Northwest Amazonia is associated with state formation, as well as with the government and civilization of native Amazonians, which brings Catholic missionaries back into the picture. Since the Colonial period, Catholic missionaries have become agents of both Church and State. The “close union between Church and State in Spanish America, where the king exercised *real patronato*, and where the viceroys were sometimes archbishops as well” (Bolton 1917:45), facilitated this process. Later, during the Republican period, the Colombian state revamped the role of Catholic missionaries as civilizing agents of frontiers and peripheral regions. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the national government had signed an agreement with the Vatican known as The Concordat and issued Law 89 of 1890 regarding “how to govern savages that are being reduced to civilized life.” This law was made under the assumption that “savages” were “children” incapable of self-government and incapable of being ruled by the regular laws of the state. Catholic missionaries were called upon by the national government to exercise tutelage over the savages and incorporate them into the body politic. Consequently, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Catholic missionaries once again served as civilizing agents of the state. In 1892 Catholic missionaries were given “exceptional faculties in order to exercise civil, penal and judicial authority over catechumens [neophytes]” (Bonilla 1968). The sovereignty awarded by the state to Catholic missionaries over marginal territories and their indigenous residents had to compete, especially since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with capitalist projects of colonization in Amazonia that were promoted by the state through the award of concessions over huge blocks of land to rubber companies or specific individuals. The techniques employed by rubber bosses and companies to extract rubber included forced recruitment of natives as a working force and the concentration of natives into camps. In this dissertation, I analyze the conflicts between different actors that shaped

colonization in Northwest Amazonia during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These encompass conflict between rubber bosses and Catholic missionaries around indigenous labor and bodies, as well as disputes between rubber bosses and natives, between Catholic and evangelical missionaries, and later conflicts between evangelical missionaries and teachers employed at state-sponsored boarding schools. These contests responded to different ideas about how and by whom the natives of Northwest Amazonia should be governed and civilized. While I follow Foucault's understanding of government as the "conduct of conduct," I also try to unearth local and indigenous meanings of government and civilization. Consequently, discussions about how to rule or govern indigenous populations, bodies and territories were not simply rhetorical, but were directly related to the formation of state hegemony and the consolidation of governmental apparatuses (Inda 2005:4). However, in the case of Northwest Amazonia, evidence suggests that modes of colonization were configured through conflict and interaction between Catholic missionaries, rubber entrepreneurs, natives, evangelical missionaries and state agents, among others. I also present historical evidence that suggests that in Northwest Amazonia there is no direct correspondence between colonial projects and the agenda of those who enact these projects. Agents changed their allegiances according to varying circumstances.<sup>10</sup> For example, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Catholic missionaries confronted rubber bosses because they were seen as an obstacle to their evangelizing work, but later criticized evangelical missionaries because they were interfering with the work of *colonos*. In this work, I trace how

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<sup>10</sup> In *The Devil's Handwriting. Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa*, George Steinmetz shows that there is no necessary coincidence between colonial policy and colonial rule. Steinmetz points out that: "colonial rulers in German Samoa, Qingdao, Southwest Africa, Togo and Cameroon often disregarded or directly flouted the demands of European investors, capitalists, and settlers" (Steinmetz 2007:20). Steinmetz also shows that settlers could be "quite peripheral to colonial government in several instances" (Steinmetz 2007:21).

these conflicts and the actors involved in them changed over time. In this context, the government of natives in Amazonia shifts from questions about the ownership of indigenous labor and bodies to questions concerning how members of indigenous societies should be educated then and more recent issues having to do with the implementation of multicultural models of indigenous sovereignty (*autogobierno*) in Amazonia.

The third thread of analysis of this dissertation is structured around questions of indigeneity in Northwest Amazonia. Despite the fact that indigenous Christians do not find any contradiction between being “Indian” and Christian, there has been a tendency in ethnographic literature to assume that indigeneity and Christianity are incompatible or opposed to each other. In this work, I try to destabilize the dichotomy between indigeneity and Christianity, by showing how local appropriations of evangelical Christianity articulate emergent notions of indigeneity and Christianity. In consequence, I develop in this work the notion of “Christian indigeneity” as a way of problematizing clear cut divisions between modernity and tradition, local and global, indigeneity and Christianity, showing how Christianity is at the center of contemporary formations of indigeneity (at least in the region of Northwest Amazonia where I did my fieldwork), and how it is impossible to separate one from the other. In fact, Webb Keane shows how in postcolonial contexts Christianity has become identified as “our” religion for a large part of the non-Western world and is no longer seen as foreign (Keane 2007:45). Furthermore, the expansion of Christianity today is no longer dependent on the work of foreign missionaries; instead a “significant part of proselytization today originates from non-Western sources or takes place within communities, for instance, in revivalist movements *among* Christians” (Keane 2007:45). The situation of postcolonial Christianity raises serious questions about the tendency in the anthropology of religion to associate Christianity with the foreign and

the global, while reducing indigeneity to the local or “native.” In order to avoid these kinds of dichotomies, I follow approaches to indigeneity that emphasize how “indigeneity acquires “positive” meaning not from some essential properties of its own, but through its relation to what it is not, to what it exceeds or lacks” (De la Cadena and Starn 2007:4). Consequently, indigeneity might be conceived more as a product of articulation and not as something in itself, a process by which “indigenous cultural practices, institutions, and politics become such in articulation with what is not considered indigenous within the particular social formation where they exist” (De la Cadena and Starn 2007:4). Indigeneity “always” needs an outside in relation to which it is defined and articulated, which varies according to historical and social context. As some analysis of ethnicity making have revealed, indigeneity always “has its genesis in specific historical forces, forces which are simultaneously structural and cultural” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:49). Considering indigeneity as inherently relational and shaped by specific historical circumstances avoids approaches that treat indigeneity as a self-contained explanatory principle or as a function of primordial ties (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:49).

On the other hand, there has been the tendency in anthropology to think of indigeneity as something that precedes modernity or is located outside of it. Conceiving indigeneity as the outside of modernity ignores the fact that the notion of “Indian” is a European invention and a product of colonialism. Despite the fact that generic descriptors used to refer to indigenous people (such as native, aboriginal and indigenous) tend to denote “prior-ity” in time and place (Pratt 2007:398), indigeneity should not be understood necessarily as “continuous with the prehistorical past but as a full member, indeed a constituent element, of the historical present”

(Greene 2009:14).<sup>11</sup> Indigeneity then, does not precede modernity, but is derived from the stage of modernity (Greene 2009:14). To the extent that indigeneity has been constituted through multiple modern means and places that include U.N. resolutions and commissions, national policies and institutions, the work of NGOs and other private institutions, one could say “indigeneity has always been modern” (Greene 2009:15). However, indigeneity or indigenism, as Alcida Ramos prefers to call it, cannot be limited to state incorporation of indigenous peoples or to putting indigenist policies into practice, but should be expanded in order to include the “vast realm of both popular and learned imagery among the national population onto which are carved the many faces of the Indian” (Ramos 1998:6). The fact that indigeneity is determined simultaneously by popular imagery, national and international policies, as well as by indigenous political and social practice, makes it a contested field of political relations in which different actors, discourses and practices converge and clash (Ramos 1998).

Recognizing that indigeneity has “always been modern” does not entail that the place and meaning of indigeneity within modernity has always been the same. In this dissertation, I try to historicize indigeneity within modernity, paying close attention to the shifting discourses and practices that have informed and shaped indigenous experience and politics in Northwest Amazonia, especially during the last century. Specifically, I explore how Catholic missionaries initially and later evangelical missionaries produced discourses and practices that enabled specific forms of indigeneity and modes of becoming “Indian.” Evangelical representations of indigenous culture changed over time and responded to different ideological frameworks. The

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Louise Pratt points out that even if “social groups become indigenous or aboriginal or native by virtue of the recognition that someone else arrived in a place and found them or their ancestors “already” there,” this idea is full of ironies and contradictions (Pratt 2007:398). In fact, although the indigenous are marked as having “prior-ity” in relation to the “invaders,” what predominates in this relationship is the temporality of the colonizer (Pratt 2007:398)

first evangelical missionaries that came to the region framed indigenous culture in terms of “pagan customs” that should be replaced with Christian ones. Contemporary evangelical missionaries claim that they are not changing culture, instead they conceive conversion as a transformation that takes place in the realm of “personal belief.” As I mentioned earlier, some evangelical missionaries claim that they are reinforcing indigenous culture through the translations of the Bible that they have made. These discourses about indigeneity located echos in indigenous narratives of the past and in the ways in which indigenous culture is objectified by pastors and indigenous leaders alike. For instance, some indigenous Christians tend to think that in the past they lived in a “different culture,” which now they see as evil and “wordly,” which to them has negative connotations associated with living a sinful life.

On the other hand, indigeneity was initially produced in Northwest Amazonia through colonial and racial ideologies that conceived of natives as savages close to an animal-like condition. According to indigenous Christians, the process of civilization brought by Christianity allowed for challenging those colonial ideologies. The extent to which indigenous appropriations of evangelical Christianity transformed or unmade colonial ideologies is one of the questions this work tries to answer. At the same time, indigeneity has been remade through different state programs as well as indigenist policies that have been implemented in the region. For instance, since the 1970s the national government began to develop policies and programs that were concerned with specific challenges posed by indigenous communities. In the case of education, the national government issued decrees that incorporated bilingual education into curricula of public schools in regions where indigenous languages were spoken, and the state was also concerned with adapting the academic contents to “the idiosyncrasy of the *indígena*, in full respect of his cultural values.” However, this did not mean that *indígenas* should not be

trained or educated. Unlike today when native Amazonians are seen as “ecological natives,” in the 1970s native Amazonians were viewed as ignorant people who lacked the ability to exploit natural resources in rational and efficient ways. In this context, the state developed programs to teach indigenous communities the “correct use and protection of natural resources,” as well as “advanced techniques of agricultural exploitation.” Through education and social programs the state also promoted the establishment of indigenous leaders who could serve as “cultural brokers” between the indigenous communities and the state in different fields including “health, agricultural extension, literacy, cooperativism and community action [*acción comunal*].” In this context, state policies produced new forms of indigenous leadership and new ideas of what an indigenous community is supposed to be. More recently, environmental NGOs have become mediators between indigenous communities and the state as well as crucial actors in helping these communities gain access to the rights awarded to them by the Political Constitution of 1991. This new Constitution declared Colombia to be a pluri-ethnic and multicultural nation, and it recognized the specific rights of ethnic groups. I explore here how the new Constitution changed relationships between indigenous communities and the state in Guainía, and the role that indigenous political organizations and NGOs played in the reconfiguration of these relationships.

Most of the fieldwork for this dissertation was carried out in 2009 in what is today the province of Guainía in Colombia. I have been visiting the region since 2005, when I carried out a research project about indigenous political organizations in the region with a colleague. I spent most of the time in the capital city of Inírida, where I conducted interviews and collected oral histories from missionaries, indigenous leaders and pastors, *colonos* and local politicians. However, I also took several trips to Curripaco and Puinave communities located on the Inírida



and Guainía Rivers, the two major rivers of the province. Most of the archival research was done in the archives of the regional government, which is mainly composed of boxes organized chronologically by year, although the content of the boxes did not always correspond with the labels. I had to make my own archive identifying the kinds of documents I was interested in, including decrees, letters directed to governors by the central government, letters directed to governors by indigenous leaders and communities, minutes of meetings and trials, and reports about indigenous communities written by government officials. My work in the local archive was complemented with research in the *Archivo General de la Nación* (General Archive of the Nation) in Bogotá, where I looked at official correspondence of the regional government. Other primary sources included the books published by Sophie Muller about her work and experiences living among indigenous Christians and non-Christians.<sup>12</sup> Oral histories and archival research allowed me to account for indigenous agency through different historical moments as well as indigenous visions of conversion and colonization. Ethnographic fieldwork enabled me to know, on an intimate basis, contemporary “Christian indigeneity,” how relationships between natives and *colonos* have unfolded, as well as how relationships between indigenous communities and the regional state have developed during the last decades. Throughout my fieldwork I realized that my job was not to judge how “Christian” they were or whether they were following specific values or practices. Instead, being aware that Christians are also “produced by modern

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<sup>12</sup> Sophie Muller published 3 books throughout her life about her work, methods and anecdotes in Northwest Amazonia as a missionary of New Tribes Mission. Sophie Muller’s first book *Beyond Civilization* was published in 1952 and presented as a “collection of letters written to describe jungle journeys while pioneering among a hitherto unreached Indian tribe in the jungles of South America.” In *Jungle Methods*, published in 1960, Muller lays out her methods as a set of questions and answers directed to a “prospective missionary.” Muller’s last book *His Voice Shakes the Wilderness* (1988) presents in chronological order different stories about her evangelical work in Northwest Amazonia.

discursive practices” (Harding 1991:374), I tried to overcome negative stereotypes of Christians as well as the sidelining of Christianity within the discipline of anthropology (Robbins 2007:6) through a critical and nuanced ethnographic and historical approach that explores why, in this particular context, it made sense for natives to become Christian and what it meant to live a Christian life in a colonizing frontier.

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. The first chapter addresses the historical constitution of Northwest Amazonia as a missionary and colonial frontier since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. This chapter introduces in a historical mode the main actors and institutions that have shaped colonial and missionary history in the region. Specifically, the chapter describes how Catholic missions became the main institution through which frontier areas were administered and governed by the Portuguese and Spanish empires. In contrast to the power delegated by Spain and Portugal to Catholic missionaries, the Dutch were more concerned with having direct trade and exchange with indigenous populations. The roles and reactions of indigenous polities to colonialism was never homogenous, including both temporary alliances and open resistance to colonial initiatives. In this chapter I analyze how the shifting reactions of indigenous polities shaped colonialism in Northwest Amazonia, while relationships between different indigenous groups were also reconfigured in the process of colonization. During the Republican period, national elites revived the role of Catholic missionaries as the main agents in charge of civilizing frontier regions and their indigenous inhabitants. Through Law 89 of 1890 the national government compared “savages” to children in need of tutelage and Catholic missionaries were called upon to exercise such tutelage. This chapter describes how the idea of civilizing natives by Catholic missionaries had to compete with a capitalist mode of colonization that was implemented in Amazonia since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when

natural resources such as rubber started began to acquire economic value. Rubber entrepreneurs had close relationships with the state and took advantage of this fact, while state formation was mediated by rubber barons through patronage. Patronage and state authority became largely interchangeable and indistinguishable. Finally, the chapter traces the arrival of American Christian missionaries to Northwest Amazonia in the context of material and ideological transformations that shaped the practices of missionaries since the end of World War II. The chapter also explores how anthropologists have interpreted Sophie Muller's work, emphasizing how these interpretations have neglected and mystified indigenous historical agency in the process of mass conversion to Christianity. This critique forces us to take into consideration indigenous representations and interpretations of Sophie Muller's work as well as indigenous understandings of their own process of conversion and transformation.

The second chapter of this dissertation explores how the different modes of colonization and evangelization since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were shaped in relation to each other through shifting conflicts and alliances between the different actors involved: rubber bosses, Catholic missionaries, natives, evangelical missionaries and state officials, among others. The conflicts usually addressed the ownership of indigenous bodies, souls and territories, and they raised questions such as by whom and how should the natives be governed. I show in this chapter how different notions of civilization, government and colonization emerge out of these conflictive relationships, first, between Catholic missionaries and *colonos*, then between natives and *colonos*, evangelical and Catholic missionaries, and later between state agents (teachers in this case) and Sophie Muller. In the midst of this convoluted scenario, the state articulates its colonial project in the region through the establishment of towns, boarding schools and the creation of new political-administrative units (provinces). This project coincided with an

attempt during the 1960s to expand the power and authority of the State to those regions that had been the scene of political violence during the 1950s. In this context, the regional state recognized and even appointed indigenous authorities while simultaneously exploiting native labor and dispossessing natives of their lands. To some extent, the effect that evangelical Christianity allegedly had over natives was considered a threat to the authority of Catholic missionaries and consequently as a threat to the authority and sovereignty of the state over indigenous communities. Consequently, this chapter examines how these conflicts unfolded on the ground and the modes of colonization and evangelization that emerged out of them.

The third chapter of the dissertation compares and historicizes missionary narratives of evangelization and indigenous narratives of conversion. Early missionary narratives of evangelization resignified indigenous religion in Christian terms and thought indigenous religion be converted as a whole into something else. Therefore, missionaries such as Muller understood conversion as a process of replacing “worship of the devil” with “worship of God” (Muller 1963). More recent missionary narratives of evangelization tend to separate or purify culture from religion in order to associate conversion to Christianity with an inner and personal transformation that does not bring about major cultural changes. In contrast, while indigenous narratives of evangelization and conversion also vary across generations, but most of them tend to see conversion as a clear-cut break with the past. In this chapter I address the tensions and ambiguities faced by indigenous Christians in their attempt to make a clear-cut break with a “pagan” and “worldly” past. While contemporary missionary narratives of evangelization try to purify religion from culture, indigenous Christian narratives of conversion tend to purify the past from the present. Instead of discussing which narrative is more accurate, I show how different narratives of conversion reveal alternative understandings of change, indigenous

culture, agency, and subjectivity. On another level, while anthropologists and teachers have seen indigenous conversion to Christianity as a process of cultural loss, contemporary indigenous leaders do not conceive Christianity as something inherently opposed to indigenous culture. Some of these leaders represent Christianity as a space where indigenous tradition and culture can be refashioned and recreated. In this sense, indigenous leaders, pastors and missionaries are able to combine narratives of rupture and narratives of continuity, finding ways of reconciling or negotiating different regimes of indigeneity. Simultaneously, a clear tension is produced between multicultural representations of indigeneity based on ideas of ancestral practices and traditions, and Christian notions of indigeneity that are based on the idea of leaving behind a “worldly” past. While there have been several critiques of the notions of indigeneity that multiculturalism promoted in Colombia since 1991, this chapter focuses more on the limits and contradictions of Christian notions of cultural change and on how indigenous Christians articulate different regimes of indigeneity.

The fourth chapter focuses more on the practice of Christianity, starting with my own engagements and frictions with indigenous Christians doing fieldwork. Drawing on ethnographic insights and oral interviews, in this chapter I explore how notions of self and community are intertwined through certain moral discourses that include giving public testimony as well as everyday practices of Christianity, showing how the production of Christian selves should be understood at both an individual and collective level. In this sense, spoken and performed testimony should be understood as practices by which indigenous Christians become accountable before God and before the other members of the Church. In order to analyze notions of the self I use personal narratives to show how conversion can be seen as a multifaceted process where the interaction of events, persons and institutions make

conversion possible. An emphasis is placed here on how conversion to Christianity entails a process of self-estrangement from one's own past and culture (Keane 2007). In this context, I explore how relationships and transactions between self, family and church are produced through specific understandings of morality and power. Stories of conversion are usually intertwined with the histories and actions of the churches and communities in which conversion takes place. Having a better grasp of the context in which conversion takes place entails looking closely at local understandings of the modern framed in terms of *lo mundano* (worldliness). In this sense, local understandings of "worldliness" reveal specific relationships with materiality, money, commodities and modernity. The last part of the chapter describes how indigenous Christians seek to practice a sort of "moral modernity" that embodies the ambiguous and selective relationship that indigenous Christians develop with modern objects and commodities.

The final chapter of this dissertation explores contemporary formations of indigeneity that have emerged out of political interactions between indigenous communities, indigenous political organizations, the state and NGOs. This chapter looks at two different periods in the relationships between indigenous communities and the state. The first moment (1973-1991) is defined by an effort of the state to incorporate indigenous communities into the body politic through educational, health, social and development projects. In the process of accommodating official initiatives to local realities, new forms of indigenous leadership emerged and new ideas of what constituted an indigenous community were consolidated. White teachers were also involved in promoting the creation of the first pan-ethnic indigenous organization in the region during the 1970s. Indigenous communities were also included in the rule of the state through the creation of *Juntas de Acción Comunal* (Boards of Community Action) which mediated the relationships with the regional state and developed a whole new "language" materialized in

forms of petitions, official visits and specific forms of establishing communication with the state. During the 1980s, the politicization of indigenous leaders and communities continued as politicians from both political parties carried out political campaigns on the rivers and trained leaders for this purpose. Indigenous forms of leadership and authority were transformed through clientelistic and electoral politics as politicians and governors started to appoint *capitanes* in some of the indigenous communities along the Inírida and Guainía rivers. The second moment that I analyze (1991-2005) is characterized by the consolidation and demise of regional indigenous political organizations, the reconfiguration of the relationships between indigenous communities and the state through a new Political Constitution, and the emergence and relative consolidation of environmental NGOs such as GAIA Amazonas. Specifically, I analyze the “politics of mediation” deployed by NGOs and enabled by specific state policies and legislation. NGOs do not just mediate between indigenous communities and the state, but also tend to displace the latter, becoming “necessary” intermediaries in the access and exercise of ethnic rights by indigenous communities recognized in the Political Constitution of 1991. Despite the fact that indigenous political organizations, NGOs and the state seem to have the “same” agenda regarding indigenous rights, this chapter looks at the conflicts between NGOs, indigenous political organizations and the state. These conflicts revolve around issues that appear to be politically neutral or progressive, such as environmental conservation and *etnoeducación* (ethnic education), but become fields of political struggles when different cultural politics clash and coalesce.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Missions, Colonization, and Frontiers in Northwest Amazonia**

Since the establishment of the mission in 1942, New Tribes missionaries have often presented their work in terms of reaching previously “unreached tribes.”<sup>13</sup> The idea that saving the last soul (probably “some tribesman out in the jungle somewhere,” as a historian of the mission put it) was something needed in order to complete the Church (the body of Christ) and provoke the second coming of Christ, became one of the *leitmotifs* of the mission and its missionaries.

Sophie Muller was no exception to the influence of this idea. In all of her books, Muller claims to enter in contact with tribes that had not been contacted by anyone before or reached by the word of God. For instance, in her first book *Beyond Civilization* (1953), Muller mentions how God had sent her to South America to “reach a tribe whose language was unknown and unwritten” (Muller 1953: 7). This chapter problematizes the idea that Muller was reaching unreached tribes or indigenous groups that had not entered in contact with outsiders until her

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<sup>13</sup> The idea of “unreached tribes” or “lost tribes” has a long history and genealogy that can be traced back to accounts of the ten lost tribes of ancient Israel (Kirsch 1997:58-59). Kirsch points out that the concept of the lost tribe can be understood, following Obeyesekere, as a “European myth model” which has appeared and reappeared in a variety of contexts and forms (Kirsch 1997:58). Specifically, Kirsch shows that the model of the lost tribe has been “invoked by colonial powers and missionaries in their attempts to remake the histories of indigenous peoples” (Kirsch 1997:58). Furthermore, the myth model of the lost tribe presents a paradox given that “lost tribes” are treated as if “they exist independently of historical time,” but this obscures the fact that “lost tribes” are created through historical and social interactions (Kirsch 1997:58). For the case of Amazonia, Kirsch argues that: “lost tribes of the Amazon are the product of centuries of colonial relations. Their discovery is made possible by virtue of their long history of retreat and resistance; their isolation is a social creation rather than a natural condition” (Kirsch 1997:62).



arrival to the region. In this sense, I try to situate here Muller's project of evangelizing indigenous groups in Northwest Amazonia within a broader and longer history of colonial exchanges, contacts and relationships between missionaries, natives, settlers, traders and state officers, among others.

This chapter lays out a historical analysis of the different modes of colonization and evangelization that have converged during the last four centuries in Northwest Amazonia. The first part of this chapter explores the historical constitution of Northwest Amazonia as a missionary and colonial frontier since the 15<sup>th</sup> century when the Portuguese and Spanish empires started a dispute over the limits of their territorial possessions in the Americas. The first section of the chapter looks at how the Treaty of Tordesillas signed between Castile and Portugal in 1494 in order to divide their possessions in the New World only lead to a partial resolution to the territorial disputes between them. The differences and similarities between Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese colonialism are addressed in the first section, as well as the outcomes of the different strategies implemented by European settlers and missionaries. While Spain and Portugal relied heavily on missionary orders such as the Jesuits in their attempt to "reduce" the natives to civilized life, the Dutch were more concerned with having direct trade and exchange with natives and established a long lasting alliance with the Caribs. However, in the case of Spain and Portugal the Catholic mission became the main frontier institution through which the margins of empire were administered, governed and developed (Bolton 1917). I show how colonialism reconfigured social and political relationships between different indigenous groups and polities. Indigenous chieftaincies of the 16<sup>th</sup> century such as the Manóas were reduced to virtual bands by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, whereas marginal groups such as the Caribs became dominant chieftaincies during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Whitehead 1993). Indigenous politics and

shifting allegiances played a crucial role in shaping colonialism and colonial relationships. As a result of the disputes between Spain and Portugal regarding the limits of their possessions in Amazonia, the first Spanish settlements were established in the region of the Upper Orinoco during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The second section of the chapter shows how the rhetoric of political elites during the national period in Colombia attributed to missionaries a special role in civilizing indigenous subjects and in governing peripheral regions of the country known as *Territorios Nacionales* (National Territories). Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal and conservative elites in Colombia made several attempts to create special legal regimes and administrative policies for territories and populations situated at the margins of the nation. *National Territories* were considered to be in need of special and exceptional legislation, as their indigenous residents were also considered to be like children who were not ready enough to be ruled by the laws of the state and, consequently, were in need of tutelage. Catholic missionaries were the first ones called by the national elites to exercise such tutelage. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the government signed an agreement with the Vatican for the purpose of creating a joint civil-ecclesiastical rule of peripheral territories that shaped the development of these territories until the 1930s (Rausch 2003:22).

Despite all the legislation promulgated by national elites in order to civilize the Indians through missionary work and tutelage, most of indigenous communities in Amazonia were initially incorporated to the rule of the state and the world economy through violent practices that were part of extractive economies (such as rubber extraction). The third section of this chapter, explores how indigenous and non-indigenous populations engaged in the extraction and commercialization of rubber in different ways since the first rubber boom exploited in the 1850s.

This section explores how rubber extraction was made possible through the mediation of local state authorities that became almost indistinguishable with rubber bosses and barons. Local state agents and rubber bosses took advantage of the lack of control of these regions by the central government and were able to create their own regimes of power with specific rules and “laws.”

The final part of this chapter traces the history and the arrival of American evangelical missionaries to Northwest Amazonia during the 1940s. The last section shows how the arrival of New Tribes Missionaries to Northwest Amazonia is part of a long history of engagements and relationships between the natives and newcomers of different kinds. In this section I trace the origins of New Tribes Mission (1942) to Christian reform movements that emerged in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s. The focus of New Tribes Mission on what they call “unreached tribes” should be understood in relation to the experience of the founders of the mission (Paul Fleming and Bob Williams) in the Malay Peninsula during the Second World War. Furthermore, I explore in this section how Sophie Muller frames her “calling” and ends up doing missionary work in Northwest Amazonia. The chapter concludes with some critiques of academic explanations that have been given to the massive process of conversion to Christianity that was allegedly triggered by Muller’s presence and work in Northwest Amazonia.

Specifically, I try to problematize Wright’s hypothesis that natives received Muller as “someone with extraordinary powers” and this proved to be “compatible with a long tradition of millenarian and messianic movements that go back to the mid XIX century” (Wright 1998:254).

As I show here, there is no historical evidence that the natives received Muller as a messiah upon her arrival to the region. Nonetheless, Muller also used the idea of herself as a white goddess in her last book published in 1988. I explore at the end of the chapter the problems and

ambiguities Muller faced in trying to translate her own presence in meaningful ways for indigenous cosmologies and histories.

### **Northwest Amazonia as a Colonial and Missionary Frontier**

The colonial history of Northwest Amazonia goes back to disputes between the empires of Spain and Portugal at the end of the 15th century regarding the ownership of the recently discovered islands by Christopher Columbus in 1492. Since the early 15th century “papal decrees had given the Portuguese title to lands they had discovered during their explorations along the west coast of Africa, including the Azores and Cape Verde Islands” (Brown 2010: 291). When Columbus returned to Castile after his first voyage to the New World, the Spanish-born Pope Alexander VI issued in 1493 a series of bulls by which he gave possession to Castile over the recently discovered lands, as well as the responsibility of converting their inhabitants to Christianity. Portugal claimed that some of the recent discovered lands lay within their jurisdiction. In the papal bull known as *Inter Caetera*, Alexander VI established a line of demarcation, giving to Spain the lands 100 leagues west of the Azores and Cape Verde Islands and to Portugal the lands to the east of these territories. The King John II of Portugal was not satisfied with the solution given by Pope Alexander VI to the conflict between Castile and Portugal, arguing that the papal bull dividing the lands in the Atlantic was against the interests of Portugal, ignoring the ownership of territories previously discovered by Portuguese sailors. King John II requested to Castilian authorities to reconsider the privileges the Pope had given to Spain (Prieto 2006: 49). In order to resolve these competing claims regarding the possession of the newly discovered lands, Portuguese and Castilian representatives met at the Spanish town of Tordesillas to negotiate a settlement to the territorial dispute. The Spaniards agreed to extend

the line 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands, instead of 100, and in turn, the Portuguese recognized Castilian claim to the lands Columbus had discovered. The Treaty of Tordesillas, as the agreement between Castile and Portugal came to be known, was ratified by Spain on July 2, 1494 and by Portugal on September 5, 1494. When the treaty was signed Spain and Portugal had little geographical knowledge about the lands to the west of Cape Verde. Neither Spain nor Portugal knew the location of the line 370 leagues west of Cape Verde that separated their possessions. Ironically, the treaty created more confusion between Castilian and Portuguese authorities and did not resolve the conflicts between the two emergent empires.

The first Spanish expeditions to the Amazon region began in 1541, when Gonzalo Pizarro was appointed by his brother Francisco Pizarro as lieutenant on a voyage east of Quito in search of El Dorado, the mythic City of Gold. The expedition followed the Coca River and then the Napo River. Several months after the expedition had set off it ran short of food. The Spaniards were surrounded by different sources of food, but they didn't know which plants were edible. Instead, as Mann points out, "they ate all the surviving pigs, then the dogs, and then turned to spearing lizards" (Mann 2005:287). Francisco de Orellana, who was Gonzalo Pizarro's second-in-command and cousin, suggested that he split off part of the expedition to see whether he could obtain supplies. Pizarro agreed, and Orellana set off in the expedition's prized boat on December 26, 1541, with a crew of fifty-nine (Mann 2005:287). Orellana and his expedition reached the intersection of the Rio Negro and the Amazon River on June 3, 1542 (where Manaus is now located) and the mouth of the Amazon River on August 24, 1542. Orellana bestowed the name *Amazon* to the river because his expedition was allegedly attacked by female warriors, reminiscent of the mythological Amazons (Goforth 2010:242). Orellana returned afterwards to Europe and landed first in Portugal, where the Portuguese king tried to

persuade him to return to the Americas as the leader of a Portuguese expedition. Balking at the idea, Orellana made his way to Spain and there was appointed by King Charles I as governor of the Amazonian region, which was dubbed New Andalusia, and chartered another expedition to the area in 1545 with the objective of founding two cities. The expedition failed, as did many other attempts by Europeans to establish permanent settlements in the region. The other expedition to the Amazon made during the 16th century was the Spanish expedition of Pedro de Ursúa and the infamous rebel Lope de Aguirre in 1560. In words of the historian John Hemming, “the survivors of these expeditions emerged broken and impoverished; and Amazonia acquired a terrible reputation. Lope de Aguirre summed up contemporary thinking when he wrote to the king of Spain: ‘God knows how we got through that great mass of water. I advise you, great King, never to send Spanish fleets to that cursed river!’” (In Hemming 1987:146).

As it happened on the northern frontier of New Spain, Catholic missions also became in Amazonia the main institution through which Spain’s frontiers were “extended, held and developed” during the colonial period (Bolton 1917:43) Catholic missions and missionaries played a crucial role in the Spanish colonization of the Upper Rio Negro and Orinoco River. Since the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, religious orders had a strong claim to “interfere in Indian affairs because the canonical reason for giving the Portuguese and Spanish possession of the New World was the evangelization of the ‘gentiles’” (Wright and Carneiro da Cunha, 1999). In the Upper Orinoco region the mission remained the main frontier institution among the Amerindians until the very end of the colonial period given the difficulties and slowness of the process of “turning ‘reduced’ and instructed Amerindians over to the state” (Whitehead

1988:131).<sup>14</sup> In 1661, the Jesuits made an agreement with the *Audencia de Santa Fe* through which they were given jurisdiction over the eastern plains (*llanos orientales*) and the Orinoco region. After a few failed attempts to establish missions in the Upper Orinoco during the 1640s, the Jesuits were able to establish missions, some of them temporary, on the Atanarí River in 1665 (Misión de San Joaquín de Atanari) with 400 Achaguas, the Misión de Nuestra Señora de los Sáliva o Yanquí in a Sáliva village called Yanaquí in 1669, the San Lorenzo de Tabaje mission Truaje in 1681, the Santa María de los Adoles mission in Adeoles in 1681, the mission of San Cristóbal de Peruba in Peruba in 1681, the mission of San Josef de Gucio in the Achagua village of Gucio in 1681, the mission of San Salvador de Catarubenes in Catarubén in 1681 and the mission of Duma in the same year. Most of these missions were destroyed by the Caribs in 1684, rebuilt by the missionaries in 1691 and destroyed again by the Caribs in 1693, revealing the precarious control of the region by the Spaniards.

On the other hand, Portuguese colonization in the region started in January of 1616 when they evicted French settlers from the Maranhão region, whom were established there since 1612. The Portuguese founded a fort 400 miles West on the Pará River, which forms the southern mouth of the Amazon. This fort developed into the town of Belém do Pará. Portuguese

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<sup>14</sup> The idea of “reducing” the natives to civilized life and/or Christianity was a part of a broader project of colonization summarized in the term *reducción*. Willian F. Hanks glosses *reducción* as “pacification, conversion, ordering,” depending on the context. According to Hanks, *reducción* was a total project aimed at coordinated transformations of space, conduct and language” (Hanks 2010: xiv). According to American historian Herbert Bolton, Spanish authorities soon discovered that: “in order properly to convert, instruct and exploit the Indian, he must be kept in a fixed place of residence (...) it soon became a law that Indians must be congregated in pueblos, and made to stay there, by force if necessary. The pueblos were modeled on the Spanish towns, and were designed not alone as a means of control, but as schools in self-control as well” (Bolton 1917:44). The project of *reducción*, according to Hanks, was articulated around three interrelate spheres that included “*pueblos reducidos* ‘ordered towns’, *indios reducidos* ‘ordered Indians’ acting in accordance with *policía cristiana* ‘Christian civility’, and *lengua reducida*, the new version of the native language attuned to proper civility and religion” (Hanks 2010:xv).

settlers of Pará were engaged in trading and enslaving natives, causing huge depopulation. In 1637, these settlers were surprised by the arrival of a canoe containing two Spanish friars and some soldiers that had descended the Amazon from Quito. This event inspired an expedition whose underlying objective was to claim the channel of the Amazon River for Portugal. Pedro Teixeira was appointed by the governor of the province to command an “expedition of 70 Portuguese soldiers, with 1,100 mission Indians to paddle 47 canoes and to supply food by hunting and fishing. The governor gave Teixeira sealed orders to plant Portuguese boundary markers when he reached the lands of the Omagua, no less than 1,500 miles west of the Line of Tordesillas” (Hemming 1987:175). At the same time, available labor force in the middle and upper Amazon was decimated by the increasing slave trade. The Portuguese started to penetrate the region of the Negro, Japura, and Solimoes rivers, where they found it increasingly difficult to trade for captives with the groups who already had access to steel tools and weapons acquired from other groups, especially the Carib, who were in contact with the Dutch in the Upper Orinoco region. In 1657, the expeditionary Benito Maciel, son of the governor of Pará, established himself in the place called Tarumá, close to the mouth of the Rio Negro. The Portuguese settlers following Maciel kept on moving towards the mouth of the river in response to the hostility from indigenous groups to their enterprises and established (in 1669) the fort of São José that later became Fortaleza da Barra and eventually Manaus. Fortaleza da Barra became the major center of Portuguese slave trade in the 18th century. Since 1690, the Portuguese obtained slaves from the Upper Rio Negro and Upper Orinoco through the Manao Indians, who traded slaves in the area and also exchanged them with the Dutch for commodities.<sup>15</sup> According to anthropologist Robin Wright (1981), Portuguese slaving activities

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<sup>15</sup> The Portuguese, like the Dutch, also preyed on indigenous groups for slave-capturing and



on the Rio Negro began well before there were any written documents about them. In the 17th century, enterprising individuals from Pará and Maranhão negotiated for slaves from the people living along the banks of the lower Rio Negro. Portuguese settlers used the slaves to collect forest products, such as cacao, growing along the banks of the middle Amazon and Solimoes (Wright 1981:121). Furthermore, Brazilian historian Vicente Tapajós shows how the exploration of the Brazilian interior between 1580 and 1690 took the form of slave-hunting expeditions known as *bandeiras* or *entradas*. The expeditions had the name of the region where they took place; there were *bandeiras* paulistas, bahianas, pernambucanas, maranhenses and amazonenses (Cabrera 2002:61). The main objective of these expeditions changed over time and included the search for precious metals such as gold. Official slaving, however, affected the Rio Negro population far more than private slaving. Official slaving had two forms: *tropas de guerra* (war troops) and *tropas de resgate* (ransom or rescue troops). The first were “official government expeditions sent to ‘punish’ Indian tribes which had attacked Europeans without provocation, and were charged with capturing and enslaving as many members of the ‘guilty’ tribes as possible.”<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, according to David Sweet, *tropas de resgate* were “official government expeditions sent to barter trade goods for slaves with friendly Indian chiefs, which normally also raised villages to capture people as well” (Sweet 1974: 819). Ransoms

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slave-trading activities. Wright shows how the Manao people played a key role in the Rio Negro slave trade. The Manao controlled virtually all slave traffic from the 1690s through the 1720s and traded for slaves as far afield as the upper Rio Negro and upper Orinoco. They conducted trade with the Portuguese and with the Dutch until 1725 (Wright 1981). After the Portuguese declared a “war of extermination” against the Manao Indians between 1723 and 1725, other indigenous groups such as the Guaipunavis and Caberres assumed the role of slave providers in the region of the Upper Orinoco. Portuguese slave trade in the Upper Rio Negro and Upper Orinoco went on until 1756 (Useche 1987:92).

<sup>16</sup> According to Robin Wright, the best known of these *tropas* were probably those sent against the Arawak people of Lake Saracá off the lower Rio Negro, in the late 17th century, and another sent against the Manao and Maiapena in the first quarter of the 18th century (Wright 1981:122).

were supposed to be undertaken on “barbarians who had been tied up by their enemies and were in danger of being eaten” (Sweet 1974: 819). Both inter-tribal warfare and the practices of cannibalism were considered to be “just causes” for troops to enter into negotiation with chiefs to obtain captives or to make war on the aggressors.<sup>17</sup> Sweet points out that once the captives were obtained, they were bound with ropes and taken back to the slave camp. Once captured, Jesuit missionaries subjected the Indians to examination in order to determine the legal basis for enslavement. In fact, missionaries took part in some of the *tropas de rescate*, as it happened in 1657 with the expedition of Benito Maciel (Cabrera 2002).

However, in 1655, António Viera, a Brazilian-born Jesuit who had risen to be the close confidant and confessor of Dom Joao IV of Portugal, persuaded the king to enact new legislation against Indian enslavement. The Jesuits were entrusted by the king with the task of bringing the natives from the interior by peaceful means and establishing them in mission villages under their control. Five years later, after several expeditions to all the main tributaries of the lower Amazon and far up the Rio Negro, the Jesuits tried to relocate some 200,000 Indians into 54 mission villages (Hemming 1987: 177). Many of the natives died of foreign

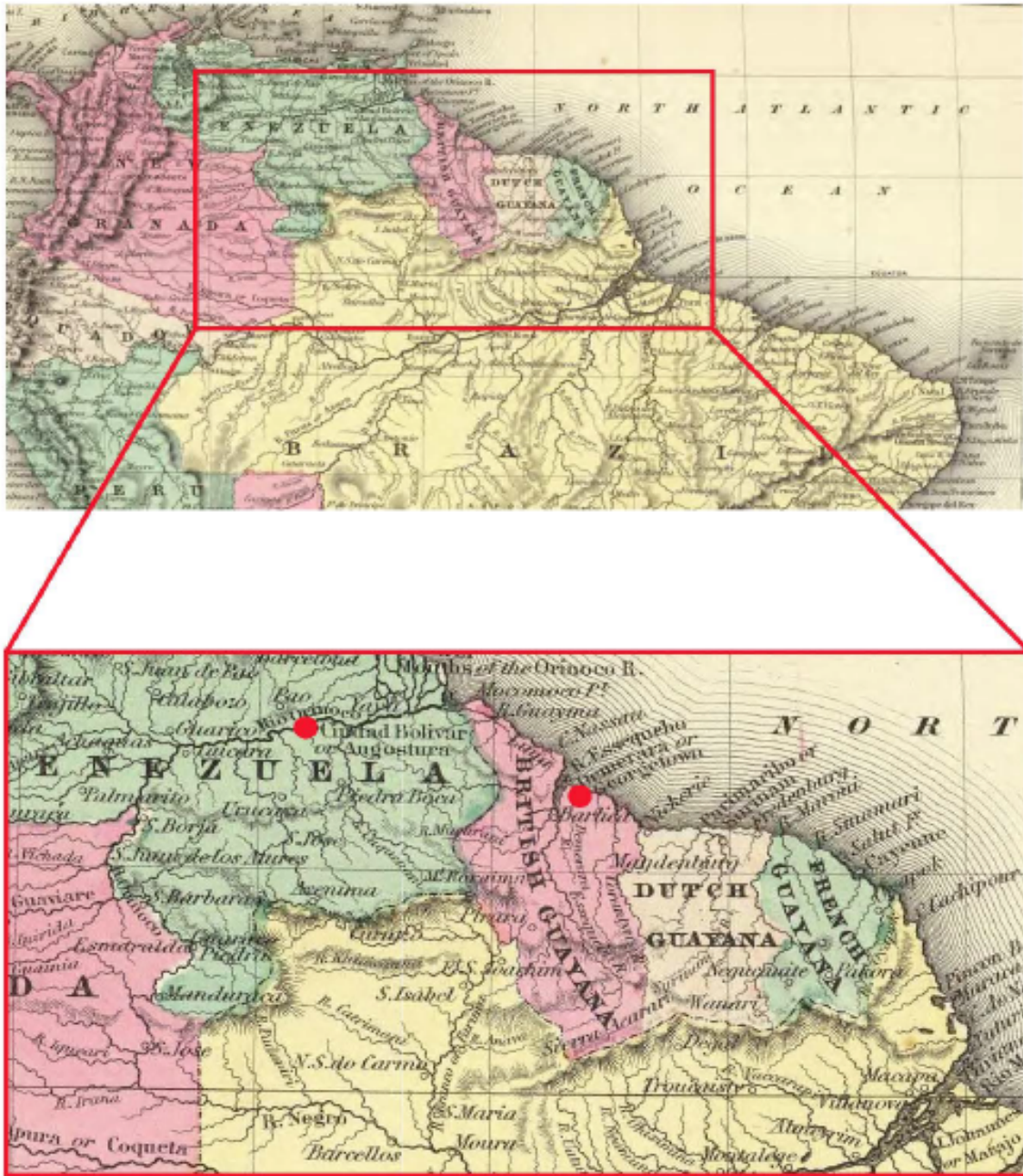
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<sup>17</sup> The question of cannibalism among indigenous groups in South America has been contested and debated by several authors in different contexts. According to Beth A. Conklin: “Cannibalism was at the center of debates over the legal and moral status of the American Indian, as in the famous debates between the Spanish philosopher, Ginés de Sepulveda, and the Dominican bishop of Chiapas, Bartolomé de Las Casas, in Valladolid, Spain in 1550. Reports of people-eating were the linchpin in arguments that Indians were inferior, even sub-human, and thus in need of being brought under control by outsiders. This has been a recurrent idea through centuries of struggle between South American Indians and those who have sought to conquer, colonize, or convert them” (Conklin 1997: 68). One of the earlier reports of cannibalism in South America comes from Hans Staden account of his captivity among Tupí groups for nine months, entitled *True Story and Description of the Wild, Naked, Grim, Man-munching People in the New World, America* (1557). Regarding Hans Staden text, Whitehead points out that “Staden was part of the demographic impact which was to devastate Tupi Populations” (Whitehead 2000: 750). Staden’s text should be read in this context, paying attention to how “the practice of the cannibal theater was attuned to this demographic challenge and to the way in which the Europeans read the practice” (Whitehead 2000: 750).

diseases during the voyages down to Belem. The survivors were settled in villages near Portuguese towns, but the Indians were exposed to constant demands for their labor and crowded into these settlements, which left them specially vulnerable to ongoing diseases, including smallpox and measles. Antonio Vieira himself drew up regulations for the daily conduct of life on Jesuit missions on the Amazon in the *Regimento das Missoes* (1686) in what was called Maranhão and Grao Para.<sup>18</sup> In 1693, the whole Amazon region was divided among different religious orders for missionary purposes. The Jesuits restricted their own activities to the south bank of the Amazon upstream to the mouth of the Madeira River, while the north shore of the Amazon to the Paru River fell to Franciscan Capuchins of Santo Antonio, and the region of the Solimoes River and Rio Negro was given to the Carmelites as a mission field (Schwartz, 1987). At the same time, since the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Dutch started to establish colonies in what is today Guyana (former British Guiana, see Map 2). The Dutch established the colonies of Essequibo, Demerara and Berbice. In fact, the Dutch had established a “sufficiently good relationship with the Caribs of Essequibo [river] to be able to take Amerindians wives and even lead war parties in covert guerrilla action against the Spaniards” (Whitehead 1988:159).

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<sup>18</sup> A previous law was issued in 1680 which prohibited all Indian slavery and increased the control Jesuits had over Indian souls and labour (Schwartz 1987:124). This law provoked “virulent reactions from the colonists and contributed to the expulsion of the Jesuits from the Maranhão in 1684” (Schwartz 1987:124). When the *Regimentos das Missões* was approved in 1686 the Jesuits were already reinstated with royal support. Nonetheless, according to Schwartz: “two years later a further law also provided for “government –sponsored *tropas de resgate* (‘rescue troops’) to bring in Indian slaves and distribute them among the colonists. In this arrangement, the Jesuits were to accompany each troop to ensure its compliance with the rules for slaving” (Schwartz 1987:124).



Map 2. Former British Guayana.

The Dutch engaged actively in trade with native populations, which completely changed native trading networks and regional circuits of exchange. Trade posts were established in the interior and the coast where native people could bring foodstuffs, pottery, woods, dyes and other forest products that were exchanged for European goods, metal tools, and cloth. The items traded between the Dutch and the Caribs included Indian slaves and weapons. The character of the

trade between the Dutch and Amerindian populations changed significantly during the 18<sup>th</sup> century as Dutch economic activity put greater emphasis on sugar plantations in Guyana and the Antilles. “Red slaves” (referring to natives that were taken as slaves for Dutch sugar plantations) were traded with different Carib groups for European commodities including weapons. Indian slaves became an important and valuable item in the continuous exchanges and alliances between the Caribs and the Dutch. In fact, Carib traders used to travel to the Ventuari and Guaviare Rivers in the Upper Orinoco (respectively located in Venezuela and Colombia) in order to get Indian slaves from other indigenous groups that were traded for European commodities that the Caribs had come to value (Useche 1987:46). Although the Spaniards were prohibited by their government from participating in trading activities with the Dutch, including slave trade, in order to survive isolation and scarcity, the Spaniards in Santo Tomé (established in 1595) ended up participating in these activities.

The Spanish Empire was also interested in colonizing the region of the lower Orinoco River since the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The province, which the Orinoco River runs through, was called Guayana and the Spaniards organized several expeditions heading East in order to find the city of Manoa, associated with El Dorado. Antonio de Berrío, the nephew in-law and the heir of Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada (who is known as the founder of Bogotá), was the first Spaniard to navigate the Orinoco from its intersection with the Meta River (Upper Orinoco) down to its mouth in the Atlantic. In 1595, Berrío established the fort of Santo Tomé in the lower Orinoco. Santo Tomé would gain prominence during the 17<sup>th</sup> century as base of support and confrontation for different colonial enterprises.<sup>19</sup> Three year before, in 1592, Berrío had

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<sup>19</sup> As a response to the attacks of corsairs (including Walter Raleigh) and Carib groups, Santo Tomé was resettled three times after its foundation in 1595. In 1764, Santo Tomé was moved to a definitive place on the banks of the Orinoco River and its name was changed to Santo Tomás

established the town of San José de Oruña in the island of Trinidad, in his attempt to find the best way to reach the Orinoco from the open sea. Antonio de Berrío died in 1597 and his son Fernando inherited the right his father had gained from Jiménez de Quesada to administer and govern the province of Guayana. In 1617, Sir Walter Raleigh and his son took the fort of Santo Tomé and the attack cost the lives of the Spanish governor of Guayana (not Berrío, who had been suspended in 1613) and Raleigh's son.<sup>20</sup> Fernando de Berrío rebuilt the fort at Santo Tomé and ordered his men to enslave the Caribs. The Caribs and other indigenous groups were crucial actors in how the colonial history of Northwest Amazonia unfolded. The Dutch raided again the town of Santo Tomé in 1629, after the death of Berrío, and established themselves among the native population until the fort was retaken by the Spanish in the 1630s. At the end of this decade, the Dutch and a large contingent of Caribs attacked again the fort of Santo Tomé. Since 1621 the Dutch West India Company had supported the establishment of a Dutch colony on the Essequibo River.

During the 18th century other religious orders such as the Capuchins and the Franciscans started to establish missions in the province known as Guayana or Nueva Andalucía as it was also called by then, with the clear objective of developing a religious-military strategy intended to dismantle the control of the Caribs over the Orinoco River (Useche 1987:89). Catalan Capuchins, for instance, tried to create Carib missions using forced recruitment through armed militias specially trained for these purposes. Unlike the Capuchins, the Jesuits never tried to create missions with the Caribs. In 1723, Andalusian Catalans established the Mission of

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de la Nueva Guayana de la Angostura del Orinoco, until 1864 when it acquired the name that holds until today: Ciudad Bolívar (see Map 2).

<sup>20</sup> Raleigh had already ordered a raid over the town of San José de Oruña in Trinidad in 1593. Men of Raleigh took Berrío captive for a few days in order to get information from him about El Dorado.

Nuestra Señora de los Angeles with members of different ethnic groups in the Middle Orinoco region. The Franciscans did something similar during the 1730s when they chased the Caribs, captured them, and then took them to their mission on the west shore of the Orinoco River. The Jesuits established their first mission on the Orinoco River, called Concepción de Uyapí, in 1731. Three years later in 1734, the different religious orders reached jurisdictional agreements known as *concordias*, with the help of Colonel Sucre (governor of the province of Guyana in that moment). Part of the Middle Orinoco and all of the Upper Orinoco, south of the Cuchivero River, was assigned to the Jesuits. As time went by, tension with the Caribs increased because of the Spanish forced recruitment and illegal slave trade the Spaniards ended up competing with the Caribs for slaves. Consequently, the Capuchins had to change their strategy. In 1734 the Capuchin Fray Las Llagas (President of the Orinoco Missions) travelled east of the Cuchivero River without any escort to the headquarters of the Caribs but fails in his “peaceful” attempt to convince the Caribs to resettle in their missions and accept the Capuchins in their towns. The Caribs, whose main chief was a man called Taricuara, rejected the proposition saying they would not receive any missionaries (Useche 1987:103). The Caribs came back in 1735 and destroyed several Jesuit missions including Concepción de Uyapí on the Orinoco River. According to Colonel Sucre, the Carib raid was part of a huge slave-capturing operation in order to cancel a debt they had with indigenous groups from Surinam. In a response to the Carib offensive, in 1736 the Jesuits built the fort of San Francisco Javier de Marimarota in the Upper Orinoco, annexed to the *hacienda* and mission of Carichara built in 1733, that later would become the Jesuit headquarters in the Orinoco. In 1739 The Jesuits created the mission of Burari, with 500 Yaruros on the shores of the lower Meta in the eastern plains of what is today Colombia. Burari was the furthest meridional point the Jesuit reached in the Upper Orinoco

region. The Jesuits in Burari started to receive information from the natives about the presence of Europeans beyond the mouth of the Guaviare River in the Upper Rio Negro region.

In 1740 two stranded Portuguese reached the Jesuit missions of the Upper Orinoco, without knowing that they had travelled through the Casiquiare Canal –the only waterway that directly connects the Rio Negro with the Orinoco River. In 1744 the Jesuit Manuel Román tried to reach the Guaipuinavis in the Atabapo River and he ran into a boat with a Portuguese crew who was said to have travelled from the Rio Negro, where they lived, by water. Román was invited to the Rio Negro and agreed to follow the Portuguese. Román spent several months in the Rio Negro where he met his colleague Aquiles Avvogadri, chaplain of the ‘slaves camps.’ Román took notes about the Portuguese slave trade in the Upper Rio Negro and gave numbers in his report based on the records taken by Avvogadri who, according to Román, was “sent to examine and register if the Indians slaves are appropriately bought or not” (Useche 1987:111). Román reported that in 6 years there were 8000 indian slaves register and the *entradas* to indigenous towns had aggregated another 4000 souls. Román also reported that many of the indian slaves are not reported in the registers, or they are “overlooked in order to not pay the tribute owed to the king” (Useche 1987:111). By the time Román reached the region in 1744, the Manao Indians of the Río Negro had almost been exterminated by the Portuguese and the role of slave-providers was occupied by other indigenous groups of the Upper Orinoco, including the Guaipunavis and Caberres who were able to establish a barrier against the Carib expansion on the mouth of the Atabapo River (Useche 1987:112). Once Román came back, the Jesuits expressed their concern to royal authorities about the activities of the Portuguese on territories considered to belong to Spain. The Jesuits decided to expand towards the south, changing the direction of their initial missionizing activities. Although, the same groups that were allies of



the Portuguese, such as the Guaiupunavis, were hostile to the expansion of the Jesuits in the Upper Orinoco. In 1747, the Guaiupunavis set on fire the mission in the torrent of Atures, created initially to serve as vanguard of the expansion of the Jesuits towards the south. The Jesuits also had to confront disease and natives frequently escaped from their missions. For instance, in 1740 and 1746, there were huge epidemics that killed more than 1000 individuals. By the end of the 1740s the colonizing mission of the Jesuits in the Upper Orinoco had produced few results. In 1749, out of the 19 missions established by the Jesuits on the Orinoco River since 1731, there were left only 6 missions (Useche 1987).<sup>21</sup> This fact shows how precarious was the Spanish presence in the region, as well as the difficulties and failures that confronted Catholic missions in the Upper Orinoco.

As it is clear from the historical description and analysis presented before, the region of the Orinoco and the Upper Rio Negro was transformed into a colonial and missionary frontier where different imperial powers and local indigenous polities coalesced but also clashed between each other. Since the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch colonial empires were “competing with each other and with some of the more powerful Amerindian groups of local macro polities to establish control over indigenous populations and regional trade systems of the Orinoco and Amazon rivers” (Vidal 2002: 249). While Spain and Portugal relied on missionary orders such as the Jesuits in their attempt to “reduce” the natives to civilized life, the Dutch were more concerned with having direct trade and exchange with the

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<sup>21</sup> Widely known are the Carib rebellions that took place in the middle Orinoco between 1729 and 1740. In 1732 and 1733 Franciscan and Capuchin missionaries realized several *entradas* (entrances) to Carib territory. In these military incursions, missionaries seized hundreds of Caribs, including a few chiefs. As a response to the operations of Spanish missionaries, in 1733 the Caribs attacked several reductions of the Franciscans in the middle Orinoco (Whitehead 1988:113). Jesuit reductions on the Orinoco were also attacked in attempt to drive them away from the newly founded missions among the Achagua and the Saliva (Whitehead 1988:106).

natives and established an alliance with the Caribs, who provided them with Indian slaves in exchange for weapons and commodities. Indigenous shifting allegiances played a crucial role in shaping colonial ambitions in the region. Anthropologists Neil Whitehead (1988) and Vidal and Zucchi (1999) have argued that indigenous societies were organized in *aboriginal political macrosystems*. By the 16th century, there were 10 macrosystems located in the area north of the Amazon River and each of these systems was composed of diverse units or multiethnic federations. According to anthropologist Silvia Vidal, these macropolities were “multiethnic, multilingual, sociopolitical, and economic systems, which had an internal interethnic hierarchy led by a paramount chief (“lord” or “king”) and a powerful elite of secondary chiefs; leadership was hereditary (Vidal 2002: 248). The ancestors of the contemporary Arawak (which include the Curripaco), Tukano, and Makú (which include the Puinave) speaking groups that live in contemporary Northwest Amazonia were part of the Manoa and Oniguayal (also known as Omagua) macropolities. The effects of the European presence in Northwest Amazonia were multiple and paradoxical as indigenous groups established alliances with different colonial actors. The political arrangements and relationships between indigenous groups and polities changed significantly as a result of these encounters. While powerful chieftaincies of the 16th century, including the Guayano, Tapajos and Manoa were reduced to virtual “bands” by the 18th century, “marginal ethnic formations of the 16th century, such as the Aruan, Mundurucu or the Caribs, produced regionally dominant chieftaincies in the 18th and 19th centuries”(Whitehead 1993:287).

According to Spanish historian Manuel Lucena Giraldo, by 1746 Spain was in such a weak position that it could neither colonize the interior regions of Brazil, nor prevent the Portuguese expansion in Amazonia (Lucena 1993:72). The question of the boundaries between Spain and

Portugal's possessions in the New World was still a contentious matter, despite all the treaties signed since the Treaty of Tordesillas. The disputes continued and pertained not only to the region of Amazonia, but also the Colonia of Sacramento (located in what is now southwest Uruguay) established by the Portuguese in 1678, and the Jesuits reductions among Guaraníes and related indigenous groups in Paraguay. Of the three regions under dispute, the Amazon was the area the Spaniards had least scientific information about in their negotiations with the Portuguese. Consequently, in November of 1747 the *Marques de la Regalía*, member of the *Consejo de Indias*, sent a letter to Antonio de Ulloa who was by then participating with Jorge Juan de Ulloa in the French Geodesic Expedition nominally led by the mathematician Louis Godin.<sup>22</sup> The letter said explicitly: "I guess we agree that it is necessary to work on the possession of *Marañon* under the title of Geographic or Topographic Dissertation, as the cosmographers say. It should start saying where that river is born, through which provinces does it run, where [its water] flows into the sea, who was the first one to discover it and how some call it *Marañon*, others *Amazonas* and others *Orellana*" (In Lucena 1993:75-76). Despite the lack of information the Spaniards had about the Amazon and Guyana regions, José de Carvajal y Lancaster who was appointed in 1746 as new secretary of state of Spain and was in charge of reaching a new treaty agreement with Portugal, received in 1748 from the *Consejo de Indias*,

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<sup>22</sup> This expedition has gone down in history under the name of one of its few survivors, the French geographer Charles de la Condamine. The geodesic expedition was done with the objective of clarifying a scientific dispute between French and English scientists regarding the shape of the earth. The scientific dispute, which was also a political dispute, was between French Cartesian geographers whom believed the earth had the shape of a sphere and English scientists that thought, following Newton, the earth was an spheroid flat at the poles (Pratt 1992). Two scientific expeditions were organized in France during the XVIII century for this matter. One team of scientists and geographers, led by the French physicist Maupertuis, was sent north to Lapland to measure a longitudinal degree at the Meridian. The other team, lead initially by Louis Godin, headed for South America to take the same measurement at the Equator near Quito (Pratt 1992:15-16).

the so-called *Expediente del Gran Pará*, which had a huge amount of information (most of it collected by the Jesuits) about the Portuguese incursions and the frontier war in Mojos, the Napo and the Amazon river, as well as information about the huge raids of the Portuguese between 1730 and 1745 (Lucena 1993:75).

The negotiations for a new treaty between Spain and Portugal started in July of 1746, the same year in which Fernando VI became king. One of the main matters under dispute was not so much the Amazon region but the exchange the Portuguese had proposed: the 7 “reductions” of the Jesuits in Paraguay in exchange for the Colonia of Sacramento in Uruguay. Portugal’s position was understandable given the hatred *paulistas* (people from São Paulo) felt for the Jesuits, but there were also rumors about the “supposed wealth of the establishments of the Company [of Jesus] who had converted them into objects of political ambition” (Lucena 1993: 14). On the other hand, Carvajal proposed at the beginning of the negotiations a new divisory line that would prevent the secession of the territories requested by the Portuguese and solve the problem of the smuggling of goods into Spanish domains (Lucena 1993:77). The Portuguese and the Spaniards reached an agreement after Carvajal accepted the request and exchange of possessions proposed by the Portuguese. The agreement reached in January of 1750 would later be known as the *Tratado de Madrid*.

The Treaty started with a historical analysis of the conflict between Spain and Portugal, enumerating the mutual ruptures and motives each nation had for these ruptures, and recognized the necessity of leaving behind the political disputes between the two crowns. The Treaty of Madrid also began by acknowledging the Treaty of Tordesillas as one of the main sources of dispute and, in consequence, this treaty was cancelled as well as the others that were signed

between Spain and Portugal up to that moment.<sup>23</sup> While the second article of the Treaty of Madrid declared that Portugal ceded to Spain the Philippines and adjacent islands, the third article declared that Spain ceded to Portugal part of the Amazon region.<sup>24</sup> Other articles of the Treaty gave the navigation and possession of the Rio Negro to the Portuguese crown and did the same with the Orinoco River for the Spaniards. The other articles of the Treaty specified the definition of the borderline, saying that it should follow natural features (such as rivers and mountains) and adjudicated the islands on the rivers to the crown whose shore was closer during the dry season. The Treaty of Madrid was different from previous political treaties for two reasons. First, it introduced the necessity of making scientific observations in order to substantiate political claims to overseas territories and, second, it introduced the notion of *utis possidetis facti* that replaced the notion of *utis possidetis juri* that was present in the Treaty of Tordesillas. The opposition between *de jure* possession based on legal titles and *de facto* possession based on the effective occupation of territories, became a juridical move that allowed the “legalization of all the process of Portuguese occupation,” especially in the Amazon region (Lucena 1993:82). The new Treaty also established specific ways of enforcing the different clauses the parties had agreed upon. Boundary commissions were designed in order to mark and verify the new borders established between the Spanish and the Portuguese empires in South America. The Spanish boundary commission and expedition came later to be known as

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<sup>23</sup> The treaty of Madrid clearly stated that: “Recognizing the difficulties and doubts that will make embarrassing this dispute most of the times, if it were to judge by means of the demarcation established in Tordesillas, even if it was not declared from which of the islands of Cape Verde should the count of the 370 leagues start, or given the difficulty to point out on the coasts of South America the two points south and north where the line should start, or given [also] the moral impossibility of establishing with certitude a meridian line that would through the middle of [South] América” (In Lucena 1993:79).

<sup>24</sup> The article states that: “(...) it will belong to the crown of Portugal all that has occupied up of the Marañón or Amazonas River” (In Lucena 1993:80).

Iturriaga's Expedition to the Orinoco, in charge of the expedition was the Spanish politician and military José de Iturriaga y Aguirre. The expedition was also joined by cartographers, astronomers, chaplains, surgeons, soldiers and a group of naturalists led by Pehr Löfving, a disciple of the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus. Iturriaga's expedition to the Orinoco took off from Cadiz in February of 1754. The expedition was simultaneously scientific and political, revealing the growing value of science for imperial politics as well as the necessity of the colonial state to control the frontier regions (Lucena 1993).<sup>25</sup> Iturriaga's expedition was

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<sup>25</sup> The importance given to scientific exploration of the hinterlands of the Spanish Empire, during the second half of the 18th Century, was attuned with a new vision of empire brought to Spain by the Bourbon House (which replaced in 1700 the House of Habsburg, who had ruled since 1516). Phillip V, the first Bourbon King in Spain, made by Charles II (the last of the Habsburgs) his successor ruled between 1700 and 1746. Phillip V tried to unify the kingdom, imposing the juridical, political, and administrative model of Castile to the previous kingdom of Aragon. Phillip V was replaced by Charles III, who ruled Spain between 1759 and 1788, and implemented what came to be known as the Bourbon Reforms. The reforms were informed by the ideology of the Enlightenment and were part of an effort to restore royal authority and centralize the power of the king. As part of the Bourbon Reforms, in 1767 Charles III expelled the Jesuits from Spain and Hispanic America. the Jesuits would only return to the former colonies of Spain during the XIX century after different republican governments were established throughout Latin America. The same was done by the Marquês de Pombal in Portugal in 1759 as part of the The Pombaline Reforms. Given the great power acquired by the Jesuits in Spain and its colonies, as expressed in the possession of vast amounts of land and cattle, as well as the administration of several educational institutions, the religious order gradually became regarded as a threat to royal authority. The Bourbon Reforms also included the creation of schools of arts and crafts as well as the promotion of economic societies. One of the main goals of the Bourbon Reforms was to reinforce the control of Spain over its colonies through more rational and efficient exploitation of the natural resources that were found in the colonies. Under the influence of the physiocrats (who believed that cultivation of land was the main source of wealth for the State) agriculture was promoted. Scientific and botanical expeditions were also organized and realized to the viceroyalties of Peru and Chile in 1777, New Spain in 1787 and New Granada in 1783. Ironically, the Bourbon Reforms had the contradictory effect of undermining the authority of the crown that they were supposed to reinforce, as many of the independence revolutions in Latin America during the 19th century drew on political and social ideas of the Trans-Atlantic political and intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment.

supposed to meet with a Portuguese expedition that was traveling through the Rio Negro but this never happened.

However, Iturriaga's expedition to the Orinoco River led to the establishment of the first Spanish settlements in the region of the Upper Orinoco. In 1758, Jose Solano, who had participated in Iturriaga's expedition building boats and exploring the Orinoco, commanded an expedition to the Upper Orinoco that ended up in the establishment of the first Spanish town in the region called San Fernando de Atabapo (few miles away from where today is Inírida), in homage to king Fernando VI. In March of 1758, Solano travelled in a long boat crewed by 20 Indians towards Guipanabi territory and established contact with chief Crucero, who ruled the indigenous town of Maracoa. Although, Solano already knew who Crucero was. Solano met Crucero in March of 1756 when he crossed the torrent of Atures. According to historian Manuel Lucena Giraldo, Solano developed a new way of relationship with indigenous communities, based on "dialogue," and using indigenous labor and knowledge for colonial purposes. At the same time, Solano took advantage of confrontations between indigenous polities and inclined the "regional balance of indigenous power" to his own interests (Lucena 1991:166). Out of the "mutual collaboration" between Solano and Crucero emerged the establishment of San Fernando de Atapabo, the first Spanish settlement in the region. The establishment of San Fernando included concentrating previously dispersed Indians, the appointment of authorities (Crucero was designated as main chief), as well as farming work and the indoctrination and baptism of children (Lucena 1991:194). Soon after it was established, San Fernando was populated with persons that came from nearby regions, some of which were forced to go there. By 1759, Solano was able to reach peaceful relationships with the Manetivitannas and the Manaos. Both indigenous groups had accepted the vassalage to the king of Spain, as well as the order of

gathering in a convenient place (Lucena 1991:195). Nonetheless, in 1760 San Fernando was destroyed and in 1765 capuchin fray José A. De Xerez tried to rebuilt it.

### **Civilization, Catholic Missionaries and the Concordat of 1888**

The situation of the Catholic missions in the Upper Orinoco and Upper Rio Negro region did not change significantly after the provinces ascribed to the Viceroyalty of New Granada declared their independence from Spain in 1819. For example, in the *Llanos* (plains) frontier region, west of the Upper Orinoco and east of the Andes, missions and churches were swept away by patriot soldiers during the war of independence as they recruited natives to fight against the royal soldiers. When peace was restored in 1821, there were only two missions left in the *Llanos* frontier (Rausch 2003:13). Despite the decrease of missionary presence and activity during the first decades of the 19th century, the national elites insisted that Catholic missionaries still had a role to play in governing and civilizing the frontier regions of the emergent republic (Rausch 2003:14). In this sense, historian Erick. D. Langer points out that despite the fact that “historical studies of missions have almost exclusively focused on the colonial period,” the role that missions continue to play in the republican period should also be taken into account (Langer 2009:4-5). Specifically, Langer pays attention to how Catholic or Protestant Missions structured social interactions in frontier regions of Latin America throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

During the mid-nineteenth century there were two attempts to design special administrative policies for the frontier regions including not just the Northwest Amazonia region but all of the



Amazon region, the *Llanos* frontier, the Pacific coast, and part of the Caribbean.<sup>26</sup> The first attempt to create “special” legal and administrative regimes for the frontier regions was done under the liberal governments of Pedro Alcántara Herrán (1841-1845) and Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera (1845-1849). As American historian Frank Safford pointed out, in the “1840s the New Granadan elite became convinced that -given the country’s terrain, its unskilled, illiterate labor force, and its meager capital resources- its future lay entirely in tropical agriculture” (Safford 1976:43). This belief was reinforced by the “exaggerated reports about the fabulous resources of regions that were not yet developed” or incorporated to the rule of the state (Rausch 2003:15). For instance, article 167 of the political constitution of 1843 stated that: “places that for their isolation and distance from other populated places [*poblaciones*] cannot by part of any canton or province, could be ruled by special laws; until they can be aggregated to a canton or province, or become one of them, so then might the constitutional regime be established upon them” (In Rausch 2003:15). José Ignacio Márquez, who served as secretary of the interior of President Mosquera, brought up again in 1845 the idea that frontier regions constituted “special territories” that should be ruled by a different legal regime from the one that ruled in the “populated” centers of the interior. Legislators agreed with Márquez and in 1845 they established that the regions of Caquetá (which included part of Northwest Amazonia), San Martín, Guajira, Darién, Guanacas, San Andrés and Raposo should become “special territories.”

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<sup>26</sup> It is worth pointing out here that the political organization of what today is known as Colombia, changed significantly during the XIX century. Colombian elites tried out 5 different ways of organizing the emergent republic throughout the XIX century: the New Granada (1832-1857), the Granadian Confederation (1857-1861), the United States of Colombia (1863-1886) and the Republic of Colombia (1886-present). In addition, between 1832 and 1836 the national congress changed the borders of the internal provinces fifteen times. The general trend was that the Andean region, the most densely populated, would gain prominence while the importance of the lowlands would decline (Rausch 2003:14).

These “special territories” were supposed to be ruled by what state officials called prefects, who had the power to regulate “trading activities, develop new cities, control smuggling activities and promote the civilization of the Indians by supporting the activities of missionaries” (Rausch 2003:16). What made these frontier regions exceptional for national elites was not only their distance and isolation from other provinces, but also what this meant in terms of not having any kind of control over the economic and social activities that took place in them.

The second attempt to create specific legal and administrative regimes for the frontier regions was carried out during the liberal government of José Hilario López (1849-1853), associated with a series of liberal reforms included in the Political Constitution of 1853.<sup>27</sup> Regarding frontier regions, the Constitution stated that: “the territorial divisions of Guajira, Caquetá, and others that are not populated by civilized persons may be organized and governed by special laws” (Gibson 1948:210). Despite this recognition, no “special laws” were created in 1853 in order to rule the “special territories” that were in the margins of the nation. Only until the decade of the 1860s the first system of rule was designed for what came to be known later in the national public sphere as “the national territories.”<sup>28</sup> For instance, Article 78 of the Political

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<sup>27</sup> Among the liberal reforms introduced by López were the abolition of slavery, the abolition of the monopoly the state had over tobacco production, the separation between Church and State, extension of the vote to men who were analphabets and had no property, and administrative decentralization. Additionally, during the government of López the first geographical expedition of the national period was carried out. The expedition was named the *Comisión Corográfica* (1850-1859) and was led by the Italian geographer Agustín Codazzi, who did the same in Venezuela. López also expelled the Jesuits again from Colombia in 1848.

<sup>28</sup> Colombian anthropologist Margarita Serje points out that a common assumption among analysts from different orientations has been the fact that in Colombia “the [national] territory is bigger than the nation and the nation bigger than its government” (Serje 2005:105). This fact makes the question of sovereignty a vexed issue given that there is “not a single, recognized and universal sovereignty in the national territory,” but there have been multiple sovereignties in dispute, as well as autonomous regions (Serje 2005:105-106). Since independence, according to Serje, two apparently contradictory ideas started to take shape: (i) the naturalized existence of a national territory whose limits overflow the area effectively controlled by colonial occupation,

Constitution, approved by all of the nine sovereign states of the republic in 1863, advocated that scarcely populated territories or territories inhabited by indigenous tribes, could ceded to the “general government for the purpose of promoting colonization or for making material improvements, shall be governed by a special law” (In Rausch 1999:12). The same article specified that when a given territory reached a “civilized” population of 3,000 a commissioner could be sent to the House of Representatives. The commissioner could vote on legislation concerning the territories, but could not vote on legislation concerning the rest of the country. A representative could be elected when a territory reached a population of 20,000 and he would have a vote in all of the discussions that took place at the House of Representatives. When a territory reached a population of 100.000 people, it was eligible to become a state (Rausch 2003:18). The notion of national territory worked as a transitory category for classifying peoples and territories that were in the process of being incorporated to the body politic. The Constitution of 1863 established the civilization of the Indians as one of the main duties of the general government. This duty was mentioned along with other duties including the promotion of public education, postal service, and the elaboration of statistics and maps of towns and

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and (ii) the idea that Colombia never existed as a unified political entity, but instead was constituted as a fragmented group of autonomous regions in conflict (Serje 2005:106). There is a debate regarding the “frontier question” in Latin America. While American historian Alistair Hennessey uses Frederick Jackson Turner hypothesis in order to argue that unlike the United States, Latin American nations are “frontier societies lacking a frontier myth” (Henessey 1978:3); Margarita Serje argues that there has existed a frontier myth in Colombia and Latin America, even if it does not fit idealized visions about the colonization of the American West. The frontier myth that Serje identifies is associated with the chimeric and utopian visions projected upon frontier regions by political geographers and national elites since the 19th century and even earlier. According to Serje, the concept of frontier also conceals a myth (in Barthes’ sense) that is implicit in the ways in which these territories (i.e. national territories) and its inhabitants have been filled with content and meaning (Serje 2005:120). By 1850, Latin America still had huge extensions of land that were unexplored and never incorporated to the colonial economy. After 1850 the demand in the world market for products from tropical regions (including rubber) started to increase and, consequently, several of the “frontier regions in Latin America started to acquire economic value” (Le Grand 1988:14).

territories.<sup>29</sup> Civilizing the Indians went in hand in hand with the idea of colonizing and incorporating under the rule of the state the so called *Territorios Nacionales*.

The notion of civilization is crucial to the understanding of state formation and nation making during the 19th century throughout Latin America. 19th century intellectuals and politicians often portrayed nation making as an ongoing struggle between civilization and barbarism. Among Colombian elites, the meanings and practices associated with the idea of ‘civilization’ changed according to political and ideological affiliations. For instance, for conservative elites civilization was associated more with the making of a Catholic nation, the critique of anticlericalism and secularism, as well as the valorization of the Spanish legacy in the Americas. On the other hand, liberal elites associated civilization more with democratic institutions, the separation between Church and State, and the critique of Spanish colonialism in the Americas. Nonetheless, the critique of religion deployed by liberal intellectuals was circumscribed to clericalism and did not question the role Catholicism had to play in the building of a new nation. Liberal and conservative intellectuals embraced Catholic principles and values as the “basis of moral and civilized life, and as a constitutive part of the character of the people [*pueblo nacional*]” (Arias 2005:15). Even the most radical liberals, recognized in Catholicism one of the main elements of Colombian society, a “powerful agent” that prevailed in popular customs, shaping and sustaining “private morality” which constituted the basis of all “public virtues” (Ancízar 1848: 89). Some intellectuals would even praise the role priests had to play in remote villages as the only “positive agent” of civilization and source of order in places that were far from the rule of the state. In this sense, figures such as the priest and the

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<sup>29</sup> Benedict Anderson points how the census, the map, and the museum became crucial “institutions of power” in nation building processes that shaped “the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion –the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry”(Anderson 2006:163).

missionary became crucial for building a Catholic and modern nation in the most remote areas of the country.

Soon after the Political Constitution of 1863 was approved, the regional states realized that it would be easier for the federal government to assume the responsibilities and costs of “civilizing” the frontier and wild peripheral regions of the country. In this context, Bill 39 of 1868 tried to further organize the government of special territories. The law provided that the president should name a prefect for each territory for a 2 year period. The prefects would eventually have the power to enforce laws, solve disputes, establish towns, civilize the indigenous population, and defend national sovereignty from external invasions. Under this new law the government agreed to pay the wages of prefects, *corregidores*, priests, missionaries and schoolteachers (Rausch 2003:18-19). Despite the enthusiasm expressed by some state functionaries regarding the fate and potential of the “Territories,” this feeling contrasted with the real situation of the peripheral regions of the country that were still isolated and distant from the centers of population. For instance, Eustorio Salgar who was president between 1870 and 1872, argued that the “large sums the national treasury has spent [on the Territories] have not born true fruits in the work of colonization. The great distances between the capital and the territories favor the abuses and irregularities that remain unpunished. The instability among personnel and the difficulties in postal communications are other hindrances to make law effective, and for executive action” (In Rausch 2003:20). In a few words, there was a huge gap between the reality of the National Territories and the plans made to civilize these remote regions.

After an attempt in 1882 to reform the responsibility for governing the territories of the regional states, the Political Constitution of 1886, which was written by conservative politicians

and intellectuals, reestablished the federal government of the “Territories.” Rafael Núñez, who became president for the second time in 1884, and his Conservative supporters worked out a plan under the Constitution of 1886 that led to an agreement with the Vatican known as the Concordat. The agreement brought a “joint civil-ecclesiastical rule of the territories that would shape their development until the 1930” (Rausch 2003:22). The Concordat crystalized the long-held idea that the civilization of the Territories and its inhabitants was the responsibility of Catholic missionaries.

The Conservative Constitution of 1886 differed significantly from the Constitution of 1863, which was written under the influence of liberal ideas. The new Constitution reconstituted the “Colombian Nation” as a unitary Republic, composed of states and national territories (Gibson 1948: 314-315). The Constitution established the “Apostolic Roman Catholic Religion” as the “religion of the Nation” and established also that “public authorities shall protect it and cause it to be respected as an essential element of the social order” (Gibson 1948: 320). The Concordat signed by the Colombian government in 1887 with Pope Leo XII reaffirmed the ideal of making Colombia a Catholic nation and state. Following the social doctrines of the Church expressed in *Rerum Novarum*, the Article 11<sup>th</sup> of the Concordat stated explicitly, that the Vatican will “support and cooperate with the government in order that religious institutions are established in Colombia preferably dedicated to charity, missions, education of the youth, teaching in general and other works of public welfare and worth” (Moreno 1915:173). The Concordat emphasized that public education was to be organized and conducted following the principles and morality of Catholic religion. In exchange for the “cooperation” of the Church, the government not only recognized rents and benefits to the Church over real estate properties previously confiscated, but also agreed to designate a specific amount of money to be given annually to the Church. The

amount of money given by the government to the Church was supposed to increase as the situation of the national treasury improved. The money was to be invested in works related to the “civilizing action” of the Church that included the work carried out by diocese, seminars, and missions, among others. Regarding the specific work of missionaries among indigenous groups, Article 31 of the Concordat expressed that “the agreements celebrated between the Vatican and government of Colombia to promote Catholic missions among barbarous tribes, do not require further approval by Congress” (Moreno 1915:177).

Three years after the government had signed the Concordat, a new law was issued regarding “how to govern savages that are being reduced to civilized life.” The law 89 of 1890 was signed initially by the government in order to dissolve indigenous collective land titles known since colonial times as *resguardos* (reservations). Law 89 distinguished 2 different kinds of indigenous societies. The first were those “savages that are being reduced to civilization by missionaries,” referring to nomadic indigenous populations that lived in the jungle and should be reached by missionaries. The second kind of indigenous societies were those “indigenous communities already reduced to civilized life,” referring people living in *resguardos* or permanent settlements with “semi-occidental” customs as it happened with most of the indigenous societies that lived in the Andean region in the south-western part of the country (Bonilla 1968:61). Law 89 of 1890 was designed for the second type of indigenous societies. Even if Law 89 recognized collective ownership of land and “indigenous” political institutions such as the *cabildos*, Law 89 was made under the influence of liberal ideas as it tried to abolish

the payment of tribute by indigenous communities and privatize collective lands in order to create a free indigenous labor force that could be used as wage labor in the *haciendas*.<sup>30</sup>

Whereas Law 89 was concerned specifically with Indians in the process of becoming civilized (most of whom lived in the Andes), it also laid out the background for ‘civilizing’ savages that were considered to be lower on the evolutionary scale and who lived on the margins of the state. For instance, the first article of Law 89 established that the “general legislation of the Republic will not apply to the savages that are still being reduced by missionaries to civilized life.” In consequence, the “government in agreement with ecclesiastical authorities, will determine how these incipient societies should be governed.” Law 72 approved in 1892 established that the government could delegate to the missionaries “extraordinary faculties in order to exercise civil, penal and judicial authority over catechumens [neophyte].” This law emphasized that regular legislation did not apply to the Indians undergoing process of civilization until they “overcame savagery and could be governed by these laws” (Bonilla 1968). In this sense, laws 89 and 72 were made under the assumption that Indians were children in need of tutelage and the ones called to exercise such tutelage were the Catholic missionaries.

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<sup>30</sup> During the colonial period, *cabildos* were municipal councils created in order to administer towns and cities. *Cabildos* also served as an institution of political representation used by local elites before royal authority. At the same time, *cabildos* were used for ruling indigenous populations that lived in *pueblos de indios* [towns of indians] or in communal lands called *resguardos* [reservations]. During the Republic, liberal reformers tried to abolish *cabildos* and *resguardos*, as well as any privileged status that Indians had before state authority. However, Law 89 recognized *cabildos* as legitimated forms of indigenous authority within *resguardos*, constituting *cabildos* as the main institution of government within indigenous communities. In recent legislation, an indigenous *cabildo* is defined as: “a special public entity, whose members are also members of an indigenous community, elected and recognized by the latter, with a traditional sociopolitical organization, whose function is to represent legally the community, exercise authority and realize the activities attributed by law, and by the uses, customs and the internal regulations of each community” (Decreto 2164). As I show in Chapter 5, one of the main objectives of the indigenous movement in Colombia was the defense of indigenous *cabildos*, specially the Indigenous Regional Council of Cauca (CRIC) created in 1971 made of the strengthening of indigenous *cabildos* one of the main objectives of its platform of struggle.



Despite all the legislation issued by different governments throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century about the role played by missionaries in civilizing indigenous populations and frontier regions, few missions were established in the Colombian Amazon region during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Something different happened in the region of the Upper Rio Negro that was still under the control of the Portuguese crown. In this region, the Portuguese crown promoted the presence and work of Capuchin missionaries first and Franciscan missionaries after that. In fact, in 1852 the Capuchins created the mission of the Vaupés and Isana Rivers that was administered by Italian friar Gregorio María de Bene. By 1856, according to an official report, the missionized population was of 2,754 individuals that included members of different ethnic groups such as Tucano, Tariano, Wanano, Cubeo, Pira Tapuyo and Makú (Cabrera 2002). On the other hand, in 1870 Emperor Don Pedro II received in Rio de Janeiro six Franciscan missionaries who later established the Franciscan Mission of Amazonia in Manaus. Only until 1881 the Franciscan mission of Vaupés and its 17 mission villages (*aldeas de misión*) were established. A French traveler to the Vaupés region estimated that 2,977 individuals were missionized in those villages (Cabrera 2002).

At the same time as the presence of Catholic missionaries in Northwest Amazonia was vanishing, the region started to acquire economic value as a result of the increasing international demand for rubber.<sup>31</sup> The model of civilizing indigenous populations of Amazonia through the tutelage of Catholic missionaries started to compete, since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with a model of colonization that had rubber extraction at its basis and native Amazonians as its

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<sup>31</sup> In fact, with the exception of the Capuchin missions established in 1899 and 1900 in the Upper Putumayo region (Bonilla 1968:66), and the Montfort mission of Vaupés established in 1914 (Cabrera 2002:164), no other missionary efforts were done during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to evangelize indigenous peoples of Northwest Amazonia.

working force. The tutelage that missionaries were called to exercise over natives was now exercised by rubber barons or bosses, whom were also related to state authority in different ways. The next section of this chapter, analyses how rubber extraction might be understood as part of broader processes of “accumulation by dispossession,” by which an “organic relation” is created between the expanded reproduction of capitalism and “violent processes of dispossession” (Harvey 2007:141-142). In the case of Amazonia, an organic relation is created between the political economy of rubber extraction and processes of state formation.

### **The Political Economy of Rubber Extraction and State Formation**

Since the 1870s national elites showed interest in extracting and exporting *quina* (out of which quinine is made) from the Amazon region. *Quina* had been “discovered” since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was used to cure intermittent fevers and had been the object of different botanical expeditions conducted by European and local scientists. In 1873, Rafael Reyes, who was president of Colombia between 1904 and 1909, started to explore the region of the Upper Putumayo and Upper Caquetá Rivers looking for trees of *quina*. One year later, one of his brothers created the company Casa Elías Reyes, after he recruited in Bogotá partners and relatives in order to carry out the exploitation and marketing of the *quinas* from the headwaters of the Caquetá and Putumayo Rivers. The company had an equipment of shareholders and managers, the latter worked directly in the field and were in charge of coordinating the workers necessary for the extraction, transport and marketing of *quina* (Domínguez 2005:92). In 1874, Rafael Reyes acquired from the emperor of Brazil the license to navigate steam ships through the Amazon River and his company was able to market *quina* beyond the borders of Colombia (Pineda 2000). Nonetheless, in 1884 the international price of *quina* dropped down significantly

and most of its employees were forced to abandon their camps (Pineda 2000). In 1895, the first companies for extracting and marketing rubber were established in Colombia.<sup>32</sup> A previous partner of Reyes and his brothers whose name was Benjamín Larrañaga owned one of these companies. Larrañaga owned an establishment known as La Chorrera and in 1904 created with the Peruvian rubber baron Julio César Arana a company called Arana, Vega y Larrañaga that operated on the Putumayo River. Arana was one of the owners of the Peruvian Amazon Company (*Casa Arana*), he had arrived to Iquitos at the end of the 1880s selling “Panamá hats” and became a rubber trader in 1889. Arana acquired economic power as a rubber entrepreneur and political power as a politician in Iquitos. In 1901, Arana was mayor of Iquitos, president of the chamber of commerce and president of the departmental assembly in 1902.

For traders and local political elites, Amazonian indigenous populations seemed to be perfectly suited for the enterprise. As a consequence of this, a huge number of natives from the

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<sup>32</sup> Until the 1880s, the Amazon region was virtually the sole supplier of rubber to the world. A major surge in the demand for rubber took place after 1839, when Charles Goodyear perfected vulcanization. Vulcanized rubber was resistant to both heat and cold, which made it suitable for a “wide variety of products ranging from sprockets, belts, hoses and tires to suspenders, shoes and raincoats” (Weinstein 1983:8). The demand for rubber increased during the 1890s as a result of the popularization of bicycles and later in the 1900s with the massive production of automobiles. Nonetheless, rubber extraction was not totally dependent upon the tire industry. For instance, the amount of rubber exported from the Amazon region in 1850 was more than twice of the amount exported in 1846, showing how the “demand for crude rubber in the manufacturing world began to grow long before the development of the tire industry” (Weinstein 1983:9). Rubber extraction in Amazonia was not only made possible by the fact that the region was the “natural habitat” of the *Hevea brasiliensis*. Technological innovations such as the introduction of the steam ship to the Amazon region in the 1850s also changed completely the spatial dynamics of the region as it reduced significantly the effort and time invested in travelling, allowing the transportation of rubber from remote places in the jungle to main ports of the region located in Iquitos, Manaus and Belém do Pará (Pineda 2000:30, Souza 1994:134). Besides *Hevea brasiliensis* there were other species of rubber in the eastern slope of the Andes associated with the genus *Castilloa*. Some authors have identified extractive fronts and modes of extraction that corresponded to different genera of rubber, but both of these were also mediated by the way in which national frontiers developed in each country.

Amazon became rubber tappers throughout the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1907, Colombian liberal politician and intellectual Rafael Uribe Uribe, gave a speech before Church authorities, governors and members of the National Academy of History, about the “reduction of savages” [*reducción de salvajes*]. Uribe argued that,

In Caquetá, if it were not for the aborigines, rubber would not be extracted or it would be extracted in very small quantities. In that exploitation, as in the ones of other products, some known and others ignored, the proper man is the one whose backwardness from civilization gives him still the wandering habits [*hábitos errantes*] that such industries require. The same way in which the character free of great demands is more useful quality of the soldier of our armies (...) the same lack of demand for comfort is an indispensable condition for the elaboration of national wealth (In Eastman 1979:310).

Ironically, the “nomadic” condition that indexed the savagery of Amazonian Indians made them at the same time, according to Uribe, the most suited and “proper” men for extracting rubber.<sup>33</sup> The production of national wealth was made possible by the “natural” characteristics of native populations. However, the racialization of labor and power relations does not account by itself for the violent and particular features that rubber extraction acquired in Amazonia. In this sense, one of the main paradoxes to be explained is the striking contrast between a “technologically advanced, highly capitalized rubber goods industry based on a primitive system of rubber extraction” (Weinstein 1983:10). In this process, metropole and colony were unequally made and remade through the production, circulation, and transformation of rubber into a commodity. Consequently, rubber extraction might be understood as a process of “accumulation by

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<sup>33</sup> Alcida Ramos points out that “nomadism” is a “notion that is too often evoked by dominant society in regard of the exotic primitive,” whereas any kind of indigenous mobility is taken as “a sign of nomadism” (Ramos 1998:39). In this sense, “nomadism” becomes a stigma attributed to people “who simply do not comply with the Western ideal of sedentary life”, as well as an “anathema to the exercise of control” (Ramos 1998:39). Ramos prefers to use the term *mobile* instead of nomadic when she refers to indigenous societies such as the Yanomami or the Shavante that follow different patterns of spatial mobility.

dispossession” (Harvey 2003). The notion of accumulation by dispossession emphasizes how the violent features (i.e. conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, and force) that Marx considered to be characteristic of “primitive accumulation,” can no longer be considered part of an “original” or primitive process given that they remain powerfully present within capitalism’s historical geography (Harvey 2003:145). Rubber becomes one of the assets that capitalism finds outside of itself, but appears as necessary to confront pressures of overaccumulation (Harvey 2003:143). The violent means by which rubber was appropriated and produced shows how “non-capitalist territories” are forced to open to capitalist trade and investment.

However, the particularities that rubber extraction acquired in the periphery of capitalism have been accounted for in different ways. The whole system of rubber extraction was entrenched in colonial representations of natives, as well as in material practices including debt-peonage, coerced labor, and physical violence. The system of rubber extraction depended upon the “appearance of trade in which the debtor is neither slave nor wage laborer but a trader with an ironclad obligation to pay back the advance” (Taussig 1986:65) The excess of violence displayed by rubber bosses over indigenous populations has been a recurrent theme in most of the accounts written about the rubber extraction industry in Amazonia. For instance, Michael Taussig (1986) shows how rubber extraction and its representations, including Casement’s reports, were embedded in an economy of terror by which torture and its ritualization was not only used as a ‘means of production,’ but also as a ‘mode of production.’ According to Taussig, “torture and terror were not simply utilitarian means of production; they were a form of life, a mode of production, and in many ways, for many people, not least of whom were the Indians themselves, its main and consuming product” (Taussig 1986:100). The process by which terror was transformed from a means to an end in itself puzzled most of the outsiders that visited the

Putumayo region at the beginning of the 20th century. Casement, for example, who believed in the pure 'rationality of business,' did not understand why Indians were systematically slaughtered and killed if they were the working force upon which the whole rubber industry depended (Taussig 1986:53).

On the other hand, the state played a crucial role in the expansion of the rubber industry in Amazonia. It is impossible to understand the consolidation of the local rubber industry without looking simultaneously at how the state was built in these regions. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the infamous Peruvian Amazon Company (*Casa Arana*), owned by Peruvian rubber baron Julio Cesar Arana, had the support of the Peruvian army when it expanded its jurisdiction over Colombian territory and forced Colombian rubber traders to sell their properties or abandon their businesses (Pineda 2000). In most of the cases, rubber bosses or barons would hold public offices to the extent that it was hard to distinguish, even for natives themselves, between a state functionary and a rubber boss.

State formation and rubber extraction were intertwined in the region of the Upper Rio Negro and Upper Orinoco in ways that put into question any attempt to draw a clear-cut division between the political and the economic realms. Local historical imagination traces the origins of rubber extraction to the figure of Tomás Funes. Funes was a ruthless Venezuelan colonel who commanded rubber extraction in the region between 1913 and 1921. Funes took control over the local government in San Fernando de Atabapo in 1913, after he led a conspiracy with other rubber entrepreneurs against governor Roberto Pulido. Funes and about sixty men, armed with Winchesters, guns and *machetes* not only killed Pulido and his family, but also slaughtered 43 more persons in an event known as *La Funera* (Henriquez 1994: 48). Funes ruled the region for 8

years until he was executed in 1921.<sup>34</sup> Camilo Gonzalez, an elder from a Puinave community near the headwaters of *Caño Bocon*, told me when I met him in the summer of 2006 that,

They told me that Funes had punished a lot of people, he used to torture Indians. He would send his soldiers to whip the people, each person received 50 whips with the branches of guayaba trees. He punished all kinds of Indians: Curripacos, Piapocos, Guahibos, all kinds of Indians that are in this region, even whites were punished. He whipped a person until the person could not bear it any more.

My deceased father told me that I had to respect the white men, fear the white men, because white men tortured and killed Indians. I have never disrespected white men until today and I keep the advice of my father. I have heard about the *guerrillas*, because of that I can't step on white men and I have been respectful.<sup>35</sup>

Camilo remembers vividly how events unfolded on January 31<sup>st</sup> of 1921, the day Funes was captured and executed by military forces sent by the central government of Venezuela, led by general Emilio Arevalo Cedeño. Camilo told me how “Funes came out [of his house] well dressed, with a lot of money in his socks. [Arevalo's] soldiers told Funes some words to deceive him, they told Funes to come out soon and they would send him home. Four soldiers captured him. When he was captured, people started laughing at him and they started to shout.” The death of Funes did not end rubber extraction, nor the exploitation of natives by white merchants as working force for rubber, *balata* (a kind of rubber) and gum extraction. But yet, there was a sense of victory in the way Camilo told the story about the capture and further execution of Funes by Arevalo's soldiers.

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<sup>34</sup> While Funes was ruling the Upper Orinoco region from San Fernando de Atabapo, the military dictator Juan Vicente Gómez ruled Venezuela since 1908 until he died in 1935. During Gómez's rule Venezuela was transformed from an “indebted agricultural nation into a wealthy oil exporter” (Coronil 1998:68). Gómez “provided the oil companies with what was widely regarded as an exceptionally advantageous investment climate,” and in turn “the oil companies established political and economic conditions that helped consolidate his dictatorial rule and turned him into one of America's wealthiest men” (Coronil 1998:68).

<sup>35</sup> In this last paragraph, Camilo combines the contemporary fear that some of them have of members of F.A.R.C. (“I have heard about the *guerrillas*”) with the fear they held in the past towards Tomás Funes.

Funes also appears in the famous modernist novel *La Vorágine* (The Vortex), written by José Eustasio Rivera and published for the first time in 1924. Rivera, -who visited San Fernando de Atabapo as secretary and lawyer of a Colombo-Venezuelan border commission-, uses the voice of one of characters Ramiro Estévez to talk about Funes. The novel refers to Funes in both a literal and metaphorical way: “Don’t think that when I say Funes I have named just one person. Funes is a system, a state of the soul, the thirst of gold, the sordid envy. There are many Funes, but only one of them bears the fateful name” (Rivera 1990:348).<sup>36</sup>

Understanding Funes as a system and not as a single person suggests how rubber extraction embraces patrons and tappers, masters and slaves in a single network. In Estévez’s words “servitude in these regions becomes a life time issue for slave and master: one and the other have to die here. A fate of failure and curse follows all of those who exploit the green mine. The jungle annihilates them, the jungle retains them, the jungle calls them in order to be swallowed” (Rivera 1990:355). Despite the fact that Rivera thought of the jungle in such a negative way, it is clear that the wilderness and chaos of the Amazonian jungle becomes a metaphor for rubber extraction and the “state of the soul” that animates the whole industry.

On the other hand, it seems that when Estévez refers to Funes as a system he is also thinking about the blurry boundaries between the economy and the political in this frontier region: “even the governor makes business in rubber” (Rivera 1990:348). The system Estévez describes is animated by the “black idol” (rubber), by the “custom of pursuing illusory wealth at the expense of Indians and trees” (Rivera 1990:348). In this *comarca* (region), says Estévez, the governor is a “business man and his subordinates live out of him; being his particular employees they have a constitutional function. One is called judge, the other civil

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<sup>36</sup> Translation by author.



chief, and the other [is called] registrar. He [Funes] imparts on them promiscuous orders, fixes their salaries and removes them at his own will ” (Rivera 1990:348). Estévez complaints about the fact that in the region was considered “legal and correct” to have a judge who was also in charge of weighting the rubber for Funes. A judge who closed his office after the *patron* gave him the task of “dispatching *mañoco* for the rubber tapers of Beripamoni” (Rivera 1990:349).<sup>37</sup> Estévez made it clear that there was no de facto separation between state and rubber industry, between employees of the state and dependents of patrons.

In 1923, Rivera and his partner in the border Colombo-Venezuelan commission sent from Manaus a report of the commission to the Colombian office of foreign affairs and classified the report as secret. Rivera stated in the report that the “regions surrounding the sector where we have just established milestones, and where the Rivers Vichada, Guaviare, Inírida, Atabapo and Upper Guainía go through, has a scarce population composed in its majority of *indígenas* that belong to the tribes Bores, Guahibos, Camos, Banivas, Cunicamos, Puinaves, etc., and some *colonos* from Brazil, Venezuela and Colombia, the later being the fewer” (In Pachon-Farias, 1991:44). Rivera mentions in the report how “these tribes use their autochthonous languages [*idiomas*] to communicate among themselves, but many of them understand Spanish, mainly the *caciques*” (In Pachon-Farias, 1991:44). This fact shows how some of the indigenous groups that Rivera contacted had some familiarity with Spanish and newcomers.

Furthermore, Rivera narrates in his report how he used the opportunity to communicate the natives some “notions of their nationality and give them graphic explanations about the limits of Colombia in the region” (In Pachon-Farias 1991:44). Rivera’s major concern was the fact that Venezuelan authorities had “exercised jurisdiction” over the area for more than 50 years.

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<sup>37</sup> *Mañoco* is flour made out of bitter manioc, it is used in soups and beverages among indigenous peoples in Amazonia.

Several complaints were given to Rivera about the treatment people, both indigenous and non-indigenous, had received from Venezuelan authorities. In fact, the “boundary work” carried out in the area had been used by Venezuelan authorities to send commissions to the area to “pick up” the “Indians from the Colombian zone and incorporate them into Venezuela through threats and tricks” (In Pachon-Farias 1991:44). Rivera complained about the ways in which local state agents used political and economic power on their behalf and also argued that this situation was caused by the fact that since “immemorial times no other authority is exercised on both shores of these rivers than the authority of Venezuela” (In Pachon-Farias 1991:45).

The border commission in which Rivera took part was in charge not just of reporting to the central government about the social and political situation of the region, but also of placing milestones along the borders and places they travelled through. The fact that even as late as 1923 the borders between Colombia and Venezuela in Northwest Amazonia were not totally clear, reveals how, despite rubber extraction, the power and presence of the state in the region remained weak. As I show in the next section, American evangelical missionaries took advantage of this situation in order to carry out a specific agenda.

### **Reaching the Unreached: New Tribes Mission**

During the decade of the 1940s rubber extraction and colonization were intensified in Northwest Amazonia, leading to a second boom.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, a new brand of

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<sup>38</sup> World production of rubber decreased significantly at the beginning of the 1940s when rubber plantations in South East Asia fell into the hands of the Japanese. This fact led countries like the United States to put their attention again in the Amazon region as their main source of rubber (Wagley 1953). The *Rubber Development Corporation*, known locally as *La Ruber*, started to promote in the 1940s the extraction and commercialization of rubber and other gums such as *balata* and *pendare*. Few years before around 1928, Henry Ford acquired huge extensions of land in the Brazilian Amazon with the aim of transforming them into rubber

missionaries started to travel to South America as part of a world-wide crusade that accompanied the emergence of evangelical groups in the United States during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These missionaries, most of them American, came from a different background than Catholic missionaries (Jesuits, Capuchins and Franciscans) who attempted to establish missions in the region during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some of these missionaries were inspired by a new kind of Christianity that was crafted in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s.

The practice and meanings of Christianity underwent huge transformations in the United States during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Reformist Christian movements in the US produced new ways of being and becoming Christian that differed significantly from more conventional forms of Protestant piety. Some of these movements, which had their roots in nineteenth-century evangelicalism, also developed an “intense focus on evangelism as the church’s overwhelming priority, the need for a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit after conversion in order to live a holy and effective Christian life, the imminent, premillennial second coming of Christ, and the divine inspiration and absolute authority of the Bible, whose very words were free from errors” (Carpenter 1997:6). Most of these Christian reformist movements became explicitly anti-secular. Harding shows how during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> some evangelical

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plantations. According to Greg Grandin: “Ford planted rubber trees on a plantation three times the size of Rhode Island, equipped with state-of-the-art processing facilities intended to replicate the kind of mechanized industrial production he had pioneered in Detroit. The town that arose on the property soon housed four thousand workers, making it the third-largest city in the Amazon. But unlike those other rough-and-tumble-settlements, this one sported concrete sidewalks, fire hydrants, a fully equipped hospital, modest bungalows for workers, larger homes for administrators, grass lawns and white picket fences” (Grandin 2010:11-12). However, Ford’s enterprise seemed to be doomed from the start for different reasons, including the characteristics of the terrain, which “made it impossible to deploy the kind of large-scale mechanization Ford had envisioned” (Grandin 2010:12). In addition to this, rubber tappers also “protested the rigidity of the plantation’s rules, the segregation of tasks according to race, and the abuse of administrators” (Grandin 2010:12).

groups in the US waged a cultural and political battle “against modernism, Darwinism, worldly amusements (liquor, the theater, moving pictures, dance halls, flappers) and social vices (divorce, sex education, birth control, suffrage, women’s clubs)” (Harding 2000:11). After the Scopes trial in 1925, several Christian evangelicals retreated from public life and declared themselves “separated from the world,” they devoted themselves to build Bible-believing enclaves in which to live out what they believed to be the last days of a lost and dying world before the second coming of Christ (Harding 2000:11). While some of these evangelicals decided to build and live in “Bible-believing enclaves” in the US, others followed the advice of Mark in the Bible when he says that “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). The idea of “world evangelization” was one of major tenets of American evangelicals.

While some of the young Christians joined non-denominational missions that already existed, others took it upon themselves and created new non-denominational missionary agencies. This was the case of Paul Fleming and Bob Williams who created New Tribes Mission in 1942 after being “uprooted by the war from their work with tribes living in remote parts of Southeast Asia” (Carpenter 1997:180). Fleming’s missionary work in the Malay Peninsula made him realize it was a mistake to think, as people who lived in big cities did, that the “whole world had [already] been reached” (Fleming 1970:51). In an early volume of the journal *Brown Gold*, published by the mission since 1942, Fleming wrote that,

Thousands of tribespeople, representing language groups which at a conservative estimate number eighteen hundred, have no portion of the Bible in their own language. Their languages are unknown. They have no contact with the civilized world. They possess no radios, for they live far from civilization, hidden often in the jungles of the remote areas of the world. Until recently, little was known about them. Even now most Christians are scarcely aware of their existence. So different are their ways from the ways of civilized man, that to reach them is

often more like reaching men from another planet than men of another race (Fleming 1970:50).

The idea of reaching the unreached took over the imagination of several of the missionaries that worked for New Tribes Mission. Reaching the tribes that lived in “the jungles of the remote areas of the world” entailed linguistic, missionary and physical training. In fact, Fleming pointed out that “seldom do people realize how closely missionary work parallels that of Uncle Sam’s jungle fighters” engaged in Asia and the Pacific during World War II (Fleming 1970:44). The Christian GI, according to one New Tribes promoter, was “better prepared than almost anyone else to be a modern missionary” (Carpenter 1997). Fleming was convinced that missionary training was overly focused on books and ignored a “practical approach,” emphasizing how “we can learn a lesson from the Army by adding a practical approach to missionary training”(Fleming 1970:44).<sup>39</sup> As much as New Tribes Mission was against certain “modern amusements and doctrines,” the mission relied heavily on modern technology. According to American historian Joel Carpenter, the war in Asia and the Pacific, with its mechanized incursions into formidable jungles, impressed on Fleming and Williams the idea that an outreach to remote tribes could be mobilized with greater speed than ever before (Carpenter 1997).

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<sup>39</sup> In fact, Paul Fleming, Bob Williams, and the chairman of the mission Ken Johnston, started searching for a camp where “men and women would train in conditions which really simulated what they would find abroad” (Fleming 1970:44). They acquired land in California in a “wild, lonely valley where a group of deserted wooden huts lay. Nearby a river flowed. It was a deserted Civilian Conservation Camp far from the comforts of town” (Fleming 1970:44). The camp created by New Tribes Mission for missionary physical and practical training came to be known as Fouts Springs Boot Camp. The camp was destroyed few years after its acquisition by a sudden fire. The flames and fire were understood by the members of New Tribes as an action of the Devil to hold them back from their work as missionaries. The camp was moved to Pennsylvania and later to Florida (Fleming 1970:50).

When Sophie Muller joined New Tribes Mission in 1944, missionary work was still considered an activity in which men (even when they travelled with their wives) figured most prominently. This was not the case with Sophie Muller, who joined the Mission as a single woman in her early 20s and remained single until she died in 1994 in the Venezuelan province of Amazonas. In the *Foreword* to Muller's first book *Beyond Civilization*, Johnston expresses admiration of Muller, saying that "she has been an inveterate worker, working most of the time by herself far beyond civilization" and "she has continued to push the spiritual battle with a strong offensive, even though in the past several years visas for new missionaries have been almost impossible to get for Colombia" (In Muller 1952:2-3). In the *Introduction* to Muller's second book *Jungle Methods* (1960), Johnston referred to the "privilege" of having been a witness of Muller's missionary work. He states enthusiastically, "I have followed the tribal work that developed and has been carried on through the ministry of this one frail little lady. She has worked all by herself in the lowland jungles of Colombia, South America, for well over twenty-two years now.... It is thrilling" (In Muller 1960:1). What was most striking for Johnston about Muller's enterprise was that "while she is a lady missionary, all the churches have men for their leaders. She presides at none of their meetings. This, in itself, is amazing" (In Muller 1960:1). Nevertheless, Johnston had ambivalent feelings regarding Muller's missionary work that centered on her presence as a woman carrying out this challenging task. In the *Foreword* to *Beyond Civilization*, Johnston seemed to regret the absence of men on the mission field when he asked his readers: "Where are the men? Figures indicate seven women to one man on mission fields of the world today" (In Muller 1952:3). Johnston was only able to frame Muller's work in masculine terms, describing her as "one little lady doing a man-sized job" (In Muller 1952: 3).

In her account of how she came to be a missionary, Sophie Muller tells of a transformative event. An invitation to accept Christ as Savior was extended to her by Jack Wyrzten, leader of the original Word of Life group, on a street of New York in 1941.<sup>40</sup> It awoke in her, she relates, the “the desire to be active for God like Jack and his young group” (Muller 1988:5-6). She renounced “all ambition to be a renowned artist,” and while she was taking a course at the National Bible Institute she asked God, in prayer, to show her “what He would have me to do with my life” (Muller 1988:6). God answered “with a burden to go to a tribe that had never heard the Gospel.” This answer turned out to be her “call,” and she joined New Tribes Mission in 1944. During the orientation to the Mission she “asked God which country [she] should enter to work with that unreached tribe.” After a short period of prayer she “just knew it was Colombia” (Muller 1988:6). Sophie Muller made a first trip to Puerto Leguizamo in the Putumayo region with a medical missionary whose name was Catherine Morgan. The trip failed for there were no tribes in the area who were beyond the reach of the mission that was operated by Catherine’s friends. After another failed trip to Leticia on the Amazon River, Muller followed the advice of Pat Symes, who lived in Bogotá, and travelled to Mitú in the Vaupés River. Muller spent a few weeks in Mitú and decided to travel to the Curripaco community of Sejal on the Guainía River. The place where Muller arrived was precisely located in the border region between Colombia and Venezuela where Rivera had travelled two decades before as part of the bilateral border commission.

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<sup>40</sup> Wyrzten created Word of Life in 1940 as a “ministry committed to reaching youth with the Gospel” (Word of Life 2006). Wyrzten wrote in 1988 the Introduction for Muller’s book *His Voice Shakes the Wilderness*, where he recalls when Sophie Muller came for the first time one Saturday night to the open-air meetings the group held in Woodhaven, New York (Muller 1988: IX).

After translating the Bible into several indigenous languages, Muller allegedly triggered a massive process of conversion to Christianity in Northwest Amazonia (specifically in the region of the Upper Rio Negro and Upper Orinoco River), which led simultaneously to the making of a specific kind of indigenous Christianity across ethnic groups. There is still debate among anthropologists about what “caused” exactly the massive process of conversion unleashed initially by Sophie Muller. One of the most common explanations has been reiterated several times by anthropologist Robin Wright, who works in Brazil. According to Wright, all of “the observers of the Baniwa [Curripaco in Brazil] since the decade of the 1950s have noted that their conversion to evangelism was compatible with a long tradition of millenarian and messianic movements that go back to the mid 19 century” (Wright 1998:158).<sup>41</sup> In his book about cosmos, self and history in Baniwa Religion, Wright argues “there is strong evidence from Muller’s account that she was received as someone with extraordinary powers, far

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<sup>41</sup> Robin Wright and Jonathan Hill address the case of Venancio Kamiko, also known as Venancio Christu, an indigenous shaman from the Upper Rio Negro who led a millenarian and messianic movement that became prominent during the 1850s. Venancio’s upbringing combined a deep knowledge of Christian and indigenous religions. Venancio was also employed as woodcutter in the boat-building industry around San Carlos in Venezuela. According to Wright and Hill, Venancio was “unable to pay back his work-debt to several employers, including officials at San Carlos and Maroa in Venezuela and a Brazilian trader, Manuel Gonçalves Pinto who lived at São José do Arara on the Içana River” (Wright and Hill 1986:35). Apparently, the weight of all his “debts contributed to an acute sense of oppression, which many Indians of the Rio Negro felt at this time” (Wright and Hill 1986:35). Among the people following Venancio were “several hundred Indians and caboclos (Indian-white mestizos) from about tenvillages of the middle-to-lower Içana and the upper Rio Negro basin” (Wright and Hill 1986:36). Venancio announced that the end of the world would take place on St. John’s Day (June 24, 1858), the world would end in a great fire and then God would descend to earth to realize the final judgment. At different moments, Venancio claimed to have established communication with God. In one of these occasions, Venancio claimed that God had given him orders “so that no one should cut wood and that they should give him chickens, this or that pig, etc., and that he had orders to pardon the debts of those who gave him what he asked for” (Wright and Hill 1986: 35).



different from the way Baniwa had received white people before” (Wright 1998:254). The fact that Muller was allegedly received as ‘someone with extraordinary powers,’ would account, according to Wright, for a massive process of conversion that has unfolded over the last six decades in several of the indigenous communities that live in Northwest Amazonia.

Other authors suggest that Muller was considered another messiah, who followed the tradition established by Venancio Cristo and his disciple Santa Maria during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but who brought a new “discourse of salvation” (Uruburu 1998:160). Furthermore, Colombian anthropologist Sonia Uruburu traces a structural relationship between messianic movements and what she calls the “sociopolitical and economic situation.” Uruburu argues that it can be “suggested that the millenarian and apocalyptic discourse adopted by the different messiahs -today accepted and used by most of the indigenous communities of the region- could have derived from a specific sociopolitical and economic situation” (Uruburu 1998:160). While the kind of exploitation that indigenous population were going through during the 1940s as part of their involvement in extractive industries, is not comparable to that of the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; racial hierarchies, violence and ideologies were still predominant in the 1940s. For instance, back in the 1940s white settlers (*colonos*) still used to call the natives *naturales*, whereas they used the term *racionales* (rational) to refer to themselves. Nonetheless, we should be cautious when we depict Muller as the leader of a millenarian and messianic movement blindly followed by “most of the indigenous communities of the region” (Uruburu 1998:160). In fact, most of the indigenous Christians I met were aware that Muller was a missionary. Even if some of them knew that God had sent Muller as a missionary to the region, this does not mean that they assumed she possessed “extraordinary powers.”

Moreover, there is no strong historical evidence to support Wright's and Uruburu's hypothesis that Muller was received as a messiah in the region when she arrived in the 1940s. In her first book *Beyond Civilization* (1952), Muller describes how she was received in one of the first villages she visited in the Rio Cuyarí: "We climbed up the bank and looked into the first house. The men were all congregated there. I told them that I had come to teach them about God and to read. It was a rather tense five minutes. They looked at me and laughed" (Muller 1952:18). Therefore, the idea of Muller as a messiah might be conceived as historically constructed a posteriori by the different actors, including her, involved in the process and, therefore, holds different meanings for each of them. When this idea is used to account for a massive process of conversion to Christianity, it tends to mystify the whole process of conversion and attributes all of the agency of this process to Muller. In fact, in her last book *His Voice Shakes the Wilderness*, published in 1988, Muller refers to how she was conceived by natives upon her arrival as a "white sister," and eventually a "white goddess." The first chapter of the book is entitled *Trial by Poison* and starts off with the story of a *Trial* that she was subjected to by some Indians in the jungles of Colombia,

A group of Indians sat around the dying embers of a fire in the middle of a big clay cabin in the interior of Colombia. They were having a pow-wow about the origin of a white woman who traveled their rivers and taught in the villages.

"She's a witch doctor," said one.

"No, she isn't," came from several. "She wants only to help us."

"But all witch doctors talk about the unseen world. How could she know so much about it?"

"From her black book! She says it's the book of *Dios*." What our old witch doctor used to tell us? He said once he had died and entered the presence of Yapericoli in a city of dazzling lights."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Iñapirriculi is a cultural hero in mythological traditions of Northwest Amazonia. Iñapirriculi's origin is narrated in a myth that narrates how after the total destruction of the first

Most of them did not remember, but one older man joined in.

“Yes. And our witch doctor could never forget what Yapericoli told him with all those lights shining around him.”

Every ear was attuned to the speaker.

“Yapericoli promised him that some day he would send his sister down to our river with a message for all our people.”

Gasps of surprise around the campfire. “You don’t suppose...?”

The Indians were quickly putting two and two together. This white woman who was teaching them seemed to fit right into that picture (Muller 1988:1).

After the members of the *pow-wow* raised different questions regarding the fact that Sophie Muller might be *Yapericoli’s* sister, they concluded the meeting saying “if she’s really Yapericol’s sister, she cannot die! So even if she should take poison, she cannot die.<sup>43</sup> There’s one way to find out. Some day we must give her poison with her food, and if she doesn’t die, then she *is* Yapericoli’s sister” (Muller 1988:2). The doomsday came and the “white sister was a given a bowl of soup.” She survived and the people said to themselves: “she must truly be the white goddess!”

What is most striking about this story is not how it ends, but the fact that a woman, with the “appearance of a sorceress,” told her weeks before she had the soup that “someone is going to poison you!” Muller connected the two events “only five years later” when a man confessed

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people, the “chief of the animals and thunders, Enúhere, throws a bone into the middle of the river.” Inside the bone were Iñapirriculi and his two brothers, first as shrimps then as crickets. Enúhere’s wife and Iñapirriculi’s grandmother or aunt (in some cases) pick up the bone and raise them as Enúhere continues to try to kill them. Iñapirriculi “brought forth the first ancestors of humanity,” and created the “conditions that sustain and renew life –the fertility of gardens, the alternation of day and night and corresponding human activities, the acquisition of tobacco and cooking fire” (Wright 1998:47).

<sup>43</sup> According to Muller, some of the questions raised by some of the participants in the meeting about the origin of Muller included the following: “Yapericoli’s sister?;” “Why else does she think of us and want to help us?;” “Who else would know so much about the Great Chief and tell us things we didn’t know about him?;” “Isn’t the white sister telling us of Heaven and how to get there?;” “Didn’t she come from a distant land?”

“that he had given the white sister enough poison in that turtle soup to kill five men” (Muller 1988:3). The contradictions and inconsistencies in this story raise many questions. Beyond the fact that, according to indigenous versions, Iñapirriculi did not have any sisters, why would he send a message in a black book to people who were not familiar with books?; why didn’t anybody remember what *Yapericoli* had told the “old witch doctor” when he died and talked to him in a “city of dazzling lights”; why does Muller legitimize her presence through the words of “witch doctors” and mythological characters; why does she consider to be true what “witch doctors” say or know if, after all, she considered them to be her “chief rivals”?

All of these questions and inconsistencies not only suggest that Muller was constantly translating and resignifying indigenous “concepts to fit her conversion project” (Wright 1998:255), but also reveal the ambiguities entailed in this “colonial encounter,” as well as the problems Muller faced in trying to translate her own presence in meaningful ways for indigenous cosmologies and histories. Furthermore, in the story about the *Trial by Poison*, Muller seems to be engaged in the production of commensurability as she puts at the same level her ‘knowledge’ and the ‘knowledge’ of the witch doctors: “(...) all witch doctors talk about the unseen world. How could she know so much about it?” (Muller 1988:1). In this sense, Muller tried to craft a “common ground” upon which translations and comparisons between Christianity and indigenous religions could be made and sustained. Muller presented the belief in the existence of an unseen world and “evil spirits” as a proof that natives had their own religious beliefs, no matter how ‘wrong’ they were, they were also signs of Satan’s “rule and reign” in this unhindered, vast [and], “unpenetrated domain” (Muller 1952:86). As I will show in Chapter 3, the domain of practices and beliefs that Muller defined as “religious” (using sometimes words such as “superstitious”), became a subject of observation and transformation

in her books and missionary work. The extent to which Muller succeeded in this project of “purification” remains a topic for debate.

Furthermore, I attempt here to decenter Muller’s voice, agency and interpretation of the massive process of conversion to Christianity that took place in Northwest Amazonia since the 1940s. I question here the idea, common among anthropologist that work on the region, that all the process of conversion to Christianity in Northwest Amazonia can be understood in relation to the “millenarian and messianic movements” of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, which supposedly explain at the same time how Muller was received by indigenous communities. Questioning the role that anthropologists have attributed to Muller in the indigenous process of conversion, entails historicizing both missionary and indigenous narratives of conversion. While Muller thinks of conversion more as a process of “replacing” or “correcting” pagan customs with Christian practices and changing the “mind of the natives,” the missionaries that followed Muller tend to separate culture and religion, arguing that conversion is the product of an individual choice that brings inner transformations. This distinction allows contemporary missionaries to argue that indigenous culture or indigenous societies are not necessarily changing as a whole when individuals decide to become Christians. Some missionaries even argue that they are reinforcing indigenous culture through the translations of the Bible they make. At the same time, indigenous notions of conversion have changed over time and across generations. The first generation of indigenous Christians associated conversion with learning to read the Bible in their own language and becoming civilized, more recent generations think of conversion as a personal transformative event by which a clear-cut break with a worldly past is produced. This dissertation traces the ambiguities of Muller’s evangelical project and its aftermath, as well as the role of indigenous pastors and missionaries in the process of becoming subjects of their own

brand of Christianity (with specific rituals, practices and ‘beliefs,’ that distinguished it from other denominations such as Catholicism). My main thread of analysis is neither Muller’s literary production nor her ideas about indigenous evangelization. I am more interested in exploring historically and ethnographically the ways in which indigenous Christians and non-Christians have engaged with and transformed themselves through Christianity and colonization (in its political and economic manifestations). In order to account for this process I try to answer in the following chapters the following questions: what kind of differences do we find between Catholic and Christian techniques of evangelization and how do these articulate to different forms of government? How has Christianity articulated emergent notions of indigeneity? How have Christianity and colonization converged or clashed at different points? How has Christianity informed specific notions of self and indigenous community?

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I examined how Northwest Amazonia was constituted as a colonial, missionary and imperial frontier since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Colonization of the region was initially driven by territorial conflicts between Spain and Portugal, which led to agreement known as the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494. However, far from solving territorial disputes this treaty gave way to more territorial disputes between Spain and Portugal, which led in turn to specific projects of colonization in the region. In both cases, the Catholic mission became the main frontier institution through which peripheral areas of empire were governed, administered and developed (Bolton 1917). Catholic missionaries based their work on the idea of “reducing” natives in order to civilize them. *Reducción* became a complex technology of government that included linguistic, spatial, ideological and material transformations aimed at producing *indios reducidos* (Hanks 2010). In order to understand how this project of *reducción* evolved it is

necessary to take into account the agency of indigenous groups, as well as the kind of relationships they established with colonial powers. These relationships included confrontations and antagonisms, but also alliances and complex transactions between Europeans and indigenous communities. There has been debate among historians about the exclusive emphasis that scholarship about missions has placed on the historical agency of missionaries (Langer 2009:2) and how evangelism is commonly imagined in popular and academic circles as the “work of a few good missionaries” (Peterson 1999:1). In the case of Northwest Amazonia, it is clear that missionaries and other colonial agents never had absolute control over indigenous populations. The control that missions exercised in Northwest Amazonia was limited and precarious. One could mention here the Carib rebellions that took place in the middle Orinoco between 1729 and 1740, as a response to the attempts of Franciscan missionaries to evangelize them. On the other hand, the conflicts between Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch and English colonial agents, as well as the differences between their own colonial practices, make it difficult to speak of a singular and homogenous colonial project that was implemented by European powers in the region. Alliances such as the one between the Caribs and the Dutch were crucial in how the colonial process unfolded, producing reconfigurations of inter-ethnic relationships. An example of this is the way in which the Caribs passed from being a marginal group and became dominant chieftaincies during the 18th and 19th centuries (Whitehead 1993:287).

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the Colombian government, through Law 89 of 1890, delegated the government of “national territories” and the civilization of its indigenous inhabitants on Catholic missionaries and missions. Despite all the legal efforts of the Colombian government to give the tutelage of indigenous subjects to Catholic missionaries, with the exception of the Vaupés region (part of which was under control of the Brazilian government),

few Catholic missions were established in Northwest Amazonia during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. While the presence of Catholic missionaries in the region started to decline during the republican period, since the 1850s frontier regions in Latin America started to acquire economic value as the world demand for products from tropical regions (including rubber) started to increase (Le Grand 1988:14). The model of civilizing indigenous populations of Amazonia through the tutelage of Catholic missionaries started to give way to a model of colonization that was based on rubber extraction and needed indigenous working force in order to succeed. The development of the rubber industry in the region mediated and was mediated by processes of state formation, which were lead by individuals that were related to the rubber industry but were simultaneously in charge of the regional state. These kinds of articulations make it difficult to draw a clear-cut division between the political and the economic realms. Even for natives themselves was difficult to distinguish between rubber bosses and state agents. In this context, I try to expand Harvey's approach to the "organic relation" developed between the expanded reproduction of capitalism and processes of dispossession, in order to address the relationship between the political economy of rubber extraction and processes of state formation in Amazonia.

Finally, I analyzed in this chapter how the reconfigurations of evangelical missionary ideology and practice after World War II lead to the expansion of non-denominational missionary orders, some of which (such as New Tribes Mission) were specialized in what they called "unreached tribes." In the context of these transformations in Christian missionary ideology and practice, American missionary Sophie Muller traveled and established herself in Northwest Amazonia during the 1940s. I criticize here dominant interpretations developed by anthropologists in order to account for Muller's work and impact among indigenous



communities of Northwest Amazonia. This critique allows me to explore other venues of analysis that shift the emphasis from a process centered on one individual (Sophie Muller) to a more complicated picture where it is less clear to determine who has converted by whom: did Sophie Muller convert Puinaves and Curripacos to her own brand of Christianity? Or was Christianity “customized,” transformed and remade in the process of being translated and appropriated by Puinaves and Curripacos? Recognizing indigenous historical agency in the process of conversion to Christianity leads us to take into consideration both missionary and indigenous narratives of conversion (See Chapter 3).

While this chapter has tried to describe the different colonial agents and projects that have coalesced in Northwest Amazonia, the next chapter explores how different modes of colonization and evangelization were configured in relationship to each other. Specifically, I try to historicize the different conflict between rubber bosses, Catholic missionaries, natives, Christian missionaries and *colonos*, showing how actors changed their allegiances according to changing circumstances. The issues at stake in these conflicts changed over time but most of the conflicts had a common concern: by whom and how should the natives be governed and civilized?

## Chapter 2 Government, Civilization and Colonization (1910-1973)

This chapter explores the intersections between the different modes of colonization and evangelization that converged in Northwest Amazonia from the 1910s until the 1970s. In particular, the chapter analyses how the interactions and conflicts between Catholic missionaries, rubber entrepreneurs, natives, evangelical missionaries and state agents produced specific modes of colonization and evangelization that simultaneously mediated processes of state formation and nationalization in the region. While the conflicts typically focused on the sovereignty of indigenous bodies, souls and territories, the actors involved in the conflicts changed their allegiances and position over time in response to specific historical conjunctures. The first section of the chapter examines the conflicts between Catholic missionaries and *colonos* in Vaupés around indigenous labor and bodies. Since the establishment of the province of Vaupés, as a new political and administrative unit in 1910, the State has promoted two related but competing colonial projects. On the one hand, the state supported a capitalist project of colonization as it adjudicated concessions over huge blocks of land (territories called by then *territorios baldíos*) in Amazonia to rubber companies or specific individuals.<sup>44</sup> On the other

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<sup>44</sup> *Territorios baldíos* could be translated as waste lands or empty territories. Since the Republic was established in the early 19th century, the national government has been in charge of adjudicating *territorios baldíos* to specific citizens under specific conditions (LeGrand 1988:32). According to historian Catherine Legrand (1988), the national policies regarding *territorios baldíos* show two contradictory tendencies that originate in “attitude of the colonial regime towards land.” On one hand, land policy has been used to promote colonization and the development of rural economies, distributing land at low prices among peasants willing to cultivate this land. The ones who cultivated land were supposed to have legal access to it. On the other hand, the second tendency considers *territorios baldíos* as source of revenue for the

hand, through the law 89 of 1890 (analyzed in the first chapter) the government gave to Catholic missions the tutelage over natives in the so-called *territorios nacionales* (national territories). Conflicts between *colonos* and Catholic missionaries around indigenous labor and bodies raised questions such as: by whom and how should the natives be governed?<sup>45</sup> What did it meant to civilize and, at the same time, protect the natives from the “civilized race”?

The second section of the chapter looks at conflicts that emerged between rubber bosses and natives as a result of the continuous violence exercised over indigenous bodies. Native

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State and, therefore, lands were sold or given in concession to the highest bidder (LeGrand 1988:33). In both cases, the notion of *territorios baldíos* constituted a strategy of dispossession, given that most of the lands considered to be “empty” were actually occupied by indigenous communities, afro-descendant groups or regular peasants. In this sense, the notion of “empty territories” can be related to earlier notions that were common in international law such as the notion of *terra nullius* that circulated in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. According to Whatmore, the legal doctrine of *terra nullius*, which translates literally “no one’s land,” legitimized the “annexation of ‘uninhabited lands’ by settlement as an acknowledged means, alongside conquest and secession, for the proper conduct of colonization by ‘civilized’ nations” (Whatmore 2001:63-64).

<sup>45</sup> The notion of *government* deployed in the documents I use in this chapter is close to early modern notions of government by which government refers less to political structures or the management of state, but rather it designates the “way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed: the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick” (Foucault 1982:790). In this sense, according to Foucault, to govern is to “structure the possible field of action of others,” as it constitutes also a “mode of action upon the action of others” (Foucault 1982:790). In the lectures he gave at the Collège de France in 1977-1978 and published later under the title *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault traces connections between the different ‘arts of government’ that emerge in the sixteenth century: the government of oneself, the government of souls and of conduct, and the government of the state by the prince. The question of government then is posed in terms of a related series of questions: “how to govern oneself (...), how to be governed, by whom, to what extent, to what ends, and by what methods” (Foucault 2009:127). Anthropologist Jonathan Xavier Inda has suggested that there are three crucial dimensions in Foucault’s analytics of government: “First, there are the reasons of government. This dimension encompasses all those forms of knowledge, expertise, and calculation that render human beings thinkable in such a manner as to make them amenable to political programming. Second, there are the technics of government. The technical is that domain of practical mechanisms, instruments, and programs through which authorities of various types seek to shape and instrumentalize human conduct. Finally, there are the subjects of government. This dimension covers the diverse types of individual and collective identity that arise out of and inform governmental activity” (Inda 2005:2).

conceptions of rubber bosses that emerged in this process reveal how, to a large extent, patron and state authority became interchangeable and indistinguishable. This section analyzes in detail the murder of Victor Guarín and the associations of this event with the end of physical violence exercised over natives by white rubber bosses. Furthermore, I compare native interpretations regarding the end of physical violence with *colono's* accounts that attribute the end of physical violence to the establishment of the province of Guainía in 1965.

The third section of the chapter addresses conflicts between Catholic and evangelical missionaries. Since the end of the 1950s conflicts between Catholic missionaries and evangelical protestant leader Sophie Muller took place in what is today Guainía. These conflicts were no longer between *colonos* and Catholic missionaries as had occurred years before in Vaupés, but between Catholic and evangelical missionaries. Catholic missionaries perceived Muller's work and presence in the region as a threat to their project civilizing of *indígenas* led by them and *colonos* alike. Catholic missionaries argued that “evangelical religion” reinforced natives tendency towards laziness by kept them away from productive and trading activities with *colonos*. They also objected to the way evangelical protestants taught them to conceive material improvement as sinful things. The local adoption of evangelical Christianity was also framed by Catholic missionaries as a threat to the authority and sovereignty the State had given to them in mission territories since the end of the 19th century Muller's work was treated as a “religious problem” and a problem of “sovereignty and borders,” a risk for both religious and state authority in the region. In this context, the last section of the chapter explores the creation of the *Comisaría* of *Guainía* in 1963 as a response to the supposed threat posed by the expansion of evangelical Christianity among indigenous communities. The creation of a new administrative and political unit entailed the establishment of a new town (Puerto Inírida) that

would serve as capital of the province and seat of the regional government. The final section of the chapter examines competing narratives deployed by indigenous leaders, elders, *colonos* and teachers that account for the establishment of Puerto Inírida around 1965. These narratives reveal complex and contradictory transactions between state authorities and native leaders that made possible the emergence of a modern urban setting in a remote region. In order to gain access to indigenous lands where the capital of the new province would be established, the State paradoxically combined the recognition of indigenous authorities with policies that dispossessed them of their land and led to the recruitment of natives as working force for the *Comisaría*. In this process, indigenous authorities (*capitanes*) became brokers in the relationships between the State and indigenous communities. Nonetheless, state colonization was not an ordered and planned process even if official documents try to portray it as such. Colonization unfolded in different fronts that included urban planning, public health and education. The efforts at establishing boarding schools within indigenous communities that were already evangelical brought new conflicts between teachers working for the state and Sophie Muller. I examine those conflicts by analyzing a formal investigation carried out by state authorities among the teachers and followers of Muller after she was accused of obstructing public education. The testimonies of natives and teachers reveal more about the failures and shortcomings of the ‘civilizing’ project of the state and less about the alleged felony of which Muller was accused.

### **Civilizing and Protecting the Indians in Vaupés**

In December of 1910 the national government created by a decree the *Comisaría Especial del Vaupés*, which included the actual departments of Guaviare, Guainía and Vaupés. Before 1910, the region was part of the territory of Caquetá. This territory included the region between the Duda River in the West foothills of the Andes, the Rio Negro in the East, the Guaviare River

in the North and the Putumayo and Amazon River in the South. The creation of a new *Comisaría* in this part of Northwest Amazonia intensified the processes of colonization, as well as the presence of rubber barons and companies along the Vaupés River. The capital of the *Comisaría* was initially the town of Calamar located on the shores of the Itilla River. In his “Explorations in the North-West Amazon Basin” (Rice 1914), American scientist Hamilton Rice, who travelled to the region between 1912 and 1913, described Calamar as a “community of more than twenty houses, under a special commissioner, though five years earlier there had been but two sheds and a kitchen” (Rice 1914:148). According to Rice, Calamar served as the “receiving and distributing center for the *caucheros* or rubber gatherers working the *caucho negro* (black rubber) [in the] districts of the Upper Caquetá and Vaupés regions” (Rice 1914:151). In his scientific report, Rice pointed out that,

The *comisario* had the invaluable services of Gregorio Calderón, a Tolimense Colombian, whose name is known throughout the Republic. He was who founded Calamar, cut paths through the great forest from the Guaviare to the Amazons, acquired both the Hiutoto and Carijona dialects, formed the Indians of both those nations into colonies, teaching them the value of co-operation and organized labor, and founded the great rubber *empresa* [company], only to have much of his work undone as a result of the so-called Putumayo atrocities (Rice 1914: 148).

Rice’s insights about the close relationship between Calderón and the *comisario* corroborate how from the beginning state formation and colonization were intertwined in the region. The *comisario* depended on the rubber baron and, in a similar way, rubber extraction was possible and even promoted by the guarantees the State gave to rubber entrepreneurs. Curiously enough, Rice describes with admiration the “civilizing” practices of Calderón who organized the Indians into permanent settlements and taught them the value of co-operation and organized labor while running his company. The company that Calderón created began by extracting rubber from the Upper Vaupés and the Isana River. Calderón’s company later expanded its operations to the

Middle Vaupés River and the Apaporis River, close to the border with Brazil, after another variety of rubber (*hevea brasiliensis*) was “discovered” on the banks of these rivers. Calderón also took advantage of the slave-hunting and trade networks that existed before the first ‘rubber camps’ of his company were established. The networks that were used by Colombian and Brazilian *colonos* for the recruitment of Indian labor were later expanded and reorganized by Calderón. The slave trade networks that previously existed in the Vaupés, Tiquié and Papurí Rivers were used by Calderón in order to run his business. According to Gómez and Domínguez, Calderón became “the owner of the region through the land titles given to him in Bogotá and with the monopoly over the *varadores* and paths that he built with enslaved or contracted labor<sup>46</sup>” (Gómez and Domínguez, 1995: 272). Even if Rice believed that the *comisario* had the services of Calderón, de facto power seemed to be in the hands of the latter.

Not all of the *caucheros* achieved the same power and authority as Calderón. Several of the *caucheros* that came to the Vaupés region at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were landless peasants and regular “workers.” In 1911, Carlos Guillermo Fraser, the first appointed *comisario* of Vaupés, reported to the central government that,

There are about 400 hundred *caucheros* in the region, most of them *tolimenses*, energetic and long-suffering workers, not even 5 out of 100 know how to read. They only know how to exploit the black rubber, one of these trees, well grown, gives them between 1 and 3 *arrobos* of rubber, once the tree is knocked down. They frequently find oils and resins without knowing what they are, I have asked them to get some [samples] in order to send to the government. All of these *caucheros* come from the Caguán River, they left the region because there was no rubber left, and they go, so to speak, destroying the black rubber they find on their way to the Rio Negro; this region will not support them for more than 4 years (In Cabrera 2002:126).

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<sup>46</sup> *Varadores* are paths used in Amazonia in order to transport vessels and commodities in the parts of the rivers that are not navigable. Some of these *varadores* can be long, since they connect rivers with one another.

As it is clear in Fraser's report, *caucheros* included not only rubber entrepreneurs such as Gregorio Calderón, but also "long-suffering workers" who barely knew how to read and write. Not all of the *colonos* were wealthy entrepreneurs who had money to invest in rubber extraction, most of the *colonos* that came to the region after the early 20th century were landless peasants looking for a better future. In the same report, Fraser pointed how *barracas* that belonged to the different companies working in the region were expanded along the Vaupés River<sup>47</sup>,

At the place called *Llano de Pazos*, you can find the first *barracas* of *indios ciringueros* of the house Villamil & Compañía. After six days [of travelling] you find the [*barracas*] of Montaña & Compañía that expand after the *Yaruapari*, the first big waterfall of these river, that has several meters of altitude (...). After this, you find again the *ciringueras* that are exploited by Villamil & Compañía (In Cabrera 2002: 127).

Rubber bosses and entrepreneurs became de facto owners of the paths they built and limited the access to "their" *cauchales* to people who worked for them. This process went along with concessions the central government gave to rubber entrepreneurs over large areas of land that were considered to be *terrenos baldíos* (empty land). Gómez and Domínguez point out that some entrepreneurs who had contacts with bureaucrats in Bogotá were able to arrange the concessions over the *terrenos baldíos*. These arrangements had negative consequences for small businessman who did not have enough resources and lacked contacts or connections with bureaucrats in Bogotá, forcing them to abandon their settlements (Gómez and Domínguez 1994:183). In fact, 12 years after Fraser filed his report, in a regular *colono* who was established in Vaupés complained about the fact that the government of Colombia had given to Mr. Manuel Antonio Gómez a concession over 15,000 hectares of land for a period of 15 years (Domínguez 2005:183). The *colono* sent a formal complaint to the ministry of the interior

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<sup>47</sup> *Barracas* or *barrancones* were the places (usually, camps) where rubber tappers lived and each of them belonged to different rubber bosses or companies.



entitled *Denuncia sobre arrendamiento de grandes extensiones de terrenos baldíos en Vaupés, en detrimento de los demás extractores de gomas* [Complaint about the leasing of huge extensions of wastelands in Vaupés, detrimental to the other gum extractors]. In the complaint, the anonymous *colono* argued that,

Naturally, with this fantastic lease Mr. Gómez will be opposed to the work that other colombian *colonos* have been doing in the region that we have already explored through paths, for several years. Besides this, it is the first time that Mr. Gómez comes to work in these forests, because he only worked near Calamar, that is several leagues away from the lands [*tierras*] that he just rented. With this procedure the Government is just persecuting the first settlers that already have establishments [*fundaciones*] with works of agriculture and good dwellings (In Domínguez 2005:183).

In this sense, *colonos* were not a homogenous set of actors with a shared and common set of interests. Conflicts among *colonos* around indigenous land and labor were common in Vaupés. More common, however, were the conflicts that took place between rubber entrepreneurs and Catholic missionaries regarding the Indian slave trade that was conducted by Brazilian merchants, as well as the forced recruitment of natives by rubber bosses on both sides of the border. The dynamics of rubber extraction made the work of missionaries harder to achieve given that *caucheros* kept the natives away from the missions (Cabrera 2002).

Montfort missionaries came for the first time to the Vaupés region in the 1910s. In June of 1914, the Montfort priests Pierre Baron and Hubert Damoiseaux established on the Papurí River (on the lower Vaupés) the town of Montfort that would later include a church, a mission and a boarding school (Cabrera 2002). Two years later, in 1916, Pierre Baron reported that,

The lower Vaupés region has between 7,000 and 8,000 Indians whose job is to get *mañoco* for the white men and help them get *seringa* (rubber). Huge is the trade that Brazilians do with this product [rubber] and their producers, taking each year to Brazil between 50 and 100 Indians that never come back. In this same region there are also four Colombian companies. Since two years ago, the Brazilians noticed that our mission does a counterbalance and they started to complain about the actual borders. They said that up to Yuruparí belongs to

them, this is, 15 days up from here, which is all the region inhabited by Indians. (In Domínguez 2005:179).

Baron shows how the struggles over indigenous labor were inseparable from struggles around the sovereignty of bodies, nations and territories. The conflicts around indigenous labor became a question national sovereignty, which led the government to reiterate their position that missionaries are in charge of civilizing and “protecting” the natives. In that same year, the government appointed the first “protector of the *indígenas* of the Vaupés River and its tributaries” the M.R.P. [very reverend priest] Chief of the missions of the same region in charge of the Company of Mary. The appointment of a “protector of the *indígenas*” was intended to prevent the “abuses committed by the ‘civilized race’ against the Indians; given that the former takes advantage of their ignorance and uses them for incursions and businesses” (Domínguez 2005:179).

In 1918, the government issued a decree about the “government and protection of non civilized *indígenas* in the region of Vaupés” (Morales 1975). The decree reiterated some of the principles of law 89 of 1890, saying that “the savage Indians of Vaupés, not civilized yet, but reduced to missions, are not subject to the common laws of the Republic and will be extraordinarily governed by the missionaries in charge of their redemption, in agreement with the faculties that are given through this decree for the exercise of civil, judicial and criminal authority” (Morales 1975:182). The project of *reducir* the “savage Indians” by compelling them to live grouped together in towns was crucial in Vaupés for several reasons. One of the major attributions the decree gave to missionaries was to attract the “*indígenas* so that they can form groups and populated centers, mark the boundaries of this places in a proper way, and appoint among *indígenas* the *capitanes* and police agents that must rule them, and change them when the circumstances require so” (Morales 1975:182). In this way, the project of “civilizing” the

natives went hand in hand with their resettlement in populated centers. *Reducir* here appears as synonymous with enclosure and, by the same token, is synonymous with subjecting previously dispersed people to the rule of law -even if its an exceptional law, as it happens here- by enclosing them in permanent settlements. The government of the natives was delegated to the missionaries, which in turn relied on material and practices that included the creation of towns and boarding schools in order to achieve this goal. Nonetheless, the government of the natives also entailed promoting self-government among themselves: “appoint among *indígenas* the *capitanes* and police agents that must rule them” (Morales 1975:182). In most of the indigenous communities in Northwest Amazonia today, the *capitán* is considered to be a traditional authority that is elected among the members of a specific community. In Guainía, *capitanes*, along with pastors, are the political chiefs in most indigenous communities; they resolve conflicts between members of their communities and serve as legal representatives of the communities before the State.

The government and *reducción* of the natives went hand in hand with the creation of permanent settlements and towns, such as Montfort, that made possible having the natives under the tutelage of the Catholic missionaries. The boarding school in Montfort initially had 60 students. At the boarding school, Montfort missionaries exercised rigorous discipline and surveillance. Males had technical training in bookbinding and carpentry, while females had sewing classes (Cabrera 2002:185). Montfort missionaries used the *tukano* language in Church, so that “everybody could understand,” but in the boarding school the official language was Spanish, which was expected to become the mother tongue of the natives. Both male and female students at the boarding school had to follow a strict schedule that included religious and academic activities that started early in the day (Cabrera 2002:185). The curriculum included

courses of religion, Spanish, mathematics, national history, geography, singing and gymnastics. The classes were interspersed with payers and sermons, as well as regular activities that included harvesting manioc, plantains and sugar cane, as well as processing these crops.

In Amazonia, according to Pilar García, missionaries were called by the state to transform “self-sufficient barbarians into productive subjects,” as well as to produce “citizens out of savages” (In Zarate 2008:225). In 1919 Antonio Nieto, who was *comisario* of Vaupés, reported to the central government that “these unfortunate [Indians] have only experienced oppression, cruelty and humiliation from the civilized and this make them to fear and loathe us; I think that they should be reduced immediately, given that they will be brave soldiers whom will fight with courage and *denuendo* for our cause, in case a conflict takes place” (In Domínguez 2005:180). Having the natives living together in permanent settlements or missions was useful for both the missionaries and the state; although at the same time, the idea of using missionaries and missions for the “protection” of the Indians against the “civilized” revealed the ambivalence of the state towards Amazonia and its indigenous residents. The decree of 1918 concerning the “government and protection of non civilized *indigenas* in the region of Vaupés” established that missionaries should “protect the *indígenas* against the abuses of the civilized that go to the reductions or towns of the Indians, and interfere in the contracts between the two groups in order to avoid that the first ones [Indians] are swindled or duped by the second ones [the civilized]” (Morales 1975:182).

Despite that both civilizing projects claimed to be doing the same, rubber bosses and Catholic missionaries had to compete between them for indigenous labor and bodies. While the state granted to rubber companies or specific individuals permission to use huge extensions of land (the so called *territorios baldíos*) in Amazonia, simultaneously delegated on Catholic

missionaries the government of peripheral regions and their indigenous residents. Through the law 89 of 1890 (analyzed in the first chapter) the government extended the responsibility to missionaries for the tutelage of indigenous populations. The first article of law 89 exempted from the “general legislation” of the Republic the “savages” that were being reduced by missionaries to civilized life. Law 89 established that the “[national] government in agreement with ecclesiastical authorities, will determine how these incipient societies should be governed” (Bonilla 1968). In Vaupés, these two civilizational projects, one led by rubber barons and the other one by Catholic missionaries, coexisted and produced tensions and conflicts between missionaries and rubber bosses around the government and ownership of indigenous labor and bodies.

Catholic missionaries on both sides of the border had a negative view of the presence and work of *caucheros* in the region. In Colombia and Brazil, missionaries complained about the physical violence that *caucheros* exercised over the natives and the negative influence that *caucheros* represented as they encouraged the natives to drink alcohol (Cabrera 2002:130). Conflicts between natives and *caucheros* were also common, as the later did not always fulfill the contracted agreements for the payment of labor with the natives (Domínguez 2005:180). There were also the kinds of conflicts reported by Pierre Baron in 1916, when Brazilian rubber traders took natives from the Colombian side of the border and never brought them back, keeping them away from the missions. Brazilians also disputed the location of the border, as the exact location of the border, had implications regarding the recruitment of natives as rubber tappers. According to Domínguez, despite the efforts of Catholic missionaries to stop the Indian slave trade, it continued on both sides of the border. Both the Montfort missionaries and state authorities saw Brazilian rubber traders as a threat. In the same report that Antonio Nieto

wrote for the central government in 1919, he stated that “from Brazil they force the Indians to call themselves Brazilians, to work in the *caucheras* like slaves without any wages and they take away the *naturales* in the season of rubber extraction from such Republic, pulling away from Colombian *caucheros* these beings who help them and whom are in fact paid” (In Domínguez 2005:180). In this sense, conflicts went across different lines and took place between Catholic missionaries and rubber traders, as well as between rubber bosses of different nationalities. Conflicts were about the ownership of indigenous bodies and souls, as well as about how and by whom should indigenous populations be governed and incorporated into the body politic of the state.

Towards 1912 a crisis of rubber production began as the world prices of rubber decreased. Until the beginning of the 20th century all of the rubber produced in the world came from Amazonia. In 1905, the Brazilian government in conjunction with the businessman that controlled the commercialization of rubber, established an “arbitrary” price of 3 dollars per kilo and in 1910 the price went up to 6 dollars per kilo. According to Alberto Pinzón, the arbitrary prices imposed by the government of Brazil facilitated speculation, which in turn produced a sudden collapse in rubber prices (Pinzón 1979:61). English businessmen who had benefited from the speculation started to invade the “world market with rubber from their colonies in Asia, that was rationally and technically produced in huge plantations, displacing in costs the hardship of rubber extraction in Amazonia” (Pinzón 1979:62). In Vaupés, the crisis led to the dispersal of several rubber tapping operations and some of the companies went bankrupt. However, extractive activities in the region did not end with the crisis, but rather the extraction of rubber continued with decreasing profits. At the beginning of the 1920s, the demand and discovery of a

new kind of gum, locally known as *balatá*, produced a revitalization of extractive activities and practices in the region (Domínguez 2005:186).

*Balatá* was found extensively in the lower part of Guainía River close to the border with Brazil and in the upper part of the river, where it comes close to the Isana River and the Inírida River in the north. By 1919, Venezuelan entrepreneurs had already started to extract *balatá* south of San Fernando de Atabapo, where Funes had ruled until 1921 when he was executed by the state. *Balatá* was also extracted in *Caño Bocón*, located west of where Puerto Inírida is today. In 1923, Carlos Palau (who seemed to be an entrepreneur) reported: “the *racionales* that inhabit the Colombian side of the border are mostly Venezuelan. Both *indígenas* and *racionales* work on agriculture, exploit *balatá*, *chiquichique* (fiber) and elastic gum that they sell in Brazil. Until the present these regions only have notions of Venezuelan authority” (In Domínguez 2005:187). Palau’s concern was similar to Rivera’s complaints about the fact that Colombian authorities and citizens had no presence on the Atapabo and Guainía Rivers, even in the places that were supposed to be in the Colombian side of the border. Indigenous oral histories also refer to the absence of Colombians when rubber and *balatá* started to be extracted in what is today the province of Guainía. Fausto Gómez, a Puinave elder who lives and was born and raised in *Caño Bocon*, where *balatá* was extracted during the 1920s, told me in interviews I carried out in 2006,

In ancient times they [the natives] used to work rubber and went up to the Orinoco. They worked rubber in order to buy *machetes*, salt and working tools, in that time Colombians had not existed yet, only Venezuelans. In that time the ancient ones did not know Colombians, they stayed hidden in the forest because they were afraid of the white men.

The fact that Venezuelans were the first ones to operate in the region raises questions about sovereignty, nationalization and the geographies of colonization. The initial request to create the

*corregimiento* of Guainía was done by Marco Acuña in 1925. In a letter directed to the central government in that year, Acuña argued that it was necessary to create the *corregimiento* of Guainía in order to “defend the lives, families and interests of the many *indígenas* that are constantly robbed, raped and forcibly recruited by Venezuelan elements that take them as slaves to work in the Venezuelan territory of San Fernando de Atabapo” (Domínguez 2005:173). Nonetheless, the idea of creating a new administrative unit that included parts of the Inírida and Guainía Rivers was only crystallized in 1963 when the *Comisaría* of Guainía was formally created through a state decree. However, the way in which Acuña framed his suggestion of creating a new administrative unit in terms of “defending” the *indígenas* against the “evil” Venezuelans shows the many faces taken by the conflicts between settlers across national borders and between civilizing projects that claimed to do the same.

Fausto’s description of the natives hiding “in the forest because they were afraid of the white men” echoes Camilo fear of the white man that was embodied for him in the figure of Funes. This fear mediated the earlier relationships that natives established with outsiders. This fear was produced in the midst of permanent confrontations between natives and settlers. Fausto, also told me that “white men looked at them like animals. White men killed them without pity and likewise when Indians saw a white man they killed him, if a white man saw an Indian he killed him, they killed each other.” Apparently, fear and violent confrontations not only preceded extractive activities and practices, but also coexisted with them. The fear towards the white man eventually decreased as the natives started to know and work for the first Venezuelans that arrived in the region. Natives used spurs tied to their boots in order to climb the rubber trees and extract the milk of the tree. They worked, according to Fausto, for the things in themselves (*machetes*, salt, matches, axes and clothes, among others) that *colonos* “offered” them. Natives



“did not know about the price or value that these things had.” This meant that if the “white men gave money to the *antiguos* [the ancient] for them it was like robbery because they did not know money, for them it was better that the white men gave them commodities. If the white men gave them money they would throw it away or use it to roll up and smoke tobacco.”

Fausto also narrated to me a failed attempt of evangelization in the hands of a Catholic priest,

After this, the priest arrived, he taught us to dress, write and read. Thanks God the priest taught us to dress (...) the priest grabbed an Indian boy and took him to their land [Bogotá], they taught him to study, they gave him education. The boy finished studying and came back in order to teach the other *indígenas* that did not know anything about civilization.

Curiously enough, Fausto told me how it was the fear towards the white man that “did not let them get close to the boy that had left [to Bogotá] to get prepared.” As the story goes, “few accepted the teachings of the boy that the priest had taken with him, they were not interested in civilization but in their own customs.” This story proves how Catholic attempts of evangelization in what is today Guainía failed to a large extent. In Guainía, rubber extraction and the practices that accompanied it, such as debt peonage and coerced labor, did not face the opposition of missionaries, as happened in Vaupés during the first decades of the 20th century. Until the decade of the 1940s, when Sophie Muller arrived to the region, the power of rubber barons and bosses remained largely undisputed. However, this does not mean that natives in Guainía were passive actors and mere victims of the practices associated with rubber extraction. In the next section of this chapter I analyze some of the conflicts that took place between rubber bosses and Puinaves on the Inírida River during the 1940s and 1950s.

### **Entanglements and Reactions to Colonization**

In the past, according to Fausto, natives would hear through the white men that “Germany was in war, that other countries were in war, [but] we did not know what that was.” Natives did not

seem to perceive all of the white men as violent and threatening. Fausto told me about a white man whose last name was Flórez and worked as a policeman in Mitú (the capital of Vaupés established in 1932) and then traveled to Guainía to work on rubber. Fausto said to me “despite the fact that Flórez was a policeman he never mistreated us.” The first agent of the Colombian state that Puinave elders remember was a *corregidor* that lived in *Coco Viejo* and whose name was José Elias.<sup>48</sup> Fausto said that a man whose last name was Linares sent José Elias to *El Coco*. In the official records, Francisco Linares appears as secretary of the *Comisario* of Vaupés in 1934 (Cabrera 2002:239). According to Fausto, José Elias was sent to work in the region and “take care” of the people. While Fausto said to me that the one who brought violence again to the region was Pedro Angarita, who arrived later in the 1940s, another Puinave elder called Bachaquito -from Chorro Bocón (on the Inírida River)- told me that José Elías had some posts where he tied up the natives in order to beat them and punish them. José Elías was also involved in rubber extraction and was described to me by Bachaquito as someone with anger [*rabioso*] who would “beat you up” if you got into “problems” with him. Bachaquito met José Elías in what is today Vaupés, south of Guainía, in a small town called Caruru. Bachaquito was taking some rubber to Mitú with other people when they passed through a *varador*.<sup>49</sup> That day Bachaquito saw how José Elías caught five indigenous women who were tied up and slaughtered. José Elías worked in tandem with other rubber bosses. Bachaquito told me horrifying details about how the women were slaughtered. “Well, he would cut their bodies with a knife, all the body of the women, and then he would put water with salt in a barrel and pour it over their wounds.”

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<sup>48</sup> *Corregidores* are the representatives of the state in jurisdictions known as *Corregimientos*. *Coco Viejo* was one of these *corregimientos* and it is located a few kilometers away from Inírida.

<sup>49</sup> *Varadores* are trails that connect rivers between them. Boats and loads are carried or dragged through these trails.

On the other hand, Fausto told me Pedro Angarita was the person who brought violence to the region was. Fausto recounted how,

The one who screwed us up here was *don* Pedro Angarita, he was a policeman, and he came here with a guy called Victor. When they came here they started to mistreat us, they would tie up people [men specifically] and rape married and single women [in front of them]. Both were policemen.

The fact that Fausto identified Pedro and Victor -whom were also rubber bosses- as policemen should not be ignored. In Guainía, to a large extent, patron and state authority became interchangeable and indistinguishable. Funes (see Chapter 1), for example, was simultaneously an agent of the State and a rubber boss, leading Rivera to think that “Funes is a system, a state of the soul, is the thirst of gold, is the sordid envy. Funes *son muchos* (are a lot), but only one of them bears the fateful name” (Rivera 1990:348). The process by which rubber bosses would dress like policemen, and governors (such as Funes) would officiate also as rubber bosses, reveals the mutual constitution of the political and economic orders, as well as the impossibility of separating one from the other (Coronil 1998).

Violence directed towards natives by rubber bosses and state agents acquired several forms, and one of the most prominent and recurrent forms was sexual violence. Pablo Jiménez, a Puinave elder from Chorro Bocón, told me that rubber bosses used sexual violence as a way of punishing those who fled the rubber camps. Pablo’s memories of colonization evidence how coerced labor and sexual violence were intertwined:

The ones who came to trade rubber took the Indians to the forest, they used to be there for 8,10 or 12 months (...) They used to be there for 3 years, working out there, sometimes workers would runaway from work, because they left their families in their plots and the *patrones* would not let them go back, so they used to escape. Some of the ones that lived in their plots also used to hide, because they didn’t want to go to work out there, because that was losing the family and everything (...) they looked for them, for the ones that had escaped. For example, if they had family and daughters, and if they found them, if they caught

them, they would take them back to the camp where they lived, they tied up the husband and rape them [daughters and wives] in front of him.

Brutal rapes of women were at the heart of social relationships and conflicts between white rubber bosses and natives, *patrones* and workers in Guainía. Relations of domination between white men and Indians were mediated through sexual violence against indigenous women. Anthropologists such as Michael Taussig (1986) and Roberto Pineda (2003) show how rape and torture were often displayed in public and, in some cases, became an end in themselves (a *mode of production*), and not just a mean for instilling terror among workers. Humiliation was a central part of the acts of sexual violence directed towards indigenous women. Most of the stories I heard about sexual violence would emphasize the fact that women were usually raped in public and in front of their fathers or husbands. Shame and humiliation have been associated throughout Latin America with the experience of being Indian.<sup>50</sup> In contemporary Guainía, racial prejudice is also expressed through insults, jokes and stories that most of the *colonos* tell among them about their experiences with natives. In most of the cases, these stories are told to prove how, for example, it is impossible to trust natives. However, it should be said that some of the *colonos* that tell these stories are also married to indigenous women.

The fact that white male domination over indigenous women and men played a crucial role in rubber extraction during the 1940s in Guainía leads us to consider how gender and patriarchy were remade through the process of colonization. In the context of coffee plantations of Nicaragua, Elizabeth Dore refers to the “patriarchal power of planters” and defines patriarchy as “systematic senior male control over and protection of subordinate females and males in society’s public and private domains” (Dore 2006:27). Whereas patriarchy might have worked

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<sup>50</sup> Jeffrey Gould shows how in Nicaragua ladinos combined real violence –land expropriation and coerced labor- with the symbolic violence that usually discredited indigenous identity (Gould 1998:10).

different in Amazonia and in Nicaragua, I found Dore's account useful to think how patriarchy includes not just male domination over females, but also includes (white) male control over males from a different class or ethnic group, through the 'control' of their wives, daughters, sisters and mothers. In the case of rubber extraction, it is clear that rubber bosses exercised control and domination over male indigenous rubber tappers through the public display of sexual violence exercised over indigenous women bodies. In this sense, the process of colonization produced and remade specific gender and racial ideologies.

From the perspective of the natives involved in rubber extraction, it seemed difficult to understand which was the ultimate objective of rubber bosses. According to Bachaquito,

(...) they [white men] had a problem with the Indians. They wanted, I don't know, I believe they wanted to exterminate Indians. At that time, brother, we the Indians were very stupid. Indians were also thinking: if the white men think they are going to exterminate us, then we are going to fight back!

This kind of "consciousness" of colonization that Bachaquito reveals in his narrative challenges accounts that portray natives as passive subjects of colonization. Ismael Martínez, a Puinave teacher and leftist political leader that grew up in Inírida, speaking from a position informed by contemporary indigenous struggles, told me how in the 1940s there was a sort of alliance between rubber traders and state agents in Guainía: "the representatives of the state used to intimidate the Indians, encouraging Indians to pay their debt, be loyal, obey their *patron*, they didn't have any kind of defense." As I show, the "alliance" described by Ismael between agents of the state and rubber bosses poses interpretative challenges, given that rubber bosses would often act as policeman, using symbols of state authority on their behalf, and, on the other hand, governors -such as infamous coronel Funes- were at the same time rubber entrepreneurs. However, natives were not absolutely defenseless, neither agentless, in the colonial process, as

Ismael tries to argue.<sup>51</sup> The idea of “fighting back” was actually put into practice or was produced under specific circumstances. Bachaquito told me about a specific encounter that some Puinaves had with Victor Guarín, the rubber boss that came with Pedro Angarita in the 1940s,

One day the deceased Victor Guarín came down here to pick up people, to fight with people, to fight with people, with the community that had debts with him. He found 4 persons, he tied them up, so they wouldn't do anything, he fucked the women in front of the old man, he was tied to a pole. When Guarín's boat driver was cooking a hen, the old man that was tied up was able to release his hands. There was a man sitting down with a gun, a policeman, there were two other, dressed as civilians, they were also policemen. There were other people close from there, about 10 women were also tied up, poor women, tied up, they were slaughtered with *machetes*. The old man reacted: son of a bitch, this engineer is fucking me up. We should fight! Said the old man. Right now you are going to fall down, if you die, you die, I'm going to kill twenty, I'm going to kill, said the old man. There were 2 policemen, 1 white man, and 3 Indians. The old man grabbed a piece of a wood pole and pa! [hit] the policeman, then he grabbed the carbine and the gun, come on we are going to fight then! They went up to the headwaters of a lagoon, the policeman was there when they arrived, pa! pa! pa! [sounds of a gun]. That was the remedy for that. At that moment, the fight of that time was finished. It was finished, with that. No other policeman was sent, that fight was over.

The murder of Victor in hands of a Puinave elder shows how natives were able to subvert, in some cases, the colonial order in which their lives started to unfold.<sup>52</sup> There is consciousness of the fact of being colonized, as well as of the enactment of practices that challenged the way in which patron and state authority was consolidated in the region. Bachaquito's account of this murder, complicates the picture of how rubber bosses worked in tandem with policemen: rubber bosses that were also policemen (both Pedro and Victor were policemen according to Fausto),

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<sup>51</sup> In the previous section I show how the national government assigned to the Catholic missionaries in Vaupés the task of “defending” the natives against the rubber traders from both Colombia and Brazil.

<sup>52</sup> In fact, the embracement of Christianity by Puinaves and Curripacos since the 1940s was simultaneous to the consolidation of extractive economies in the region. Indigenous communities in Guainía articulated an ambivalent relationship to colonization by adopting evangelical Christianity and simultaneously rejecting other features of colonization.

policemen who helped rubber bosses do their job, and policemen who worked with rubber bosses but were dressed as civilians. To some extent, it does not matter if Pedro and Victor Guarín were real policemen (as Fausto told me) or not. From the perspective of the natives, state and patron authority were interchangeable, there was no clear divide between rubber bosses and policemen.

I heard several times in the field the story about the murder of Victor Guarín. The story also appears in one of the chapters of Muller's last book *His Voice Shakes the Wilderness* published in 1988. In chapter 13th, about The Church Conference, Muller recounts how: "On my way to a conference in the rubber section of the Inirida headwaters, I was met with news that caused me to turn back and let the conference go on without my presence. Victor, the shrewd and cruel rubber boss, had been murdered! Because I had told the Indians not to accept his gifts that kept them in debt. I felt it better to stay away from the area" (Muller 1988:123). Muller's statement that Victor was murdered because she told the Indians "not to accept his gifts that kept them in debt" is problematic, as it portrays the natives as simply following her orders and makes a direct connection between her teachings and this event. Immediately afterwards, Muller recognizes that "the two Puinaves who had done the deed were not believers but were cousins of an outstanding believer in that village" (Muller 1988: 123). This outstanding believer was Paulino who appears in one of the pictures of Muller's book and is described by her as "one of the most enthusiastic believers of the whole Curripaco tribe" (Muller 1988: 91).<sup>53</sup> Paulino's brother, according to Muller, narrated the story of the murder of Victor Guarín to her as follows,

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<sup>53</sup> Muller recounts how Paulino and his brother went to visit her once in the headwaters of the Guainía River and tell her "about an exciting time he had had while fishing on the Inirida River farther north. Muller uses this opportunity to recall a night when "Paulino and his friends had been reading and singing one evening by the light of a flickering tin lamp when they were interrupted by a canoe pulling up to their little port. The three occupants of the canoe were

“It was the same old story of ‘white men’ committing atrocities against Indian women while their husbands were tied up and beaten –all in a village where Victor and his helpers were hunting down workers.”

“When Victor untied two of the Indians and ordered them to make a fire and cook the meal. The two hunched over their work. Still seething inwardly from the beatings, they cut the kindling wood, watching their chance for revenge. Victor sat nearby, gun in hand as usual. At last, he turned his head for a moment. They sprang at him, cutting him across the neck and head with a machete. He uttered a cry and slumped to the ground.

“That's the last time you'll ever beat us!” They threw the words in his face and gave him one final blow” (Muller, 1988: 123).

Despite the slight differences in the details that both stories give about the murder of Victor Guarín, there is a sense of victory in the way in which both stories end. While in the version of the story given to me by Bachaquito, Victor was killed with a gun in a nearby lagoon, in the version that appears in Muller's book, Victor was sliced “across the neck and head with a machete.” However, both stories seem to derive their structure and meaning from the “same old story of ‘white men’ committing atrocities against Indian women while their husbands were tied up and beaten.” The murder of Victor Guarín should be understood as an attempt to change the relations of domination established between rubber bosses and indigenous workers. Both stories emphasize how the public rape of indigenous women in the hands of white rubber bosses was widely practiced and used as a form of coercion and humiliation. The murder of Victor was

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Puinave Indians who had been in the jungle all day cutting *chiqui-chiqui* (palm fiber for brooms) for a national *patrón*. They also were far from home but had just heard the singing in Curripaco and had hurried over to investigate. One of these visitors, Pablo -a special friend of Paulino's- spoke the Curripaco language as well as his own, since his Curripaco mother had married into the Puinave tribe. Pablo was followed by his cousin, Pascual, and his friend, Lino. As he pressed toward the little Curripaco group, he eyed with keen interest the little booklet Paulino was holding. “What is that in your hand?” Pablo asked. He had never seen an Indian - let alone his Curripaco friends- with books or paper. “It's God's Word,” Paulino was quick to say. “Listen while we read.” And the Curripacos solemnly read in turn, one verse at a time. Pablo and his fellows became excited. If their friends could read, why couldn't they? “Teach us to read right now!” they requested eagerly” (Muller 1988: 92).



thought to end the violence that was deployed in the relationships between rubber bosses and natives as part of rubber extraction. Bachaquito ends the story saying that the “fight of that time” was finished with the murder of Victor Guarín: “no other policeman was sent, that fight was over.” Paulino’s brother also ends the story, according to Muller, quoting the natives involved in the incident: “That's the last time you'll ever beat us!” They threw the words in his face and gave him one final blow.” Violence towards natives did not end with this event. State agents deployed violence in different ways and situations before and after the year of 1963, when the province of Guainía was formally created. Nonetheless, there are differing visions in the region about when did brutal violence associated and produced within extractive economies came to an end. For example, Juan Soto, one of the so called founders of Inírida, brought by the first governor of the province in 1965 (two years after the province was created), told me that violence ended when State institutions started to work in the region, denying any kind of agency to natives in the process:

When authorities came here, there was a court, people started complaining and they started calling the bosses. Let me see the book you have, where you have your balance, your receipts –the authorities would enquire-. They didn’t have. Then, you are in peace with this sir, nobody owes anyone –the authorities would say-. Given that the ones who were really in debt were exempted, bosses were broke, it was finished, they couldn’t make it, they were fucked up. Then, the Indian could breathe more again.

Nonetheless, in the same conversation Soto recognized that when he came here to establish the *Comisaría* he had seen *colonos* trading natives in trips that were made to Brazil: “they brought 40 or 50 natives and took them to the forest to cut fiber with nothing to eat, those people ran away when they could.” Furthermore, official documents show how some of the debts that natives had were transferred from patron to patron under the supervision of state authorities. Debt-peonage did not disappear with the creation of the *Comisaría* during the 1960s. In fact, an official document about “norms for protecting indigenous work” issued in 1965 reaffirmed that

the State, following law 89 of 1890, was called to exercise tutelage over the natives and the goods they produced. The document expressed the interest of state authorities to regulate “accounting books” that traders should keep as part of their transactions with natives, as well as the so-called *avances* (advances) that, according to the document, were “rule in the customs of the region.”

### **Muller, Catholic Missionaries and *Colonos***

Conflicts around the sovereignty of indigenous labor, territories and bodies reemerged at the towards the end of the 1950s when Catholic missionaries based in Mitú became interested in expanding their activities towards the northern part of the province of Vaupés (which today is Guainía). Based on expeditions done to this region, Catholic missionaries wrote two reports that address the impact of Muller's work upon the natives and its consequences for the mission given to them by the State. In the reports, Muller is portrayed as a challenge for the authority the state had granted to Catholic missionaries over the indigenous population that lived in peripheral regions of the country. One of the reports is about the “activities” of Sophie Muller and was written by priest Luis Noel Rivera. According to the report, priest Rivera had “missionized” for more than 2 years throughout the Inírida and Guaviare Rivers and had participated in a *correria misional* (missionary expedition) along the route from San Fernando de Atabapo to Mitú in Vaupés following the Atabapo, Guainía, Cuyarí, Isana and Querarí Rivers). In the report, priest Rivera argues that,

The obvious fact in all of our journey is that Sofía Muller, an American protestant missionary who has worked for several years in the region doing proselytizing activities, practically rules [*domina*] the North and North-Eastern areas of Vaupés: she exercises a real authority over the *indigenas* [natives], that tribute to her true homage of submission and respect and in fact do not recognize another authority different from her, not just in religious issues, but also

regarding civil, economic, and social issues. It is not exaggerated to say that they obey her blindly and execute without repairs whatever she orders.<sup>54</sup>

In this sense, the authority and rule that Muller had gained over indigenous communities in the region was conceived by Catholic missionaries as a threat that was not limited to “religious issues,” but also extended to “civil, economic, social and familiar terrains.” Specifically, Rivera mentioned in the report that as a consequence of Muller's “proselytizing activities,” her teachings and collaborators among the *indígenas*, serious problems were created that affected both natives and *colonos* [settlers]. Rivera refers to problems in five different domains: 1. Economic 2. Administration and government 3. Regarding the civilization of *indígenas* 4. Education and 5. Religious. Regarding the “economic problems”, Rivera argued that,

Given that *indígenas* spent their time singing and following the prescriptions of the sect, we have to say that in general terms they [natives] can't and don't want to work for any white patron. In addition to the laziness [of not working] that is instilled through these practices, we add the fact that Muller instills hate towards the white men, whom she points as being allies of the devil, if not the devil himself, and consequently working with them constitutes a sin. In fact, if an *indígena* is going to work for a white man it is necessary that Sofía authorizes this, which is not easy.<sup>55</sup>

Beyond the fact whether the account is totally true or not, it is clear that Muller's work and influence in the region was conceived by religious and civil authorities as a threat to the process of colonization that was being advanced by white settlers and state agents through different extractive economies. While few decades before, Catholic missionaries had claimed to defend the natives against the rubber traders and bosses, based on a negative idea of the work and influence of *caucheros* among indigenous communities; now they thought that an American evangelical missionary was putting the work and 'mission' of both white settlers and Catholic

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<sup>54</sup> Informe sobre actividades de Sofía Muller. Prefectura Apostólica de Mitú. Mitú, Junio de 1961. Archivo General de la Nación. Fondo Comisarias.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

missionaries in jeopardy. The evangelical conversion of native populations, as seen through the eyes of Catholic missionaries, became a proof of the fact that natives did not like to work and were easy to deceive. As an example of the consequences of the amount of time that natives spend in their religious duties, Rivera mentioned the example of what happened in the Guaviare region. This “promised land” [*tierra de promisión*], according to Rivera, “remains unproductive and the rich fishing of the river has been lost to a large extent because of the lack of arms, last year the *colonos* had to bring fisher men from the Magdalena River, while the *indígenas* spent weeks and months travelling to their conferences.”

The vision that Catholic missionaries -and later white settlers- developed about the evangelical work of Muller in Guainía, reinscribed some of the racial stereotypes that were commonly associated with native populations, such as the idea that natives were lazy and naive. In another report, written in 1961 by reverend Manuel Maria Elorza, who had been in charge of the *correria misional* (missionary expedition), Elorza complained saying that “unlike the white men, the *indígenas* are very lazy, to their innate laziness now we have to add the one that instills upon them the evangelical religion, according to which there is no need of accumulating to much things [*conseguir muchas cosas*].” The alleged naiveté of natives also facilitated the influence that Muller’s teachings had upon them, inculcating easily in them hate towards the Catholic priests. In the first report, priest Rivera complained about this arguing that,

Convinced [Muller] of the powerful influence that her teachings exercise upon the simple *indígenas*, she can then inculcate to them the hate towards the Catholic priest and distort the Sacred Scriptures in order to explain them that our antecessors, the Princes of the Jewish Priests, gave death to Jesus, that we are the same as them, even more, that we are the devil itself. Because of this, it is not surprising that when we arrive to a house, its dwellers felt really in presence of the devil, and women and boys, and even some men, ran scared towards the forest in front of such monsters.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

One of the most common strategies used by missionaries (evangelical and Catholic) in their work, has been to “demonize” indigenous culture and religion (Meyer 1999). However, little attention has been paid to the ways in which missionaries used a similar language in their interactions and exchanges with settlers, other missionaries and state agents. Both settlers and Catholic missionaries complained about how, in some situations, Muller demonized them, putting the natives converted to Christianity against them. In turn, settlers and Catholic missionaries saw Muller as a threat to the rights they had over indigenous souls, bodies and lands. In one way or another, Muller was interfering in the relationships historically established between natives and settlers, as well as in the relationships between natives and Catholic missionaries. In this regard, Rivera mentioned that in a place named *La Estación* on the Guaviare River there was a *colono* established there whose name was Abelardo Rivera. One day there was a problem between Abelardo and one of the *indígenas* that worked for him. The news about this problem came to Sophie and she went to Abelardo's house: “in a seigniorial and authoritative tone she warned him [Abelardo] to abandon the place and leave the region, (...) arguing that the cocoa plantations he exploited and the lands he was cultivating used to belong to the *Indios*.”<sup>57</sup> Priest Rivera saw this kind of situation as proof of the “supreme mastery” [*supremo dominio*] that Muller exercised over the “land and its *indígenas*,” to the extent that she pushed the natives to ignore the “authorities of their own country and practically removes their notion of fatherland [*Patria*] and nationality.”<sup>58</sup>

In this sense, Priest Rivera argued that the “orientation” of Muller's work placed in jeopardy the “civilization of *indígenas*,” formally assigned by the State to Catholic missionaries: “with

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

such orientation we can't say that the *indígenas* that are being catechized in Protestantism are being civilized.”<sup>59</sup> Specifically, Rivera mentions how the “sect limits the faculty of the *indígena* to own [*facultad de poseer*] and his ambitions to improve are trimmed.”<sup>60</sup> Priest Rivera argued that, for example, none of the evangelical *indígenas* were permitted to own an outboard motor because this supposedly did not allowed them to sing. In fact, Rivera claimed to have seen Sophie scold an *indígena* who had received an outboard engine and that he was planning to pay for his work, and apparently ordered the native to return the engine. Additionally, Rivera says in the report that *indígenas* themselves told them that [Muller] had forbidden men to own more than 2 pairs of pants and 2 shirts, while women could not wear dresses made of silk. These cases were considered by Rivera to be evidence that demonstrated how the “evangelical *indígena* has to run away from civilization and material improvement as sinful things.”<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, Rivera complained about the kind of education that Muller imparted to the natives, saying that

(...) even if its true that the *indígena* is taught to read, usually in his native tongue, these teachings only prepare them for using the book of religious chants and for the reading of the books of the Bible. In practice, teachings are reduced to reading and singing. There is no other intellectual training, and the *indígenas* don't know anything about Colombia, it's history, it's government, etc... and they don't want to. They even told us once that they did not want in their villages schools of the government, that they already know a lot.<sup>62</sup>

Muller preceded the efforts of the State and Catholic missionaries at “civilizing” the natives in the region, but the educational model on which her evangelical project relied was considered “too religious” in the eyes of Catholic missionaries. Evangelical and Catholic missionaries had different allegiances, different methods in their evangelical work, and apparently held slightly

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

different ideas of how civilized *indígenas* should behave. Catholic missionaries never taught the natives how to write and read their own language, and never made translations of the New Testament; while evangelical missionaries always used native languages in their work and created the first written alphabets for several indigenous languages. Most of the evangelical work of Catholic missionaries was done in Spanish, which was to be the proper mother tongue of the natives and the national language of the government for which they worked. Evangelical missionaries that worked in the region never adopted these goals, instead they used to live among the natives, learn their language and culture, and then they would preach in native language, as well as train indigenous pastors, missionaries and leaders. In fact, a report written by an inter-ministerial commission that visited the region in March of 1965, compared the different methods and strategies of catechizing used by Catholic and evangelical missionaries, arguing that,

The work of the evangelicals looks broader [in scope] than the one of the Catholics, possibly because of the different procedures used in catechizing. The evangelical lives [*convive*] with the *indígena*, learns his dialect and intimates in friendship and customs, obtaining more trust from him, be it child or adult.

Instead, the Catholic missionary, at least of what I have seen in Guainía and Putumayo, devotes himself to the education of children and appears locked in the mission because of his duties, without interacting too much with indigenous adults or the parents of the children.<sup>63</sup>

However, the differences between the methods used by Catholic and evangelical missionaries do not explain in themselves the conflicts that emerged between Muller and Catholic missionaries in Guainía. Before the eyes of the Catholic missionaries from Vaupés, the task assigned to them by the State in law 89 of 1890 -that is, civilizing and mentoring the tribes that

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<sup>63</sup> Informe de la Comisión Interministerial. Fuerzas Militares de Colombia. Armada Nacional. Fuerza Naval del Sur. Comando Base Naval ARC “Leguízamo”. Leguízamo, Marzo 22 de 1965. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.

have not yet been reduced to civilized life- seemed to be put at risk by the work of Muller. The report written by Priest Rivera in 1961 was clear in stating that the “mastery” [dominio] Muller had over the educational, economic, governmental and religious realms was “supreme,” as it expanded also to bodies and territories. In the second report written also in 1961 by Priest Manuel María Elorza (the apostolic prefecture of Vaupés at the time) as part of a missionary expedition, he complained about how preachers of the “sect” instill the natives to work just on their *conucos* [gardens], building their houses and Church.<sup>64</sup> Any other kind of job, according to the protestant missionaries that Elorza met in his trip, would prevent the natives from their religious practices and contribute to the disintegration of their families. Elorza emphasized that Muller compelled her followers to avoid any contact with non-Christians, specifically with Catholics. This fact created, in Elorza's words, a “seed of division” between *colonos* and *indígenas*, as well as a hostile environment for Catholic missionaries. Nonetheless, state officers who visited the region four years after Elorza wrote his report had a different interpretation of Muller's work among the natives. The report of the inter-ministerial commission that visited the region in 1965 praised Muller's work, saying that,

Without a doubt, besides the evangelizing practices, [Muller] has taught the Indian to live cleaner [*en mejor aseó*], to live an organized life, [and] learned to read and write in their own dialects: that is how within primitivism, and, specifically, the oblivion these regions [are subjected to], the indian tries to live with dignity, dressed, he is hospitable and helpful, cultivates its *conuco* (garden), as well, most of the families have an outboard engine for the canoe and shotguns for hunting; sleep in hammocks and distribute in order their jobs: women cook at home and men fish, hunt and cut down the jungle for the *conucos* (garden).<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Informe sobre una correría misional por los ríos Guaviare, Inírida, Atabapo, Guainía, Isana y Querari. Prefectura Apostólica de Mitu. Abril 9-Mayo 28 de 1961. Archivo General de la Nación. Fondo Comisarias.

<sup>65</sup> Informe de la Comisión Interministerial. Fuerzas Militares de Colombia. Armada Nacional. Fuerza Naval del Sur. Comando Base Naval ARC “Leguízamo”. Leguízamo, Marzo 22 de 1965. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.



The way in which this official report describes and praises the alleged effects of Muller's work among the natives, puts into question the truth-claims of the reports written by Catholic missionaries, including the claim that Muller stopped them from owning, as well as the inherently negative vision that Catholic missionaries had of Muller's work. Furthermore, the positive view of evangelical missionaries displayed in the official report raises questions about the “real” differences between the work and aims of Catholic and evangelical missionaries. In fact, based on the predominance of evangelical Christianity in the region, the official report of 1965 proposed a “mutual comprehension and help” between Catholics and Christians, arguing that both were “Christians” and shared a praiseworthy purpose. This “mutual help and comprehension” would benefit the “truths they teach” and “who else can do better for these Colombians and forgotten territories?” While it might be true that both Catholic and Christian evangelizing projects had some similarities and were both convenient to the State, the idea that Catholics and evangelicals could reach an agreement and work together reveals a lack of understanding regarding the conflicts between Catholic and evangelical missionaries in the region since 1958. Probably, the members of the inter-ministerial commission did not have any access to this information; nor did they to know very much about the conflicts between Catholic and evangelical missionaries.

It is worth noting that in 1958 a Catholic mission was established close to a place called La Ceiba on the Inírida River. Elorza reported that after three years of struggle the mission was established with a house for missionaries, a house for missionary women who had started to work there in February of 1961, and a boarding school with 50 boys, among whom some were natives. According to Elorza, the mission received generous support from *colonos* while the natives under the influence of Muller were indifferent to and opposed the Catholic missionaries.

In fact, Elorza recounts how some of the evangelical *indígenas* who lived close by moved to a distant place, apparently following Muller's orders. Furthermore, Elorza reported that in 1961 the Priest Francisco Luis Gil, who was in charge of the mission, was insulted verbally and physically because he let a boy stay in the boarding school who “pledged to him [Priest Gil] to admit him with the other [boys] who had started classes.”<sup>66</sup> Despite being hated and repudiated by the *indígenas*, the priests in charge of the mission devoted themselves to organize the boarding school with the children of *colonos* and with the sympathy of the “civilized inhabitants.” The mission continued in La Ceiba until 1968, when it was closed and its personnel moved to Inírida in order to support the labor of the new Parish established that same year in town.

In the report of the missionary expedition, Elorza went further saying that Muller's presence and work was against national laws. According to Elorza, Muller had promoted an intense religious proselytism in a shameless and illegal way throughout the region. Elorza recalled that, in the Convention of Missions signed between the national government and the Holy See, it was stipulated that only the Catholic religion can be catechized in mission territories, while in the territory under scrutiny Protestantism was taking possession over the region, breaching this agreement. Elorza complained that none of the claims sent to the national government asking for the removal of foreign violating missionaries had been listened to. Elorza accused the national government of breaching the Convention of Missions, letting Muller and her

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<sup>66</sup> There is a widespread rumor in Inírida regarding the death of Priest Félix Valencia Cano in August of 1959. Valencia Cano had established the mission in 1958 and local histories report that he became sick and died in 1959 (Acevedo 2002:104). However, when I asked people about the mission in La Ceiba, they often told me that evangelicals had poisoned Valencia Cano, the first priest in charge of the mission (Valencia Cano). The remains of Priest Valencia Cano are kept next to the altar of the Cathedral of Inírida. On the gravestone one can read “Priest Félix Valencia Cano m.x.y. August 11 of 1959. Seed of the gospel in this land.”

collaborators develop evangelizing activities in the region that consisted, to a large extent, on discrediting the Catholic Church and its ministers.

Towards the end of the report, Elorza summarizes the way in which an apparently religious issue (Muller's work and presence), had become a much broader political issue in which questions of sovereignty, government, education, economy and state authority were at stake. In fact, Elorza finishes the report saying that the “religious problem” created by Muller through her propaganda against the Catholic Church, had turned into a problem of “sovereignty and borders.” The reverend Manuel Maria Elorza, in charge of the expedition, complained about the fact that “the Indians told us that they were ready to leave Colombian territory and move to lands of Venezuela or Brazil in the event that Catholic missionaries” tried to evangelize them. The fact that Elorza frames Muller's works as both a “religious problem” and a problem of “sovereignty and borders,” reveals how “religious” and “political” issues were intertwined in the peripheral region of Northwest Amazonia in charge of Catholic missionaries since the late 19th century. As late as 1961, Northwest Amazonia was still a frontier under dispute between different states and missionary orders, including evangelical and Catholic orders.

### **A New *Comisaría* and a New Town**

The creation in 1963 of a new *Comisaría* (Guainía) by the Colombian government in Northwest Amazonia should be understood within the political disputes described above. The new *Comisaría* corresponded with the northern part of the *Comisaría* of Vaupés and was crossed by the Inírida and the Guainía Rivers. Although it is not possible to make a direct connection between the creation of the new province and Muller's presence the region, it is clear that sovereignty over indigenous territories and bodies had become an issue for the central government. Most of the histories written about Guainía emphasize how the central state created

the new *Comisaría* in order to gain control over frontier regions and populations that have been historically beyond its reach. Since the 1920s, visitors to the region of what is today Guainía complained about the fact that no state authorities, neither civil nor military had any kind of presence in the region.<sup>67</sup> As I mentioned earlier, one of the first requests to create the *corregimiento* of Guainía was done by a *colono* called Marco Acuña in 1925. In a letter directed to the central government in that year, Acuña argued that it was necessary to create the *corregimiento* of Guainía in order to “defend the lives, families and interests of the many *indígenas* that are constantly robbed, raped and forcibly recruited by Venezuelan elements that take them as slaves to work in the Venezuelan territory of San Fernando de Atabapo” (In Domínguez 2005:173). Decades later, in the report written in 1961, Priest Manuel María Elorza dedicated a section of the report to the “absence of authorities and the ineffectiveness of the existing ones.” Elorza lamented the precariousness of the few *corregimientos* and police inspections present in the region (*El Coco*, a few miles west of Inírida, was one of the few police inspections that were established in the region). Priest Elorza also complained about the absence of transportation available for state agents in a region where “every *colono* and trader had to look for its own medium of transportation” and where “smuggling activities” were common along the border areas. In addition, Elorza pointed out that state agents lacked the physical means to “impose” their authority among people (especially those considered civilized) who “were always armed and take a revolver wherever they go.” *Colonos* (especially those that lived in the lower Guaviare Region) carried of “justice among themselves,” while the [state] authority without any support or police does not dare to file a report to superior authorities. State officials, according to Elorza, did not even have access to paper with which to write

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<sup>67</sup> See my analysis in Chapter 1 of the report written by José Eustasio Rivera as part of his participation in a border commission in the region in 1923.

reports or letters for official purposes. In this sense, Elorza complained both about the “religious” problem created by Muller's campaign among indigenous population, and also about the fact that *colonos* were beyond the rule of the state. Consequently it was necessary to incorporate these regions and their inhabitants into the body politic. As I will show in the rest of the chapter, colonization and state formation became issues that concerned both *colonos* and *indígenas* in different ways.

On July 4th of 1963, conservative President Guillermo Leon Valencia signed the law by which the new *Comisaría* of Guainía was created. It should not be considered an accident the fact that the law to create the new province was signed in 1963, five years after the *Frente Nacional* (National Front) began in 1958. The *Frente Nacional* was the product of a political agreement signed in 1956 between the two main political parties: Liberals and Conservatives. The agreement was signed to end the dictatorship of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953-1957) and reduce the increasing political violence between Liberals and Conservatives. During the *Frente Nacional* there was parity in public offices and each party governed for periods of 4 years, throughout a 16 year period (1958-1974). The bipartisan political system institutionalized during *Frente Nacional* continued until 1991 when the current Political Constitution approved a multi-party political system. In addition to this, the *Frente Nacional* constituted an attempt to expand the power and authority of the State to those regions that had little interaction with the State. Another idea promoted by *Frente Nacional* was to repopulate and “rehabilitate” places and regions affected by political violence since 1948. However, few historical research has been centered on the historical experience of the *Frente Nacional* in regions and places such as Northwest Amazonia that have traditionally been ignored by Colombian historians. I attempt here to change this trend in national scholarship by making visible how macro social and

political processes (such as the *Frente Nacional*) were lived, made and experienced in the margins of the nation state.

The “official” process of colonization started in 1965 with the decision to establish the capital of the new *Comisaría* (initially called *Obando* and later Puerto Inírida) close to the confluence of the Inírida and Guaviare Rivers where a small indigenous village called by then *Las Brujas* (The Sorceresses) was located. According to indigenous accounts, the name of the village in Puinave was *Júnsutat*, which means the *bamba* [lower part of the tree] of the *ceiba*. The *ceiba* is a tree of huge size and thickness; it produces a cottonish flower called *Junsu* in Puinave, which was used for making darts. Toró, a Puinave *payé* (shaman) that came from *Caño Chucuto* on the Inírida River and lived for 2 years in Caranocoa (very close to Inírida) where his nephew Agapito Sandoval was *capitán*, established *Júnsutat* decades before the town was founded. In his book about the history of Inírida, Tiberio de Jesús Acevedo relates that Toró was a traditional native (*indígena tradicional*) who had limited contact with the white men and preserved his “ancestral beliefs” (Acevedo 2002: 91).<sup>68</sup> After requesting permission from Agapito Sandoval to make a *conuco* [garden] in *Júnsutat*, Toró settled there with his wife, daughter and two sons. Therefore, explains Acevedo, the name of *Las Brujas* for the village established by Toró started to circulate after Sophie Muller came to the region because Toró refused to convert to Christianity. The idea that in that place (*Júnsutat*) lived a sorcerer (Toró) and sorceresses, referring the indigenous women that lived there, became widespread and popular in the region even among the white settlers, who used the name of *Las Brujas* in some of the official reports written in 1965 (Acevedo 2002:101).

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<sup>68</sup> Tiberio de Jesús Acevedo is a teacher from the interior of the country, married to an indigenous woman. He has done research on his own about indigenous cosmologies and culture, some of his research has been funded by the Ministry of Culture, and has been done with girls and boys interested in indigenous culture.

There are different versions about the foundation of Inírida and the characteristics of *Las Brujas* when the governmental commission in charge of establishing the capital of the new *Comisaría* arrived in 1965. For instance, in a conversation we had in front of his house in April 2009, I asked Diego Gómez (a Puinave elder from *El Paujil* who was born in *Las Brujas*) about the foundation of Inírida, he told me that all of the Puinaves that had established *Las Brujas* were already converted to evangelical Christianity and insisted that they had been so for about 20 years before government officials came to establish Inírida in 1965. Diego recounted how “in those days, before they [white men] came to found this, the ones who established [*fundó*] this were evangelical, Agapito was an elder pastor, his brother Antonio was a pastor, Alejandro was also a pastor.” In this sense, it is hard to tell why *Júnsutat* was known as *Las Brujas* if most of the families established there in 1965 were evangelical. In other words, the process by which *Las Brujas* became or was from the beginning an indigenous evangelical village remains to be traced and reconstructed. In Acevedo’s book there is a sketch of the village of *Júnsutat* [based on information provided by Orlando Acosta and his wife Etelvina Restrepo, who lived in *Las Brujas* when the “founding Comission” arrived] that shows two lines of houses that follow the actual layout of the main street of Inírida where most of the stores and shops are located, ending in the port. Acevedo lists 21 houses with their past and present “owners,” a “chapel of worship,” the tomb of Toró and the zone of gardens. The layout of *Júnsutat* presents striking similarities with contemporary indigenous evangelical villages, where it is common to see lines of houses that are in front of each other and a church closing the lines on one end or the other. Acevedo mentions that as part of his research he had conversations in 2001 with José Elías Cayupare “who understands and speaks Spanish, and performed as pastor in *Júnsutat* and now lives in the neighborhood *La Esperanza*” (Acevedo 2002:100).

The first regional government (*gobierno comisarial*) was installed on Sunday February 7th of 1965. On a decree signed two days before, the new *comisario* Hernán Ríos declared February 7th “civic day in all the territory of the *Comisaría* as a tribute to the Civil, Military and Ecclesiastical authorities that labor with creative effort, tenacity and patriotism in order to lay the foundations of the future of this rising section of Colombia.”<sup>69</sup> The decree also stated that every February 7th the *people* of Guainía should express its gratefulness to the *doctor* Guillermo León Valencia, for having sanctioned the “law that created the new *Territorio Nacional*.”<sup>70</sup> In his book, Acevedo asserts that Hernan Ríos González, the head of the new regional government, recognized to some extent the authority the *capitán* of *Júnsutat* Delfín Acosta and to the *capitán* of Caranacoa Agapito Sandoval, whose jurisdiction extended to *Júnsutat* (Acevedo 2002:96). The *comisario* tried to reach an agreement with indigenous authorities in order to have access to the land that was used by natives and where the capital of the new province was going to be established. According to Acevedo, the regional government was able to reach an “agreement” with indigenous authorities and this included the official recognition of the authority of Agapito and Delfín: “In order to *congraciar* [gain their affect] the *capitanes* were taken by the *Comisario* to Bogotá and invited to the National Congress where they were condecorated” (Acevedo 2002:96). Agapito told Acevedo in a personal conversation: “the *Comisario* told me: Agapito, I name you *capitán* of the Puinaves and Delfín Acosta [*capitán*] of the Curripacos, so there won't be any problems” (Acevedo 2002:96). In this sense, official recognition of indigenous authorities went hand in hand with processes of dispossession and land expropriation. In October of 1965 the general secretary of the *Comisaría*

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<sup>69</sup> Decreto 003 de 1965. Por el cual se declara oficialmente establecido dentro de su territorio el primer Gobierno de la Comisaría Especial del Guainía y se dispone conmemorar esta fecha. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.



named Agapito Sandoval a substitute member of the board of local promotion, recognizing “personal merits and his willingness to serve the welfare of the community.” After the supposed alliance between the regional government and the *capitanes*, argues Acevedo, “the *indígenas* promised [se comprometieron] to build the town, where the capital of Guanía would be erected, *capitán* Agapito Sandoval was incorporated to the official staff of the Comisaria and retired with a pension” (Acevedo 2002:96). Nonetheless, official documents show that the incorporation of natives to the working force of the Comisaría was not always done through the recognition of local authority. In a letter written to the *Comisario* in February 10 of 1965, the inspector of the *Comisaría* reported that he had started to clear up the urban area of El Coco with the help of seven natives from *Las Brujas*, one settler [blanco] and two merchants from the place. The inspector clarified in the report that three out of the seven natives were punished after they had disturbed public peace. There are, in fact, more paradoxes in Acevedo's account: why did the *Comisario* named Agapito and Delfín *capitanes* if they were already recognized as such by their own people? In order to answer to this question we need to look at the ways in which some indigenous authorities and leaders (such as *capitanes*) have been historically constituted as mediators between the State and indigenous communities.<sup>71</sup> While rubber bosses introduced the figure of the *capitán* as a strategy for controlling and organizing the indigenous labor force, the State named and recognized indigenous *capitanes* as part of a complex and somehow ambivalent process of domination. In one way or another, the recognition of indigenous authorities became a form of “indirect rule” through which the relationships between indigenous communities and the State were organized.

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<sup>71</sup> In the specific case of Northwest Amazonia, it is clear that what today are considered indigenous traditional authorities (i.e. pastors and *capitanes*) are the outcome of specific processes of colonization and evangelization.

The story of how Inírida was established remains today a contentious matter among *colonos* and natives alike. Ismael Martínez, the Puinave political leader I mentioned in section 2, recounted to me in the summer of 2007 the story of the foundation of Inírida as a “territorial invasion.” Ismael heard initially this story from Orlando Acosta, an elder and indigenous pastor that lives in El Paujil. Orlando told Ismael how “the white men came, the *fundadores* [founders], they offered us 5 pesos to each one of us and told us they were going to build a big town for us.” Ismael emphasized that “we the Puinave used to live here, around the *ceiba*, in the *bamba* [lower part of the tree trunk] *ceiba*, around the *ceiba* [...] here lived *Júnsutat*, which was the name of the community, it was the Puinave settlement when the invaders created the *Comisaría*.” Ismael explained to me how, “they came to us with that story and the people accepted it, and they used the Puinave as workers, pushed them out to the periphery, to that corner that is the *zona indígena* [indigenous area].”<sup>72</sup> This story should be understood within the context of past and present conflicts between *colonos* and natives in the region. For instance, in October of 1965 more than 10 *colonos* that lived in the Upper Inírida River requested protection from the regional government, arguing that they had heard versions that “natives want to finish (kill) with the white men that inhabit these remote locations with no official protection from government authorities.”<sup>73</sup>

Ismael’s story about the foundation of Inírida is in opposition to other stories and narratives about the same topic. Specifically, the stories told to me by some of the so-called *fundadores*, *colonos* that came in the 1960s when the *Comisaría* was being established, the majority of which ended up working in one way or another for the regional government, had a heroic tone,

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<sup>72</sup> *Zona indígena* is one of the poorest neighborhoods in Inírida, it has sewage problems and no water supply.

<sup>73</sup> Carta dirigida al Señor Comisario Especial de El Guainía. Morichal, Octubre 16 de 1965. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.

emphasizing how they brought progress and civilization to the region. One of them told me in the summer of 2006, “*los blancos* [white men] bring progress, so they [natives] can have a refrigerator, a power plant for electricity that did not exist before, and an outboard engine.” That same summer I met Juan Soto (one of the so-called *fundadores*) in the summer of 2006 in his small bakery, he told me to ask him, when I came back to formally interview him, how he was called with other 40 guys to be part of the first commission that was created to establish the new capital and province. One week after this, I started the conversation with Juan Soto with that question:

E: So you were called, was it the first *comisario*? was it Cliomedes or the one before?

JS: Hernan Ríos Gonzalez. I was working with the oil company [in Putumayo], I was a hunter and an explorer, the *comisario don* Hernán knew me and sent me a letter that said: Juan Soto if it is possible come with me to a distant territory for the foundation of a *comisaria* that is in Guainía and I need friends who know about the jungle to come with me, [people] who know about all those matters because it is necessary. If you find a friend of your stature to go to the *monte* [jungle], go ahead find one or two. I had my brother, who died recently in the Guainía (river), he was a brave explorer of the *monte* and we came with him. We left Putumayo on January 1st of 1965, they brought us by plane from Puerto Asís (Putumayo) to Bogotá. In Bogotá we spend eight days in a hotel, eight days later we told the *comisario*: this is very cold and boring, sent us to a warm place! then we were sent to Villavicencio. In Villavicencio he [the *comisario*] came and started to find the personnel such as a treasurer, doctors [...] he set up everything and the *comisario* told us: well you guys have rested, we are going to load the trucks, we will leave in 7 or 8 trucks, commissions will be named to take care of the stuff and help the driver, and so it was...

Juan Soto continued narrating for me in a heroic tone how they traveled for several days through a broken and muddy road until they arrived to Santa Rita (located in the province of Vichada, close to the Orinoco). In Santa Rita they unloaded the trucks, loaded some boats that were sent to them and took off to reach the Inírida River through the Orinoco River. Some of the details given by Juan Soto raised doubts in me about the kind of enterprise he was talking

about: “it seemed to me like a commission of crazy guys, because neither the *comisario* nor the engineer knew the place where we were supposed to be going.” The commission started to look for a place where they could establish a town with an airport, while the *comisario* decided to set up a tent in the mission of La Ceiba and started to take care of business from there. The commission tried to survey the land for an airstrip in Caranacoa and in La Ceiba, but both were floodplains inadequate for supporting an airstrip and a town. After these failed attempts to establish the new capital, a new commission from the central government arrived with the Secretary of Interior and the head of the division of *Territorios Nacionales*. The members of the new commission said: “the new *comisaría* will be established in San Felipe (Upper Rio Negro),” and flew down there in a seaplane with the *comisario*. The terrain in San Felipe was also useless, according to Juan Soto, worst than the places they (Juan Soto and the members of the first commission) had checked out on the Inírida River.<sup>74</sup> The new commission went back to La Ceiba and a commission that was in *Las Brujas* came there. This last commission, unlike the other two, was composed by *colonos* that already lived in the region, among which Juan Soto mentioned Samuel Pachón, Vicente Suárez and Yesid Suárez. These *colonos* told to the members of the commission from Bogotá: “look, down there, there is a place [*Las Brujas*] that looks to us, who have been living here a long time, good for a city and an airport.” The *comisario* replied saying “it is not possible, I know a lot of natives and none of them has said anything (about *Las Brujas*).” The *comisario* sent a military engineer with other people, including Juan Soto, to look at the terrain and make measurements for an airport and a town.

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<sup>74</sup> There is today an airstrip in San Felipe, used during the 1990s to ship out drugs from the region and since the military took control of the region in 2008 it is used to move personnel and provision. Twice a month there is a commercial flight from Inírida to San Felipe from a private airline that owns just one DC-3.

They took a quick look at the terrain where the airport is located today, conducted some land survey and the engineer said “it works, a big town can be settled here.” Juan Soto and the other people went back to La Ceiba to tell the *comisario*, all of them went back to *Las Brujas*. They came back to *Las Brujas*, set up their tents and found around 7 straw houses, “there lived *capitán* Delfín Acosta and 6 more families, kin of him, very formal and kind.” Juan Soto finished his story about the *fundación* recounting how “we started to work and make huts, small houses for the offices, big huts of about 20 meters long for offices like the *comisaría*, treasury, everything was piled up, sticks and straw, others were sent to the airport with shovels and spades, and planks to slide the wheelbarrows, that was how Inírida was founded.”

In this sense, the foundation and establishment of Inírida was not the planned invasion that Ismael portrays in his account, neither the consensual process that Acevedo describes in his book, nor an ordered and carefully designed process as some official documents try to depict it. In March 11 of 1966 a decree was issued with the aim of establishing norms and procedures for the urban development of Inírida,

The *Comisaria* will make the general Regulating Plan of Inírida, indicating how the capital city of Guainía should be erected. Such plan [plano] should include the zoning for the construction of neighborhoods, location of public buildings, churches, schools, hospitals, military quarters, parks, squares, avenues and other streets with their specifications, green areas, markets, cemeteries, and other works necessary for the development and beautification of the city, clearly delimiting the different areas or sectors: official, residential, industrial, commercial, etc.. There should be enough terrain reserved for neighborhoods of natives [indígenas] and workers.<sup>75</sup>

It seems clear from this decree that the colonial project of the state in the region included urban planning and rationally designed urban settlements. However, colonization never worked out as

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<sup>75</sup> Decreto por el cual se ordena levantar el plan de Puerto Inírida, se establecen normas sobre desarrollo urbano y se dictan otras disposiciones. Marzo 11 de 1966. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.

planned. A report written in 1965 with recommendations for the regional government shows how “in the first stage of governmental administration [between December of 1964 and March of 1965] there has been a lack of organization and coordination in all most every aspect.” In July of 1965, the person in charge of “public works” [*obras públicas*] in Puerto Inírida, complained in a letter to the *Comisario* that the “urban plan” of this “city of the future” was not being followed. The director of “public works” said in the letter to the *Comisario*: “with great surprise I see everyday an uncontrolled proliferation of shacks [*ranchos*], although they may be provisional, these will be come in the near future a true obstacle in order to carry out a technically planned urbanization.”

These kinds of efforts were combined with efforts in other fields that included public health, education and the economy. One of the first things the regional government did was to appoint a “home improver” [*mejoradora de hogar*], who would visit natives’ homes and instill on them specific health practices and ideas. In July of 1966, Amalia Torre, the “home improver” at the time, reported to the secretary of the regional government about two recent visits she had done. For example, regarding the children of José Cipriano, Amalia reported that they: “work in agriculture and they all look healthy.”<sup>76</sup> At the end of the report, Amalia pointed out that,

I have tried to reach the heart of these natives, mostly through persuasion, in order to instill [upon them], the necessity of being worried about their health, giving them instructions about personal hygiene, with the dress, food preparation at home, don't drink water without boiling, because in it you can find a source of germs of diseases, etc

Given that the secretary knows enough about the idiosyncrasy of the natives, you can easily conclude that they are reluctant and not interested very much in instructions, but I am sure that with persistence and patience I will achieve my

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<sup>76</sup> Informe de labores dirigido al secretario de gobierno. Puerto Inírida, Julio 4 de 1966. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.

purpose and the one of the government of the *Comisaría*, which is to raise the moral and material level of the indigenous population.<sup>77</sup>

This report reveals confronting visions about the methods as well as possibilities of civilizing and transforming the natives. However, improving the “moral and material level” of indigenous and non-indigenous populations that lived in the region became a main concern of the central and local government. For this purpose, in September 6 of 1965, the *Comisario* received a letter from Secretary of Interior with a new decree, issued 5 days earlier, attached. The decree was issued in order to promote what the central government called “popular integration.” The decree began recognizing the existence of “a huge amount of Colombians from the city and the country, facing difficult conditions, prey of diseases, unemployment, ignorance, civic inertia, lacking housing, recreations and opportunities of human progress.”<sup>78</sup> According to the decree, such “fellow countrymen” found it impossible to participate in the “economic, cultural, spiritual and civic life of the country,” as a result of their “condition of marginalization from social life, isolation and incapacity to resolve their own problems.” Popular integration was understood, then, as the way of overcoming the marginality of that huge mass of Colombians that lived in the poorer areas of the cities and the peripheral regions of the country. Popular integration was designed to promote the “integral development” and “real incorporation to national life” of the marginal sectors of society.<sup>79</sup>

One of the strategies used by the regional and central government in order to reach the “real incorporation to national life” of marginal populations, was to establish boarding schools in the indigenous communities dispersed throughout the rivers of the region. In September of 1968,

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Decreto Número 2263 de 1966. Por el cual se organiza y estimula la Integración Popular, con la participación del pueblo, el Gobierno y las entidades privadas. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

the *comisario* wrote a report to the central government with an “inventory of the services and needs of the *Comisaría Especial del Guainía*.” The report referred to education, saying that

I think that this problem, along with public health [*salubridad*], is the most important to address in the inventory of realizations and needs that are being requested. The first one [education], besides the indispensable literacy campaign, is closely related to the rational exploitation of natural resources in order to defend the fauna and flora, given that in these regions hunting and fishing are misused and, as it happens in all of the national territory, logging destroys more than what it uses.<sup>80</sup>

The *comisario* gave detailed information in the inventory about the schools that existed in the region with the cost of what had been built and the cost of what remained to be built. For instance, regarding the school of Guadalupe (which is far from Inírida and close to the border with Brazil in the Upper Rio Negro), the report says: “it operates in a local ceded by a *colono*, with 25 students of both sexes, and is served by a [male] professor. Regarding the local it has materials that were randomly put together and its construction will be hired in the next visit to the region of the *Comisario* and the secretary engineer of public works.”<sup>81</sup> Most of the first schools were precarious and used buildings that were ceded by *colonos* or buildings that belonged to a police inspection, as it happened with the school in *El Coco*. The idea was that most of the schools built and the ones to be built in the future would become boarding schools [*concentración escolar*], given that the “population is very dispersed throughout this extensive territory and will not be possible to have a school in every small nucleus [of population].”<sup>82</sup> In this process of nation and school building, teachers, some of whom were also *colonos*, became sort of the “missionaries” of the state. In a letter written to the *Comisario* in February of 1966

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<sup>80</sup> Informe sobre inventario de servicios y necesidades en la Comisaría Especial del Guainía, con destino al gobierno central. Puerto Inírida, 26 de Septiembre de 1968. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.



by the head of one of the first schools that existed in Inírida regarding the creation of a literacy center for adults that would open at nights, expressed that the support they received from the *Comisaria* would be a “reason for the pride for each of the Colombians that participate in this arduous labor of establishing [*implantar*] sovereignty and bring to these remote national regions a cry of culture that will echo for the rest of eternity.”<sup>83</sup> However, school building and the establishment of public education in the region did not go undisputed and gave rise to new conflicts. For instance, in march of 1966, Pedro Angarita wrote from Morichal, a place on the the Upper Inírida River, a letter to the *Comisario* regarding the inadequacy of the terrain they had chosen for the airport in Morichal; Angarita also used the opportunity to warn the *Comisario*,<sup>84</sup>

There is a key issue [here] for you, *señorita* Sofia was informed about the good will you had with the Upper Inírida and she ordered to built a school in “*Barranco Colorado*,” in the place where we had previously agreed [to build a school], no less than 25 men are working on that job, in my view this is done to counteract your good will with all of us at which we look with need.<sup>85</sup>

These new conflicts were most of the times between teachers (some of which had come to the region as *colonos*) that worked for the state and Sophie Muller. This was the case of Fernando Carrillo, who came very young to the region in the early 1970s, with his father, to *colonizar* (colonize/settle). After the *Comisario* in charge convinced him to work for the regional government, Fernando started to establish (*fundar*) boarding schools. During the 1970s, Fernando established five boarding schools in different indigenous communities throughout the

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<sup>83</sup> Carta dirigida al Señor Reynaldo Cabrera, Comisario Encargado del Guainía. Puerto Inírida, Febrero 21 de 1966. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.

<sup>84</sup> Pedro Angarita was a famous rubber boss and merchant that came to the region in the 1940s and Fausto (Puinave elder from *Caño Bocón*) described him to me as the “one who brought violence to the region,” see the second section of this chapter.

<sup>85</sup> Carta dirigida al Comisario Especial del Guainía. Morichal, Marzo 14 de 1966. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.

Guaviare River. Fernando recounted to me how when he established his first school among Piapoco people in a community called Guaco, he had to look for the acceptance of the members of the community, including the *capitán*. The later accepted his presence and told Fernando that he could start teaching at the church, while they built the school. It was around 1973 that Fernando had his first encounter with Sophie Muller in Guaco. Fernando recalls how Muller went to the place where he was staying and said to him,

Teacher you're a devil, you're a devil! (...) she was upset, she turned red, and why am I a devil Sofia? I replied to her (...) that is a devil [pointing to a calendar poster with a woman in blue jeans], that radio is a devil, that is a devil! More devil are you Sofia! You have pants, she [woman in the poster] also has pants, then where is the nudity? You are more devil! When I replied to her like that she started tapping the floor with her shoes (...) I talked to her like that because I was upset, me a Colombian, constructing nation [haciendo patria] around here, creating schools, teaching to the people and all that thing, and then a foreigner comes here, I hadn't drunk my coffee that day, I was about to make one, to insult me!

Fernando also told me how Muller would turn the people against him, telling them that he was a devil because he smoked and drunk. The conflict between Fernando and Muller escalated to the point where Fernando ended up filing a complaint in the Department of Education and with monsignor Correa, who was in charge of some of the boarding schools created by Fernando.

Cleomedes Caballero Bueno, former *Comisario* of Guainía, opened in October 30th of 1973 a formal investigation against Sophie Muller for obstructing public education. The crime attributed to Muller was: “damage of success of [public] education” (1973). As part of the investigation both teachers and native were interrogated. Cleomedes. Caballero ordered state functionaries to investigate Muller regarding her determination to hinder public education and requested information regarding “difficulties that might have taken place between teachers and students” (1973). The documents left in the archive of Inírida about the investigation of Muller, include more than ten transcriptions of interrogations of teachers and natives. There is no

evidence available regarding the final outcome of the investigation, although some of the teachers interrogated suggested that Muller should be deported given that, according to them, her work had a negative impact upon indigenous society, economy and education. Far from trying to reach a definite conclusion regarding the “crime” attributed to Muller, I show how indigenous testimonies reveal more about the shortcomings of the “civilizational” project of the State, and less about the crime Muller was accused of. Following David Cohen (1994), I try to unearth here the perspectives and claims that converge and collide in this particular case, emphasizing the “*silences, allusions, and indirections*” that surface in the transcripts of interrogatories made to people involved in the dispute. The ambivalences that underwrite the responses of teachers and natives regarding the work of Muller reveal different and differing positions, meanings and values attributed to Muller’s enterprise.

All the minutes of the interviews of both teachers of boarding schools and natives have a similar structure, similar questions were made to the people summoned to testify. Most of the interrogatories took place in Barranco Minas a town in the Guaviare River. Part of the investigation was made in other places of Guainía such as Sastre, Palmar, Carpintero and Guaco, suggesting that those in charge of developing the investigation traveled around the region in search of those that were involved in the conflicts that aroused between Muller, her followers, and teachers of boarding schools. Three persons signed all the transcriptions of the investigation at the end: the *Corregidor*, the deponent and a military or police officer. The interrogatories started mentioning the date and place where the interrogatories were made. After the deponents identify themselves and swore to tell the “truth and nothing but the truth,” interrogatories started with a question asking the person summoned to attend if he knows the reasons of being called to make a declaration in the investigation. Most of the people

interviewed replied saying they didn't know the reason why they were asked to testify. The following question was about their knowledge of Muller or Miller as she appears in the records: "do you know the lady (señorita) SOFIA MILLER of American nationality and known in this region as EVANGELIST, in case you do, when was the last time you talked with her, what did you talked about and when?"<sup>86</sup> The rest of the questions were about the concrete effects of Muller's work upon the education of indigenous population and their relationships with teachers of boarding schools and white settlers. It is important to point out that the six natives that were interrogated as part of the investigation were illiterate and only one of them knew how to write down his name. This fact shows how the state project of educating and civilizing the indigenous population of Guanía was a major failure.

Teachers that worked in boarding schools complained in the interrogatories about Muller's obstruction of their work. Pompeyo de Jesus Acevedo Muñeton, a teacher of the region declared in Barranco Minas,

I think she [Muller] is in fact causing damage, because one goes to pick up those kids for class, and parents [of native students] say that they have to wait the orders of *la señorita Sofia*. This damages the kids because they get behind in their classes, damages the parents because their sons loose time. It damages us because we have to put up with whatever she says about the kids going to class.<sup>87</sup>

The testimony of Acevedo shows that there were no harmonic relationships between the teachers send by the government and Sophie Muller. Some of the Indians interrogated confessed having known Muller for 29 years. Public teachers went so far in their accusations as to claim that religious conferences contributed to the spread of diseases such as tuberculosis and influenza. A teacher named Luis Alfonso Camargo Forero recalls that in an "Evangelical

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<sup>86</sup> Informativo 003. *Procedente Comisaria Especial del Guainia. Denunciado: Sofia Miller, Puesto Policial Barranco Minas. Delito: Prejuicio Éxito Labor Educación. Iniciado: 30-X-1973.- En la Corregiduria Civil y Militar del Guaviare con sede en Barranco Minas.* Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía. Octubre 30 de 1973.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

conference I realized that the agglomeration of indigenous peoples from different regions brings the spread of epidemic diseases.”<sup>88</sup> This alleged fact also affected the teacher’s work because they had to treat the kids when doctors were absent and students who were sick could not attend classes. In addition, teachers complained that Muller used to demonize them by drawing on cold war ideologies. According to the testimony of the teacher Jorge Eliécer Gutierrez,

In my presence she told the natives [*indígenas*], that I had communist and socialist tendencies because of my long hair and beard. That I was the pure devil and during the service she presented movies, she always said that socialists and communists were bad. The natives were psychologically influenced and I noticed a change or reaction. In this way, they deployed signs of aggression against me; speaking in their language they make gestures of contempt.<sup>89</sup>

In fact, in a chapter of the book *His Voice Shakes the Wilderness* (1988) entitled *Friends and Adversaries*, Muller recounts how the teachers sent by the government “did not contribute to the Indians’ new moral standards. Most were young, atheistic men, fresh out of college, and full of Karl Marx” (Muller 1988:178).<sup>90</sup> Muller did not oppose the idea, as such, of teaching the Indians mathematics, social sciences and Spanish, but she apparently opposed some of the teachers that were sent to teach indigenous kids about these matters based on a moral argument about their politics. In the same chapter, Muller complains about the teachers saying: “at meeting time, the teachers’ radios played loud rock music. Then they started the dances, which

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> The contempt of communism that Muller openly expressed brought her serious problems with guerrilla groups affiliated to F.A.R.C. In the last chapter of *His Voice Shakes the Wilderness*, Muller remembers that once a leader of F.A.R.C. “entered a village at the end of a church conference. He was accompanied by a dozen heavily armed men and was asking for me. The Indians knew what he would do if he found me –either kidnap or kill” ((Muller 1988:189). In the same chapter Muller recounts that one month later after this episode F.A.R.C did “kidnap Connie and Mari Cain’s son and wife along with the New Tribes Mission plane and two pilots” (Muller, 1988: 190). The conflicts between New Tribes Mission’s missionaries and F.A.R.C in Colombia acquired tragic dimensions in 1994 when Steve Welshy and Timothy Van Dike were kidnapped in the outskirts of Villavicencio and murdered a year and half later by members of F.A.R.C.

as in the old Indian culture, ended up in immorality. They brought liquor from the launches that now went up and down the Guaviare River, drank with the older teenagers, and ruined many of the Indian girls” (Muller 1988:178).

The natives interrogated as part of the investigation denied the charges that were imputed to Muller by state officials. Juan Gaitán, a native from the Guaviare River, refers to Muller in the interrogatory saying that “she is always around teaching us the word of God and she is a close friend of us, she is our pastor.”<sup>91</sup> When state officials ask Juan if Sophie prohibited the kids to attend schools ran by white teachers, he replied: “she doesn’t prohibit the kids to attend classes with white teachers, she doesn’t say anything like that.”<sup>92</sup> Testimonies of Muller’s followers contradict the accusation of both state authorities and teachers, showing the controversial and ambivalent nature of Muller’s work.

Furthermore, some of the testimonies reveal more about failures of the state's ‘civilizational’ project in the region and less about the alleged charges against Muller. For instance, state authorities in charge of the investigation asked a native, named Luis Ernesto Rojas, if it was “true that since Sophie came to organize religious conferences Indian kids stopped attending classes in public schools?” Rojas replied saying: “Well, here in *Minas Alto*, the kids stopped attending class before Sophie came here and after her arrival they went back to classes.” This answer contradicts what teachers said in their testimonies, as well as the assumptions of the investigation against Muller. Another native named Indian Federico Piñeros from a community called Carpintero, explained to state authorities in one of his responses that they did not rejected white teachers that went there to teach them, “we host them, but they bother the girls and they don’t like to study because of that, then only the boys study.” The term “bother” used by

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

Piñeros probably refers to sexual harassment. A similar question was directed to the native Federico Bautista Gaitán: “why do you guys reject official teachers?” Bautista’s answer was explicit about the reason that made them “reject official teachers”: “because white teachers like to take our women and we don’t like that, and because they don’t teach well.”<sup>93</sup> These kinds of practices among teachers in boarding schools are still common today in Guainía. Several indigenous parents have refused to send their daughters to boarding schools because, as a Curripaco from Meroy on the Atabapo River told me on the summer of 2006: “I was really upset when I saw my daughter coming back pregnant from school, I was angry.”

The ways in which the conflict between teachers of boarding schools and Muller’s followers unfolded suggests that we should not take at face value accusations state authorities made about Muller’s influence and power in the region. Furthermore, the “civilizational” practices that were crafted as a reaction to Muller’s work in the region, since Catholic missionaries established the mission in La Ceiba in 1958, had failures of its own and shortcomings of its own. These failures (specifically, sexual violence exercised over indigenous girls by some teachers) might explain better why some parents refused to send their kids (specially, girls) to the boarding schools that the regional government started to establish in the region since the end of the 1960s.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter explored the conflicts and intersections of different colonial projects that converged in Northwest Amazonia since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the decade of the 1970s. The conflicts were between different agents that included Catholic missionaries, rubber bosses, state officials, *colonos*, natives, evangelical missionaries and teachers, that

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

claimed to civilize or defend the natives against other projects of civilization or evangelization. Conflicts revolved around questions of how and by whom should the natives be governed and how to save and civilize indigenous bodies, souls and territories? The different actors involved in these conflicts changed their allegiances and positions according to the issues at stake, including: labor, nationality, money and land. These changes in alliances and subject positions show that there is no necessary correspondence between colonial projects and the agents that enact them. For instance, while Catholic missionaries claimed to defend the natives against the exploitation of rubber bosses during the 1920s and 1930s, Catholic missionaries would defend the work of *colonos* in the 1960s when they that Sophie Muller was putting some of the natives converted to Christianity against Catholic missionaries and *colonos*.

The second part of the chapter analyzed how *colonos* and Catholic missionaries saw Muller as a threat to the rights the state had given to them over indigenous souls, bodies and lands. The growing influence of Muller in the region altered the relationships between rubber bosses and natives, but natives themselves had also tried years before to end the physical violence that was associated with rubber extraction. From the perspective of Catholic missionaries, the effects of Muller's work were not limited to the religious sphere, but had also become a question of "sovereignty and borders." Muller was a considered a threat to both the authority and sovereignty the State had given to Catholic missionaries in the *national territories* since the end of the 19th century. The creation of the new *Comisaría* (Guainía) in 1963 should be understood as part of the efforts of the state to nationalize peripheral and border regions where state authority was precarious as it was reported by Catholic missionaries in 1961. While the creation of a new province and the establishment of new urban centers in the region has been explained as an attempt of the central state to achieve sovereignty over the disputed region, I show that



state formation and colonization involved different practices in which *colonos* and *indígenas* participated in different ways. The event that marked the creation of the province was the establishment of the capital Puerto Inírida, but how this exactly happened remains a contested matter among *colonos*, natives and local historians. The process of state colonization went along with the recognition of indigenous authorities in the midst of process of land dispossession. Indigenous leaders became brokers but also agents of the state in the process of colonization. The “agreement” state authorities reached with indigenous authorities in order to use their lands entailed the official recognition as legitimate authorities: “In order to *congraciar* [gain their affect] the *capitanes* were taken by the *Comisario* to Bogotá and invited to the National Congress where they were condecorated” (Acevedo 2002:96). After this official recognition took place “the *indígenas* promised [*se comprometieron*] to build the town where the capital of Guainía would be erected” (Acevedo 2002:96). At the same time, colonization unfolded in different fronts that included urban planning, public health and education. The efforts at establishing boarding schools within indigenous communities already evangelical brought new conflicts between teachers working for the state and Sophie Muller.

The testimonies used to analyze the conflict between teachers working for the state and Sophie Muller reveal mutual misunderstandings of what each thought the other was doing. In addition, the conflict between teachers and Muller unearthed details about how the first boarding schools established in the region operated on the ground. While one may interpret the accusation of sexual abuse aired against teachers as a shortcoming of the civilizational project of the state, this kind of “shortcomings” also produced specific modes of colonization and civilization. The role of sexual violence in processes of state formation in the region reveals

strong continuities with long a established historical pattern from the time period of the rubber trade.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Between Rupture and Continuity: The Politics of Conversion**

Conversion has become a unique “object” of analysis within anthropology of Christianity - one that allows us to examine questions of temporality, agency, change and subjectivity. In particular, the way in which indigenous Christians tend to understand conversion as a clear-cut break with the past raises specific questions such as: how to account for radical rupture and change with a discipline that has usually emphasized continuity? What kind of similarities and differences do we find between indigenous narratives of conversion and missionary narratives of evangelization? What do different understandings of conversion reveal about specific ways of conceiving subjectivity, agency, time, rupture or continuity? What dilemmas and tensions are faced by indigenous Christians in their attempt to leave behind the past *vis-à-vis* contemporary efforts by the State and indigenous political movements to preserve and ‘recover’ traditional indigenous culture? How are notions of rupture related to or underwritten by specific ideas of continuity?<sup>94</sup> These are some of the questions I will address in this chapter through an

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<sup>94</sup> Recent scholarship in the anthropology of Christianity has called for a serious and cautious consideration of the claims to rupture and radical change deployed by Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians across the globe. In a recent article, Joel Robbins argues that “Christian assertions about change are hard for anthropologists to credit because anthropological and Christian models of change are based on different models of time and belief” (Robbins 2007:5). Robbins draws attention to the tendency of anthropology to emphasize cultural continuity over rupture, rendering it ill-equipped to develop theoretical models of discontinuity or radical cultural change to account for what allegedly happens in most of the indigenous societies that have embraced Evangelical, Pentecostal or Charismatic Christianity. Nonetheless, other anthropologists have questioned directly the idea that it is in fact possible to make a complete break with one’s own past, as many Christians claim to do. For instance, Birgit Meyer shows how for Ghanaian Pentecostals, the “notion of rupture only becomes meaningful because it urges people to remember what links them with their 'past' in order to forget (Meyer 1998:339).

analysis of the ways in which indigenous and non-indigenous missionaries, indigenous Christians, and *colonos* (settlers) account for a massive process of conversion to Christianity that began when Sophie Muller, traveled by herself to Northwest Amazonia in the 1940s searching for “uncontacted tribes” and established the first indigenous evangelical churches in the region.

In this chapter, I discuss the uses that missionaries, indigenous Christians and *colonos* made and make of categories such as custom, culture, conversion, Christianity, civilization, evangelization, indigeneity, religion, tradition and cultural loss. The semantic field created by these categories and the narratives they enable operate in different ways, depending on the historical context and the subject that is speaking. Different views about the past reveal different subject positions in a field of social relations that have been radically reconfigured during the last 20 years, since a new Political Constitution was issued in Colombia. The 1991 Political Constitution granted indigenous peoples special rights to health, land, education and political participation, and opened up political spaces for indigenous representatives at the national and local level. Even before this, between 1986 and 1989, the national government had recognized 44 indigenous reservations in Amazonia that expanded over an area of 35,145,182 acres. In 1990 the government ratified the Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (No. 169) drafted by the International Labor Organization in 1989, which recognized indigenous peoples’

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In this sense, the break with ‘the past,’ as it were, presupposes its prior construction through remembrance and through Pentecostal discourses of the past as pagan (Meyer 1998:318). Pentecostalism, according to Meyer, “seeks a rupture from a ‘tradition’ or ‘past’ which it has previously helped to construct” (Meyer 1998:318). In a similar vein, Webb Keane argues that the Christian ideal of leaving behind the past in order to reach salvation, is part of a broader moral narrative of modernity by which the past and its embeddedness in specific semiotic forms (such as material objects, practices, words or spirits) are portrayed as “anachronisms” and as constraints to individual freedom and agency (Keane 2007:114-115).

rights to self-determination, land, health and education, and also encouraged the different states where indigenous peoples live to protect their laws, values, customs and perspectives.

While contemporary representations of conversion held by missionaries and indigenous political leaders are informed by positive discourses of indigeneity that circulate worldwide, early missionary accounts described evangelization as a process aimed at replacing pagan customs with Christian practices, or replacing false religion with true religion. Early missionary accounts of evangelization do not use the word culture. Instead the word custom is used to describe so-called witchcraft ceremonies, but also simple things such as roaming around at night or eating specific kinds of food (i.e. *Indian bread*). In Muller's (1953; 1963) inaugural narrative, Curripacos are described as living in spiritual darkness, and in need of someone who "will go and tell them of the love of Jesus, and bring them out of spiritual night" (Muller 1953: 20). Put simply, Muller conceives conversion as producing a change in "their mind" from Satan to God. Evangelization here is about correcting sins and heathen customs, it is about replacing worship of the devil with worship of God (Muller, 1963). Spreading the word of God also entails instructing natives about specific bodily habits and disciplinary practices that go hand in hand with the act of listening to the word of God. As Jean and John Comaroff (1991, 1997) point out, the changes brought by colonialism and evangelization are not limited to the realm of "consciousness," but also entail bodily and material transformations.

Contemporary missionary accounts of evangelization, on the other hand, emphasize that conversion is the product of a personal decision that does not bring about major social or cultural changes. They claim that indigenous culture did not change that much, given that conversion is thought to be a change in personal beliefs, an inner transformation, but not a social or cultural one. Some missionaries even argue that Christianity has strengthened

indigenous culture through the translation of the Bible, making people read and use more their own language. Missionaries' claim of leaving indigenous culture unchanged is based on a separation or purification between religion and culture. By purification, following Bruno Latour (1993), I refer to specifically modern practices that create distinct ontological zones that are supposed to work autonomously and have no relationship between with each other. The separations between nature and society, science and politics, humans and non-humans, are part of the modern work of purification, as it is also the separation that evangelical missionaries produce between culture and religion<sup>95</sup>. Whereas missionaries usually consider religion as inner and personal belief, culture is seen as a simple collection of traits or things, which might include activities such as fishing and hunting. This work of purification allows missionaries to claim that conversion to Christianity brings just religious, not cultural change. According to evangelical missionaries, natives are able to keep their culture and identity, despite the changes that take place in terms of religious affiliation and beliefs. As Webb Keane points out, Christian missionaries usually attempt to "define what is cultural and what is religious, to distinguish them from one another, in order to separate upon one without disturbing the other" (Keane 2007:104).

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<sup>95</sup> According to Latour, modernity designates two kinds of practices that should be studied together: "the first set of practices, by 'translation', creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture. The second, by 'purification' creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand, that of non-humans on the other. Without the first set, the practices of purification would be fruitless or pointless. Without the second, the work of translation would be slowed down, limited or even ruled out" (Latour 1993:10-11). The modern effort of separating nature and society, purifying each from the influence of the other, remains impossible to achieve completely, it is never entirely successful, as the "modern Constitution allows the expanded proliferation of the hybrids whose existence, whose very possibility, it denies" (Latour 1993:35). Webb Keane also uses the notion of purification within the context of the "Reformation attack on certain aspects of semiotic form" (Keane 2007:24) In particular, "one of the chief aims of the work of purification, as undertaken by Protestant missionaries, is to establish the proper locus of agency in the world by sorting out correct from mistaken imputations of agency" (Keane 2007:54).

The continuity that is present in recent missionary narratives of evangelization is at odds with indigenous accounts of conversion that emphasize rupture and conceive conversion as a clear-cut break between a pagan past and Christian present, echoing earlier missionary narratives. For Curripaco and Puinaves, evangelization is associated with the arrival of civilization and the reformation of traditional custom. Becoming Christian is also a learning process, a civilizing change that takes place in different spheres of life. Conversion brings changes in housing patterns, morality, social and political organization, ideas of personhood and community. Some of the indigenous Christians consider conversion a total social fact that involves changes in all the realms of personal and social life.

The distinction some indigenous Christians draw between a “worldly” past and a Christian present can be conceived as an attempt to purify and separate the past from the present. Other distinctions and purifications that matter to indigenous Christians include those between matter and spirit, humans and non-humans, body and soul. Indigenous accounts of conversion as a radical rupture with a worldly past might be associated with ideas of modernity as entailing a break with tradition. In fact, radical conversion can also foster a “heightened sense of history, but this sense of history can take as many forms as there are kinds of Christianity” (Keane 2007: 113).

Indigenous attempts to separate and purify the past from the present are put into question both by missionaries and by indigenous accounts that refer to the presence of things and practices that are usually considered part of the pre-Christian past. The permanence of “worldly” customs and beliefs among Christian converts pose specific dilemmas for indigenous Christians in terms of the limits of radical change and the possibility of making a total rupture with the past. In the second part of the chapter I address the dilemmas posed for indigenous Christian by the

persistence of past semiotic forms, as well as the ways in which the natives engage with and deal in the present with their own multiple traditions. This raises, then, questions of translation and commensurability between Christianity and indigenous religions regarding the nature and status of spirits that inhabit and constitute the forest, rivers and landscape.

The last part of the chapter shows how while missionaries attempt to separate culture from religion, contemporary indigenous leaders include Christianity as part of indigenous culture and politics, putting in jeopardy the work of purification advanced by missionaries. Furthermore, missionaries, converts and indigenous leaders deploy different notions of rupture and continuity depending on the issues, context and audience at stake. The dichotomy between rupture and continuity falls short in accounting for the kinds of transformations involved in the encounter between Christian missionaries and indigenous peoples in Northwest Amazonia. The missionaries were also transformed and affected by this colonial encounter. The cultural politics of missionaries were appropriated and transformed in unexpected ways by indigenous missionaries and political leaders, revealing a specific “politics of conversion.” In this context, Christianity not only becomes the hinge between native Amazonians and the West, but it is also transformed into a space for recreating and refashioning indigenous tradition and culture.

### **Early Missionary Narratives of Evangelization**

Most of the New Tribes Missionaries who have visited Guainía since Muller’s first visit in the 1940s shared the idea of contacting uncontacted tribes or reaching unreached tribes, as they put it. Reaching these tribes entailed learning their languages, preaching the Gospel and founding tribal churches. However, missionary accounts of evangelization in Guainía are far from homogenous. I will show here how different missionaries talk about evangelization,



indigenous culture, and conversion. Differing modes of evangelization were predicated upon different ideas about indigenous culture, agency, and subjectivity.

In her first book *Beyond Civilization*, Muller renders her work as a part of a “spiritual battle,” a continual battle between the “powers of light and darkness, but God is mightier than the Devil” (Muller 1952:94). The trope of “possession” symbolizes her vision of evangelization: “These people seem like ‘empty houses, swept and garnished,’ waiting to be occupied. I pray that the Lord will be allowed to take possession of each one, so that the Devil doesn’t return in power (...)” (Muller 1952:53). In *Jungle Methods* (1960), Muller (1960) states that the main task of a missionary when he or she comes into a village is to “realize that he is there to ‘possess it’ for the Lord. He must say to himself, ‘Yes, I shall possess it for Christ’” (Muller 1960:16). The fact that Muller combined possession of souls with possession of land alludes to ways in which spirituality and materiality were intertwined in her project of evangelization. Spreading the Word of God has usually been associated by New Tribes Missionaries with establishing tribal churches.

Muller refers to shamans as “witch doctors” and to their practices as “professions of faith.” The former term is still used by evangelicals. Muller considered the “witch doctors” as her “chief rivals,” and recognized the authority and power of well-known shamans among the Indians. In fact, once they became Christian, she relied on traditional authority and used it on her behalf. In Figure No. 1, published in her first book, Muller depicts the “witch doctor of Canyo Iwiali, and an enlargement of a stone that appears to have been handed down for generations, giving him authority to practice witchcraft” (Muller 1952:123). Misrecognition of indigenous rituals and religious practices took place as Muller tried to understand and explain

from a Christian framework the meaning and origin of the practices she meant to change.<sup>96</sup> In this move, Indigenous culture and history were translated into Christian terms, while Christianity was also transformed in this process of translation. The work Muller implied a process of double translation. On the one hand, Muller had to transform and translate her Christian cosmology, geography and experience into indigenous categories and beliefs; and, on the other hand, Muller translates and resignifies indigenous “concepts to fit her conversion project” (Wright 1998:255). New words such as *Dios*, *Jesús*, and *Spíritu Santo* were left in Spanish in the translations of the Bible to native languages, but there were also native words and categories that remained untranslatable, despite the attempts of missionaries to incorporate them to Christian cosmology and mythology. In this process of translation, indigenous culture and religion were misrecognized as the opposite of Christianity and closely related to devil worship and idolatry. A clear example of misrecognition and misinterpretation appears in *Beyond Civilization* when Muller tries to describe a traditional Curripaco ritual known as *pudali* in the following way,<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> I would say that misrecognition lies at the heart of both evangelization and conversion. As Wacquant points out “far from being a novel development linked to the rise of “cultural diversity” in advanced societies, *the politics of recognition have always been with us*: they are intrinsic to the human condition” (Wacquant 2004:11). Lovell also shows how recognition and misrecognition are key concepts in Bourdieu’s sociology of domination, as well as in his analysis of symbolic power. According to Lovell, for Bourdieu “misrecognition of the dominated by the dominant takes the form of a (*legitimated*) refusal to grant any but inferior standing to the dominated or to recognize them other than on terms of the dominant culture on which their own claims to distinction are based” (Lovell 2007:71). Nonetheless there is a huge difference between Catholic and evangelical understandings of indigenous religions. While Catholic usually despise indigenous beliefs as “superstition,” evangelical missionaries treat “evil spirits,” to use Muller’s language, as real entities that had concrete effects in world.

<sup>97</sup> *Pudáli* are ritual ceremonies closely linked with “subsistence activities of the yearly agricultural and fishing cycles and with everyday social institutions of kinship and marriage” (Hill 1983:319). According to Hill, *pudáli* involves wife and food exchanges, as well as ritual dances where flutes and trumpets are played. *Pudáli* ceremonies were “held in two-part cycles

It seemed like a calling together of all the demons in creation. Moving along in a slow, funeral-like procession, they blew on long, tube-like poles, swaying them slowly from side to side, in time with the hollow notes that issued forth and re-echoed through the jungle. One could easily associate these weird strains with witchcraft or demon worship, especially on a moonlight night in the heart of the jungle (Muller 1952:30).

Despite the fact that Muller despised Indians' "witchcraft and evil practices", there are several references in her books to the idea of going native and becoming, to some extent, one of them. Muller recommends other missionaries not to take food supplies into the tribe, except for powdered milk since "it would make them covetous and take their eyes off the Word." Muller believes that "it's best to 'eat native' and live on them." In *Jungle Methods*, Muller recalls how she used paddles in canoes by herself, but then realizing that she had not the time and strength to do it, it was easier to delegate this job to the Indians with all the advantages it brought: "In drifting along peacefully with the natives from place to place, you are not only received as 'one of them,' but you save your strength for the real job" (Muller 1963:14).

In *Jungle Methods*, Muller emphasizes that evangelization should start by awakening "their interest in the Word" (Muller 1952:22). This process entailed learning the language of the "tribe" and teaching the members of the group to read and write their own language using syllable charts, following the Laubach method.<sup>98</sup> Finding audiences willing to hear the Word might require the help of former pupils that "will help you teach the new ones at the next village, and

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between local sib groups of different phratries who were either actually or potentially related to one another as kinsmen to affines" (Hill 1983:320)

<sup>98</sup> The Laubach method was created in the 1930s by Frank C. Laubach while working in the Philippines. The method originated as a way of teaching adults to read and write in their own language. The Laubach method emphasizes learning through association rather than through rote memory, letters and sounds are introduced through keywords with picture association. Nonetheless, repetition is also used to "strengthen the visual image." The Laubach method also draws heavily on "community involvement or infrastructure" in order to encourage and promote literacy. Usually, trained tutors or teachers from the community involved are used to teach their fellow community members.

most important of all, you'll find eager ears and open hearts for the entrance of the Word of Life, if you go with a tribal escort" (Muller 1960:30). Muller not only trained indigenous pastors and leaders, but also relied in the authority of well-known shamans. She depicted some of these shamans in her books (See Image 1). Specifically, in the translation of the entire New Testament from Curipaco in Puinave, a former shaman named Julio helped Muller: "he was one of the witch doctors who had held sway over the village only half a year earlier. This man, who had made a clean break from his witchcraft, would turn out to be my most efficient and persevering helper" (Muller 1988:102).



Image 1. Curripaco shaman, drawing by Sohpie Muller

Muller used oral and visual resources in her evangelical work. Oral indoctrination was used under the principle that "faith cometh by hearing," and under the conviction that "prayer

changes things” (Muller 1952:97).<sup>99</sup> Given that the first words will make the greatest impression and become rooted in the minds of the natives, evangelization began with a set of “simple sentences about God, Satan, Sin and Salvation” (Muller 1960:23). The emphasis placed by Muller on language and the Word, resonates with how rhetoric is regarded by evangelicals to be the prime vehicle of conversion. As Harding points out, “among orthodox Protestants, and specially among fundamentalists, it is the Word, the gospel of Jesus Christ, written, spoken, heard, and read, that converts the unbeliever” (Harding 1987:168).

Indeed, one of the questions Muller asked herself in *Jungle Methods* was: “What brought about this mass change of heart from serving the devil to serving the Lord?” She replied saying: “by translating the Word into their language, by teaching them to read it, by inserting a question after every verse thus making them think of what they read” (Muller 1960:4). If the missionary was not able to communicate the main meaning of a verse there was the risk of a twist “to incorporate some old heathen idea” (Muller 1960:7). Something similar happened with rituals, Muller recounts how “these services, especially such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper, would turn into regular witchcraft ceremonies if they did not have the mode of service all down in black and white, with all the Scripture verses and songs written out in connection with each service” (Muller 1960:9). Muller’s enterprise was strongly focused on literacy and books: “you send out a thousand fundamental missionaries every time you send a thousand books through the tribe” (Muller 1960:7).

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<sup>99</sup> In fact, Muller recognized that the principle of “faith cometh by hearing” was also observed by communists: “Even the communists are working in the “cold war” with their tireless repetition of denunciations and Godless ideology” (Muller 1960:23).

She used extensively storyboards extensively as visual aids.<sup>100</sup> She believed that the flannel board helps the missionary “overcome the language barrier because it holds their interest while the missionary is groping for words” (Muller 1960:16). Confusion and ambiguity haunted Muller’s efforts with visual aids as a way of instilling the word of God. Methods that included storyboards had to be used in specific ways in order to contain confusion and ambiguity. For example, Muller recommended the missionaries “have pictures with good facial expressions for Christ, and evil scheming expressions for the devil, so that when they come up for a close look they are attracted to the Lord and repulsed by the devil and all the sin and witchcraft that he has been leading them into for years” (Muller 1960:17). Muller suggested that missionaries should be careful not to invite people to pray if the figures haven’t been taken away from the flannel board, so “they don’t speak to the figures. Tell them why you took them off. This actually counteracts idolatrous ideas” (Muller 1960:25).

The methods used by Muller also included disciplinary, bodily and ritual practices. The missionary had to discipline himself first in order to be able to discipline and convert the natives: “we’ve given our lives to do a job, and we must discipline ourselves to do it as good soldiers of Jesus Christ and not to be entangled in anything else” (Muller 1960:15). Muller encouraged her readers, presumably other missionaries, to build a church for the natives which will help them to ‘stay put’ and listen” (Muller 1960:23). Muller promoted Bible study groups and gatherings for the Lord aimed at displacing “their gatherings for the devil only because the question method made their meetings interesting and sociable” (Muller 1960:7). The idea was

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<sup>100</sup> The word Muller uses in her books is flannelgraph, sometimes also called a flannel board, which is a storytelling system that uses a board covered with flannel fabric, usually resting on an easel. Flannelgraph has been (and continues to be) a popular medium for telling Bible stories to young Sunday School students in Christian (and particularly Evangelical) churches. Indeed, it is used as a storytelling method almost exclusively in elementary level Christian education.

that “even the unsaved do not miss the sociability of their former dancing and drinking parties and have no resentment in their hearts toward this change in their daily life” (Muller 1960:7). For Muller, evangelization was about replacement of pagan and idolatrous customs. That was the case with presenting and naming new-born babies. Muller created a dedication service that was aimed at replacing the witchcraft ceremony that included “chanting and pounding on a basket all night” (Muller 1960:11).

Muller also suggested the realization of semi-annual Bible conferences that should be done at different times of the year in order to give the missionary the opportunity “to counsel, exhort and lead them on in the knowledge and the love of God” (Muller 1960:23). Leadership of the missionaries was done through specific disciplinary technologies that involved appointing policemen in the evangelical meetings known in the region as *conferencias*. Bible study groups and conferences should make Indigenous churches self-governed and self-propagated throughout the tribes. However, despite all the efforts of Muller to convert and discipline different indigenous groups, she recognized that her attempts also failed in one way or another. In *Jungle Methods* and his *Voice Shakes the Wilderness*, Muller mentions that drinking, smoking, dancing, and “witchcraft went on as usual when I wasn’t around. It seemed that reading had become an end in itself and was merely a ritual to most of them” (Muller 1988:60). In fact, in *Jungle Methods* Muller recounts that she had to “get the Indians to think about what they were reading,” because she noticed that “with their mouths they said, ‘we all believe,’ but there was no real evidence of new life except for a faint flicker in some” (Muller 1960:5).

### **Contemporary Missionary Accounts of Conversion**

Recent missionary versions of evangelization tend to be informed by contemporary anthropological concepts and visions of indigenous peoples. Richard Johnson is a New Tribes

Missionary who came to the region in 1971 and lived there until 1995 when he was expelled by F.A.R.C.<sup>101</sup> Today, Richard visits frequently the capital of the province as he works, with the help of Puinave Christians, on an improvement of the existing translation of the New Testament into Puinave. Richard has also done linguistic research about the Puinave language and is helping the Puinave to standardize their alphabet. The later initiative is being done within broader projects of cultural revival that include recuperating traditional myths and practices.

Richard spent four years in Remanso on the Río Inírida when he first visited the region. He was received warmly by Christian converts after being recommended by Sophie Muller. Richard told me that when he started his missionary work he had four initial assignments: (i) learning the language; (ii) learning what Puinaves believed; (iii) understanding their culture; (iv) and finding how much and how well Christian Puinaves understood the Bible. Richard and his wife started their work by trying to get really close to the Puinave and know them on a personal basis. This was not an easy process. At the beginning, Richard told me, “things were not working very well,” as they were considered outsiders and were treated with deference. Richard and his wife decided to ask the *capitán* of the community if they could adopt them in order to be treated both as relatives. A Puinave woman was willing to adopt Richard and treat him almost like a son, more like a nephew, and Laura, his wife, was living with the same family. Laura had trouble getting to know the Puinave women on a personal basis. After a period of frustration, both Richard and Laura asked their consultant how to proceed.<sup>102</sup> Laura cried on the shoulder of the consultant, who suggested that she find a different family that could adopt her. Laura needs

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<sup>101</sup> The conflicts between New Tribes missionaries and F.A.R.C. acquired tragic dimensions in 1994 when Steve Welsh y Timothy van Dike were kidnapped in the outskirts of Villavicencio. One year and a half after being kept in captivity they were murdered by members of F.A.R.C.

<sup>102</sup> Although I was never told, I assume the consultant was someone in the mission in Bogotá who gave advice to the missionaries in the field.



her own family, said the consultant. Richard showed extensive knowledge of how the Puinave kinship system worked, as he tried to explain to me that they had to find a family for Laura that had the appropriate relationship to Richard's family. This meant that Richard and his wife had to be situated in the kinship system as cross-cousins, making their marriage possible. Richard told me that at the beginning they were just observing, trying to be objective and trying to understand what was important for the Puinave. Richard wanted to learn the Puinave language, to know Puinaves on a personal basis and to understand what they believed in. Learning Puinave was not an end in itself; the goal was to communicate with the Puinaves at a deeper level by using their own language. Richard wanted to understand Puinave culture, their cultural concepts and meanings, in order to make sense when he engaged in conversation with them. Getting to know the Puinaves on a personal basis entailed participating in everyday activities. For instance, Richard recounted how he used to go with other Puinave men to cut *chiqui-chiqui* fiber and used to bind the fiber into bundles for exchange. The fiber was later sold or traded for commodities with the *patrones*, white bosses that had control over the labor of indigenous peoples in the region. Richard used those activities to learn catch-phrases and common words as well as to get closer to the Puinaves.

Once Richard and Laura gained fluency in Puinave they started talking to people about their own experiences as Christians, "people wanted to hear about my own relationship with God," said Richard to me. Richard emphasized that their purpose was not to push anyone to become Christian. He did not consider evangelization as an outward imposition: "We are not interested in people doing religious things, we are not interested in people doing religious rituals, we are not imposing religious ideas or beliefs." To the contrary, he explained that evangelization is

about provoking inner transformations, about convincing people in their “own hearts” about the “existence and work of God, as it is revealed in the Bible.”

Richard’s vision of indigenous conversion was completely informed by the idea of a free and autonomous subject who makes rational decisions based on the truth of facts or revelation, for this matter. According to Richard, conversion is an individual choice: “they as individuals have to choose.” This belief lead Richard to claim that missionaries don’t want to “change Puinave culture and see them become different as societies,” since conversion is thought to be a change in the interiority of the self, a change that takes place in your “heart,” a change of beliefs. Nonetheless, following Richard, conversion is also expressed in outward changes that are the product of a process of self-reflection and self-evaluation. Accepting God entails a process of self-evaluation and making choices. Once you become Christian you have to evaluate your previous practices and beliefs, and choose to drop those that are wrong or contradict your new beliefs. In this sense, Richard argues that “we don’t lose our culture when we become Christians,” instead we just reject things of our culture that contradict our new beliefs. Put into indigenous terms and practices, this means that Christian Indians should leave behind practices and beliefs associated with witchcraft. The possibility of leaving completely behind practices such as sorcery remains questionable, as Richard himself recognizes that some Puinaves still “know myths but don’t believe in them anymore.”

Consequently, Richard does not consider conversion to entail a cultural change, as he thinks that likeness between Christian and non-Christian Puinaves is maintained despite evangelization. Although “Christian Puinaves preserve more of their language and identity,” they are “proud to be Puinaves.” It seems clear that Richard is not just operating under a notion of culture as a set of traits that can be divided between evil and good, and eventually replaced by other traits

without major consequences, Richard is also drawing on ideas of culture as language.<sup>103</sup> How else could one explain Richard's concern and effort in getting to learn Puinave's main cultural concepts and meanings using their own language for this purpose? What else accounts for Richard's interest in establishing communication with the Puinaves at a deeper level using their own language? Given that the final objective is to put the word of God into Puinave's own cultural terms, by using Puinave language as a medium of conversion Richard is also producing a particular reformed version of indigenous culture that fits his own political and cultural project.

In this sense, Richard assumes culture and religion as residing in separate domains, where culture is associated with traits such as language and religion is considered as pure inner belief. Christian missionaries try to purify and separate culture from belief as if they were not affected by each other. Nonetheless, it is possible "to tell" when someone is or not an authentic Christian. Richard said explicitly that it is "very easy to imitate a real Christian, but you can differentiate spurious from authentic Christians." Although the missionaries are supposed not to judge the relationship between the person and God, Richard claims that it is possible to tell when someone has a similar relationship with God to his one. In fact, when Christian Puinaves

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<sup>103</sup> Adam Kuper shows how the idea of culture as a random set of traits goes back to 1871, when Tylor's defined of culture or civilization as a "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities an habits acquired by man as a member of society" (In Kuper 1999:56). Kuper shows how the idea of culture as a set of traits was derived from the fact that Tylor "stated that a culture formed a whole, but his idea of a whole was a list of traits, with the consequence that a culture might be inventoried but never analyzed" (Kuper 1999:57). It was until the 1930s when Boas and his students began to use the term culture in the plural. According to Kuper, when "Boas did write about 'a culture' rather than 'culture,' he wavered between describing it as an accidental accretion of traits and as 'integrated spiritual totality,' animated by the 'genius' of 'a people' (Kuper 1999:60-61). Lowie developed further the idea of culture as accidental accretion of traits, arguing that "cultures develop mainly through the borrowings due to chance contact. Our own civilization is even more largely than the rest a complex of borrowed traits... To that planless hodgepodge, that thing of shreds and patches called civilization, its historian can no longer yield superstitious reverence" (In Kuper 1999:63). This definition of culture as an "accidental" set of traits, is an explicit rejection of the notion that a culture constitutes an integrated whole.

have stayed at Richard's house, he claims he can tell when Christian Puinaves are not trying "to impress" him, but share similar responses and evaluations towards things. The authenticity of conversion depends on a specific 'relationship' or 'engagement' with things.

Richards's vision of indigenous conversion and culture is also shared by a Colombian missionary known as Luis Ordoñez, who lived for 25 years in the region, since the early 1960s. Ordoñez settled in the community of Tonina, on the Guainía River, where he established a school in which he taught native peoples mathematics, history and geography. This was before boarding public schools were created by the State in the region. Ordoñez holds the view that conversion to Christianity does not erase or eradicate what he understands as indigenous culture, closely associated also with language and traits such as beliefs and legends. "You saw them, they are still Curripacos, they still speak their language, have their beliefs and legends," Ordoñez told me. He went further arguing that it is historically proven that when the Bible is translated to a specific language, this language endures more over time as it is increasingly used to read and talk about the Bible. This missionary was emphatic when he argued that traditional myths became part of indigenous *folklore*, they know myths but don't believe in them anymore, though some of the do, according to Ordoñez. Referring to *camajai*, a widely used poison associated with sorcery, Ordoñez said that it was impossible to eradicate the belief that *camajai* produced sickness, those beliefs, in his own words, "stick to the mind of the people." A "combination of things" is produced, according to Ordoñez. Conversion in this sense is never absolute, it is always already partial and incomplete. In fact, Ordoñez acknowledges that sorcery is real and has concrete effects: "sorcery, witch doctors can kill a person, we think it is not true, but it is true." Why not, then, believe in something that is true, real and has concrete effects?

Ordoñez's account of indigenous conversion raises several questions and dilemmas, some of which are still present concerns about indigenous Christians in Guainía. What does it mean to say that Curripacos know myths but don't believe in them anymore, though some of them do? What makes the Bible more real or truthful than myths, when the later refer to and are embodied in places, things and stuff that are part of Curripacos' everyday life? How can missionaries claim that they are not trying to change indigenous culture, while simultaneously downgrade myths to folklore or just stories? How have indigenous ideas about truth and myths changed since Christianity was introduced in the region during the 1940s?

### **Indigenous Accounts of Conversion**

Unlike missionary accounts of evangelization that emphasized cultural continuity despite the conversion of Puinaves and Curripacos to Christianity, indigenous accounts recognize both rupture and continuity as part of the process of becoming Christians. For most elders, pastors and former indigenous missionaries, becoming Christian was associated with learning to read and write their own language.<sup>104</sup> Learning how to read the New Testament in Puinave or Curripaco was one of the main entrances to Christianity. The idea of a written language was unknown for most of the Indians when Muller arrived in 1944.

A former sorcerer or *brujo* -as they are called by indigenous Christians - told me the story of his conversion. Martín came from a puinave family of *payes* or shamans. As a child, Martín was chosen over his brother to become a *paye* after he was able to inhale more *yopo* than his brother and remain still<sup>105</sup>. Sophie looked initially for him twice: *donde está el brujo?* [where is the

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<sup>104</sup> It is important to point out that most of today's elders were very young when Sophie Muller arrived in the region in the 1940s. Most of them were between 7 and 15 years old. Ironically, this means that a lot of the elders, as some of them told me, did not understand what was going on when Sophie Muller arrived for the first time in the 1940s.

<sup>105</sup> Yopo is a hallucinogenic powder made out of the bark of a plant (*Anadenanthera peregrina*).

sorcerer?] Both times she told him that if he continued with his witchcraft he would go to hell. It was his sister-in-law who converted Martín. Martín told his sister-in-law: *si usted tiene la letra que habla, entonces enseñeme* [if you have the letter that speaks, then teach me]. Martín's sister-in-law stayed with him for two weeks teaching him how to read the Bible in Puinave. Martín stopped practicing after spending these two weeks with his sister-in-law. Sophie came looking for Martín for a third time, after being told of his conversion, and called him *hermano* [brother]. This story not only alludes to how Christianity and literacy were intertwined in Northwest Amazonia, but also reveals particular understandings of written language and signs. In addition, the story of how Martín became Christian points to the importance of women in the process of conversion. Luis Concha, one of the first Puinave missionaries, told me that it was through the Christian hymns sung by Puinave women that the Word of God started to get into his head.

Not all of the sorcerers were easy to convert. Luis also told me about an encounter between him and a sorcerer, when Luis was working as a missionary with Sophie Muller. It happened in one of the many missionary trips that Luis undertook with Sophie. The trip was to a Guahibo community in the prairie region called Vichada that had neither bitter manioc, *casabe* (cassava bread), nor *mañoco* (fariña). Luis asked the people there where could he find these foods, they told him a sorcerer in the middle of the prairie had the kind of food he was looking for. The next day, Luis went to meet the sorcerer, talked to him and his sons, who were mad at Luis, because he started preaching to the sorcerer about Jesus. The sorcerer told Luis: “you’re young and just now you’re learning about God. I’m old and have known God for several years. I was with him before I came here and I will go back to meet him after this.” Luis replied to the sorcerer telling him: “My friend you don’t know God, you know Satan, the chief of the sorcerers, the devil.”

After this, Luis was chased with knives by the sons of the sorcerer, as they did not want Luis to preach their father and “prove” him wrong. This particular story and encounter shows how evangelization was contested by some *payes*. More interestingly, Luis’ encounter with the sorcerer illustrates how Christianity was perceived by some *payes* as a threat, putting at risk their own knowledge and proximity to the sacred.

Indigenous Christians usually associate evangelization and conversion with becoming civilized and with the arrival of civilization. For most Christian elders, the past was worldly, full of ignorance, violence and chaos. “My father that is deceased now used to be a worldly person,” told me Feliciano Cayupare, a brother of one of the first Puinave missionaries. Conversion to Christianity unleashed processes of self-estrangement and self-recognition that I address in detail in the next chapter. Evangelization is thought to produce a clear-cut break with the past, a learning process that changed local beliefs, customs and practices. Gerardo, an elder pastor of a Curripaco community in the upper Guainía river, told me that “before *señorita* Sophie came here, people used to live with their own culture.” I asked him how was their culture back then, Gerardo told me they had their own rituals and dances in which they would drink *chicha*. Culture here seems to be understood as customs (*costumbres*) and beliefs. Gerardo and his son, a teacher in a local boarding school, who was translating parts of the interview, told me how “they” (meaning their predecessors) had their own gods considered sacred and respectable, “they used to call them the devil,” according to Gerardo. In this sense, the arrival of Sophie is associated with leaving “that” culture behind and learning to live in a civilized way: “after she [Sophie] taught them, they have civilization with this book [the Bible], people know what civilization is about and know how to live here in this world.” When I asked Gerardo about the meaning of civilization, he said it was related to “learning how to live, having a house like this

one, cleaning your patio.” In a broad sense, becoming civilized and Christian entailed material and bodily transformations: building single family houses with separate rooms for girls and boys, having correct manners and being polite, hosting in the correct way any visitor (even a white man), living in communities with several family houses gathered around a church and a communal meeting building, among others. All of these external signs work as indexes of inner and moral transformations.

Indigenous understandings of civilization resonate with the French notion of *civilité*, coined for the first time in the Sixteenth Century by Erasmo de Rotterdam. According to Norbert Elias, the notion of *civilité* refers to how “bodily carriage, gestures, dress, facial expression” constitute the outward expression of the inner person. In fact, religious conversion among Indians nowadays is related to becoming a better person and this transformation can be seen through explicit material signs that include dress, bodily carriage, politeness and hospitality. A white pastor that worked with Christian Puinaves for several years told me once how it is possible to tell if someone is Christian by the way he carries his body. In this sense, conversion can hardly be conceived as a purely spiritual transformation, or a simple change in beliefs, as missionaries sometimes put it.

Indigenous Christians also associate evangelization with discipline and following authority.

Gerardo remembers vividly what it was like to travel on missionary trips with Sophie:

when you were traveling with her you had to know how it was to work with her (...) I am a pastor, but I don't handle people how she did, just like in the Bible (...) she was a *señorita* and she wouldn't wear shorts, she used pants, following the Bible (...) if you were going to take a bath you should do it far from her, far from the women, like the Bible says.

Discipline extended to other domains such as the naming of pastors and forbidding “sorcery.”

Policemen were also appointed to watch on people for each evangelical conference. For



example, Gerardo told me how he became pastor not because he wanted to, but because Sophie told him to. According to Gerardo, two years after she arrived in the Rio Guainía, Sophie started naming “her pastor, her elder” in each indigenous community, and these pastors and elders would help her organize the *conferencias*. Gerardo was one of the new pastors that Sophie named and placed “in office.” It seemed clear for Gerardo that he was obliged to become a pastor, and he was only 17 years old when Sophie named him pastor in the community of Cejal: “Obliged, because she [Sophie] was smart, she noticed that I knew something about the Bible.” Gerardo summed up the story of him becoming pastor, saying that it was God who had chosen him as a pastor. However, it was until 1977, when Gerardo was approximately 40 years old (23 years after his ‘first’ conversion), that he stopped engaging in certain practices considered un-Christian: “I don’t drink, I don’t dance, and don’t go to patronal festivities, nothing,” said Gerardo about his real conversion. It is worth mentioning that Gerardo considers himself a botanist. He knows all kinds of plants and remedies that can be made out of them, including remedies or plants used for countering sorcery.

On the other hand, most of the elders I interviewed emphasized how traditional rituals and practices associated with *payes*, drinking *chicha*, smoking tobacco and using hallucinogens such as *yopo* were strictly forbidden by Muller. People refer to these practices as customs (*costumbres*) they had before evangelization. Carlos Cárdenas and his father Rodrigo, described how Muller was able to convince people to give up the practice of traditional rituals. It was a slow process that took between 3 and 5 years. At the beginning Muller didn’t forbid anything, she would watch them perform their rituals. When she realized people would listen to her, Muller started to reschedule traditional parties just for Sundays and only during the day. Once the *capitán* and the elders were convinced about the Word of God, Muller told them that the

parties they made were a problem because people were killed in the midst of these “drinking parties.” The elders started to recognize Muller was right, and little by little she was able to convince them. Finally, Muller named her own leaders that would also preach for her throughout the rest of Curripaco communities. It was then, according to Carlos Cárdenas and Rodrigo, that Muller started to organize cults on Sundays in Cejal, aiming to replace traditional rituals with Christian ceremonies. At the beginning, elders used to smoke in church or before entering the church, Muller would scold them but they kept on doing it.

To some extent, becoming civilized and Christian is associated among native elders with “domesticating” or “pacifying” the white man. Scholarship about indigenous memories in Amazonia has revealed the different “cosmologies of contact” created by indigenous peoples using both mythical and historical accounts (Hill 1988, Turner 1988). Stephen Hugh-Jones, for example, shows how in Vaupés “myth and history are not mutually incompatible but co-exist as two separate and complementary modes of representing the past” (Hugh-Jones 1988:141).<sup>106</sup> Most of the indigenous societies in Amazonia have myths that account for the origin of the white man and historical accounts about how have relationships with the white man changed over time.

Bruce Albert and Alcida Ramos call *Pacificando O Branco* (Pacifying the White Man) the process by which relationships of native peoples with the white man were transformed, sometimes using white man’s practices and technologies. Pacifying or domesticating the white man refers not only to how indigenous peoples appropriated commodities and practices

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<sup>106</sup> The debates about the relationships and articulations between “myth” and “history” go back to Levi-Strauss’ (1966) dichotomy between cold and hot societies. Indigenous societies that live in Amazonia have been widely used as examples of “cold societies.” Indigenous peoples of Amazonia have often been depicted, both within the discipline of anthropology and outside of it, as “being out of time –frozen in history, or unable or unwilling to conceptualize change as history” (Fausto and Heckenberger 2007).

associated with outsiders, it also refers to how indigenous populations were able to deter and neutralize, “pacify” to some extent, the violence and dangers associated initially with colonization (Albert and Ramos 2000). Domesticating the white man refers to how indigenous populations were able to empty the white men of “their aggressiveness, malignity, lethality, in few words, domesticate them” (Carneiro da Cunha 2000:7). Through this process indigenous communities establish new relationships with the white men, reproducing themselves as societies “this time not against them, but through them, recruiting them for their own continuity” and transformation in this case (Carneiro da Cunha 2000:7).

Evangelization in Northwest Amazonia is usually linked with the end of physical violence exercised by white traders (of rubber initially and later fiber), over indigenous men and women.<sup>107</sup> In this regard, Gerardo told me how “since the arrival of Sophie, people live an organized life, they know what life is about, they don’t run anymore when the white man comes.” Gerardo recalled how white men used to call them “savages,” they “didn’t respect the people because they said that Indians are like animals (...) they did whatever they wanted.” In this sense, as native peoples became Christians and “civilized,” they were able to gain the respect of the white men. This was part of the evangelical project of Muller. Orlando, an elder from el Paujil, told me once that Sophie used to say to them: “Life is going to change, be ready. Lots of people will come here to live with you, organize yourselves, receive the people that arrive here, but demand respect. People will come and will want to abuse and exploit you, it is not necessary to fight with them, but demand respect. Don’t kill them.”

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<sup>107</sup> *Colonos* would say that it was the State that ended the violence between Indians and white traders associated with rubber extraction, when the province of Guainía was created in 1963. As I discussed in Chapter 2 physical and symbolic violence was reenacted by the state and some of its agents in different ways and settings.

The claim that white settlers or *colonos* stopped conceiving of the Indians as savages after they became Christian raises serious questions about the nature and dynamics of colonialism in Amazonia. As I show in the next section of this chapter, some *colonos* believe that Muller duped the Indians and Christianity made them lazy. Furthermore, racial stereotypes of Indians as inferior and less civilized are still held by many of the *colonos* in the region. Nonetheless, crucial questions are raised by Jesus' account: how did Christianity affected racial hierarchies and power relationships between Indians and *colonos*? Did Christianity collude with or interrupt, in one way or another, colonization?

### **Evangelization and Culture Loss**

Dario is one of the white teachers that came to Guainía in the early 1970s, when the first boarding schools were created. I met Dario in Inírida a few weeks after my arrival in February of 2009. Dario has carried on anthropological and linguistic research about the Curripaco while working as a teacher in different boarding schools in the Guainía river. Dario also was a student in Masters program in ethnolinguistics at a prestigious university in Bogotá, but never finished. Since the first time I met him, Dario told me how the evangelical work of Sophie Muller had a negative impact on indigenous culture in Guainía. Dario believed that the missionary work of Sophie Muller destroyed completely indigenous culture and traditional rituals. Dario argues that when Muller started saying that traditional knowledge was useless, since then “everything started to breakdown, to crack down.” However, Dario recognized that Muller was the first non-indigenous person that came to the region to “show different things” and “she has taught ‘us’ how to read.” “Nobody else,” said Dario, had done this before, neither a “merchant, nor a *colono*, and a rubber boss never, because what they had received from the [white man] was practically pure exploitation.”

Dario recalled how Muller tried to convert him, but he told her from the beginning that he was Catholic and would die as Catholic. Dario argues that Muller was able to “dazzle”

(*deslumbrar*) the natives,

[Muller] was not able to convince me obviously, but all that stuff of her, all her things, her plates and all her lore, all that influenced a lot in... what it's true is that the passages of the Bible, there are passages that are really beautiful (...) so them [the natives], imagine yourself reading that in your own language, well they were dazzled by that.

The idea that Muller tricked in one way or another the Indians is widely shared among the *colonos* in Inírida. For example, when I told a woman who works in the local archive about my research she replied with a question: “so, your research is about that woman who duped the Indians?” Nonetheless, the assumption behind this idea is basically that indigenous Christians are dumb and did not know what they were doing. Furthermore, this idea perpetuates common stereotypes of Indians as ignorant and easy to deceive.

Negative ideas about evangelization are very common among *colonos* who worked as teachers for the government or merchants. A lot of *colonos* believe that evangelization made the natives lazy, for they became more concerned with praying than with working. Some of the views *colonos* hold about evangelization come from direct interactions they had with Sophie Muller and their own experience working and living with natives. This is the case of Fernando, who came very young to the region in the early 1970s, with his father, to *colonizar* (colonize/settle). After the governor (*comisario*) of the province convinced him to work for the regional government, Fernando started to establish (*fundar*) boarding schools. During the 1970s, Fernando set up five boarding schools in different indigenous communities throughout the Guaviare River. It was around 1973 that Fernando had his first encounter with Sophie Muller in

a community called Guaco. Fernando worked there as the only teacher in the school he had created. Fernando recalls how Muller went to the place where he was staying and said to him,

Yeacher you're a devil, you're a devil! (...) she was upset, she turned red, and why am I a devil Sofia? I replied to her (...) that is a devil [pointing to a calendar poster with a woman in blue jeans], that radio is a devil, that is a devil! More devil are you Sofia! You have pants, she [woman in the poster] also has pants, then where is the nudity? You are more devil! When I replied to her like that she started tapping the floor with her shoes (...) I talked to her like that because I was upset, me a Colombian, constructing nation [*haciendo patria*] around here, creating schools, teaching to the people and all that thing, and then a foreigner comes here, I hadn't drunk my coffee that day, I was about to make one, to insult me!

Fernando also told me how Muller would turn the people against him, telling them that he was a devil because he smoked and drunk. In fact, in her last book Muller argues that teachers chosen by the government to “do the teaching did not contribute to the Indians' new moral standards. Most were young, atheistic men, fresh out of college, and full of Karl Marx” (Muller 1986:178).

The conflict between Fernando and Muller escalated to the point where Fernando ended up filing a complaint in the Department of Education and with monsignor Correa, who was in charge of some of the boarding schools created by Fernando. A formal investigation was opened in 1973 against Sophie Muller for obstructing public education. As part of the investigation both teachers and Indians were interrogated. The director of the national intelligence agency (DAS) back then visited the region and wrote a report (Matallana 1976).

Regarding evangelization, Fernando firmly believed that the “characteristic” laziness of Indians has its origin in the teachings of Muller. According to Fernando, it was Muller who taught the Indians to be lazy, “she told them that *mana* will come from heaven, don't work, just for subsistence, all this was taught by Sophie.” Fernando added that state patronage in both Colombia and Venezuela also has promoted and sustained the laziness of Indians. Another common stereotype that *colonos* hold towards indigenous peoples in the region has to do with

their supposed laziness, and in some cases, unwillingness to work for them. According to Fernando, the “characteristic” laziness of “Indians” was originated and taught through evangelization. In addition, since the 1990s in both Colombia and Venezuela indigenous populations receive more material support from the State. Local politicians tend to recruit constituents using money and commodities.

Some indigenous leaders also hold critiques of evangelization, but they have a different tone, as they are formulated from the “inside,” aware of the significance and meaning that religion has for indigenous communities in Guainía. For example, Emilio, who worked as pastor and captain for several years in Chorro Bocon (the biggest Puinave community on the Inírida River), argues that Sophie made some mistakes when she banned traditional music and instruments that were not necessarily “negative” and she would also “push” some people to become Christian, without explaining to them thoroughly what becoming Christian meant.

Another indigenous critique of evangelization was voiced to me by Ismael Martínez (Puinave teacher, former president of CRIGUA -Indigenous Regional Council of Guainía- and the union of teachers that work for the government). Ismael argues that evangelization produced a rupture in indigenous cosmology, history and culture. Ismael, who confessed not to be an evangelical, disagrees with how Sophie banned all kinds of sorcery, without understanding or recognizing –this means misrecognizing-, the different ways in which “sorcery” was used not just to produce sickness but also was used as a healing practice. Mythology, according to Ismael, “for the Puinaves, represents the philosophy of a people, is the essence of our live, mythology is our own philosophy, mythology, customs, are expressions of our own philosophy, of the thought of the Puinave people.” Under this frame, evangelization constituted a rupture in the continuity of mythological knowledge and cultural practices associated with it. Despite this

rupture, Ismael acknowledges the role religion has in the social organization of indigenous communities: “each community has its church, all of them, absolutely all of them have their pastors, deacons, evangelical organization that is an authority within the community.” Ismael thinks that besides spiritual organization and strength, evangelization also contributed to political organization, training leaders, and oriented the communities in how to “use and distribute the domestic space.”

Other indigenous leaders that grew up in Inírida believe that Muller destroyed native culture and undermined practices associated with shamanism. Loss of culture is also a growing concern for Indians that live in Inírida or close to it, as it happens to those that live in the reservation of El Paujil. Cultural loss is particularly seen in the loss of language, the children that grow up in Inírida speak more in Spanish than in their native languages. Ironically, in an urban setting such as Inírida the loss of language might go hand in hand with the loss of traditional Christian values that included refrain from smoking, drinking, dancing and womanizing, as well as the lack of commitment with the Gospel. According to Ismael, the social role of pastors and churches becomes more important now that “globalization comes from everywhere, if the church, the pastors, loose their strength, their essence as spiritual guides for social control, communities are under threat.” As many other indigenous leaders, Ismael conceives globalization as a threat for indigenous culture, without realizing that contemporary discourses about indigeneity are also the product of global processes as well as the expansion of Christianity.

### **“The Hill is Still There”**

Up to now seems clear that ideas held by both missionaries and Christian Indians about conversion and evangelization are problematic for different reasons. The emphasis some



missionaries place on continuity, the idea that indigenous culture did not change with conversion, contradicts with indigenous representations of conversion as a clear-cut break with the past both at the collective and individual level. On the other hand, conversion and evangelization are constituted by Christian Indians as events, which constitute them as Christians and produce a clear cut, but progressive, break between a pagan past and a Christian present. As I argue that the persistence of elements from the pagan past, sometimes as spirits embodied in different forms or material objects, pose specific dilemmas for both elder and younger Christians in Guainía. Webb Keane addresses some of the problems raised by the persistence of past semiotic forms, including traditions, languages and material objects, for a “moral narrative of progress” that puts at its center "human emancipation and self-mastery" (Keane 2007:7). In particular, the persistence of past semiotic forms poses specific dilemmas for projects of radical conversion and self-conscious transformation (Keane 2007:145). I pay attention here to the forms these dilemmas take among Puinaves and Curripacos in Northwest Amazonia, focusing on the persistence of sorcery, but more importantly on the presence of objects and material things that mediate and index practices such as sorcery.

Ricardo López, who grew up in Guarinuma, a Curripaco community in the Upper Guainía River, told me a story about how Muller tried to ban the poison known as *camajai* widely used by sorcerers,

They talked about *camajayeros*, when *señorita* Muller said: pastors, I think some of you pastors have *camajai*? Yes, *señorita* some of us have *camajai*, what do you want *señorita*? I need you guys throw it to the river in front of everyone. Ah sure *señorita*, when *señorita*? Tomorrow after noon, ah sure, time came, at one in the afternoon everybody to the river... ppssshhh, ok *señorita* we threw it away but the hill is still there. Aaaahhhh? [said Sophie] hills of *mavicure*, *pajarito* and hill *paujil*, have *camajai*. Because of that I say, and???? I can throw this, but you get it right there, in that deposit.

In this sense, the landscape itself emerges as a limit to radical transformation and conversion. Fernando Santos-Granero (1998) shows the different ways in which history in Amazonia gets “written” into the landscape. Drawing on a growing body of work, Santos-Granero emphasizes the “importance of landscape as another means of encapsulating and transmitting historical memory in both literate and nonliterate societies” (Santos-Granero 1998:131). In the case of Amazonia, specific associations are traced between landscape features or sites and past events be they historical, personal or mythical. For example, in Guainía the *Cerro de Mavicure*, is not just a symbol used to promote tourism and epitomize the region. People claim that *dexicoira*, a Puinave “princess,” lives inside the hill, after she tried to conquer a man in a party with a *pusana* (magic plant) that ended up driving her crazy and in the midst of her craziness she had to go inside the hill. There is actually a sign on the hill, that looks like a door or window, and it is said that the door was used by *dexicoira* to go inside the hill.

It is worth underlining that landscapes in Amazonia, and more specifically, forests, water and animals, are inhabited or constituted as different kinds of spirits or beings that take specific forms. Among the Puinave, for example, it is widely believed that some sacred sites on the river are inhabited by spirits called *yum*. These sites are considered also to be the home of the animal masters. *Yum* appears when taboos are violated and it might take different forms. Puinaves refer to these taboos as their law of origin, which should be respected by all of them. The taboos include not eating raw food when you are there, not drinking the water of sacred sites and not bathing in the water of sacred sites. When people go to these sites they usually take with them the *contra* (a kind of amulet that protects persons from spirits such as the *yum*). This can be *caraña* (a plant), *cumui* (tuber), salt or chili powder. Christians usually pray before they enter sacred sites and non-Christians have their own spells. In addition, people hit the water with the

hand when they visit these sacred sites in order to let the *yum* know they are there. These sites might also include parts of the forest or lagoons that are formed by the course of the Inírída river.

*Yums* takes different forms: they can make the earth shake, raise the water level of the river, or produce a downpour. *Yum* can cause sickness. Different types of *yum* produce different effects or do different kinds of things. The *yum* that inhabits the forest sometimes whistles and can make you get lost in the forest, until you trick him.<sup>108</sup> *Yums* are less fierce in urban settings, given that there are more people, salt and chili<sup>109</sup>. *Yums* can also take a human shape. If you think too much about your girlfriend or wife while you're in one of these places, the *yum* might appear as a woman but without a navel. Most of the stories I heard about *yums* were told to me in a small workshop I was invited to participate in by a puinave leader in *El Paujil*. The workshop was part of a project to design the *plan de vida* (life plan) of the Puinave that inhabit the Paujil reservation. The project was sponsored by an NGO based in Bogotá. *Planes de vida* have been widely used in Colombia as a tool of development for programs in ethnic communities promoted by both governmental and non-governmental agencies. In the workshop a few leaders were participating, and one of them, Rodrigo, works as deacon in one of two evangelical churches that exist in *El Paujil*. The day we talked about *yums* Rodrigo suddenly jumped in and said: *el yum es Lucifer* (Lucifer is the *yum*). The other 4 or 5 persons attending the workshop didn't say too much about Rodrigo's injunction, but they insisted to me and a

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<sup>108</sup> As I was told, the *yum* can make people get lost in the forest while they are traveling or hunting. People know when the *yum* is around because they will try to find the way out from a specific place and end up in the same place, going in circles. What people do in these cases is make a kind of puzzle, with a leave from a tree for example, in order to distract the *yum*, while they find their way out.

<sup>109</sup> *Yums* tend to avoid stuff such as salt and chili, and because of this salt and chili are used as *contras*. My understanding is that salt and chili powder represent products that have been processed (or "cooked") by humans.

sociologist working for the NGO, that all of the stories they told us about *yums* were true and real, and they also emphasized how they were now evangelical, and we prayed before each lunch we had at the workshop. Rodrigo usually led our prayers, but he also knew a lot about sacred sites and the taboos associated with them.

Rodrigo's understanding of the yum as Lucifer raises questions of translation and commensurability between Christianity and indigenous religions. The equivalent of the *yum* among the Curripaco would be *yupinai*. I became familiar with *yupinai* during my stay in San José, the biggest Curripaco community on the Guainía River. Salomon, the head of the boarding school and friend of mine, told me how *yupinai* had produced a skin rash on one of the doctors was assigned to the health post the year before my arrival. The doctor tried all kind of conventional medications, until he was diagnosed by Samuel Gutierrez, one of the most respected elders in San José. Samuel gave the doctor a plant infusion and the skin rash disappeared completely few weeks later. I talked several times with Samuel. Samuel is not considered exactly a *paye*, but he knows quite a lot about healing with specific plants, counters against *camajai* and snake bite, as well as cures for common diseases such as stomach flu. One day in my last visit to San José, as the cult was happening, I asked Samuel what is *yupinai*? He replied to me saying that it was also what they called *mauari* (spirit of the water or rivers). Samuel continued saying that he asked a teacher of the boarding school who speaks curripaco about the translation of *yupinai* and she told him it would be like a *dwarf*. "We call it *puperi* (spirit of the forest), we call him also *maitero*." Samuel included *salvaje* (savage), as a kind of *yupinai* and said that it was also like a person. According to Samuel, *yupinai* is similar to what

the *colonos* or peasants call *la madre monte*.<sup>110</sup> At the end of this brief conversation with Samuel, I asked him: is *yupinai* mentioned in the Bible? Samuel replied saying no, the Bible only mentions the Devil and demons. Unlike Rodrigo, it seems clear for Samuel that *yupinai* was not the same as the Devil or demons. Therefore, *yum* or *yupinai* can not be simply translated as Lucifer, the Devil or demons. Furthermore, it might even be problematic, as an anthropologist from Inírida told me several times, to translate *yupinai* as spirit. Most of the definitions of spirit, informed by a Judeo Christian philosophy, have in common the idea that when we talk about spirits we are dealing with non-corporeal entities. Nonetheless, both *yum* and *yupinai* refer to entities with agency, sometimes visible and sometimes invisible, that take different shapes and are embodied in different material signs and actions. *Yum* and *yupinai* have a materiality of their own that is absent in the Christian notion of spirit.

Amazonian cosmologies put into question not just the divide between matter and spirit, but also the ontological divide between humans and non-humans, culture and nature. Viveiros de Castro shows how Amazonian perspectivism puts into question any kind of clear cut division between humans and non-humans, humans and animals, cultural and nature, as well as any attempt to locate agency and “humanity” on just one side of this divide. Perspectivism is defined by Viveiros de Castro as an indigenous theory according to which “the way humans perceive animals and other subjectivities that inhabit the world –gods, spirits, the dead, inhabitants of other cosmic levels, meteorological phenomena, plants, occasionally even objects and artifacts- differs profoundly from the way in which these beings see humans and see

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<sup>110</sup> *La madre monte* would be translated literally as mother spirit of the forest, although in most popular visions of *la madre monte* she is depicted as a “tall, robust, and fancy woman, dressed with branches, leaves, reeds and moss” (Ocampo López 2006:14).

themselves<sup>111</sup>” (Viveiros de Castro 1998:470). By the same token, only shamans, “multinatural beings by definition and office,” are capable of transiting these various perspectives and subjectivities, as well as capable of “returning to tell the tale” (Viveiros de Castro 1998:472). There are different ways of telling when an animal is “spiritual.” This means that a shaman transformed into an animal can be recognized by means of specific signs.<sup>112</sup>

Consequently, Ricardo’s story should not be read from a perspective that considers plants and mountains as simple inanimate objects, but also as subjects with a kind of agency of their own. Ricardo’s story about *camajai* and the hills is not just about the possibility of always finding magic plants or bark to make *camajai*, but it is also about the practices mediated by those kinds of objects. When I told Ricardo that I heard that flutes associated with traditional rituals were thrown also to the rivers, not just the *camajai*, he said that “all the stuff they used was thrown away, *yapurutu* (flutes), *maracas*, everything, everything was burned, my grandmother told me, yes, they burn it, they themselves.” As several authors have pointed out, the destruction of material objects with sacred value has been common in several projects of political and religious reform, as well as in broader missionary enterprises (Keane 2007; McCormack 1991). But, how can you destroy a hill or make a magic plant disappear?

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<sup>111</sup> It is necessary to point out here that perspectivism is different from cultural relativism. While “(multi)cultural relativism supposes a diversity of subjective and partial representations, each striving to grasp an external and unified nature, which remains perfectly indifferent to those representations. Amerindian thought proposes the opposite: a representational or phenomenological unity which is purely pronominal or deictic, indifferently applied to a radically objective diversity. One single ‘culture’, multiple ‘natures’- perspectivism is multinaturalist, for a perspective is not a representation” (Viveiros de Castro 1998:478).

<sup>112</sup> Once a man was attacked by a tiger. They wrestled all the night, the man realized the tiger had no teeth, he was a “spiritual animal.” I was told by one of the leaders attending the workshop that he saw once a group of tigers cooking, just on the shore of a river. He added that tigers see human babies as pineapples. Fishes were the ones to make the first rituals.

Even if the flutes and objects associated with sorcery were destroyed, what assures us that the spirits or agents embodied in these objects are also destroyed?

David López is a Puinave missionary who worked with Muller and studied in Argentina, has traveled to the United States and other countries of South America as part of his involvement in a pan Indian network of evangelical indigenous churches and leaders called CONPLEI (Conselho Nacional de Pastores e Líderes Evangélicos Indígena) created in Brazil in 1991.<sup>113</sup>

David told me also another story related to sacred flutes, which seems like Ricardo's story told in reverse. In *Chorro Bocón*, a Puinave community on the Inírida River, some years ago a bunch of men who were fishing found in a small branch of the river a flute that was used in traditional rituals. Flutes were hidden before under the water in places considered sacred. Nobody wanted to touch the flute because they had the belief, according the David, that if someone saw or touched the flute, women especially, this person could die. "But there was a trap," told me David. It wasn't the flute, that "piece of wood," that killed people, David explained to me, it was the people who spied on each other and killed with poison those who touched or played the flute. People in *Chorro Bocón* were scared of the flute. When David arrived there, they had the flute hidden in a kitchen. David wanted to see the flute but they wouldn't let him. He told them: "let me go inside, I don't care if I die." David took the flute outside, showed it to everyone and told them: "guys look, look, look guys, nobody is going to die here." As Webb Keane points out, "one of the chief aims of the work of purification, as undertaken by Protestant missionaries, is to establish the proper locus of agency in the world by

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<sup>113</sup> CONPLEI has its headquarters in Brazil. Some of the main objectives of CONPLEI as they are announced in the website of the organization are: promote union and confraternity among pastors and other indigenous evangelical leaders, represent indigenous evangelical churches and support them in issues related to civil society and constituted public powers, defend, safeguard and fight for indigenous rights ([www.conplei.org.br](http://www.conplei.org.br)).

sorting out correct from mistaken imputations of agency” (Keane 2007:54). In this sense, David was trying to explain the people in Chorro Bocón that the flute had no agency in itself, it was a mistaken imputation of agency. Instead, David attributes agency to the men that are in charge of watching the flutes. If whether David and other Christian missionaries succeeded in their effort to purify agency, and established an ontological divide between humans and non-humans, culture and nature, remains to be explored. When he finished telling me the story about the flute, David added that “this was historical, it would be nice if we played a Christian flute and all that.” In this sense, Christian missionaries like David are not against objects (musical instruments in this case) themselves, but despise the belief that certain kinds of objects, including language, might have agency themselves.

Indigenous attitudes towards myths and their “ancestors cosmology” remain ambiguous, in a similar way as in the case of Luis Ordoñez. In a different *plan de vida*, published in 2002, under the sponsorship of the ONIC (National Indian Organization of Colombia), Spanish cooperation agency and the Curripaco regional organization, and written by different indigenous leaders, it is argued “our ancestors also had their own notion and cosmogonic organization in Majlena, Ñapiirriculi, Kuwai, Yuli, Amarru and others, that for us now are part of our history” (PVCY 2002:35). In the same document, there is a clear positive vision of the past when it says that “from our ancestral knowledge, the rules of kinship, and botanical medicine, the necessary forms of live are derived and have configured our uses and customs” (PVCY 2002:27). In this sense, relegating myths and mythical characters to the past and downgrading myths to simple stories does not coincide with the idea that “ancestral knowledge” informs everyday life of contemporary Indians. Something similar happens with recent attempts to recuperate and revive indigenous traditional culture in Guainía. These attempts at cultural revival find themselves



trying to recuperate a past, a history that is considered under a Christian guise as sinful and pagan. For example, Tomás, an indigenous leader who works as a legal representative of the reservation of *El Paujil*, expressed to me his interest in developing a project for reconstructing the “indigenous part” of history in Guainía, given the fact that the younger generations of natives that live in Inírida are “loosing their culture, their history.” Nonetheless, as Tomás also recognized, religion has helped them a lot, because the “customs that we had the elders don’t want to remember that, because they used to kill among each other, any kind of problem was a certain death.”

### **The Uses of Rupture and Continuity**

Both of the times I interviewed David, he emphasized the importance of indigenous history, tradition, cosmology, values, identity and culture. In fact, criticized white missionaries because they came to indigenous communities and started telling people: *Ah! That is sinful! That is wrong!*, without realizing that, according to David, natives don’t know what sin is, “don’t know what the word sin means.” Furthermore, white missionaries sometimes didn’t understand that natives have their own behavior, cosmology, forms, values, beliefs and history. In consequence, David believes that any missionary effort in order to be effective should first understand the native vision of things and what a native feels. Otherwise, conversion would remain insincere, at a superficial level, as people might display external change, but their interior remains the same.

The first time I talked with David at his house in El Paujil, when I asked him about CONPLEI, drawing on different experiences he had in his several trips, David told me:

I say and teach that we should preserve our identity, whoever it is, go where you go and even if you learn other languages, even if you learn another culture, you

are still yourself and I think it is because of that, that I'm here. I have had opportunities to work in another city or in another country, but I will not rest until the consciousness of the Indian holds that, keep the feeling of what he is, the Puinave be Puinave, and the Curripaco be Curripaco, and his way of life, his way of eating, fishing. Yes, he should have education, he should learn how the world is, he should learn internet.

Curiously enough, David also praised contemporary white missionaries because they don't say they come to "change culture, they simply preach pure religion, and that's it". The idea of evangelization as preserving and maintaining indigenous culture echoes Richardson's arguments in the same direction, but contradicts indigenous accounts of evangelization and conversion as a clear cut break with the past and pre-Christian customs and practices. In fact, a few minutes before David told me about the importance of maintaining indigenous culture, identity and self-consciousness, when I asked him about his conversion to Christianity, he replied saying how becoming Christian was a decision that: "changed my life in all senses, my way of living (...) God changed my life, because I see in the habits in my life, my vocabulary, my way of acting, liquor itself, I was becoming very addicted to alcohol."

How is David able to combine a language of rupture and transformation with a language that emphasizes cultural continuity and conservation? How to reconcile the active defense of indigenous culture and tradition with the engagement in a process of radical change that is entailed in the idea of becoming Christian? Missionaries believe that it is possible to separate, or purify for this matter, the good from evil in any specific culture. Ideally, Christians renounce the "evil" practices of their own culture that include, according to David, "cultural and physical abuses." The *plan de vida* mentions how Indians "wanted and should renounce" the ways in which their ancestors usually solved disputes with death, sometimes with "poison during the parties, in the midst of drunkenness." The authors of the *plan de vida* conceived conversion to Christianity, as part of the transformations that have been necessary for Curripacos in order to

“preserve, adapt, and improve themselves.” This transformation, then, has “prevented the extinction or disappearance of our people,” given that “beings that adapt to new changes and circumstances with success are the *most intelligent and not the strongest*” (PVCY 2002:36). Furthermore, Christianity appears here as mediating the relationships between indigenous subjects and western culture: “we have chosen the path of religiosity to come closer to western culture, because it provides us with elements to counter the most harmful of it and defend ourselves from external pressures” (PVCY 2002:37).

Questions about rupture and continuity have been central to broader debates in anthropology and history about the relationships between structure and change, structure and history, structure and agency (Sahlins 1985, Sewell 2005). In *Islands of History*, Sahlins develops an anthropological theory of history based on the idea that structures are subject to historical transformations through the action of culturally marked events (Sahlins 1985:vii, xiii-xiv). Sahlins defines the event as a “*relation* between a happening and a structure (or structures): an encompassing of the phenomenon-in-itself as a meaningful value, from which follows its specific historical efficacy” (Sahlins 1985:xiv). Through this theory of history, Sahlins attempts to transform the “unequal and radical opposition between structure and event, which made the two categories hostile and mutually incomprehensible, into a more balanced *relation*, in which each category implies and requires the other” (Sewell 2005:199). Despite the fact that Sahlins’ theory of history tends to emphasize reproduction over cultural change (“the transformation of a culture is a mode of its reproduction”), recent theories of the event developed by historians have used some of his theoretical insights. While Sahlins is more interested in showing how the event becomes a “contingent realization of the cultural pattern” (Sahlins 1985:vii), I am more concerned here with understanding how events transform the “meanings of cultural markers

[which define events] and thereby reorient the possibilities of human social actions” (Sewell 2005:219). Specifically, I am interested in understanding the kind of “structural” transformations that conversion to Christianity brought among Puinaves and Curripacos in Northwest Amazonia. However, in order to theorize the multiple effects of events it is necessary, as William H. Sewell points out, to pluralize the notion of structure and think in terms of multiple structures of different kinds that articulate different kinds of subjectivities (Sewell 2005:210-211). In this sense, what becomes characteristic of the event or “the incident as event, is the connections it makes between different orders of structure... in the culture of a given society” (In Sewell 2005:210). The massive conversion to evangelical Christianity of several Puinaves and Curripacos since the 1940s could be conceptualized as a particular event that changed specific structures and relationships, but did not produced a “complete break with the past,” as some indigenous Christians claim that it happened. As Birgit Meyer shows how for Ghanaian Pentecostals, the “notion of rupture only becomes meaningful because it urges people to remember what links them with their ‘past’ in order to forget (Meyer 1998:339). In this sense, the break with ‘the past,’ as it were, presupposes its prior construction through remembrance and through Pentecostal discourses of the past as pagan (Meyer 1998:318). In consequence, instead of taking for granted the claim the indigenous Christians make a complete break with the past (Robbins 2007), it is necessary to explore what do indigenous Christians mean when they make this claim. Is it a way of claiming that they have become modern? It is a way of resignifying external representations of them as “savages” and, therefore, reclaiming their status as civilized subjects?

In this chapter, I have tried to complicate this ongoing debate between rupture and continuity, showing how different understandings of culture and religion lead to different ways of

conceiving rupture and continuity, change and permanence, rupture and progress. Even if conversion to Christianity did not happen the way indigenous Christians think it happened (i.e. as a complete break with the past), it should be clear that conversion to Christianity did change the ways in which indigenous Christians think about change and their past. On the other hand, social actors might also use particular notions of rupture and continuity for specific purposes, be them religious, cultural or political. For example, indigenous leaders draw on ideas about their ancestral traditions when it is necessary to reclaim lands or advance specific political agendas. White and indigenous missionaries deploy different ideas of rupture and continuity depending on the context, issues, audience and politics at stake. There is the possibility that missionaries were emphasizing continuity in the process of evangelization and conversion in Guainía, because they were talking to me and know what ‘we’ anthropologists usually think about religious evangelization. However, some missionaries recognized that some aspects of culture had to be changed in order for evangelization to be effective. For instance, Ordoñez emphasized how Muller was explicitly against rituals that entailed drinking alcohol and bloodshed. After all, most missionaries see themselves as helping and saving the Indians, Ordoñez himself recounted how there was a great deal of sickness when he started his missionary work in Guainía back in the early 70s. Ordoñez worked as a nurse at some point. The ability of Christian missionaries, as I have emphasized here, is to separate or purify culture from religion and be able to claim, and even tell the natives, that they don’t come to change culture but to teach religion.

## Conclusion

I have tried to show here how the narratives of Christian missionaries that tend to separate culture from religion, as part of a broader work of purification, are put at risk by indigenous visions of religion, culture, and conversion. The ontological separation between culture and religion established by missionaries, is unmade by the idea that religion is now part of indigenous culture. Indigenous leaders now conceive religion as part of a broader cultural system that includes other things such as political and social organization, subsistence activities and ancestral knowledge. Far from being something personal and intimate, Christianity is conceived as fostering indigenous ideas about community, society, salvation, ethics and morality. The work of purification, nonetheless, goes hand in hand with the proliferation of hybrids (Latour 1993; Keane 2007). What we are witnessing in the statements laid out in the *plan de vida* published in 2002, is the emergence of a kind of Christian indigeneity. This kind of indigeneity combines, according to the authors of the *plan de vida* the “ancestral knowledge that is transmitted from fathers to sons, and the intelligence to adapt to cultural, social, economic and political changes from a philosophy of salvation and solidarity” (PVCY 2002: 37). In this sense, practicing Christianity becomes a particular way of refashioning tradition and becoming Indian in Northwest Amazonia. The collective voice of the *plan de vida* states that “pastors and missionaries in the communities show the spiritual development that combined the gospel of Christ with our beliefs and customs, this revives our tradition in the cult, in the sacred suppers and conferences, in the morning and afternoon prayers, in the dawn of the elders” (PVCY 2002: 29). Christian indigeneity as described in the *plan de vida* is not absent of contradictions. How to reconcile the continuity of indigenous “spiritual development” that brings together “the gospel of Christ with our beliefs and customs;” with the claims to rupture and breaking with the

past that I would hear again and again in the field when indigenous Christians told me their stories of conversion?

Before answering this question, it is necessary to recognize that the *plan de vida* was a document made for political purposes by indigenous leaders, under the support of an NGO called GAIA, whose polemical work I address in another chapter. The *plan de vida* might be understood as part of an attempt to “invent” a tradition in a moment when indigenous peoples have gained rights and resources that did not have before. Nonetheless, the *plan de vida* also reveals a particular way of understanding the articulation between Christianity, modernity and indigeneity. While the *plan de vida* traces a continuity between Christianity and indigeneity, the *plan* also recognizes political, economic and social changes to which indigenous peoples have “adapted.” There is a tension between change and continuity in the *plan de vida*, which seems to be part of an attempt to find and fix “tradition” in a constantly changing and modern world. It seems clear that indigenous leaders such as David are able to combine languages of rupture with languages of continuity, as well as navigate different regimes of indigeneity that interpellate indigenous leaders in different ways.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Practicing Christianity: Self, Community and Modernity**

#### *My first evangelical conference*

It was early July 2009, time for my second visit to San José, one of the biggest Curripaco communities on the Guainía river. My first visit had taken place in the month of March of that same year. I went there with teachers from Leon de Greiff, a boarding school in San José named after a renowned Colombian writer and poet. When I visited San José in March, I stayed for 2 weeks in a building where each of the teachers had their own bedroom. Gaining the trust of the *capitán* Julio Gutierrez and the rest of the Curripacos who lived in San José was a long and complicated process. Most of the time, I was being tested regarding different issues: my politics of knowledge, religious affiliation and moral stance, among others. Some of the Curripacos from San José didn't trust me very much. During my first visit in May of 2009, I had to make clear what my work was about. Specifically, I had to explain to the Curripacos in San José several times that I did not work for GAIA, an NGO whose headquarters is in England, and which has been doing environmental and cultural projects with Curripacos since the late 1970s and early 1980s (I will address GAIA's controversial work among Curripacos in the next chapter). Additionally, the first time I had a formal talk with Julio he told me about how anthropologists used to be considered by some Christian Curripacos as antichrists, drawing on Muller's vision of anthropologists and responding to negative views of evangelization held by anthropologists that have done fieldwork in the region.



Objects such as radios, Bibles and catechisms initially mediated the relationships I established with some of the Curripacos from San José. During my first visit, some of the Curripacos I talked to would ask me when was I coming back. I replied saying that I would be back in early July for the evangelical conference (after being invited to attend the conference, given my interest in Christianity) that was going to take place in the Curripaco community of Victorino, on the Venezuelan side of the border. Some of them asked me to bring them a Bible, a catechism or a Christian songbook in Curripaco and a few of them asked for radios. Christian Curripacos in San José gave me specific instructions about how and where to get the Bibles. In Inirida I contacted the person who had the Bibles, catechisms and songbooks; he gave me several of them to take to San José. All of this created sort of a conflict for me. I never thought I was going to end up supporting Christianity among indigenous communities in Guainía in one way or another. Nonetheless, who was I to judge if what the Curripacos of San José desired or were doing as Christians was good for them or not, and whether it was right or wrong?

I was back in San José in early July, after a 4-day trip by river from Inirida, before attending the conference that was going to take place in Victorino during the second week of July. I had brought with me several Bibles, Catechisms and songbooks and one radio for Julio's brother Samuel. This time, I went to San José with my research assistant, a female undergraduate anthropology student from the Jesuit University I was affiliated to in Colombia. Some of the Christian Curripacos I had barely met in my first visit to San José started to call me *hermano* (brother in Christ), while they looked for me and asked me for Bibles. I would call them by their own names. During my first visit to San José I had attended *el culto* (religious service) a couple of times in order to get a sense of how it worked, and did the same during my second visit. Christian Curripacos also started to call my assistant *hermana* (sister). Some of the Christian

Curripacos in San José thought my assistant and I were missionaries, as we seemed to evoke the way some missionaries used to arrive in these communities in couples, with Bibles and gifts for them. In fact, I was talking once with Ernesto, an elder Christian Curripaco, about how young males used to smoke in San José and he told me that “next time you come you should go after the boys that smoke, like a policeman, and question them, so you can teach them.” Ernesto added that young males started smoking a lot less since my first arrival in San José.

The day of the evangelical conference had come, it was the first Tuesday of July (See Image 5). I ran that morning into Pedro, one of the two pastors of San José, in front of the communal room, next to the Church. Pedro was wearing a Caribbean hat, a nice gray shirt and brown pants. When he saw me that morning he blessed me, after asking me if I was ready for the conference. Together with the people from San José attending the conference, my assistant and I boarded the big boat that would take us to the conference in Victorino. All of the boats attending the conference placed a white flag in the bow of the boat with the label United Bible Churches (Iglesias Bíblicas Unidas) and the name of the community that the passengers came from (in this case San José). It is worth pointing out that most of the boats that travel throughout the border between Colombia and Venezuela, carry the flag either of Colombia or Venezuela, depending where they are originally from. We had to stop a few meters before Victorino in order to wait for boats from other communities that were attending the conference. The boats were formed in pairs and everyone started singing Christian hymns; on the shore you could see the people of Victorino making a long line. As we got off the boats we started making a line and greeting the people of Victorino. We started shaking the hands of every single person from Victorino, *God bless you*, each of one of them told me as I shook their hands. After all the greetings, the people attending the conference gathered around an old basketball court in front

of the church forming a square. The coordinator of the conference welcomed everyone and explained how they had arranged different houses for people from each community to stay in. Separate spaces were arranged for men and women in the back of Victorino to be used as bathrooms. The coordinator also emphasized how men and women should use separate parts of the shore of the river when they take a bath. There was a feeling of joy in the atmosphere, lots of people smiling. The young members of the churches attending the conference had t-shirts with logos such as: *Jesus, king of kings*, *Jesus is the best*, and *I am of Jesus*.



Image 2. Arriving at an evangelical conference.

The inaugural service of the conference started around 7 p.m. As in most of the services, women were seated in the left side of church, while men were seated on the right side of the church. The members of the church from Victorino were in charge of the opening service and the singing. They had a group of young boys who played different instruments and girls in

charge of singing. The service was opened with Christian songs in Curripaco and Spanish. After half an hour of singing, every elder member of the church of Victorino, welcomed everyone to the conference and expressed their joy in hosting the conference. At the end of the service the first group of ‘policemen’ were named, each of one of them from different churches attending the conference, following the instructions in the catechism<sup>114</sup>. As each of one of them was called, they passed to the front of the church and a spear was given to them. After this, they sang the following song in Spanish, holding in one had the spear and moving their legs as if they were soldiers marching:

*We are soldiers  
We belong to the Lord  
We go in defense of our Gospel  
Pa para pam pa!  
Pa para pam pa!  
We will reach victory with Jesus*

The recently appointed policemen said to the people attending the conference that despite the fact that they were in charge of watching them, they should also police them as policemen, given that they might also make mistakes. Once the opening service was finished everybody went to sleep to the houses assigned by the coordinator of the conference. I stayed in a house assigned to the people from San José.

The church of San José was in charge of the first morning service the next day. After a few songs, the elders started to give *testimonio* (*dar testimonio*). It was the turn of Pedro, one of the

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<sup>114</sup> In *Jungle Methods* (1960), Muller refers to the job of policemen in conferences saying that the “will look into each house before each meeting to see that no one hides away from God’s Word. They will also watch entrances of Conference building to see that whoever leaves meeting, quickly returns. If someone refuses to attend meetings, the leaders must tell them to leave the Conference, also any who want to commit sin. The policemen will watch to see that no one walks around after the evening meeting. They will watch the children that they do not play bad (immorally). They must not let unbelievers bring drink or cigarette to the Conference. You must all respect these men and come when they call you, since they will be helping our Lord to keep Satan out of this Conference” (Muller 1960: 49).

main pastors from San José. Pablo, Pedro's grandson was serving as my translator. Pablo started translating close to me ear and said: *he is talking about you*. Surprised, I replied: *really? What is he is saying about me?*. Pablo told me: *he is saying that somebody saw you smoking a cigarette*. In fact, the day before, I had gone into the woods to smoke a cigarette, hoping that nobody would see me. When I asked Pablo later to translate for me the complete testimony of Pedro, he said it went something along these lines: *a white man came with us, I was told he has been smoking, you all know it is forbidden to smoke in conferences. It's not just me saying this, it is stated in the catechism*. I was ashamed and pissed off at the same time. I didn't know how to react or what to say. I kept silent thinking about the unfortunate incident. Most of the people in the Church started giving me awkward looks and some of the male adults would imitate the gestures of a smoker when I looked at them. After the service was finished, Felix, the pastor from a community called Tonina, approached me and told me I should explain to everyone what I was doing in the conference (something I had already done with some of the people from San José). I felt my first apologies should be given to Pedro, as he had trusted me and took me with the members of his Church to the conference. I gave Pedro my apologies and he replied with a secular argument telling me that smoking was bad for my health. Anyway, I followed Felix's instructions and gave a short speech about my research in the communal lunch that took place after the service. I thought my speech would serve as a public apology for my behavior the day before. My relationship with most of the Christian curripacos from San José, changed since that day, instead of calling me *hermano*, they started to call me *amigo* or just Esteban. I was downgraded. To some extent, I was fitting the stereotype of anthropologists as antichrists and enemies of the Gospel.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Nonetheless, I was flattered once on a different occasion when a young Christian Puinave in

This apparently insignificant episode drove my attention to things I hadn't thought about as I was trying to understand how indigenous Christian communities work and come to be in this region. Why did Pedro accuse me in public, instead of calling my attention in private? What does this episode, together with the appointment of policemen, tell us about how rules and discipline are produced and reinforced among indigenous Christian communities in Northwest Amazonia? What does smoking or not smoking tobacco tell us about the semiotics of conversion and morality among Puinaves and Curripacos? How are ideas about the self and community intertwined for indigenous Christians, considering the importance they place on public confessions and giving testimony? In this chapter I will try to answer these questions showing how Christian notions of self and community should be understood in relation to each other. Conversion entails both the production of Christian subjects and communities. Paying attention to the contingencies and circumstances that enable conversion, this chapter describes conversion as a multifaceted process where the interaction between specific events, persons and institutions produces moral subjects and communities (Foucault 1985, Durkheim 1995).

Drawing on Ludwig Feuerbach (1841), Webb Keane (2007), and local testimonies, the chapter starts showing how conversion entails a process of "self-estrangement" from one's own past and culture, as well as new forms of "self-recognition." These processes of self-objectification are mediated by specific understandings people have about the Bible (i.e. the Bible as mirror). The idea that we should "know who we are" in order to be good Christians, illustrates how the "rule that one should know oneself" has been regularly combined with the

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San Juan de Ucata in Venezuela, told that I had come to talk the Gospel and revolution. He was probably thinking about the 'Bolivarian Revolution,' given that I was asking questions about religion and about the perception that indigenous people had of Chavez' policies and political project.

theme of “care of the self” (Foucault 2005:491). In this sense, conversion might be understood as a ‘technique of the self’ by which one learns how to become a good person. The Bible emerges here as a “prescriptive text,” that must be obeyed and dictates specific ways of conducting your self in front of God and others. The articulation between self and community is constituted through practices that include “giving testimony” (*dar testimonio*) and public confessions. Spoken and performed testimony produces ways of becoming accountable for one’s own behavior before God and before the other members of the Church. Local theories of power also refer to a hierarchical articulation between self, family, Church and community. In order to be able to manage appropriately other people you should learn first how to discipline yourself and your family. Government starts in the household and goes all the way up to the church and the community. In between these fields of practice, morality emerges as “field of cultural predispositions informing and creating, rather than supporting social relations between groups and persons” (Howell 1997:5). Morality, then, produces and makes possible relationships and transactions between self, family and church. The last part of the chapter, analyses the ambiguous relationship that indigenous Christians have developed with the modern framed in terms of *lo mundano* (worldliness). A sort of “moral modernity” is created out of this relationship by which specific commodities and technologies are cautiously used and appropriated.

### **Becoming Christian**

As it happens in many other evangelical communities, Christian Puinaves and Curripacos associate becoming Christian with being “born again.” Pablo, a Puinave pastor from El Paujil (an indigenous reservation close to Inírida), told me how he uses the story of Nicodemus in

John 3:1-8 in order to explain to the youth what it means to become Christian and what kind of change does this entail. According to the Bible Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish ruling council and one night came to Jesus and said: “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.” In reply Jesus declares: “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” “How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!” and Jesus finally answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.” Pablo explained to me how this story shows that “when you convert from the Word, from what the Word teaches us, it is like being born again.” Everything changes, according to Pablo, how you talk, walk and dress.

Furthermore, among Puinaves and Curripacos, becoming Christian is described as a multifaceted process contingent upon the actions and influence of different agents and events. The agents might include the Bible, God, kin, the community or the Church and internal voices, among others. When looked at in retrospective, conversion is described as something that happens to you and not as something that you explicitly chose. Specific stories of conversion illustrate the ways in which indigenous Christian subjectivities are fashioned and produced from within and without. Most of the Christian indigenous communities throughout the rivers hold two or three services (*cultos*) per week in addition to the Sunday service that can take between three to four hours in the morning. Holy suppers are done the first weekend of every month and religious conferences happen once or twice a month, depending on the sector where you live. The Sunday service includes a Sunday school (*escuela dominical*), especially for the children, where they are taught Christian songs and memorize verses of the Bible.



Pablo refers to two specific events that paved the way for his conversion to Christianity. Pablo's conversion goes back to 1974 when he worked extracting *chiqui-chiqui* fiber on the Inírida River. One night Pablo stayed in a place known as La Ceiba, with his brother in law. That night, Pablo and his brother in law got really drunk that night, Pablo almost killed a friend of him who took the bottle of alcohol away from him. Pablo recalls how he heard a voice in his mind telling him: *the day you leave this place you have to look for a place where the word of God is preached*. When I asked Pablo whose voice was it, he replied saying: *I don't know*, and he added: *sometimes I remember, I think it was the Lord who called me to be in this thing that I'm living today*.<sup>116</sup> In a later conversation we had, Pablo confessed to me that he still hears that voice.

The second event that drove Pablo to become Christian took place one day when his wife told him: *look, we are going to receive this word that is better (...), I don't want you to drink*.

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<sup>116</sup> There are several known cases of sudden conversions in the history of Christianity that follow the idea of an epiphany produced by an interior voice that speaks to the subject. However, there are two cases that remain emblematic. The first case comes from the story of St. Paul, Badiou tells the story: "while traveling to Damascus as a zealous Pharisee in order to persecute Christians, Paul hears a mysterious voice revealing to him both the truth and his vocation." Badiou raises the following question: "is the term "conversion" appropriate to what happened on the road to Damascus? It was a thunderbolt, a caesura, and not a dialectical reversal. It was a conscription instituting a new subject: "By the grace of God I am what I am" (Cor. I.15.10)(Badiou 2003:17). The other known case of "sudden" conversion comes from the story of Luther and its known as "the tower experience." Luther was in the tower of the Black Cloister in Wittenberg trying to understand a specific passage of the Bible in Romans 1:17: "In the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed." After a sudden revelation, Luther understood the passage: "At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me" (Luther 1960:336-337).

*All that my dad, my family does is not right for me, I want you to receive this instead, that you read the Bible.* Pablo told his wife that this word was not good for him, because he couldn't fulfill it. *"It is a very very hard law for me,"* said Pablo to his wife after her request. Pablo's wife insisted asking him if he wanted to do wrong then, he said he didn't wanted to wrong either. A few days after this conversation between Pablo and his wife, some Christian Puinaves from Caranacoa who were very faithful (*muy creyentes*) according to Pablo, came to Pablo's house and officed a service (*culto*) with his approval. Once the service was over the Christians from Caranacoa asked Pablo: *what do you think about it?* Pablo replied saying: *it's all right. Do you want to receive it?* The Christians asked him. Pablo told them it was his father-in-law who should answer that question first, Pablo's father-in-law said he could not receive it, but he suggested that Pablo should receive it. Pablo finally accepted and "received the word." After this transforming event, Pablo started to enjoy reading and understanding the Bible, he spent about 2 or 3 years learning about the Bible until he settled down in El Paujil.

Pablo explained to me how conversion entailed a two-sided process: *first, we have to convert ourselves (convertirnos), we have to think what we are and give our life to the Lord, so that then the Lord can convert us.* In this sense, one could say that conversion comes from within the self and from without. Conversion entails the construction of subjects that are willing to act upon and transforms themselves. Conversion becomes a process of searching, according to Pablo, of *looking for what it is that the Lord wants [to do] with us.* Pablo told me how at the beginning: *I didn't know about the Bible, what it was that the Bible wanted to do with me, I didn't understand, but I understood one day, what it is that the Bible teaches me.* One of the main tasks of Christian Indians in Guainía is not just to read and understand the Bible, memorizing the verses in the service, but more importantly perhaps to obey the Bible. As Pablo told me

once: *if I say I am a pastor, but if I don't come through, then what am I doing? Nothing. The Lord just wants us to obey what the Bible teaches us. As I will show here, obeisance to God starts with self-discipline, which is possible through the action of the Word: discipline is what comes out of the Word, you see me here, like disciplined. I am here disciplined, but it is not because you disciplined me, it is not because the pastor disciplined me; it is just because I am disciplined of the Lord, with the help of what he told me, all that he gives us, because the Word is what comes from heaven.*

Conversion is made possible through self-reflection (*think what we are*) and introspection. The Bible and the word of God mediate this process of self-reflection. For example, Rodrigo, a deacon from El Paujil, told me how he heard in a conference a pastor said that: *we are a person, a living soul, we have spirit, the day that we die we don't die, we will remain as spirit in the hands of God and God is going to judge us.* The process of finding who we were and what we are is achieved through the Bible and the message of God. Pablo recounted how he liked the message of God when he heard of it for the first time: *I liked the message very much, because it seemed very good to me, because it talked about what I had gone through before, I said: it is very true, because where I came from was very good, but truly it was not very good.* Conversion produces specific forms of estrangement from one's own past as well as new forms of self-recognition.<sup>117</sup> Referring to pre-Christian times, Pablo said that: *the Bible teaches us that those*

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<sup>117</sup> Webb Keane points out that both Marx and Heidegger consider estrangement as a crucial element for understanding the condition of modernity. For Marx, “estrangement involves abstraction of that which was concrete, decontextualization of that which lives within a context of social relations, and alienation of persons,” while for Heidegger, estrangement includes a “denial of temporality, and the taking of the world as so many objects from which we stand out” (Keane 2007:10). Both contribute, according to Keane, to an “underlying narrative about modernity and its costs, the effects of life disembedded from previous unities, and the consequences of estrangement” (Keane 2007:11). The characteristic estrangement of modernity is instilled through different means among which one may include the conversion to

*times were a punishment, we used to live punished, but who held us as slaves? It was Satan, he was the one that ruled, but now that we are not anymore with Satan, we changed our way of living.* The role words and things play in this dialectic between self-estrangement and recognition cannot be ignored. Webb Keane shows how both language and material objects are “crucial media for the self-objectification by which human subjects know themselves and make themselves recognizable to others” (Keane 2007). Ironically, the estrangement from one’s own past and culture turns them at the same time into ‘objects’ of reflection, which can be acted upon and changed in one way or another.

One way of understanding how the Bible mediates self-estrangement and recognition among Puinaves and Curripacos is to pay close attention to the symbolic associations between the Bible and different kinds of objects. One of the objects the Bible is clearly associated with by Puinaves and Curripacos is a mirror. The metaphor of the Bible as a mirror is clearly illustrated in one of the many plates used by missionaries as pedagogical tools for evangelization purposes. Elder Christians keep some of these plates and some are hanged on the walls of Churches. The plate is divided in two parts, the upper part has the title *the Bible is milk and food* and shows on the left side a healthy female baby drinking milk from a feeding bottle and the right side shows an undernourished male baby. The lower part of the plate (see below) has the title *is a mirror*.



Image 3. The Bible as mirror.

On the upper left corner of this plate there is an inscription that reads: “Through the Bible, the young man sees his sins and says: “I’m dirty, I want to be cleaned up by Christ.” There are two more inscriptions on the plate. The one in between the “two heads” reads: “Then he leaves and soon forgets his disappointment with the dirtiness he saw in his life and continues with it like before. John 6:22.”<sup>118</sup> The other inscription in the lower end of the plate has two verses; the first one reads: “So the Bible says: “The one who listens to the word and doesn’t obey is like a man that looks at his dirty face in a mirror and goes away, forgetting how he was... James 1:23.”<sup>119</sup> The second verse reads: “That’s how those who give testimony of following Christ

<sup>118</sup> There might be a mistake in this quote given that John 6:22 refers to the scene when the disciples of Jesus saw him walking on the sea on their way to Capernaum and then the crowd following Jesus notices the he had not been aboard together with his disciples.

<sup>119</sup> The complete quote of James 1:22-25 is: “Be doers of the word, not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man that looks at his natural face in a looking-glass; for after looking at himself, he goes away and at once forgets

and return to the world are like the dog that returns and eats his own vomit... 2 Peter 2:22.”<sup>120</sup>

From the plate seems clear that when the man looks at (or reads) the Bible, it works as a mirror. The dirty spots around his face are seen through the Bible as signs of specific sins: lies and drunkenness in his forehead, theft and hate on each cheek, wasteful spending between his nose and mouth, deception in his chin, rudeness and fornication in his throat.

The plate seems to illustrate the two different trajectories a person can follow after reading or encountering the Bible: the person might recognize himself in the Bible, repent of his sins and start a new life “cleaned up by Christ,” or the person might just ignore what he read or saw in the Bible, “forgetting how he was” and continue with his life as before. There seems to be also a shifting middle ground between the last two main options suggested by the plate: those who “give testimony of following Christ and return to the world.” Persons who have been “led astray” (*descarriarse*) and failed conversions, as I will show later, pose specific questions for Christian Puinaves and Curripacos regarding authenticity and sincerity.

I asked Pablo to explain to me the idea that the Bible is like a mirror. Pablo said: *The Bible says is like a mirror, because if one doesn't look at one's face in a mirror, one doesn't know what is going on with one's face. The same thing happens with the Bible, the Bible shows that one is a sinner before God. Then, when one takes the mirror and looks, look what I have on my face, I am ashamed, did I go over there at noon like this? It is the shame that is shown by the*

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what he was like. But anyone that looks at the perfect law that makes men free, and stands by it, being not a hearer that forgets, but a doer that acts, that shall be happy in his work.”

<sup>120</sup> 2 Peter 2:20-22. For if through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ they have escaped all the uncleanness of the world and then are caught again in its net and mastered, their last state is worst that their first. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it, and then turned away from the holy commandment given to them. The truth of the proverb is proved in them: The dog returns to its vomit, and the sow that has been washed to its rolling in the mud.

*mirror. In the same way, the Bible shows our sins before God.* In this sense, without objects such as a mirror or a Bible it would be impossible for us to know who we really are and recognize ourselves as sinners before God.<sup>121</sup> Furthermore, the Bible mediates feelings such as shame, which entail the presence of others. More than simply reflecting our own selves as they are, the Bible gives us back a negative image of ourselves, it *shows all the evil we have*, Pablo told me. It is here that estrangement comes into play as we are not really who we thought we were. Pablo thought he was doing good and being a good man before becoming Christian, but later he realized that there was nothing good about his previous life.

In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2005), Foucault shows how the “rule that one should know oneself” has been regularly combined with the theme of “care of the self” (Foucault 2005: 491). In this sense, the precept according to which “one must give attention to oneself” took the form of an “attitude, mode of behavior; it became instilled in ways of living; it evolved into procedures, practices, and formulas that people reflected on, developed, perfected and taught” (Foucault 1988:45). The case at stake here is no exception to the close relationship between self-knowledge and care of the self. Conversion does not just open a space for a new relationship between self and self, but also instills specific techniques of the self by which the “individual constitutes and recognizes himself *qua* subject” (Foucault 1985:6). In this sense, the

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<sup>121</sup> In *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), Feuerbach states that “Man is nothing without an object,” in order to explain how self-consciousness becomes possible through the idea of God: “Man -this is the mystery of religion- projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself and object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject; he thinks of himself as an object to himself, but as the object of an object, of another being than himself” (Feuerbach 1957:30-31). In this regard, “consciousness of God is self-consciousness” and “knowledge of God is self-knowledge” (Feuerbach 1957:12). Paradoxically, in the process of knowing and becoming closer to God, ‘man’ must become a stranger to himself: “faith produces in man an inward disunion, a disunion with himself, and by consequence an outward disunion” (Feuerbach 1957:247).

recognition of one's own dirtiness goes hand in hand with the desire for cleanness: "I'm dirty, I want to be cleaned up by Christ." It is through confession that our sins are washed away and our soul is cleansed up. The Bible does not just show who we are, but also tells us who we should be and how should we live our life. In Pablo's own words, *we must look at the Bible everyday, through the Bible the Lord speaks with us: you have to live this way, talk in this way, walk in this way and do these things*. The Bible is constituted among Christian Indians in Guainía as a "prescriptive" text, capable of suggesting specific rules of conduct. Following Foucault, "prescriptive" texts work as "functional devices" that "enable individuals to question their own conduct, to watch over and give shape to it, and to shape themselves as ethical subjects" (Foucault 1985:13). Forming oneself into an ethical subject entails acting according to a prescriptive set of elements that make up a specific code. In consequence, conversion expresses both a specific *mode of subjection* and a technology of subjectivation by which the individual "establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obliged to put it onto practice," and constitutes an attempt to "transform oneself into the ethical subject of one's behavior" (Foucault 1985:27).<sup>122</sup>

There is another plate (see below) that illustrates how the Bible is conceived as a device for shaping one's own conduct, self and life in a particular way:

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<sup>122</sup> According to Judith Butler, subjection tends to be paradoxical as it speaks of how the subject produced by power is also dependent upon that same power for his existence. In her own words: "We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside, as what subordinates, sets underneath, and relegates to a lower order. This is surely a fair description of part of what power does. But if, following Foucault, we understand power as *forming* the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are" (Butler 1997:2).





Image 4. The Bible as brake and rudder

This plate has the title *The Bible is brake and rudder*. The plate draws on James 3:3.<sup>123</sup> On the upper left it reads *with the brakes we can manage (manejar) the whole body*,<sup>124</sup> and in brackets it reads *So, too, through the Bible we can put brake on evil desires and walk with our God*. On the upper right it reads *With a rudder it guides them through where it wants in the path of life*, and in brackets it reads *Without a rudder the driver cannot avoid the rocks in the river... In this same way, without the Bible we are not alert to the temptations that can destroy our life*. The plate uses local metaphors in order to convey a message that makes sense for the natives who

<sup>123</sup> The complete quote of James 3:1-5 is: “Not many of you must become teachers, my brethren; remember that we teachers shall be judged more severely than others. In many ways we all fall into sin. If any man falls into no sin of speech, he is a perfect man, able to control his whole body. If we put the bridle into a horse’s mouth to make it obedient, we can turn its whole body. Ships, also, big as they are and drive by violent winds, are turned about, as you see, with a very small steering-oar, wherever the will of the steers-man chooses. So the tongue is a small organ, but it boasts of great things. See how large a forest a small flame sets on fire!”

<sup>124</sup> In Spanish *manejar* refers to both “manage” and “drive” in the sense of providing direction.

read it or see it. On the side of the boat there is an inscription that reads *Life. Stay awake and pray*. There is an explicit analogy between the boat and life, the rudder and the Bible. In a similar way, each of the rocks on the river has a particular inscription: drugs, alcohol, impurity, jokes and evil friends. Underneath the rider and the horse there is a short paragraph that reads *the reins are tied to each side of a steel bar in the mouth of the horse, with this break the owner can guide it on the path where it should go. So too the Holy Spirit is guiding us through the Bible in the dangerous path of this world until we reach our home in heaven*. The Christian self is in control of his or her own body and, aware of his or her own desires and the temptations that come from the ‘dangerous’ world. Conversion is about recognizing one’s own dirtiness, managing one’s own body and repressing desires. Practices such as drinking, smoking and dancing represent a risk for the idea of Christian self, guided by the Holy Spirit. “As you know,” told me Pablo once, “when you drink you loose your mind, you end up lying anywhere.”

Fabio Maecha, a pastor born in Inírida, whose parents were *colonos* and who describes his life as “always surrounded by indigenous persons,” said to me that one of the main things that Sophie Muller taught the Indians was that “our body is the temple of God” and, therefore, it shouldn’t be exposed in public, the “body is only for the husband or wife.” According to Fabio, previous misconceptions of the body, through which sin was instilled, led to “sexual abuse” among the Indians. Those “customs” were changed by “talking about order” and building churches with two doors and sections: “through one door the men go in and through the other door the women go in, one on side men are seated and on the other side women are seated. Through this, she [Muller] wanted to make them understand that there had to be respect.” The idea of “respecting” one’s own body, being ashamed of nakedness, and not exposing the body in public, go hand in hand with new ideas about the meaning of dress and *decorum*: “Back then

the Indians did not wear shoes very often. Sophie never told them they had to go in [to the temple] wearing shoes, never told them they had to wear a shirt or long skirt. Sophie just said that in light of the word of God it was a dress, a way of dressing decently. Then, the word of God talks about how a Christian should be dressed.”

New forms of personhood informed by Christianity are associated with the adoption of specific manners and ways of carrying the body and interacting with others. Conversion is not only about becoming a “new” a person, but also a different kind of person. The “spiritual man,” guided by the will of God, leaves behind the ‘natural man’ that lives for the ‘things of this world.’ These kinds of transformations are indexed through specific bodily and social practices that include the way one dresses and carries the body, politeness, hygiene, and hospitality, among others. Fabio explained to me how the convert should be a “transformed person in order to show the example that Christ left in this world.” Fabio described conversion as a spiritual change that can be “recognized” in specific bodily signs and transformations: *There should be a total change within the person. Your way of behaving, your way of talking, your way of sitting down, even your way of, let’s say, playing, the way in which you play with another person should also be decent.* In this sense, conversion is performed and indexed through specific body techniques (Mauss 1979). Becoming a “transformed person” entails learning and inhabiting these new ways of carrying your body, talking and interacting with other people. In other words, conversion entails the production of a particular “body hexis” and the acquisition of a specific kind of “social skin.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Mauss defines “*hexis*,” following Aristotle, as “acquired ability” and “faculty.” *Hexis* is defined as a kind of “*habitus*” that refers more to those “habits” that vary between “societies, educations, proprieties and fashions, prestiges” (Mauss 1979:101). On the other hand, the notion of “social skin,” developed by Terence Turner, refers to how the “surface of the body” becomes the “symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted, and bodily adornment (in

Alfonso and Santiago, two Puinaves from Caño Bocón told me once in a cafeteria in Inírida how they lacked the financial resources to send their children to study in Inírida, after completing their primary school education in Caño Bocón. When I asked them about the money each indigenous reservation receives on an annual basis from the government, depending on the population each reservation has, Santiago, who is also the *capitán* of Caño Bocón replied to me by saying that most of that money was invested in the Church: “we support the Church a lot with that money.” I asked Santiago why they invest government funds in the Church and he replied that “the pastor gives good counseling to the people, to the young ones.” Alfonso added that “we see it almost as an education, the pastor focuses on the education of the boys” and Santiago commented that “it’s like a school.” I couldn’t hold back my questions,

E: What do you learn there?

A: Lots of things.

E: But what kinds of things?

A: How to live since you’re young.

E: How to live?

A: How to live well, for example, how to live from the time you’re young until you become an adult, not doing evil things.

S: No stealing.

A: no stealing, no killing... we understand it as education.

In this sense, becoming and being a good Christian is associated with a kind of moral education by which one learns how to live an appropriate life. As I will show in this chapter,

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all its culturally multifarious forms, from body-painting to clothing and from feather headdresses to cosmetics) becomes the language through which it is expressed” (Turner 1993:15).

some Puinaves and Curripacos conceive Christianity as a kind of moral knowledge invested with practical value.

### **Giving Testimony**

Rodrigo's story about how he became a deacon of one of the churches of El Paujil shows how personal stories of conversion are intertwined with the histories and actions of the churches and communities in which conversion takes place. In 2000 when F.A.R.C tried to take over Inírida, the *paujileros* (as the people from *El Paujil* are known) were caught in the crossfire. Members of F.A.R.C. explicitly prohibited the *paujileros* from crossing the Inírida River and fishing on the nearby Guaviare River (under the threat of death). Most of the Puinaves from el Paujil have their *conuco* (garden) on the other side of the river, which is also part of the reservation. One day Rodrigo's cousin asked him if he wanted to go fishing the next day and Rodrigo said he couldn't go, because he didn't have any money. Rodrigo's cousin told him to go with him, given that his brother was going to lend him money so he could get the gas needed for going fishing. Rodrigo agreed to go fishing with his cousin the next morning. In the end Rodrigo couldn't join his cousin because his mother asked him early in the morning, before he was to leave, if he could help her to carry a lot of bitter manioc from their *conuco* (garden) in order to have reserves for the coming weeks. Indian women usually carry the manioc by themselves, but this time Rodrigo's mother needed help because of the amount of manioc that she was planning to bring. Rodrigo came back in the afternoon from helping his mother and asked for his cousin, his aunt replied that he was still fishing. Around 3 a.m. there was a rumor that F.A.R.C had killed some people. People in el Paujil were shouting and wondering who was killed. "The next day everyone was silent," recounted Rodrigo; his cousin had been killed.

This singular and tragic event was crucial in Rodrigo's conversion Christianity. Rodrigo

recalls how *with my cousin we used to get drunk in the discos, we smoked, we talked about things of 'this world': women, money, drunkenness, liquor, all that, we didn't congregate or attended the service.* Rodrigo recalls hearing the preaching of a pastor in a conference, about "us being a person, a living soul," who will be judged by God and *depending on how our work was, if it was bad [we will go to] hell, but if it was good [we will be] in paradise with the Lord.* It was the last part of the preaching referring to the final judgment that caught Rodrigo's attention as he realized what would have happened if he had been killed that day with his cousin: *drunkards, sorcerers do not enter, won't be part of the Kingdom of God, it was then when I took the decision. What am I going to do? I am practicing this, if I die today like my cousin, where would I go? To hell, I made the decision [to be Christian].* It is necessary to point out that it was not just Rodrigo's cousin death that lead him to become Christian, as important as the event itself was, but rather it was the interpretation Rodrigo made of it through the preaching of the pastor he heard in a conference that resulted in his conversion. Rodrigo framed this event through the words of the pastor in a way that lead him to repent from his own 'practices,' to stop this behavior and confess his sins in public: *It was then when I made the decision. What is going to happen to me if I keep on doing this, if I don't repent? It was then that I thought: There it is, the word. The message of God is entering my heart. I am going to give myself to the Lord. When the pastor, the missionary makes a call: "Believe in your heart that the Lord woke up from the dead and you will be safe, come, if you really know Jesus, come and confess." In that moment you stop, you stop. I stopped and said in public: "Brothers and sisters, look I now give myself to the Lord and I am here before you and my Father, it is the first time I accept Christ as my personal savior, and now I am brother of you in Jesus Christ, and I am going to receive the baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit."* The

practice of “giving testimony” (*dar testimonio*), as well as public confessions, reveal a particular relationship between self and community, and inform specific ways of becoming accountable for one’s own behavior before others.

Nonetheless, becoming deacon was not something that Rodrigo could choose. The church that Rodrigo belonged to was going through hard times: *When you are in the law of God you already have enemies. Satan as adversary, he is against anyone that works with the Lord. Temptations come, one can not stand them; that’s what happened to the first administrators of the church.* At that point, Rodrigo was just a regular member of the church and he wondered about the other members: *What happened? Why did the services stopped? Why don’t they ring the bell anymore? We were just singers, we were not supervisors and did not have the right to run things.* One day, during a conference somewhere on the Inírida River, the members of the church made the decision: *Rodrigo, we are going to give you this job; we want you to work here in the church as deacon.* In response, Rodrigo said to the members of the church: *You will know how my conduct and testimony are here, how is my faith, how I work.* Rodrigo explained to me that the members of the church were the only ones who could decide whom will be their deacon: *I can’t make that decision by myself, I can’t tell them: I am going to be the deacon, I can’t do that, because in the law it is clearly written that in order to name a deacon the members [of the church] should choose.* Once the decision is taken, it is impossible to reject it, for it is God who is speaking through the church: *God is speaking through them [the members of the church], if they chose you as apostle, as administrator of the church, when they make the decision you can’t reject it or say [anything].* The way in which the church makes Rodrigo a deacon shows that conversion cannot be understood just as an internal process of self-estrangement and recognition of oneself by oneself, it also a social process of recognition from

others and being recognized as someone in the hierarchy of the church. Occupying a place in the church, especially being a deacon also is an affirmation of public worth. In this context, the church emerges as a source of public recognition or sanction.

It was through his testimony that Rodrigo was chosen by the members of the church to be their deacon. Rodrigo emphasized how *in order to be named and get the job [as deacon], you need to have good testimony, good conduct*. Rodrigo defined testimony as a “recommendation” of God, the members of the church won’t choose someone “that doesn’t have good conduct, good testimony before the congregation and the community.” When I asked Rodrigo to explain to me testimony, he replied to me by saying: *testimony is how you live, your work, if you pray to the Lord, if you use the Bible, if you congregate people and share the word of God, that is testimony*. Rodrigo is using here two different understandings of testimony or “giving testimony” that are related to each other. First, Rodrigo refers to testimony in a conventional way as spreading the word of God, preaching and praying to the Lord. In this sense, testimony also refers to “testifying” about the presence of God in one’s own life and this kind of testimony usually takes the form of a narrative, where someone tells others about how he or she was converted or how God had delivered him or her from danger, illness, or temptation. Second, Rodrigo understands testimony as “conduct” or “how you live” your life, suggesting that testimony is not limited to ‘sacred’ spaces or events, but it is also about everyday life and how you conduct yourself in daily interactions with other people. Testimony is performed in practice to the extent your actual practice gives testimony of God’s agency and presence in this world.

Pablo Gomez, a Puinave pastor from a church in the indigenous neighborhood of Inírida called *zona indígena*, elaborated upon the two meanings of testimony saying that *we have to testify verbally what we know about the word of God and with our own life*. The first example



Pablo gave about testifying in our daily life, which he also uses also when he preaches, was related to dress. Pablo criticized Indian women who like to wear miniskirts, following the fashion of the white people in town, saying that those women are “provoking men” and that a lot of people have “fallen into those temptations.” *Those women who know about God can’t be dressed in that way*, said Pablo. He added that we also give testimony through the ways in which we talk and treat other people. For example, told me Pablo, *if a person says he is a Christian but he keeps on saying bad words or if he keeps on fighting with his wife or if a lady or a sister keeps on saying bad words or fighting with her husband and that person says she is Christian, that person is not Christian*. In this sense, testimony is also “spoken” through social practices and forms associated with decency, decorum and propriety. In order to be an authentic Christian there has to be a correspondence between what you say or preach and what you do on your daily life. If you don’t follow in your daily life what you have committed to in public *via* baptism or confession, other members of the church or the pastor might hold you accountable for the dissonance between your acts and your words. Bad testimony puts you on the spot, as it happened to me in the conference at Victorino. Testimony is also enables and enacts disciplinary practices. When someone backslides or is led astray (*descarriarse*), he or she might be disciplined by the pastor. The “punishment” usually consists in preventing the person from preaching, singing or playing an instrument in service, if the person does not correct his behavior he might be expelled from the church. In another conference that took place in El Coco, an indigenous reservation few kilometers from Inírida and close to a military base, an indigenous missionary preached about how “bad testimony serves the purpose of pointing out the person.” Bad testimony, this missionary insisted, “circulates very easily, through gossip, it travels through windows, it goes everywhere.” Religious leaders such as pastors, deacons and

missionaries, should, according to this missionary, live exemplary lives given that their example is something that must be seen and enters through the eyes.

The practice of “testifying” or showing good testimony and conduct is underwritten by a particular understanding of the relationship between self and community. Both Pablo Rodriguez and Pablo Gómez compared conversion with a kind of “contract” or “agreement,” similar to those they make with *patrones* (patrons), who are usually white persons. Pablo always tells the members of his church: *Brothers, I believe that we commit to the Lord in the same way that we commit to working for somebody.* Although, according to Pablo, in this case the commitment is not with any kind of guy but with God, *the one who created us and gave us life.* Pablo tries to make the members of his church understand that they are not committed to him as pastor, but they are committed to the Lord and therefore they should come to church and pray every time a service is offered. On the other hand, Pablo expressed how important is that church members understand the meaning of baptism as a “commitment we make with Jesus,” as a requisite for achieving salvation. Pablo compares baptism with the kind of “agreement” a person makes with a politician –most of the times white people- regarding his vote: *If I get elected I will get a job for you,* says the politician back to his constituencies when a “deal” is closed. In a similar way, Pablo emphasized that *if we don't comply with Jesus we aren't doing anything,* the duty being to obey the Lord. Both comparisons of Pablo Rodriguez and Pablo Gómez remain striking as they compare God with a white patron whom should be obeyed. Pablo's comparison of baptism with the agreements people make with politician is even more striking given that politicians rarely fulfill the agreements they make before elections with their constituencies.

However, what I would like to highlight of these comparisons is the idea of conversion as a kind of “social contract” or “political agreement” that is indexed through practices such as

giving testimony or living an exemplary life. I would also like to explore what these understandings of conversion entail for indigenous Christian in Guainía. If we were to follow Durkheim here, we could say that the compromise established with God through conversion and expressed in testimony, also constitutes a compromise with the other members of the church and with the moral community that constitutes the church.<sup>126</sup> As Pablo told me about his own experience of finding out what God wanted to do with him: *The Lord just want us to live up to what the Bible teaches us, first, in front of the Lord and, second, in front of the people.* In this context, it is equally important to carry out their Christian duties before the Lord and before the other members of the church. Furthermore, pastors and deacons are the ones in charge of running the church, officiate services, host conferences and holy suppers, and more importantly they are also in charge of guiding and supporting the “flock” in their daily life. Deacons and pastors, according to Rodrigo, should also take care of the “flock,” which means that they should provide counseling and serve as spiritual and moral guides for the members of the church.

### **Community, Church and Government**

In Guainía, the idea of community goes hand in hand with ideas about indigeneity and what it means to be and live as an “Indian.” Julio Gutierrez, the *capitán* of San José, told me that one of the main differences between white and indigenous people is that the culture of the former is

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<sup>126</sup> In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim defines a Church as “society whose members are united because they imagine the sacred world and its relations with the profane world in the same way, and [...] they translate this common representation into identical practices” (Durkheim 1995:41). In the specific case of Christianity, Gooder shows how the greek term *ekklesia* (church) in “the post-New Testament era could be used [to refer to] the building in which Christians met, as well as [to] the community and the actual act of meeting” (Gooder 2008:11).

individualistic, while the culture of the latter is collective.<sup>127</sup> Julio complained about how white people want them to become “individualistic,” despite the fact that “we can’t compare your [white] culture with our culture.” In San José communal practices and events are part of everyday life. Adults and elders get together twice a day in the communal hall, located next to the church. Early in the morning around 6 a.m. they get together and share *mingao* (a hot beverage made out of *mañoco* –bitter manioc powder) and in the afternoon around 4 p.m. they do same and share *yucuta* (cold water with *mañoco*). Each of these gatherings is announced by ringing a bell and preceded by a prayer. The bell is also used to announce religious services. One day per week, usually on Fridays, they have the communal workday, in which all the male members of the community work together in order to clean up the ground from weeds and do any other kind of work that is needed. Every Sunday at noon, all of the members of the community get together to share an *ajicero* (a soup with peppers and fish or meat from animals that are hunted in the forest). All of the communal meals are preceded by prayers, thanking the Lord for providing food. Sunday communal gatherings are used to discuss or announce important issues that concern all of the community members in one way or another. For example, the first time I visited San José, I had to introduce myself in one of these Sunday communal gatherings that are usually presided by the *capitán* of the community. My self-presentation included an explanation of why I was there. The teachers of the boarding school had to do the same thing. After the teachers and I had introduced ourselves to the community, Samuel, Julio’s oldest brother whom was also *capitán* for several years, talked about the recent

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<sup>127</sup> Dario Corzo, the *capitán* of San Juan de Ucata in Venezuel, told me how they were socialists time before Chávez starting talking about it. According to Dario, “we the indians are born into that [socialism],” but some people feel bothered about about socialism in Venezuela because “not everybody shares the things they have, and think how is a president going to take away our food in order to give it to other people.”

death of one of the elder pastors from San José and explained that his family had left San José out of grief and were going to be living for a few months in the Venezuelan town of Maroa, where they had family. It is worth pointing out that the gatherings that take place in the communal halls also follow similar patterns to the ones one finds in the services, for example, women sit in one part of hall while the men sit on the other part of the hall. Prayers are also offered each time before food is eaten or beverages consumed.

Evangelical churches follow similar communal practices. During conferences most of the food is shared in communal gatherings between the services, members of the community hosting the conference provide food for all the people attending the conference. Generalized reciprocity takes place between different communities in religious events such as conferences and Holy Suppers. For example, through the Holy Supper a translocal sense of community is produced as interaction between different communities is formalized and ritualized through the sharing of food between the baptized, reenacting Jesus' last supper with the twelve apostles (Journet 1982:6). The church indexes both specific communities and all of the communities that are attending a particular religious event such as a conference or a Holy Supper. According to Pablo, the church is the body of Christ and the members of a church constitute a single body. The idea of the church underwrites localized understandings of what an indigenous community should be; it also enables more abstract and globalized forms of belonging to broader indigenous Christian communities.<sup>128</sup> It is important to remember that Muller's project had a

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<sup>128</sup> For example, Salomon Lara, a Puinave missionary from El Paujil, has traveled to Peru and the United States as part of his membership to panamazonic indigenous Christian organizations. Specifically, Salomon is affiliated to CONPLEI (Conselho Nacional de Pastores e Líderes Evangélicos Indígenas) that has its headquarters in Brazil. Some of the main objectives of CONPLEI as they are announced in the website of the organization are: promote union and confraternity among pastors and other indigenous evangelical leaders, represent indigenous

millenarian undertone. Saving the last soul, probably “some tribesman out in the jungle somewhere,” was needed to complete the Church (the body of Christ), and then “the Lord will come back for His own with a shout.” Once in Heaven, “all tongues, tribes, nations, and peoples will be represented around the Throne, singing that new song to our wonderful Saviour and Lord” (Johnston 1985:283). Evangelization was thought as both the creation of new persons but also a new kind of indigenous Christian community. Indigenous Christian that would be neither like their ancestors nor like the *colonos* that settled in the region. The new Christian brotherhood also transcended tribal boundaries, producing a pan-tribal movement of conversion. In *Jungle Methods* (1960), Muller refers to the role played by “tribal loyalty” in her “method” that resulted in “what some call ‘a people’s movement,’ and now the entire tribes of the Curipacos, Puinavis and Piapocos take a united stand against sin and the devil” (Muller 1960:21).

It is almost impossible to draw a clear line between the church and the “political community” or to find the point where one ends and the other begins. This became clear for me in Victorino, when I heard them sang a song in Curripaco that goes: *Now we are doing the conference because our capitán is Jesus Christ. We wants us to obey everyday, because of that we do the conference, because of that we read what the Word says.* Although the job of the pastor is different from the job of the *capitán*, until recently it was common to have the same person occupying both positions. Ideally, the *capitán* is in charge of the political representation of the community before the State and other foreign institutions or agents that might include NGOs, mining companies, *guerrillas* and the military. The *capitán* presides over communal meetings and coordinates the communal workday. The *capitán* is also in charge of dealing with any kind

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evangelical churches and support them in issues related to civil society and constituted public powers, defend, safeguard and fight for indigenous rights ([www.conplei.org.br](http://www.conplei.org.br)).

of conflict that might take place between members of the community or between members of the community and outsiders. On the other hand, the pastor is in charge of running the church, organizing participation at conferences and Holy Suppers. The pastor is also in charge of supervising the moral behavior of the community and disciplining the members of the Church when it is necessary.

According to Gerardo, *capitán* and pastor of Cartagena, a Curripaco community in the upper Río Guainía, the pastor is the one who really manages the community. Gerardo tried to explain this drawing in the air a topography of power for me: *on top God, then comes the pastor, then comes the capitán and at the bottom is located the community*. The system of subordination entailed in the hierarchy Gerardo draw for me goes all the way down to the family and the self, producing specific articulations between self, family, church and community, which are underwritten at the same time by specific notions of authority and patriarchy. In this sense, Pablo explained to me how a Christian family should work: *The Bible says that we are first the head of the household, we the parents are the head of the household, first is God and second under God we the fathers, under us is our wife, at last our sons, because of this we have to obey God as father and our wife is under our responsibility as heads of the household*. In the same way as the father, out of love, is supposed to obey God, the wife should also obey her husband, in the same way as the children should obey their parents. Christian life starts in the family. If a family is not working as it should, that is, if the children are not obeying their parents, the wife her husband, or the father is not obeying God, it is impossible to have a “healthy” church or community. A pastor, in order to be a legitimate authority, should have a family that gives testimony in its daily life. The family of the pastor should be an example for the rest of the families that are part of a specific church or community.

Pablo told me how he struggled for years with one of his sons and his oldest daughter until God helped him to convert them to Christianity. Pablo describes the pastor's responsibilities as beginning with himself, then his family in the household, and finally he preaches to the community: *First I discipline myself, second my children, and third the others*. It is impossible to be a good and exemplary pastor if your family does not live a proper Christian life: *If I don't discipline my sons, how am I going to discipline them [the others]?* Everything starts at home. After all, the pastor has to be almost perfect: *the pastor has to be like me, says Christ in the Bible*. Pablo told his twenty year old son who had just converted: *Look, since you don't obey what I say, then why should I be a pastor for, or why should I preach the Gospel?* Pablo suffered greatly over the disobedience of his sons; the pastor usually bears the sins of his family and his church. It became a source of shame for Pablo, as people would visit his house and his son wouldn't even say hello to them. It took Pablo almost 30 years to convert his oldest daughter who is about to turn 36.

Pablo once summarized for me his vision of how family and church should be articulated saying that there had to be a "good government" of family and church in order for a community to work well. By "good government" Pablo probably understands obeying the Bible, obeying the pastor and obeying the husband. The pastor is in charge of his family, the church and, to some extent, the community. The job of the pastor is not limited to religious services in the temple. Rodrigo explained to me how part of the job of taking care of the "flock" consists of visiting the members of the church in their houses in the morning or in the afternoon, looking out for their health and seeing if they have any problems: *Why did you stop going to church? What happened? Do you have any problems? You ask questions, then the member tells you: This happened to me, I experimented a temptation, I did this, I had an argument with my*



*brother. Then you explain to them, you teach them again, so that they can congregate again.*

*That is the work in the community, outside of the temple.* Rodrigo usually preaches to those who don't attend the temple. Pablo's and Rodrigo's reflections about their work through the metaphor of the shepherd and the flock recalls Foucault's ideas about pastoral power and the pastoral ethos. Foucault defines pastoralship as an individualizing power and the shepherd as the one who "gathers together, guides, and leads his flock" (Foucault 1979:229). What the shepherd gathers together is dispersed individuals, who later become the object of individualized kindness. Pastoral power simultaneously produces individuals and collectivities (flocks). In order to watch over the flock as a whole the shepherd needs to "scan" each one of them: "the shepherd's power implies individual attention paid to each member of the flock" (Foucault 1979:230).

In several of the conversations I had with Rodrigo, he would talk of the Bible as the law of God, those who work in the law of God usually have enemies. The previous leaders of his church had succumbed to those enemies, but Rodrigo could not do anything at the time as an ordinary member of the church. Rodrigo emphasized that in order to give counsel outside of the church, to non-Christians, it is also necessary to have knowledge of the political constitution of the state: *One needs to have knowledge of the laws, the norms, everything, of the Procuraduría (General Attorney's Office), the norms, everything, who and why, I mean the justice, of why the District Attorney's Office, why do they punish, for rape or a lot of problems.* Rodrigo is aware not only of the fact that the church has its own law (namely, the Bible), he is also aware of the fact that the church and the community it belongs to are part of a broader political entity (the state), with its own laws and institutions, and its own ways of punishing. Knowledge of both 'secular' and divine law is necessary to be a competent leader and be able to work and give

advice outside of the temple: *You give advice outside of the temple, in the communal hall where all the community gathers, not just Christians. It is here that you give counseling to the boys, don't do that, if you do that, well the law is against that, for God that is evil too, the Bible says this, in this way, let's don't do this, don't lie, don't rape.* Most of the indigenous Christian I talked to would tell me in one way or another that 'secular' law, the law of "this world," the law of the state as it is expressed in the political constitution, was based on the Bible, that is, divine law. In this view, it is not the state that encompasses the church, but the other way around: divine law encompasses human law. The law of God will judge all of us; it is above all human law. Pablo told me once about an encounter he had with a policeman: *Who are you? I said: I am a pastor, I have been a pastor for 5 years. He told me: A pastor, how is it going pastor? Look pastor, you have a harder law than mine, your law is stronger than mine, he told me that. I said: "Why? Because the law you manage is direct with the Lord," he told me. I said: "that is true." It is true because your law never ends, whereas our law has a limit [said the policeman].*

Pablo was not the only one who talked to me about a direct connection between government of the self, the family and the church. Dario Corzo, *capitán* of the community of San Juan de Ucata in Venezuela, told he me how to be a good leader it is necessary to start with your household, for the scripture says that "the one who doesn't know how to govern his household, his family, how would he be able to govern his church?" All of these local theories of power, of who should obey whom, of the church as government, and divine law as source of all human law, echo earlier discussions about the "art of government" that took place in Europe since the end of the sixteenth century until the end of the eighteenth century (Foucault 1991). In particular, Foucault shows how during the seventeenth century some of the educational writings intended for the education of princes talked about three fundamental types of government, each

of which was related to a particular science or discipline: “the art of self-government, connected with morality; the art of properly governing a family, which belongs to economy; and finally the science of ruling the state, which concerns politics” (Foucault 1991:91). Unlike theories of sovereignty that emphasize the discontinuity between “the power of the prince and any other form of power,” as well as his externality and transcendence of the prince from the body politic, in the ‘art of government’ the task is to “establish a continuity, in both an upwards and downwards direction” (Foucault 1991:91). Whereas upwards continuity means that “a person who wishes to govern the state well must first learn how to govern himself, his goods and his patrimony,” downwards continuity refers to how “when a state is well run, the head of the family will know how to look after his family, his goods and his patrimony, which means that individuals will, in turn, behave as they should” (Foucault 1991:91-92). In his analysis, Foucault suggests that “the prince’s pedagogical formation ensures the upwards continuity of the forms of government, and police the downwards one” (Foucault 1991:92). I do not want to suggest that early modern discussions about the “art of government” as Foucault describes them, present the same characteristics as the local visions of power this people told me about. Although ideas of continuity are common to both “ideologies,” it seems clear that while Foucault sees the “art of government” as immanent to the state, the indigenous leaders I talked with are more concerned with the government of community and making churches work. The latter does not mean -as is clear in Rodrigo’s account about the importance of knowing the laws and institutions of the state- that the state is of no concern for indigenous religious leaders. There is still the question about the terms or principles that articulate continuity in each of the cases. Foucault argues that *economy* (understood as the government of the family) is the central term of the continuity between self, family and state in early modern discussions about the “art

of government.” I would say that *morality* is the term that articulates the relationship between the government of self, family and church among Christian Puinaves and Curripacos. Local understanding of morality tend to associate it with ideas and practices related to “how to live a good life.” Morality has been defined as “a field of cultural predispositions informing and creating, rather than supporting social relations between groups and persons” (Howell 1997:5); or as “questions about what makes our lives meaningful or fulfilling” (Taylor 1989:4). For Durkheim, morality is more related to bodies of rules that prescribe for individuals how their relations with other members of society will be. Durkheim points out the ambiguous character of morality as it is both imposed upon individuals but at the same time desired by them.<sup>129</sup> More recent approaches to ethics show how it involves a variety of semiotic modalities that cannot be reduced to one order (Keane 2010:69). In this sense, some authors have coined the term “ordinary ethics” to refer to things such as “speaking and acting with ethical consequences, evaluating our actions and those of others, acknowledging and refusing acknowledgment, caring and taking care,” as well as the risks involved in these transactions (Lambek 2010:1).

In this context, one of the most pressing moral issues is not just how to rule the others or take care of the “flock,” but how to serve the community. Therefore, the authority of the religious and political leaders comes from below; they have to be chosen by the community. The community decides who will be the next pastor, deacon or *capitán*, or who will cease to be a pastor, deacon or *capitán* for that matter. Dario told me how *if we govern our house well, then we can also govern [ordenar-can also mean to put in order or command] the people, not because one is going to rule but to serve, in order to be a leader, you have to be number one,*

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<sup>129</sup> In the *Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim argues that while moral strictures “bear down upon us, we nevertheless cling to them; they impose obligations upon us, and yet we find satisfaction in the way they function, and in that very constraint (Durkheim 1982:47).

*and to be number one, the leader, you have to serve, to work.* In a similar way, Pablo's wife always tells him he was chosen to serve the community, almost as a slave: *Look you were chosen by the community, like a punishment, let's say, like their slave. But the Bible says like that: I am their slave, but one day God has to pay me for that.*

It is worth pointing out that the individual imperative of "living a good life" usually entails as well the idea of living a communal life. As I have tried to show here, local appropriations of Christianity have produced specific understandings about the relationships between self and community.<sup>130</sup> Some Puinaves and Curripacos understand becoming Christian as a kind of "contract" with God and the community. Members of the church watch over each other in their everyday life and in collective gatherings. The community is also produced through these practices of surveillance in addition to sharing food and other communal practices. A Christian Curripaco in the conference at Victorino said that: *We make the conference in order to look for and rescue the descarriados, the lost ones. We also make it to become stronger in the word of God.* As a Christian, one is accountable for one's own conduct before God and before the other members of the Church. This accountability is mediated by spoken and performed testimony. One woman in Victorino complained about her husband: *brothers, I am married, but my husband is not here, he was trapped by the devil.* Public confessions might also be understood

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<sup>130</sup> Pollock shows how, in the case of the Culina in Brazil, the foundation of new conceptions of morality and the person produced as part of the conversion process can be found in a new cosmology of community promoted by Catholic and Christian missionaries in Amazonia. The notion of *comunidade* "is the structural equivalent of "macrocosm," the expanded social universe that world religions order for the converted" (Pollock 1993:191). Furthermore, the notion of community [*comunidade*] has been appropriated by the Brazilian Conselho Indigenista Missionário because "*comunidade* incorporates new conceptions of self and identity and new moral imperatives among Indians" (Pollock 1993:191). According to Pollock, "any adequate account of personhood must be attentive to the dialectic of structure and process at times of social and cultural transformation, and of the articulation of social and individual levels of agency" (Pollock 1993:25).

not so much as “techniques” of the self but more as “techniques” of the community, used to regulate and prescribe the behavior of its members. A few years ago, a Puinave *capitán* and pastor accused his wife in public of continuous adulterous behavior. His testimony, according to another leader, went something along these lines,

Those who were married by the church, be careful, because if you commit adultery before the Lord as brother or sister, you’re going to have that problem, you will never forget it, it’s like a scar. That scar nobody can take it off, it hurts. I’m talking about myself, the lady that is seated before all of you, I saw her lay down with a man here from the community. We confessed in a conference, she said she was going to leave behind that mistake she made. If you never do that again you will still be son of God, respect the rule. After my wife confessed in front of the members and God, she kept on doing it. Don’t commit adultery. Each one [of you] is accountable [*rinde cuentas*] before God. That [the adultery] is hers, it is not mine anymore, I am accountable [*rindo cuentas*] to God. If I do things well, God will pay me.

Nonetheless, the downward continuity between church, family and self also creates specific criteria for evaluating and understanding individual behavior. In August of 2009, members of the church of Pablo were upset with him because the young man in charge of playing the synthesizer was *descarriado* (had gone astray), but Pablo would let him play and attend the service. I had a conversation with Pablo about this young guy,

E: Cristina [Pablo’s oldest daughter] told me that the young guy that was helping you with the keyboards had gone astray [*se iba descarriando*]?

P: Which one?

E: The young man.

P: Oh! Yes, the young man.

P: Yes, yes, he has gone astray [*se descarrió*], he has always been like that, the young man can’t stand it or I don’t know. He doesn’t have experience of being firm, I always gave him advice, but the young man doesn’t receive the advice I give him, then you know what happens there? He blames it on me.

E: For being supposedly a bad pastor.

P: Yes, of course. You know I am the one who manages them and they have to obey what the Word tells them. Yes, then the other members of the church, the ones who see him [probably drinking or doing ‘worldly’ things] come and complain to me: *Look pastor what is happening here and why are you letting him continue working [for the church]?*

The fact that Pablo is blamed for the “deviant” behavior of the young man, shows how individual agency can be mediated by the responsibility of those in charge of the community or the church. I heard stories about churches that collapsed after their religious leaders went astray. This is what happened to the first church created on the Inírida River in a place known as Caranacoa. When I asked to Luis Concha, where was the first church on the Inírida River created, he replied saying: *the first church in Caranacoa, of the elders there, but it ended because they were “playing around” with God, it is a sin.* Pablo, who has helping me translate the stuff Luis couldn’t say in Spanish, explained to me how *The Bible says that if we commit sin before God, sin in itself [el mismo pecado] brings death. What this means is that they [elders from Caranacoa] were working along two lines, they were working with the Lord and they were working also with thoughts of their own, how they wanted to [meaning drinking, vagrancy and dancing].* Pablo recalls how all of them died, including their sons: *I remember very well that they had sons, they were there [in Caranacoa] for a while and then they came to town [Inírida], then they did what they did with their bodies and there [in Inírida] they were finished.*

## Morality and Modernity



Image 5. Worldly things.

The image shown above was widely used by Sophie Muller as part of evangelizing practices. The image shows a native sitting down, smiling, with a large amount of coins and two bundles of bills in front of him. On the t-shirt worn by the native there is a sign that says “tied-up by business and pleasures,” below this sign there is another one (“love for money”) and on top of the two bundles of bills it says “more and more.” On the background of the image there are plants with thorns and a cross with a sign that says: “take your cross and follow me,” to the left of the cross another sign says “no time to serve.” The image comes with a long explanation underneath it that goes like this:



Christ talked about the ones tied to thorns: “Are the ones that listen to the word, but the thirst [*afán*] for this world, the deception of wealth and pleasures that drown the word and don’t bear fruit.” This comparison talks about things that block [*tapan*] the voice of God and take away the desire to live for him. What today stops us [*no deja*] from thinking of God is the music of the devil, the one that invites demons to enter the households through television, radio, and cassettes expelling [*echando fuera*] the Holy Spirit. The world also calls us everywhere to enjoy in things that don’t have value [*no valen*] and waste time, instead of reading and teaching the bible to the ones who don’t know that they are lost and that there is forgiveness and salvation in Christ.

According to this explanation of the image, money is one of the “things that block [*tapan*] the voice of God and take away the desire to live for him.” Television and radio are also among the things that scare away the Holy Spirit from households.<sup>131</sup> Nonetheless, it is clear from the explanation that is not technology in itself, which puts in jeopardy Christian values and virtues, but has the desires and values that technology helps to disseminate. The references to the “things of the world” or the “thirst [*afán*] for this world, the deception of wealth and pleasures that drown the word,” should not be ignored given that ‘worldliness’ [*lo mundano*] constitutes one of the main categories through which indigenous Christians articulate their personal and social experience.

The apparent retreat and avoidance of indigenous Christians from what they call “worldly things” calls for further analysis. The brand of Christianity that Muller tried to implement in Northwest Amazonia, since her arrival to the region in the 1940s, followed the principles of a specific type of evangelical Christianity fashioned in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s, which had its roots in nineteenth-century evangelicalism (Carpenter 1997). Harding

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<sup>131</sup> When Muller settled in Guainía in the 1940s there were no TVs, neither tape recorders nor players, may be just a few radios. I was told that Muller and other missionaries would give Indians radios with just one Christian radio station known as *Radio Trans Mundial*. This means that the plates Muller used were probably made after the end of the 1950s, when the television was brought for the first time to Colombia under the military rule of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (1953-1957).

shows how evangelical Christians waged a cultural and political battle “against modernism, Darwinism, worldly amusements (liquor, the theater, moving pictures, dance halls, flappers) and social vices (divorce, sex education, birth control, suffrage, women’s clubs)” (Harding 2000:11). After the Scopes trial in 1925, evangelicals retreated from public life and declared themselves “separated from the world,” they devoted themselves to build “Bible-believing enclaves in which to live out what surely must be the last days of a lost and dying world before Christ returns” (Harding 2000:11). As Carpenter points out, there was an attempt by evangelicals to “restore primitive Christianity,” imitating holiness revival movements and communities of the late nineteenth century.<sup>132</sup> Holiness revival movements stressed matters of morality, calling for a return to “Wesleys’ teaching of a simple, unselfish, and morally disciplined life” (Carpenter 1997:57). It seems clear, then, that evangelical missionaries were not just trying to extend Christianity into virgin territory, but also were trying to refresh and revitalize their own religious experience by “returning” to roots untainted by civilization. The “separated life” evangelicals wanted to live had to “take place out in the ‘world’ more than in the bosom of church and school” (Carpenter 1997:63).

One of the chapters of a booklet distributed by Muller in the region with the title of *Religiones* (Religions), is about *El Modernismo* (Modernism). In this chapter, Muller argues that: “Modernists deny the marvelous deeds of God in the Bible, and trust in what they can understand, explain and look with the eyes. They say the Bible is not given just by God, but it is mixed with the thoughts of the men who wrote it” (Muller n.d. 52-53). Muller continued with

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<sup>132</sup> Nonetheless, during the early twentieth century there were also public rhetorics that “exiled fundamentalists” and helped defined modern America as a secular nation (Harding 2000:61). As much as fundamentalists defined themselves in opposition to modernist trends in American culture and society, the “modern point of view in America emerged in part from its caricature of conservative Protestants as Fundamentalists. They were the ‘them’ who enabled the modern ‘us’ ”(Harding 2000:62).

several quotes from verses of the Bible in order to prove that “all the Bible is the Word of God” (Muller n.d. 53). Furthermore, Muller claimed in the booklet that the “big proofs that the Bible is the Word of God, are the prophesies fulfilled by Christ and written even 400 and 1,500 years before his coming” (Muller n.d. 54). Muller finished the chapter about Modernism saying that Modernists think that if “everybody has education and money and *corotos*, everybody would be in Paradise again.<sup>133</sup> But we know that the ones who earn more money are usually the most drunk, spending the money in themselves and nothing for the elders and the poor [money and the *corotos* of the world bring neither peace nor true joy, but Christ can] (Muller, n.d. 55).

In this context, what exactly is “worldliness” for indigenous Christians in Guainía and what does it reveal about their relationship with materiality, money, commodities and modernity? What do ideas about ‘worldliness’ reveal about the moral imagination and practices of indigenous Christians? Rodrigo Sánchez told me how before he became Christian used to get drunk with his cousin: *We used to drink with him in the discos, smoked, everything. Our talk was about this world: women, money, getting drunk, all that. We did not congregate, nor entered the cult. One day I entered the cult and then the pastor preached to me.* Worldliness refers not just to material things or possessions, but it also includes places, vices, ways of talking, specific deeds and thoughts. However, there is a strong tendency to think of worldliness as something only related to the possession of material things. Uriel, a Curripaco missionary, told me how,

In Maroa I have seen brothers, I have always said: why brothers are you tied up to material things? Why? Some sisters and brothers have told me: I can’t go, I can’t go to the Holy Super or the Conference because we are going to be there 2 or 3 days and nobody watches my house, because I have refrigerator, television,

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<sup>133</sup>In the region, the term *corotos* refers to different kinds of individual possessions (such as clothes, hammocks and aluminum pots), that you carry with yourself when you travel.

washing machine, because... then things tied them up, the things of this world tied them up, do you understand? This is what happens today.

The idea that the “things of this world” (by themselves) tie up Christians, entails ignoring that worldliness also indexes desires, thoughts and values, this is, immaterial things. This explains why the problem that Muller finds with radios, cassettes and televisions is not in their ownership. The problem is how these objects might become vehicles of inappropriate desires, thoughts and values (what Muller calls the “music of the devil”). Pablo Gómez, a pastor from the “indigenous area,” a poor neighborhood in Inírida, told me that,

If we convert to God, we have to leave behind what we did when we were not Christians, the things of world, you know, the things of the world, what we call steal, fornicate, get drunk, dance, smoke, speak lies, a lot of things, bad thoughts about other people. If we don't leave this behind then the word of God says there is no change in our life, no benediction in our life.

In this sense, ideas that circulate about ‘worldly’ thoughts and deeds serve as a foil for indigenous Christians to constitute their own subjectivity, but those ideas also articulate a particular relationship with and understanding of the “modern.” I argue in this section that ideas about “worldliness” (*lo mundano*) among indigenous Christians articulate particular understandings of modernity. At the same time, ideas about ‘worldliness’ inform specific moral visions and practices that constitute relationships with objects and persons. The relationship that indigenous Christians establish with “worldliness” is ambiguous and, to some extent, uncertain. Worldliness can be left behind once you become Christian, but it was common during my fieldwork to hear stories about indigenous Christians that have gone astray and return to a worldly life. Alonso Pereira is a Curripaco pastor who was baptized at the beginning of the 1980s. He left the Church for a while, but since 2000 he has been a pastor in the border town of San Carlos in Venezuela. I met Alonso in July of 2009 and he told me that when he went astray he used to travel a lot; he visited Villavicencio, Leticia and Puerto Gaitán. Hernando said that

when he was worldly, “I traveled over there, in order to know life, in order to preach better.” To some extent Hernando is suggesting that it is not possible to preach effectively unless you know the “things of the world” or unless you led a worldly life. The more you know about the “things of the world,” the better you can preach. Therefore, the relationship that indigenous Christians hold with worldliness is ambiguous; living a Christian life would have no meaning without the idea of the “things of the world.” Indigenous Christians define themselves against worldliness and moral practices are mediated by how worldliness is conceived and experienced.

The ambiguities and moral tensions that emerge out of the relationship between indigenous Christians and worldliness tend to deepen in a colonization frontier where the idea of “easy money” is widely spread among natives and *colonos*. These tensions become explicit when, for instance, indigenous Christians or pastors get involved in electoral politics (where corruption is consubstantial to it) or in extractive activities such as mining. Such is the case of Ramiro Gomez, son of the pastor of Remanso, a Puinave community on the Inírida River. Ramiro is probably the only member of the community who owns a television and also has a cable subscription to Direct TV. The night I interviewed Ramiro, his house was full of people watching a TV series from a national channel. Ramiro has worked with miners (some of them from Brazil) for more than 20 years, since he was 10 years old. Ramiro has worked as scuba diver, moving the dredge underwater for several hours continuously. Ramiro received as wages 10 percent of the total amount of gold that was extracted in one week. There were weeks in which they obtained more than 400 grams of gold and Ramiro received up to 45 grams per week. 1 gram of gold sold for 4 to 5 dollars, much less than the international value of gold at the time, one gram between \$45 and \$50. Miners also have to pay the community 8 grams of gold per week, which are used for buying motor fuel oil for the electric power plant or for buying

electric bulbs or fuses. Ramiro told me how the money he earned working as scuba diver was invested in the television and a DVD player. The rest for his family and daily expenses. As a son of pastor, Ramiro was baptized very young and he married when was 19 years old. When I met him, Ramiro was looking how to straighten on his life. Ramiro explained to me that he had gone astray as a result of his work in mining: *In mining you see a lot of things (...) because of the money of mining, you know that money brings all those things you did not have before at home, then now is that I was gone astray [descarriado]*. When I asked Ramiro if he still used to drink, smoke or dance, he said that *it is when I go to town [Inírida] that I behave like this [worldly way]*. Maybe because he felt I was judging him, Ramiro told me that even if he did not follow a Christian life at that moment, he was a correct person, who did not like to cheat on people. Ramiro was also capitán of Remanso for more than a year and had just given up the responsibility when I met him. For instance, Ramiro told that,

When my father [tells me]: “I want to go to Holy Supper” I get the gas for him and this is grace for my Lord. When they tell me: Well, we are going to a Conference and we need gas, well I get some of the gas for them and they get the rest. Then I get the gas, I get some money for them, for the oil, some money to buy food, for the people, that is my function.

Part of the money Ramiro earns in mining comes back to the *community* or the church in the form of commodities or gas. Even if some people claim that indigenous churches are autonomous and self-sufficient, some of the religious meetings or material improvements in Churches might be funded with money that comes from activities such as mining or with “contributions” made by politicians in the form of cement or paint cans. Ramiro’s story shows how the relationship that indigenous Christians establish with “worldliness” is not simple or straightforward. Worldliness is not necessarily behind or outside, indigenous Christians transit through the “things of the world” and part of becoming Christian is learning how to deal with

this transit. Ismael Medina, a Puinave leader from a community named Matraca, said to me that it was easier to be Christian before given there was no *aguardiente*, no TV and no gold. Ismael told to me how today we live in a ‘modern world’ and younger generations can “watch that modern world in TV and see the gangs they want to imitate them and they are imitating them.” Ismael blamed television for the more laid-back morality of younger generations of Christians.

In this sense, it is possible to question accounts of Christian evangelicals that portray them as simple “militantly antimodernists” (Mardsen 2006), ignoring how evangelicals develop complex, ambiguous and unexpected relationships with modernity. For instance, historian Joel Carpenter argues that “the American revival tradition is filled with examples of evangelicals’ early and eager adaption of new communications technology in the quest to send their message our far and wide” (Carpenter 1997:23). In fact, as I show in Chapter 1, the founders of New Tribes Mission envisioned a worldwide evangelical crusade advanced with modern means. Early missionaries relied heavily on modern technology and were impressed by the idea that an outreach to remote tribes could be mobilized with greater speed than ever before (Carpenter 1997:180). Modern missionaries, as Paul Fleming and Bob Williams called them, should wage spiritual warfare using planes, radios, food processing and modern equipment of all kinds (Carpenter 1997:180). In a similar way, indigenous Christians also use modern technologies, own televisions, cell phones and DVD players. Some of the objects condemned by Muller are now owned and used by indigenous Christians for different purposes that include listening to Christian music, watching movies or soap operas. At the same time, Indigenous evangelical churches, under the influence of other Christian churches, have incorporated into their repertoire of instruments electric guitars, drums and synthesizers, among others. One of the rhythms more used as background for the Christian songs is *cumbia*, widely popular throughout Latin America.

The young members of the churches that play instruments and sing usually stay in the temple after the religious service in order to rehearse songs. Young Christians participate in a broader cultural market where they get Christian music in all kinds of imaginable genres: *vallenato*, *reggaeton*, ballads and salsa, among others. This music is sometimes played loudly in the conferences in between the religious services, people don't dance the music, but they used it as a background for different games. Furthermore, young male members of the church don't mind going to religious service using hair gel and wearing t-shirts with popular *reggaeton* artists such as Daddy Yankee.

Contemporary indigenous Christians are then "modern" in terms of the savvy use of global communications technologies, but they develop a contentious relationship with certain values and attitudes of modernity that might be disseminated or accelerated through specific objects or technologies. This contentious relationship leads to a sort of evangelical "moral modernity," which frames and mediates local experiences and transactions with the modern. Everyday struggles of indigenous Christians with worldliness are part of how this "moral modernity" is articulated in a frontier where illegal activities, corruption and easy money are part of everyday life.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have shown how conversion to Christianity produces specific kinds of moral subjects and communities. Conversion emerges here as a mode of subjectivation produced out of the colonial encounter between evangelical missionaries and natives (Bayart 2008). Conversion to Christianity is constituted through the contingent interaction of events, persons and institutions, and it entails a process of self-estrangement from one's own past and



culture (Keane, 2007). In this context, relationships and transactions between self, family and church are mediated by specific understandings of morality and power. In particular, self and community are articulated through moral practices such as giving testimony or “showing” in your everyday life good testimony and conduct. However, even if the *millieux* in which conversions take place include Christian churches, families and communities, local understandings of conversion are also mediated by the broader political and economic context in which natives live. This is clear in the comparisons that some pastors made between conversion and the “agreements” that natives make with patrons or with local politicians. Even if it seems that the relationship between individual and community is totally coherent and functional, the fact that indigenous Christians are frequently lead astray proves that there are also frictions and tension between Christian individuals and communities.

There is a clear attempt in this chapter to build an idea of morality that is not limited to “self-contained values” or to putting into practice certain values. I have emphasized more how morality might also refer to the different modalities “that ethically marked practices can take” and to the fact that ethical life also lies outside of the individual (Keane 2010). In consequence, morality includes the ways in which social relationships are shaped as well as the relationships that individuals establish with different kind of practices, objects or conducts. In this sense, becomes crucial how conversion to Christianity produces specific moral understandings of what modernity is and how indigenous Christians should relate to the modern. I have suggested that the idea of *lo mundano* [worldliness] condenses in part how indigenous Christians relate to and understand the modern. This relationship with worldliness is inherently ambiguous. As a Christian pastor suggested to me the more you know about the “things of the world” the better you can preach. In this context, Indigenous Christians define themselves against worldliness and

moral practices are mediated by how worldliness is conceived and experienced. The idea of “moral modernity” indicates that there is no “Christian morality” as such, instead notions of the worldliness and the mundane articulate specific understanding and practices of how indigenous Christians relate to modern commodities and objects. As I show here, indigenous Christians in Guainía are savvy in the use of modern technologies and objects.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Mediations of Indigeneity: Crafting Indigenous Leaders, Communities and Organizations (1973-2005)**

This chapter explores how indigeneity has been mediated in Guainía during the last four decades through different devices, discourses, laws, state policies and programs, as well as through the work of private NGOs which started to develop projects in the region since the 1990s. Indigeneity emerges here out of broader processes of articulation between “dissimilar elements” which are transformed as they are put into new relationships (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). According to De la Cadena and Starn, indigeneity is produced in relation to “what is not, to what it exceeds or lacks.” In this sense, indigeneity acquires its value and meaning through articulations with “non-indigenous” actors and discourses: “indigenous cultural practices, institutions, and politics become such in articulation with what is not considered indigenous within the particular social formation where they exist” (De la Cadena and Starn 2007: 4). Following these ideas, I am interested in exploring the multiple ways in which indigeneity has been mediated and articulated by different actors, institutions and discourses during the last four decades in Guainía. Articulations of indigeneity included initially the emergence of new forms of political representation through pan-ethnic indigenous organizations, the constitution of natives as a collective body before the state; and later, environmental discourses about native Amazonians and NGOs’ interventions that mediated the relationships between indigenous communities and the state, as well as the access to a new set of ethnic rights that were guaranteed to indigenous populations in the Political Constitution of 1991.

The first section of the chapter analyses the political and cultural effects of state educational policies promoted in the region since the 1970s. These policies reveal an interest in adapting official educational programs to the cultural specificity of indigenous communities.<sup>134</sup> As part of the bilingual education programs promoted in the region emerged the figure of the indigenous bilingual assistant in charge of bridging the communicative gap between the white professor and the indigenous educational community. Bilingual assistants also became sort of agents of the state as they were supposed to promote hygienic practices and actions associated with what the national government called by then “community development.” Bilingual assistants and white teachers established a school of leaders in 1975 in Laguna Colorada on the Guaviare River. In this school, several future indigenous leaders were trained and new ideas about community, leadership, the state, rights and land were instilled upon them. White teachers and students of the school of leaders organized in Laguna Colorada the 3d *Congreso de Indígenas* [Congress of Natives] in September of 1977 and was attended by several indigenous leaders from different communities and ethnic groups. During the Congress, leaders and members of the school of leaders appropriated specific notions of leadership promoted by the regional government in the context of state making practices. Whereas state promoted ideas of leadership and community were designed as part of development programs aimed at reaching

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<sup>134</sup> Schools and educational programs have been crucial in the relationship between indigenous communities and the state in Colombia. Until the 1970s, education in indigenous territories was in charge of Catholic missionaries and was used as a tool for incorporating native populations to the body politic and transforming them into productive citizens. However, towards the end of the 1970s so called ethno-educational programs were promoted by indigenous political organizations and were also incorporated into state educational policies in specific regions of the country, as it happened in the Andean province of Cauca. These processes have made of education and schooling a field of political struggles through which the state tries to impose its own cultural and political ideals upon indigenous population, simultaneously native populations use schooling and education to articulate their own political and cultural agendas, as well as their own politics of identity.

the integration of marginal groups into the body politic, these same ideas were reappropriated, indigenized and incorporated into an emergent indigenous political agenda. Specifically, the notion of ‘political community’ promoted by the state was indigenized, as white teachers and indigenous leaders refashioned it in order to include other issues such as land and culture. The Congress became a space for political pedagogy in which white teachers instilled upon future indigenous leaders ideas about, for instance, what a *reserva* [reservation] was and which governmental institution was in charge of receiving petitions for new reservation. White teachers also circulated ideas about the importance of achieving union among the different ethnic groups and communities in the region (specifically among the communities that lived in Guainía, Guaviare and Vichada Rivers) as well as reaching some kind of organization in order to claim for their rights as a collective body before the state. In this context, indigeneity was constituted as a pan-ethnic discourse associated with new forms of political representation circumscribed to specific regions (provinces the state had previously created such as Guainía). As an outcome of the Congress the first indigenous political organization of the region was created with the name of UNIGUVI which means *Unión Indígena del Guaviare y Vichada* [Indigenous Union of Guaviare and Vichada].” The purpose of the indigenous organization was to “listen to the problems of [natives] themselves and present them to different authorities.”<sup>135</sup> Consequently, emergent forms of political representation articulated around specific notions of indigeneity operated within traditional frames of bureaucratic practice.

The second section of the chapter looks at how interactions between indigenous communities and the regional state were mediated through specific practices, languages and forms of political organization that were defined by the central state. I explore how, since the 1960s, through state

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<sup>135</sup> Tercer Congreso de Indígenas. Rio Guaviare y Vichada. Laguna Colorada Septiembre 12-17, 1977. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.

promoted forms of “popular organization” such as *Juntas de Acción Comunal* [Boards of Community Action] indigenous and non-indigenous populations were able to participate in the process of colonization, as well as negotiate different kinds of demands and claims with the regional and national government.<sup>136</sup> Unlike conventional narratives of colonization which portrait natives as passive subjects, the letters and petitions send by groups of natives to the government at the time, show how some of them were actively involved and interested in building towns, schools and roads. Letters, invitations and petitions send to the governors in office reveal how natives were also interested in taking part in decisions and political processes that affected them. The politicization of indigenous leaders and authorities was also brought by the presence of politicians from both political parties who did political campaigning on the rivers and trained natives for this purpose during the 1980s and 1990s. Indigenous forms of

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<sup>136</sup> Liberal president Alberto Lleras Camargo made of “community action” a program of his government that started in 1958 and finished in 1962. According to Londoño, the design of boards of community action was inspired in policies implemented in the United States as part of the Alliance for Progress’ social programs aimed at “solving critical problems of poverty and preventing the conflicts resulting from social and economic deprivation of huge sectors [of population]” (Londoño 2003:308). Bell and Held show how the Kennedy administration designed its social programs under the influence of what he calls the “ideology of participation,” which assumed that marginalized groups (such as ethnic minorities and the poor) “could not help themselves because they were powerless” (Bell and Held 1969:149). This assumption lead to the idea that: “in programs fostered by government one should encourage the creation of new communities. In this way, new structures could be built that could provide help and training for the poor through institutions under their control or influence. In these communities, new, indigenous leaderships would emerge who would lead their constituents “into” society” (Bell and Held 1969: 149). In this context, the main goal of community action programs was to “help individuals help themselves.” In Colombia “community action” was initially used as a tool for “rehabilitating” rural areas of the country that were strongly affected by political violence during the period know as *La Violencia* (1948-1958). The creation of boards of community action took place first in the rural areas of the provinces of Caldas, Huila, Norte de Santander, Tolima, Valle and Nariño. Since the 1960s, boards of community action expanded to other regions of the country, including areas (rural and urban) that were not directly affected by the political violence of the 1940s and 1950s. Nonetheless, boards of community action have not always been a tool of the state for increasing and centralizing its power, in certain areas of the country these boards have also been used to oppose the state as part of broader civic and political movements.

leadership and authority were transformed in this process, as politicians and governors started to appoint, for instance, *capitanes* in some of the indigenous communities along the rivers.

However, through collective petitions natives actually disputed some of the decisions taken by politicians and governors. In this sense, politicization involved the participation of indigenous leaders and constituents in the political process, but also included the bureaucratization of the relationships between indigenous communities and the state in the form of written claims, petitions and letters.

The third section of the chapter analyses how the new legal and political rights granted to indigenous peoples in the Political Constitution of 1991, were preceded and articulated in Amazonia through the design and implementation of what came to be known as *Política Amazónica* [Amazonian Policy]. This policy was implemented during the government of liberal president Virgilio Barco (1986-1990) and its inaugural act took place in April of 1988, when president Barco handed over publicly to 10000 natives the control and possession of the *Predio Putumayo*, a huge extension of land comprising more than 6 million hectares. *Política Amazónica* was predicated upon the assumption of a strong relationship between the defense of indigenous rights and the conservation of the Amazon basin. Drawing on the anthropological work of Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, the main foundation of *Política Amazónica* was the idea that native Amazonians were “accomplished environmental scientists.” In this context, giving huge portions of land in the form of *resguardos* to indigenous communities in Amazonia became a strategy for securing the conservation of geostrategic areas. *Política Amazónica* also layed out the ground for the work of environmental NGOs, such as GAIA Amazonas, whose founder in 1990 (Martín Von Hildebrand) was part of the Colombian delegation that travelled to Geneva in 1988 as part of the ILO meetings to revise the ILO C 107 of 1957, lead to the draft of

a new convention known as ILO C 169 (Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention) that was approved in a general assembly by all the members of ILO, including Colombia, in June of 1989.

While analysis of the political consequences of the equivalence between environmental practices and those of Amazonian indigenous peoples have focused more on the construction of alliances between environmental NGOs and indigenous communities (Conklin and Graham); in the last section of the chapter I show how the effects of multicultural and environmental policies in Amazonia after 1991 also brought conflicts between the different actors involved in the implementation of ethnic rights: NGOs, the regional state, indigenous organizations and associations of indigenous traditional authorities (AATIs), among others. Conflicts between GAIA Amazonas and local indigenous political organizations started to emerge explicitly since the early 2000s when anthropologists and lawyers working for GAIA started to “organize” Curripaco indigenous communities of the Guainía River under a new legal figure known as Associations of Traditional Indigenous Authorities (AATIs). This kind of initiatives ignored the history and political work that local indigenous political organizations, such as AICURIGUA (Association of Curripaco Indigenous Authorities of the Guainía River) had been doing in the region since the early 1990s, in alliance with other regional and national indigenous political organizations. Conflicts between GAIA Amazonas and the regional government came when the AATIs created in 2005 started to demand autonomy in the management of fiscal resources for education assigned to them, as well as of the schools that were under the influence of the associations of traditional authorities. These conflicts raise questions about the “politics of mediation” that NGOs have deployed in Northwest Amazonia (Chernela 2005), and questions



about the relationships between civil society, indigenous political organizations, and the state in the region.

### **From Bilingual Assistants to Schools of Leaders**

One of the main strategies used by the regional and national government during the 1970s in order to achieve what they called “popular integration” was the creation and establishment of boarding schools.<sup>137</sup> The Catholic Church administered some of these schools while the regional government administered the ones that were established on the Inírida and Guainía Rivers.

Despite common assumptions about the kind of the education imparted on boarding schools since the 1970s, education policies at the regional and national level were concerned with some of the particularities they found relevant among indigenous groups. This meant that education and boarding schools were not intended to be assimilationist *tout court*. In August of 1973, the national government issued the decree 1741 regarding regulations for the “corporations and

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<sup>137</sup>The first decree addressing “popular integration” was sent the 6<sup>th</sup> of September of 1966 by the president Misael Pastrana Borrero to the *comisario* Hernán Ríos González. The decree issued on September 5 of that year, was designed to “organize and stimulate popular integration with the participation of the people [*pueblo*], the government and private entities.” The decree opened up mentioning the “huge sector” of Colombians, from cities and the country side, confronted with “difficult conditions, victims of diseases, unemployment, ignorance, civic inertia, lacking housing, recreation and opportunities of human progress.” The decree presented these “fellow countryman” as “incapable of solving their problems,” given their marginalization from social life. In order to “solve adequately” the problem of marginality, the decree proposed a national campaign of popular integration, aimed at promoting the “integral development of the affected sectors, with the active participation of the people, the government and the dynamic solidarity of all the forces of the nation.” The first article of the decree emphasized that popular integration was designed to facilitate the “real incorporation” to national life of those marginalized. “Marginal sectors” of the country were supposed to be simultaneously “protagonists and beneficiaries” of their own integration. The national policy of popular integration was supposed to develop along eight “national purposes” in favor of those marginalized: health, labor and economy, culture, recreation, housing, civic, grass-roots organizations, and media.

foundations constituted in order to develop activities related to indigenous communities.”<sup>138</sup>

There is a copy of the decree in the archive of the regional government in Inírida. The first article of the decree stated that the “indigenist policy [*política indigenista*] of the Colombian state is oriented towards teaching indigenous communities the advanced techniques of economic exploitation, and make possible their integration to national development in equality of conditions, with respect of their cultural autonomy.”<sup>139</sup> This new indigenist policy represented a break with assimilationist policies and legislation that was implemented in the country since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this context, development and education policies were starting to transform themselves in order to adapt to the specificities and questions posed by cultural difference.

Regarding indigenous education, the decree established 3 criteria to be followed by public institutions. Indigenous education should be bilingual, “imparted in Spanish and in the proper language of the community.” The design of academic programs had to be consistent with “the idiosyncrasy of the *indígena*, in whole respect of his cultural values;” and the academic calendars should be adequate to the “system of life” of the indigenous population. Nonetheless, what the government understood in 1973 to be indigenist policy is certainly quite different from contemporary indigenist policy informed by multicultural values.<sup>140</sup> The decree promoted to

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<sup>138</sup> Decreto 1741 del 30 de Agosto de 1973. Por el cual se dictan normas sobre las corporaciones y fundaciones constituídas para desarrollar actividades relacionadas con las comunidades indígenas. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> In 1991, multicultural reforms were implemented in Colombia after a new Political Constitution was drafted by a Constituent Assembly where different political and social actors that had been historically excluded participated in the process of drafting a new “social contract.” The new Constitution declared Colombia to be a pluri-ethnic and multicultural nation, and it recognized specific rights to ethnic groups. The new legislation constituted a significant break with assimilationist policies, which had marked until then the relationships between indigenous communities and the state. Among the specific rights recognized to indigenous peoples were the

teach indigenous communities the “advanced techniques of economic exploitation,” as well the formation of promoters in “social development,” including areas as diverse as health, agricultural extension, literacy, cooperativism and community action [*acción comunal*].” Furthermore, among the programs established by the decree was the idea of teaching indigenous communities the “correct use and protection of natural resources,” as well as “advanced techniques of agricultural exploitation.”<sup>141</sup> Ideas about teaching indigenous communities how to exploit the land and protect natural resources are at odds with contemporary visions of Amazonian indigenous peoples as “ecological natives” (Ulloa 2010; Del Cairo 2012).

The concerns in national educational policies about indigenous cultural specificities were translated into specific pedagogical practices, which simultaneously responded to the ‘obstacles’ that seemed to be posed by cultural difference. In the case of Guainía, since 1974 the regional government started to train and use indigenous bilingual assistants in the pedagogical process. A report about a “vacation training course” taught to bilingual assistants at the end of 1976, stated that bilingual assistants were born out of the “difficulty of communication between the white professor and the indigenous educational community.”<sup>142</sup> The report defined the bilingual assistant as a “thinking person that identifies the problems and needs of his tribe and looks for solutions that respond [to them].” Bilingual assistants were chosen within indigenous communities and were individuals that had a minimum academic level (up to 5<sup>th</sup> grade) and showed “leadership qualities.” In this sense, the regional government established new criteria

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right to govern themselves through institutions such as *cabildos* and other rights that included: free access to hospitals, bilingual and bicultural education, free access to higher education, exemption from military service and from taxes over land, collective ownership of land, the right to be judged according to “customary law” and the right to receive money every year from the national budget (Gross 2000:64).

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Curso vacacional para capacitación de auxiliares bilingües. Comisaría Especial de Guainía. Secretaría de Educación. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía. 1976.

for becoming a “leader” within indigenous communities. This process took shape in an increasing bilingual context, where interactions with white settlers and state officials were more frequent than before. It was common until the 1990s that the *comisario* in charge appointed “traditional authorities” such as *capitanes*. In this context, bilingualism and literacy started to become crucial for becoming an indigenous leader as this position also required dealing with state authorities and handling the language used by them.

Indigenous assistants were first trained in “teaching techniques,” and were supposed to become also “health promoters” within their own communities, once they attended secondary training. The job of indigenous bilingual assistant was not limited to bridging the “communicative gap” between white professors and indigenous communities, but also included the promotion of specific social practices and values associated with what the national government called by then “community development.” For these purposes, the assistants attended a “vacation training course” where they were instructed in 5 different areas that included: evolutionary psychology, school administration, fundamentals and techniques of education, educational aids and actualization of health promoters from the national health system. The topics that were taught to indigenous bilingual assistants covered two big areas that were education and health. Regarding education, training started with basic issues such as the “objectives of education,” the “process of communication in teaching” and the “attitude of the teacher.” Topics of evolutionary psychology included the “formation of personality,” the “process of development of personality” and “mental growth.” The area of school administration emphasized the importance of “selecting and classifying students,” as well as the how to use numeric scale used to classify students, but also basic instructions about doing academic reports and archives. On the other hand, the area of health started with basic questions

such as “what is health and sickness?,” “who is the voluntary health promoter?” and “rights and duties of the health promoter.” Other topics included “the community and its development through the voluntary health promoter,” as well as “sanitation of the environment and control of food and animals that transmit diseases to man.”<sup>143</sup> However, there is little evidence of how the work of indigenous bilingual assistants unfolded on the ground. To some extent, indigenous bilingual assistants were the equivalent, in the communities that lived on the rivers, of the “home improvers,” analyzed in Chapter 2 that were named right after the Comisaría was established in 1965. In this context, it is clear that bilingual assistants represent an emerging form of indigenous leadership enabled by the State through the promotion of national development and popular integration.

In fact, the report of the “vacation training course” was clear expressing that through this kind of training the participation of indigenous bilingual assistants in the “social and cultural development of the region was guaranteed.” The report informed that bilingual assistants had shown “interest in serving to their offspring, desire of self-improvement [*superación*] and working with the administration [regional government].” Curiously enough, the report pointed out that the bilingual assistants’ willingness of “working with the administration” did not happen before, given that bilingual assistants were allegedly “acting under religious influence [*influencia de tipo religioso*],” according to the report. In this sense, the regional government conceived evangelical Christianity as an obstacle to the education and development of indigenous communities. The report seems to entail that since indigenous communities “work with the administration” they are not any more under “religious influence.”<sup>144</sup> These kinds of

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> As I show in Chapters 3 and 4, by 1976 evangelical Christianity within indigenous communities in Northwest Amazonia was far from fading away.

“misunderstandings” might suggest also possible tensions the kind of leadership promoted by the state and religious forms of leadership.

Although, it is hard to tell exactly how did bilingual boarding schools worked on the ground, there are reports and documents that provide some information in this regard. For instance, a report written in 1976 by one of the “supervisors” of education about the school of Caranacoa in the upper Guainía River, said that the bilingual assistant “worries a lot about the progress and advance of education in this place (...) and has tried to put into practice the knowledge acquired in the “vacation training course.” At the end of the first page of the report, the supervisor writes that the *capitán* of the “tribe” Lorenzo Durante suggested that “white professors be appointed in order to train the kids in Spanish as a necessity to establish communication with white people [*señores blancos*].”<sup>145</sup> The word *señores* used by Duarte usually connotes superiority and respect, attributed in this case to the *colonos*. This request shows that while the regional government was concerned with promoting bilingual education within indigenous communities, some indigenous leaders were more concerned with fluency in Spanish, which necessary as part of the increasing contact with *colonos*. At the same time, the suggestion of appointing white professors in Caranacoa also shows that in some communities “bilingual assistants” were working as teachers by themselves. This was the case in Caranacoa where the “bilingual assistant,” according to the supervisor: “by intuition tries to use the methodology of the unitary school.” The supervisor had to give the “bilingual assistant” orientation so that he could be “more efficient in his job and be more effective in the control [*dominio*] of the group.”<sup>146</sup> The orientation given to the bilingual assistant included “practical mechanisms” that improved his

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

efficiency, understood as his ability to discipline and teach what he had already learned (in training courses) to a group of no more than 36 indigenous students. The report also pointed out that Guillermo González, the bilingual assistant, has “tried to put into practice the most the knowledge acquired in the vacation training courses.”<sup>147</sup>

The idea of having schools or “training courses” not just for regular students but also for future indigenous leaders (such as bilingual assistants), was also appropriated and deployed by white teachers with specific political purposes. A “school of leaders” was established around 1975 in a place called Laguna Colorada on the Guaviare River, but in jurisdiction of the *Comisaria* of Guainía. The school was created in order to “train a group of young people that later will help their community as teachers, health promoters, manager of cooperatives, guides in agriculture and lots of other things.” A report of the school of leaders about the topic of *liderazgo* [leadership], illustrates how the topic was approached. In the report, a leader was defined as: “The one who looks all the problems of the community and invites to work. He says: let’s go to work. It is one who carries initiative within the community, he encourages, he organizes.”<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, two types of leaders were defined in the report: natural and “trained” [*capacitado*]. A natural leader is defined as the one who without being literate or *capitán*, is “capable of organizing the community, everybody obeys him, respects him and goes with him to work;” whereas a trained leader is defined as the one who “knows the problems of his community and gets prepared to work better within his community.”<sup>149</sup> The duties of a leader were defined along four lines that included moral, political and pedagogical obligations. According to the report, the first duty of a leader was to “provide his services within the

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<sup>147</sup>Ibid.

<sup>148</sup>Ibid.

<sup>149</sup>Ibid.

community and help the others.”<sup>150</sup> Specifically, the indigenous leader, according to the report, is supposed to “worry more about his indigenous brothers than a white person [*un blanco*] and he can provide his services with more love and dedication, because he knows better their way of thinking [*su pensamiento*].”<sup>151</sup> In this sense, indigenous leaders were connected to their constituents through love and shared ways of thinking.<sup>152</sup> The main three duties of an indigenous leader included: presenting the problems of the community to whom might help resolve them, make [people] respect the land and the rights of the community, and teaching to the community what are the rights and duties of “herself” [*de ella misma*]. The notion of community emerges here as a homogenous and unified collective entity, as well as a political subject with rights and problems of its own. The notion of community promoted by the state was indigenized, as white teachers and indigenous leaders appropriated it, and it started to include other issues such as land and culture. Another of the topics taught in the school of leaders was about the “*indígena* and his culture,” where prospective indigenous leaders learned that the “thought of the white man is different from the thought of the *indígena*.”<sup>153</sup> Among the differences in thought pointed out in the report, we find the idea that “for the *indígena* the land is sacred, because his parents were born there and provides him with food; for the white man it is a thing to make money.”<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>150</sup>Ibid.

<sup>151</sup>Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ethnographic research about the “aesthetics of conviviality” in Amazonia, shows how some indigenous societies tend to “disdain the sociological” and instead place an “affective emphasis” in their interpersonal relations and everyday life. In this context, the “sense of community” entails both moral and political meanings, as well as the production of “an aesthetics of action” which informs at the same time specific “styles of relating” that vary among and within indigenous communities in Amazonia (Overing and Passes 2000:xi).

<sup>153</sup>Ibid,

<sup>154</sup>Ibid.



Within this ideological framework, the “disintegration of community” was presented as one of the main problems to be confronted, directly related to lack of land, work and means of subsistence. This alleged process of “community disintegration” consisted of “living separate from the family, each one with a different thought, working alone, forgetting your own language and customs.”<sup>155</sup> According to the directors of the school of leaders, indigenous leaders have to “defend their customs and traditions” and for this purpose they have created a newspaper called “*malicia indígena* [indigenous malice] in order to defend their land and reinforce their culture.”<sup>156</sup> The newspaper was supposed to show “all the problems of the *indígenas*,” as well as “narrate [*contar*] their custom in order to not forget everything from their grandfathers.”<sup>157</sup> In this way, the category of a ‘political community’ with rights and needs of its own (represented by a leader that knows those needs and rights) was articulated with essentialized notions of culture, custom, tradition and land. While the state had promoted the idea of community as part of developmental policies aimed at reaching the integration of marginal groups into the body politic, in Northwest Amazonia this same idea was “customized,” appropriated and incorporated into indigenous politics. White teachers implemented the idea of establishing a school for indigenous leaders, articulating at the same time an indigenist agenda that emphasized the defense of indigenous communities, of their land and culture. The

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> In this context, “indigenous malice” has an ambiguous meaning and it is an expression often used in ordinary language and conversations. On one hand, the notion of “indigenous malice” tends to reinscribe negative stereotypes of natives as treacherous, untrustworthy and evil. At the same time, “indigenous malice” might also be associated with cunningness when one is doing, for example, business with someone else. However, in both cases the notion of “indigenous malice” is associated with negative behavior (i.e. dupe or being duped by someone else) in opposition to contemporary ideas of native Amazonians as noble savages or ecological natives.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

indigenist agenda of some of the white teachers hired by the regional government informed indigenous politics at a local and regional level in different ways.

In September of 1977 in Laguna Colorada, located on the Guaviare River, the director, teachers and students of the school of leaders organized the *Tercer Congreso de Indígenas* [Third Congress of Natives]. Several *capitanes* and leaders from different communities and ethnic groups of the Guaviare and Vichada Rivers attended the meeting. The written memories of the event start with a list of all the people that attended the Congress, with their respective ethnic affiliation, and then define a leader as the “one who knows the necessities of his community and helps to resolve them.”<sup>158</sup> Evidently, this definition is almost the same as the one that was given to the bilingual assistants in their vacation course (a “thinking person that identifies the problems and needs of his tribe and looks for solutions that respond [to them]”). In both definitions there is an emphasis on the idea of identifying necessities, as well is in the idea of possessing a specific knowledge in order to identify those necessities. There is also present the idea that “knowing that problems is [simultaneously] looking for their solution.”<sup>159</sup> As part of the process of creating the first indigenous political organization in the region, leaders and members of the school of leaders appropriated specific notions of leadership promoted by the regional government in the context of state making practices. In this sense, emergent indigenous leaders and political organizations became agents of change and were incorporated into state-directed projects of cultural and social change. The state mediated, to some extent, the direction and sense of cultural and social change, as it approved and promoted specific projects of transformation, while it rejected others (such as Christian evangelization).

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<sup>158</sup> Tercer Congreso de Indígenas. Rio Guaviare y Vichada. Laguna Colorada Septiembre 12-17, 1977. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

The memories of the event give a basic definition of what a congress is and what it is useful for: “a meeting of people that look for something.”<sup>160</sup> The opening words of Carlos Gómez (a white teacher and director of the school of leaders) refer specifically to the purpose of the congress:

The *indigenas* in Colombia are running out [*acabando*] because they have to many enemies. Out of the 25 million inhabitants of Colombia, half a million correspond to indigenous population. The struggle is unequal but with ORGANIZATION it is possible to win in order to defend the originality of the Colombian. This half a million is spread out throughout Colombia; in the Congress we look for unity of the areas of Guainía and Vichada to join them to other [areas] of the country.<sup>161</sup>

As it can be inferred from here, indigenist discourses were actively produced and promoted by white teachers themselves. The emphasis of these discourses on union and pan-tribal forms of organization should not be dismissed, as it constituted a new way of conceiving and articulating indigeneity. Two indigenous leaders that spoke after Carlos, emphasized that “all united: guahibos, piapocos, cubeos, curripacos, piaroas, tucanos and puinaves; is the only hope of “getting ahead” [*salir adelante*]. Both leaders argued: “the solution to our problems is in our hands, we don’t have to wait until they come to tell us, we ourselves have to fight.”<sup>162</sup> Asserting that the “solution to our problems is in our hands” might seem paradoxical when ideas about achieving union and organization were precisely produced as a result of the interventions of white teachers in the school of leaders. However, reaching unity or “achieving union” was not an easy task as it entailed dealing with and addressing all kinds of purposes, expectations and interests that people brought to the congress. In fact, in the presentations of the different delegations that attended the congress multiple interests emerged:

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

- We are afraid of coming to the Congress because a lot of people say that it is to make enemies with the government.
- My partners don't come because the government took away help and school, they fail to meet anything, but I come to see what happens.
- I want to learn how to work, understand how they talk in order to give advice [*dar consejo*].<sup>163</sup>

In another part of the document the question about “what do you look for with this Congress?” was raised, some Guahibo leaders replied saying things such as: “help from the government,” “ask for *reserva* if there is a law that offers them” and “have ideas to create cooperatives.”<sup>164</sup> A Guahibo leader was clearer in saying that he was there to “get to know the desire of others, knowing my desire. I didn't come to ask for a present, I came to learn and teach to all of my people.”<sup>165</sup> In addition to this, the memories of the Congress also include the transcription of 5 letters written by people that attended the event. The letters refer to specific petitions and concerns that leaders brought to the Congress, assuming that making public these concerns might help to solve them. For instance, the first letter addresses the conflicts aroused on the Uva River between some natives and a *colono* called Luis Batía who wouldn't let them cross his backyard [*patio*], neither slash trees of *mure* (a native palm tree), something which natives had done for years, as well as having their crops where Luis lived.<sup>166</sup> The author of the letter made the formal request in the name of “all the indigenous communities” that this “man be expelled from here soon, we assume no liability for the life of him, if he keeps bothering.”<sup>167</sup> The authors of two other letters expressed their interest in participating in the Congress and reaching agreements with all of the *capitanes*. Both letters included demands for land or *reserva*

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> According to the letter, Luis had inherited the piece of land where he lived from his father-in-law, which probably means that Luis was married with an indigenous woman.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

[reservation], as well as references to “claiming our rights.” A fourth letter also made reference to “the limits of what belongs to us” regarding the presence of *colonos* in territory historically inhabited by natives, something the author of the letter framed in terms of “it is our limit and I am making clear my right because my grandparents lived in this part, then, we are natives of Vichada.”<sup>168</sup> A fifth letter signed by the *capitán* of a community called *Murciélago* [Bat] presented the “most urgent needs of the community,” hoping they could be solved soon. So-called “urgent needs” were materialized in specific “working tools,” among which were requested: 5 hand saws, hammers, brushes, 75 kilos of assorted nails, shovels, mattocks, axes, a dozen of *machetes*, a dozen of drills, 300 sheets of zinc with nails included, a 25 [horses] outboard engine for “common benefit,” a power plant, and the list goes on to include spikes wire and a radio phone. The letter finished with a claim to stop the exploitation by unscrupulous merchants that “don’t hesitate to charge 3 times the value of first necessity goods.” As it is clear from the diversity of demands deployed in these letters, there was not a common theme or agenda held by all of the participants in the Congress. However, these letters and their rhetoric reveal new ways of communicating with the State and constitute what some authors calls “languages of the State” (Gustafson 2009). For instance, the language of rights articulated a vocabulary in terms of which indigenous communities could frame their claims and demands. It should not be taken for granted the fact that most of these claims and demands were framed in a collective voice through the language of “community” and were collectively signed. Some of these demands were also material as the letter with the long list of “working tools” shows. As I will show in the next section, indigenous communities in Guainía participated, through state

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

promoted institutions such as *Juntas de Accion Comunal*, in the process of colonization that included the building of towns, state offices, boarding schools and paths, among others.

Despite the diversity of demands that were brought to the Congress, white teachers seemed to have their own agenda around questions of land. In this sense, the union and organization of indigenous communities was achieved through the production of hegemonic demands. Regarding the “evaluation” of the previous congress, a student from the school of leaders threw out to the audience the following question: what is the Congress useful for? Someone in the audience replies: “it is useful to demand for a *reserva* [reserve], that’s why we come from far away. Some say it is to take something from here but it is not so. An indigenous leader named Antonio Cavarte raises the question: who do we have to ask for the *reserva*? In response to that Carlos Gómez, the white teacher in charge of the school of leaders, said: “first, it is necessary to know what *reserva* is, to unite ourselves in order to demand for it from INCORA [Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform] and see in what conditions it is convenient for us; INCORA gives *reservas* but it is necessary to unite ourselves and get ready to defend it.”<sup>169</sup> A student of the school of leaders called Hector Pérez, replied back to Gómez, saying “we are owners of this land because we were born here, I don’t understand why have to demand from the government if this is ours, instead we should give *reserva* to the government.”<sup>170</sup> Despite this contention, it reveals how specific notions of “property rights” or rights over the land were articulated in the interaction between white teachers and indigenous emergent leaders. Interacting with the state

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<sup>169</sup> In 1961, liberal president Alberto Lleras Camargo created INCORA as an attempt to develop an agrarian reform that would serve to deter political violence and social unrest in rural areas of the country. Among the main duties of INCORA were to buy or expropriate unproductive land in order to give it to landless peasants, give land titles to *colonos* who cultivated small portions of land, and define indigenous rights over their territories. Between 1963 and 1977 INCORA recognized around 4 million hectares in land titles.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

entailed both collective forms of organization and political subjectivity (i.e, community), but also learning a language through which grievances and petitions should be made.

In fact, the Congress included “working groups” that were organized around questions such as “why don’t you live where your grandparents lived?” and “which are the main problems that you have in the possession of the land?”<sup>171</sup> Regarding the first question, some of the Guahibos present in the meeting responded: “because of violence we were forced to leave our land,” “because of the damages caused by animals of the white men (eat gardens, damage plants),” “because of fear of the white men’s threats of taking away our land,” and “by invitation of our relatives that live in other places.” On the same question about why people don’t live anymore where their grandparents did, some of the Piapocos present in the meeting responded: “there was not enough food nor fish,” “because of family problems (people got drunk, fight among each other),” “because it is our custom to wander around [*andar y andar*],” and “because they want to be like the white man (some do live in the land of their grandparents following Sofia’s advice or because that’s what grandfathers wanted).”<sup>172</sup> Some of the Cubeos, Piaroas, Curripacos and Puinaves that were attending the Congress, responded to this question saying: “desire to know other places” and “scarce fish where we live.”<sup>173</sup> Not surprisingly, the diversity of answers indigenous leaders gave to the question of why some of them don’t live anymore where their grandparents used to live reveals different histories, concerns and relationships to land, kin and colonization. Certainly, the Guahibos, that lived and live in areas of intense colonization (such as the banks of the Meta and Guaviare Rivers), seemed to be more concerned than other groups about issues of land dispossession. However, we shouldn’t overlook the heterogeneous

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

factors and reasons brought by indigenous leaders to explain why some of them live in different places from which their grandparents used to live. While in some cases land dispossession was in fact taking place, in other cases migration from “traditional territories” responded to nomadic patterns of life, food scarcity, the desire of living like a white man or just getting to know other places.

On the other hand, regarding the second question about the “main problems that you have in the possession of the land?,” the answers were less diverse and show specific conflicts that were taking place between natives and *colonos* around issues of land. For instance, the Guahibos said: “absence of laws that guarantee respect over our territories [*tierras*],” “presence of the *colono* and his cattle that makes us leave” and “scandal on the part of the white man (they get drunk, bad example).”<sup>174</sup> The Piapoco leaders said that: “there is the necessity of the *reservas* in order to stay in one place and leave in peace,” “delimitate the lands of the *colonos* that live there,” and “do not let more white people in.” Finally, the Cubeos, Piaroas, Curripacos and Puinaves replied to the question saying: “there is lack of union among the families (each one wants to work and live in peace),” “the presence of the white man in our villages,” and “the lack of medical attention.”<sup>175</sup> Out of all these heterogeneous demands and concerns regarding questions of land and everyday relationships with *colonos*, indigenous leaders and white teachers established a “common” agenda that was materialized in specific petitions to the government, starting by the president of the republic, as well as in the creation of one of the first indigenous organizations of the region.

The memories of the Congress conclude with a section about “ways to organize” that opens up with the following phrase: “The Congress is for making a single thought [*un solo*

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.



*pensamiento*], meet the *capitanes* and chat together to better organize.”<sup>176</sup> An indigenous leader from Vaupés named Roberto Gómez is quoted, saying that he explained the steps they took “over there” in order to organize themselves. The memories of the event refer to 4 steps: “they only looked the problems and organized themselves in order to find solutions,” “they named representatives of the community to congregate it [*reunirla*],” “they continue struggling without getting tired,” and “they looked for alliances” with other organizations from other areas of the country such as CRIC [Indigenous Regional Council of Cauca].”<sup>177</sup> In this context, one of the main conclusions and outcomes of the Congress was to create an indigenous organization: “For all of the above the assistants to the Congress saw the necessity of organizing themselves. This gave birth to UNIGUVI which means *Unión Indígena Guaviare y Vichada* [Indigenous Union

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> CRIC was created in 1971 in the town of Toribío in the northern part of the province of Cauca. The initial slogan of the organization was “unity and land.” The recovery of lands that had historically belonged to indigenous *resguardos* became one of the main political struggles of the organization during the first decades of its existence. *Haciendas* had taken some of these lands and indigenous communities were drawn into a system of patronage and labor called *terraje* (*hacendados* would let indigenous peasants live in their *haciendas* in exchange for their labor and produce). CRIC was created in the midst of agrarian struggles between patrons and agrarian workers, some of these afro-descendants, which worked in sugar cane plantations (Laurent 2005:70). To the words “unity and land” were later added to the slogan of CRIC the words “culture and autonomy” and the organization articulated a political agenda based on explicit ethnic demands. These demands included the empowerment of indigenous traditional authorities (*cabildos*), and the defense of indigenous history, languages and customs. One of the main cultural projects of CRIC was the program of bilingual and intercultural education (PEBI). In this context, education became the “basis of struggle” and an “organizational space, where community is constructed [and] leaders are formed” (CRIC 2004:21-22). At the same time, CRIC became a model for indigenous political organizations across the country in the Andean and Amazonian region. Most of the indigenous organizations created during the 1970s and 1980s followed the regional and pan-ethnic model of CRIC, whereas different indigenous groups inhabiting the same region (usually political-administrative units defined by the state) established an indigenous organization for each specific region (indigenous regional councils were created in Vaupés in 1973, in Tolima in 1983, and in Chocó in 1980 (Laurent 2005:74).

of Guaviare and Vichada].”<sup>178</sup> The purpose of the indigenous organization was to “listen to the problems of [natives] themselves and present them to different authorities.” In addition, the “representatives of the communities” that attended the Congress elected a Board of Directors. Among the members of the Board of Directors, there was a president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer and attorney. None of the Curripacos or Puinaves that attended the Congress, occupied any of these offices, all of them were taken by Guahibos, Piapocos and Cubeos. One month after the Congress was finished in September 17<sup>th</sup> of 1977, a commission representing the Board of Directors was going to travel to different places in order to collect funds from the “communities” for a trip that the Board would make to Bogotá. The purpose of the trip was to present in Bogotá the problems of the indigenous communities of the Vichada and Guaviare Rivers. I did not find any documents related to the trip of the members of the Board of Directors to Bogotá, but a letter was sent to the president of the republic in September 16<sup>th</sup> of 1977.

In this sense, what began in 1974 as a bilingual education programs based on indigenous bilingual assistants lead to emergent notions of indigenous leadership, which were simultaneously appropriated by indigenous political organizations. Emergent notions of indigenous leadership also went hand in hand with emergent notions of community as a political subject with rights and needs of its own, which could be known, studied and represented. At the intersection between indigenist policies and indigenous politics, the notion of political community was transformed into the notion of indigenous community, which became in turn associated with ideas of brotherhood, shared culture and customs, and specific ways of thinking

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<sup>178</sup> The territorial scope of UNIGUVI was huge as it included more than 158,094 square kilometers (adding up the territorial extensions of Guaviare and Vichada), this number does not include the extension of Guainía which is of 72,238 square kilometers. In some documents the organization is called Indigenous Union of Guainía and Vichada. The infrastructure and geographic extension of territories in Amazonia has often been an obstacle for indigenous political organizations in the region.

about issues such as land. At the same time, colonization and pressure over land increased during the 1970s in some parts of the Amazon region such as Guaviare, where the expansion of coca crops drew a lot of population to the region from the interior. At a national level, the 1970s signaled the creation of the first indigenous political organization following the regional and pan-ethnic model that CRIC had established for the Andean province of Cauca. In the next section, I will show how the notion of community was produced through state policies and techniques of government, which included the promotion, since the 1960s, of *Juntas de Acción Comunal* [Board of Community Action] in most of the marginal rural and urban areas of the country. At the same time, in Guainía these forms of popular organization determined specific kinds of relationships and articulations between the state authorities and indigenous citizens.

### **Community, the State and Politics**

The memories of the Congress had a letter attached and directed to the president of the republic from the liberal party Alfonso López Michelsen who had been elected in 1974, right after the *Frente Nacional* was finished. The letter was signed by UNIGUVI and started saying the after the meeting of indigenous communities from the *Comisarias* of Guainía and Vichada they wanted to ask him for an immediate solution to the problems they were suffering regarding the “possession of our lands.” After this initial request, the letter narrated that during the congresses they came to know Law 135 issued in 1961 and the Decree 2117 issued in 1969. They quoted the article 94 of Decree 2117 where it says that: “INCORA, previous consultation with the ministry of government, (...) will constitute reservations of *tierras baldías* enough for the formation of family agricultural units in favor of members of tribes or indigenous groups

that lack of them.”<sup>179</sup> In addition to this, the authors of the letter quote a discourse that López Michelsen gave in an event in Bogotá called the “encounter of the two colombias,” that was apparently transmitted by television. In his discourse, López Michelsen referred to indigenous groups saying that: “we have abandoned them for a long time, we have forgotten them, we have to return to them the face of the Colombian state with all its conatus of power, of operative capacity, return to them.”<sup>180</sup> The letter emphasized that “all of this is very good,” but the “situation is the same and is becoming worst.”<sup>181</sup> The authors of the letter tell the president that last year they sent a letter to INCORA exposing the same problems but they had “received no answer so far.” For this reason, the indigenous leaders gathered at Laguna Colorada that represented more than 30 communities and 4000 people had decided to write a letter directly to the president, in search of answers to their problems. The situation described to the president by the authors of the letter was the following:

- All of us have been evicted from the lands where we were born by the violence of the *colono*. In this moment we are tired of fleeing and besides we don't have where to go if we continue being chased.
- Due to this persecution several of our brothers go to Venezuela in search of help.
- For this reason our communities and families disintegrate; and this is very bad.
- We cannot wait too long until the problem of our reserves gets solved given that the colonization of the white men is not directed, they are looking to take way the land that we now have.
- For not having papers of our lands we can't say to the white men to stay away from our lands.
- In the elections in which you were elected as president we abandoned our kids and went to vote for you with the hope that you would help us but until today we haven't seen [*sentido*] our help.

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<sup>179</sup> Memorial dirigido al Señor Alfonso López Michelsen. Unión Indígena del Guaviare y Vichada, UNIGUVI. Laguna Colorada, Guainía. Septiembre 16 de 1977. Archivo General de la Gobernación del Guainía.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

-We are desperate because several times we have asked for help from the government and we have never been listened. If this is [the situation] having help and support, how would it be when our lands are taken away.<sup>182</sup>

As I showed before, indigenous communities and individuals in Guainía, Guaviare and Vichada confronted all kinds of problems and situations. Not all of these problems were necessarily related to land possession, and at the same time the different communities that were represented in UNIGUVI were affected differently by colonization. It is worth asking how collective land possession and dispossession became the main agenda of the first indigenous organization in the region. As it is clear in the letter sent to the president, by 1977 indigenous communities in Northwest Amazonia were highly involved in politics at different levels and in different ways. On one level, the indigenous leaders that wrote the letter in Spanish to López Michelsen showed knowledge (acquired in events such as the 3rd Congress of *Indígenas*) of state laws and institutions that were quoted to support their claims to land on legal grounds. This knowledge is also reflected in the way the letter is written that seem to follow bureaucratic rhetoric of petitions and claims made by groups of citizens to state authorities: “Mr. President: On the occasion of having met all of the communities from the Guaviare River, the Uva River (...) in the *Comisarias* of Guainía and Vichada in the Third Indigenous Regional Congress we write to you in order to ask you an immediate response to the problems we are going through regarding the possession of our lands.”<sup>183</sup> On another level, the collective claim to land leveled to López Michelsen was also based on the argument that natives had voted massively for him in the elections of 1974: “in the elections in which you were elected as president we abandoned our kids and went to vote for you with the hope that you would help us but until today we haven’t seen [*sentido*] our help.” In this sense, the collective land claims were not made appealing to

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

cultural arguments, but responded more to a bureaucratic and clientelistic logic based on laws and decrees, a presidential speech and electoral support.<sup>184</sup>

In this section, I analyze how indigenous communities interacted with the state through notions, institutions, practices and procedures that were defined by the state itself or in interaction with agents of the state. During the period known as *Frente Nacional* (1958-1974) the central government designed social programs and policies in order to achieve what they called “popular integration,” which meant the incorporation of marginal regional and populations to the body politic and national economy, making them objects and subjects of their own development. One of the main “popular organizations” promoted during the *Frente Nacional* were the *Juntas de Acción Comunal*, JAC. In 1969, the first decrees that regulated the conformation and operations of JAC. The decree 2070 of 1969 defined a JAC as a,

Voluntary association of the neighbors of a *municipio*, neighborhood, police inspection, *corregimiento*, *vereda* or *caserío*, that it is democratically organized, non-profit, in order to achieve the economic and social development of its members and the families that conform such community.<sup>185</sup>

Despite the fact that JAC were presented as grass roots organizations and voluntary associations of neighbors, the statutes were the same for all of them and this were determined by the central government. A resolution issued on June 9 of 1970, established the statutes that were supposed

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<sup>184</sup> The petition of UNIGUVI to the president was not attended immediately, only 10 years after the letter was written, INCORA constituted the first *resguardos* [reservations] in the region. In 1987 was constituted the *resguardo* of Pueblo Nuevo-Laguna Colorada on the Guaviare River, where the Congress had taken place 10 years before. The *resguardo* had an approximate extension of 44.845 hectares and in 1987 242 Piapocos and Guahibos lived in the *resguardo*. The *resguardo* of Laguna Colorada was only one of the 21 reservations that were created in Guainía between 1986 and 1989. Similar and bigger *resguardos* were constituted in that period on the Inírida, Guainía and Isana Rivers where most of the Puinaves and Curripacos lived and live today.

<sup>185</sup>Decreto Número 2070 de 1966. Por el cual se reglamentan los ordinales e) del artículo 1º., c) del artículo 6º., el artículo 11 y el ordinal b) del artículo 12 del Decreto-ley 3159 de 1968. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.

to be followed by all of the JAC created in national territory. The resolution established that one of the main purposes of JAC was to “prepare civically the members of the *Junta* to participate in the direction of the community and get actively involved in the democratic process of organization of the State and the accomplishment of its essential purposes.” In this sense, while the national government presented JAC as a way of promoting community development and incorporating the poor and marginalized to the nation, the also constituted a way of centralizing, regulating and organizing political representation. The creation of JACs entailed the formalization and bureaucratization of popular politics. Claims had to be made following the “language of the state” which entailed the use of specific formulas, procedures and legal rhetoric in which popular claims had to be framed and coded.

In January 23 of 1966 a JAC was established in El Coco and the Lower Guaviare River, a few miles from Puerto Inírida. In a letter written to the first *Comisario* Hernán Ríos González 7 days after the JAC was created, the president and secretary of the JAC requested an “ocular visit” from the director of public works in order to trace the urban layout of the town. The urban layout of El Coco would allow the people that lived there to know the place where the school would be located, as well as the “rest of government agencies that the regional government will build.”<sup>186</sup> By the first and last names of the president (Miguel Antonio Ebratt) and secretary (Jairo Ducuara) that signed the petition, it is possible to tell that both natives and *colonos* composed the JAC of El Coco and the Lower Guaviare. During the 1970s, JAC were created in the main neighborhoods of Inírida and in *corregimientos* of the region such as Barrancominas, Puerto Colombia y San Felipe. In fact, JAC were also established in indigenous communities such as San José on the Guainía River. JAC became of one the major institutions that mediated

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<sup>186</sup> Solicitud dirigida al Comisario Especial del Guainía por la Junta de Acción Comunal de El “Coco y Bajo Guaviare.” El Coco, Enero 30 de 1966. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.

and articulated the relationships between the State and the inhabitants of marginal and peripheral regions. In March of 1979, the president, vice-president and secretary of the JAC of Puerto Colombia (a *colono* settlement on the Guainía River) sent a letter to the *Comisario*,

In this *corregimiento* there is no electric lighting plant, aqueduct, school, health services, this means [there is] nothing. The populated area is growing along the river, without technical orientation, giving an uglier appearance than the brother country of Venezuela. As you should notice through this information Mr. *Comisario*, previous administrations have held in absolute abandonment this *caserío*, which in the last elections put even more votes than San Felipe. It is impossible that they continue marginalizing us from the rest of the country, the region of the Upper Guainía has no technical assistance, neither agricultural, all of the native and foreign *colonos*, are totally abandoned by the central and regional government. When the brother country of Venezuela does not want to give us permission of stepping on its territory to get a medication, put a boy in school, purchase supplies or travel to Puerto Inírida.<sup>187</sup>

Through JAC, both natives and *colonos* made petitions to the *Comisario* in office. It was also common for members of JAC to congratulate *comisarios* that were appointed by the central government. These opportunities were used to ask for “material improvements,” such as building a school, a health post, a road or a port. Even if by 1980 there were few elected offices, the reference in the letter to the votes that Puerto Colombia puts, shows the importance and impact that might had in a place like Puerto Colombia the election of one or another person as president of the country. JAC were enmeshed in clientelistic and paternalistic relationships that preceded them, but also produced new forms of articulation between local politicians and members of JAC as it is clear from the letter. In this sense, historians Palacios and Safford point out that during the *Frente Nacional* clientelism was “statalized” and in consequence the State became the main source of patronage.

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<sup>187</sup> Carta dirigida al Señor Comisario Especial del Guainía por la Junta de Acción Comunal de Puerto Colombia. Marzo de 1979. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.



On another level, JAC coexisted with and facilitated “collective” interactions of indigenous citizens with the state. In Guainía, during the 1970s became common to write petitions and letters signed by groups of citizens and directed to the *comisario* in office. For instance, on April 1<sup>st</sup> of 1979, indigenous inhabitants of Laguna Colorada on the Guaviare River (the same place where the Congress was organized two years before) wrote a letter to the *comisario* requesting their participation in the colonization and civilization of the region,

The *indigenas* that sign below with concerns of progress and the desire to live with more dignity as the man of 1979 deserves, request courteously from you to facilitate the way of achieving this [progress] by giving us the facilities [tiles] of zinc, given that we have the idea of funding a town, with similar perspectives to the ones established by the civilized. In such town 800 inhabitants will live and we think we could enjoy the benefits of electricity, water and a health post. At the same time we invite you to visit us, meet us and listen to us.<sup>188</sup>

This letter unsettles any narrative that presents natives as passive subjects in processes of colonization and state formation in the region. The desire expressed by the indigenous inhabitants of Laguna Colorada to participate in practices such as establishing towns, “with similar perspectives to the ones established by the civilized,” questions the idea that this kind of practices, or what *colonos* have usually called *fundarse* [to found oneself], have only been enacted by them. The interest natives showed in meeting in person the *comisario* and telling him about their concerns regarding the new town they were planning to establish, speaks about the influence that natives wanted to have in the regional government and obtain specific material and social benefits from the state.<sup>189</sup> However, the letter was written from the same place (Laguna Colorada) from which the petition to the president for land in 1977 was done. It

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<sup>188</sup> Carta dirigida al Señor Comisario Especial del Guainía por indígenas de Laguna Colorada. Abril de 1979. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.

<sup>189</sup> Part of the idea with the decrees of “popular integration” and the creation of JAC was to transform the “marginal sectors” of the country into “beneficiaries and protagonists” of their own development. If this happened or not, or how did it happened remains to be explored.

might seem paradoxical that indigenous inhabitants of Laguna Colorada were asking from the State, almost simultaneously (within 2 years of difference), for an indigenous reserve and for materials and social services to build a town.

Indigenous leaders and their constituents engaged actively in practices, such as establishing new towns, which have been traditionally associated with the work of *colonos*. Other practices included the constructions of roads or paths. For instance, in July of 1980 the *capitanes* of San José and Cejal, with other 3 indigenous leaders from Cejal, sent a letter to the *corregidor* and JAC of Puerto Colombia, and the traders of Puerto Colombia and San Felipe. In the letter, the indigenous leaders requested from the *colonos* a “small but valuable help that would facilitate the realization of a community work project that will consist in realizing an exploration with the purpose of localizing a favorable terrain for the opening of a road or a path that will allow us to communicate the Guainía with the Inírida River.” The indigenous leaders explained in the letter that,

As natives and *connoisseurs* [*conocedores*] of these areas we think is feasible to find a relatively short and firm path (*varador*), that will allow us to travel to the capital of the *comisaria*, whenever the circumstances require it due to closings of the border or inconveniences for the transit through the Maroa-Yavita route, very frequent and known to all of us.<sup>190</sup>

Indigenous leaders offered to do this by themselves and in a voluntary way, without getting paid, starting on July 15<sup>th</sup>, five days after the letter was written. The commission was composed by 6 “voluntary explorers” and was supposed to last for 8 days. Afterwards, through the office of the *corregidor* a detailed report of activities would be written. Indigenous leaders offered in the letter the collaboration of “our *compañeros indígenas* [indigenous fellows]” in order to make an

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<sup>190</sup> Carta dirigida al Corregidor Comisarial de Pto. Colombia, Junta de Acción Comunal de Pto. Colombia y Comerciantes de Pto. Colombia y San Felipe. San José, Julio 10 de 1980. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.

enlargement and adaptation of the path for the purpose of facilitating transit.”<sup>191</sup> It should not be ignored the fact that indigenous leaders presented the exploration and construction of the road as a “community work project” and not as an individual or personal concern. Indigenous leaders recognized the difficulties, including closings of the border, which both *colonos* and themselves went through when they used the route Maria-Yavita (which goes through Venezuela). In this sense, the new path presented as part of a “community work project” would benefit natives and *colonos*.

As I argued earlier, the notions of community that were promoted during the *Frente Nacional* were immersed in practices that simultaneously produced new forms of leadership. This is clear in the story of how Samuel Tibidor, from San José on the Guainía River, became *capitán* of his community during the 1970s. Samuel remembers vividly how he met the first *comisario* and got involved in politics with the liberal party. The first time Samuel came to know about the regional government was through Sebastián Muñoz, a merchant of the region, whom he considered not only as his patron, but also as a sort of godfather: “I felt as his “servant” [*criado*], he knew me since I was little,” told me Samuel in my first visit to San José in March of 2009. Sebastián showed one day in San José with 15 policeman and explained to Samuel that he came with this people from Puerto Inírida, who worked for the *comisario*. Sebastián told Samuel to introduce himself before them after they introduce themselves to him. Samuel refused at the beginning but he explained to me that it was similar to what happens today when the “armies” [*los ejércitos*] arrive there, it was the first time that “armies” came to San José, according to Samuel. After this “first” encounter, Samuel met a *comisario* whose name was Enrique and gave Samuel a card with his name. Enrique told Samuel: “I know you are going to

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

be useful for this community, have this [the card], when you want to visit Inírida, I am there, you are not going to have a hard time, I can help you there anytime.”

After he met Enrique, another guy named Alvaro came to the Guainía River doing political campaigning or “campaign for politics,” in Samuel’s own words. Alvaro was from the liberal party and was campaigning for Alfonso López Michelsen, who became president in 1974 and to whom the leaders of UNIGUVI directed the letter of 1977, recognizing they had voted for him. Samuel accepted an invitation from Alvaro to go campaigning with him up river and then down river close to mouth of the Casiquiare to meet a guy named Luis Caro, who was apparently in charge of the political campaign among indigenous constituents on the Guainía River. Samuel explained to me that the politicians had elected Caro “as president for us.” Campaigning for liberal candidate López Michelsen, Samuel learned a lot of things: “in that time I understand everything, how you can do, what you have to do with white men, because they taught me a lot of things.” All the politicians, according to Samuel, told him many things in order to name him *capitán*. After politicians saw that Samuel “worked well,” did “not had any problems with anyone, neither white men, nor indigenous relatives,” they chose him as *capitán*. Samuel was clear in explaining to me that it was not the “community” who had chosen him as *capitán*, as it supposedly happens nowadays, but the politicians themselves who had named him as *capitán*. As part of this process Samuel also became a member of the liberal party. This was what Samuel told Guillermo Brito (who was elected to represent Guainía in the house of representatives in 1990 and was reelected in 1994 for a period of four years) when he visited him for the first time: “I am liberal, of the old ones.” Towards the end of the 1980s Brito visited Samuel 3 times, traveling from Bogotá to Guainía. Brito told Samuel: “I don’t come to talk only to the community, I came to talk with you personally.” Samuel and Brito agreed to “collaborate

each other.” Samuel “talked with the community” and told them “if they needed something he could collaborate them [with that].” Samuel suggested to all of them to think about it, while he thought that a power plant could be useful. The people agreed with Samuel and said they would support Brito that he could “count with the vote of all of them.” “All the people,” according to Samuel, said: “Doctor Brito (...) we are going to have a power plant for the community.” Brito replied saying: “okay, I can get you that, as I'm looking for votes, we are going to run campaign, you can now count on me and I can count on you.” Brit got the power plant and Sebastián Muñoz took Samuel to Inírida to pick up the power plant.

The fact that until the 1990s, indigenous traditional authorities were named by the *comisario* in charge or by local politicians, as it happened to Samuel, does not mean that this kind of decisions were undisputed by the people that were affected by them. This was the case of the inhabitants of Yuri on *Caño Bocón*, an affluent of the Inírida River. In January of 1980 they wrote a letter to the *comisario* of the moment Guillermo Brito requesting to remove the *capitán* Aurelio Saenz, who was appointed by his predecessor. The *indígenas*, with age of majority [*todos mayores de edad*], as they presented themselves, opened the letter requesting the intervention of the *comisario* in order to solve a “situation that is causing us obvious prejudice regarding the harmony and communitary organization and, even worst, in the moral realm.”<sup>192</sup> The letter explained that after “years of struggle and resignation we have find a more orderly way of living in keeping with our conditions of human persons that respect each other among whom are part of the community in this small town under the orientations of those whom we have considered to deserve the confidence of leading us as our *capitán*.” In this sense, the authors of the letter argued that Aurelio Saenz had lost the right to represent them and the

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<sup>192</sup> Solicitud dirigida a Guillermo Enrique Brito Garrido, Comisario Especial del Guainía. Inírida, Enero 29 de 1980. Archivo de la Gobernación del Guainía.

confidence they had given to him, due to his “wrong procedures and for not fulfilling completely the duties towards our community.” At the end of the letter, the natives said that:

Wanting to be fair [*justos*], and conscious of the great responsibility that entails to reject among us, the natives, someone who pretends to represent us with no dignity, we appeal to the “highest authority” that rules us who is the *señor Comisario*, we strongly request to take the necessary measures for the actual *Capitán* be changed and replaced by the *compañero* Mauricio Parada, who due to the respect and confidence he has among us we have decided to chose him unanimously to represent us.<sup>193</sup>

This letter is crucial for two reasons. First, it questions that idea that *capitanes* could be arbitrarily named by the *comisarios* according to their own criteria. While the natives recognize the *comisario* as the “highest authority” that rules them -which was in turn named by the president-, they also show a particular understanding of criteria involved in choosing someone as *capitán*. To some extent, the letter anticipates ideas of indigenous self-government and autonomy that would become popular during the 1990s.<sup>194</sup> Second, this petition and the way the argument is laid out, shows a clear intersection between religious (i.e. Christian) and political notions of community. In fact, when the authors of the letter refer to the “years of struggle and resignation” that took them to find a “more orderly way of living” based on the mutual respect of members of the community they might be talking about the process of evangelical conversion. However, in the letter signed by more than 25 persons it is clear that the argument for removing

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Since 1986 the popular election of majors was established and with the new Political Constitution of 1991 the popular election of governors was also approved. The new Political Constitution also changed the political and administrative status of provinces that were considered until then *intendencias* and *comisarias*. Since 1991 all of the *intendencias* and *comisarias* (there were 9 of them and 6 in the Amazon region including Guainía) were upgraded to *departamentos*, which was the status of the rest of the provinces in the country located mainly on the Andean, the Pacific and Caribbean region. Before 1991, the president in office appointed from Bogotá *comisarios*, *intendentes* and *gobernadores* [governors], most of the people chosen were personal acquaintances or members of the same political party. In the case of the Amazon region, most of *comisarios* appointed were not from the region and this lead to an indirect form of rule by which politicians in Bogotá tried to establish some kind of control over peripheral and marginal regions of the country.

the *capitán* is both a moral one (he is causing “moral prejudice”) and a political one (the *capitán* affects “communitary organization,” does not “fulfill his duties towards the community” and therefore has lost the right to represent them before the State). This shows that emergent criteria that started to shape indigenous leadership after the 1960s (such as bilingualism, knowledge of the “community,” of its rights and duties) were not sufficient by themselves to define who could become an indigenous leader. According to the petition, moral behavior and status could be equally important for becoming a legitimate indigenous leader. These examples show how indigenous forms of authority and leadership were mediated, negotiated and transformed through interactions with state agents and local politicians.

### **“Política Amazónica” and GAIA Amazonas**

During the 1980s and 1990s radical changes took place in the legal, political and symbolic relationships between indigenous peoples and the Colombian state. After decades of assimilationist policies, and violent confrontations between indigenous movements and the state (mostly in the Andean region), the liberal president Virgilio Barco (1986-1990) promoted during his government what was called *Política Amazónica*. On April 23 of 1988, president Barco handed over publicly to several Amazonian indigenous communities the control and possession of the *Predio Putumayo*, a huge extension of land comprising more than 6 million hectares. Barco gave a public speech that day in a place called La Chorrera in the province of Amazonas (close to the border with Perú) in front of different national and indigenous authorities. Barco opened his speech in Witoto language, saying: “I bring you my greetings. I come to give you a piece of good news, a word of truth: at last your land is yours” (Barco 1990:18). Afterwards, and without any details, Barco alluded in Spanish to how the “history of the *Predio Putumayo* is the history of the country, intimately linked to Colombo-Peruvian

relations and especially relevant to the frontier question” (Barco 1990:18).<sup>195</sup> Barco’s main announcement in his speech was that the “Colombian State has formally recognized the indigenous peoples the character of owners, under the structure of the reservations, of the Putumayo Property” (Barco 1990:18). The formal recognition of land ownership to indigenous peoples in Amazonia made by the national government was based on the idea that “indigenous groups have conserved it [*Predio Putumayo*], using their very particular ancestral wisdom concerning the management of nature, during all the years of its existence; even when their lineage has been looked down on and with a decrease in their numbers” (Barco 1990: 18). In this sense, the underlying premise of *Política Amazónica* was that Amazonian indigenous

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<sup>195</sup> The history of the Putumayo Property is narrated in the resolution through which the indigenous reservation is constituted. The story goes back to 1899, when the Arana brothers (owners of the well known Arana House) made incursions into the upper Putumayo River expanding the rubber industry they had started in the Peruvian Amazon. In 1900 Julio César Arana affiliates with Colombian *caucheros* [rubber barons] and in 1904 he establishes in La Chorrera the main offices of all the rubber extraction that was taking place on the Igaraparaná River. The Peruvian government recognized to the Arana brothers over a huge extension of land that included the Putumayo Property. Between 1932 and 1933 a short war took place between Colombia and Peru, after 300 armed peruvians took over the Amazon city of Leticia as a reaction to the frontier Treaty Lozano-Salomón originally signed in 1922 between Colombia and Peru. This treaty gave sovereignty to Colombia over a portion of land north of the Amazon River that some Peruvians considered being part of the province of Loreto. The war did not lasted more than 3 months and Colombia won it, after Peru withdrew its military forces from the region. The end of the war and the victory of Colombia brought under the sovereignty of the Colombian state the Putumayo Property. However, the full transaction of the ownership of the Putumayo Property to the Colombian state lasted more than 50 years. According to the resolution: “in development and fulfillment of the Treaty on Limits and Free Navigation, and after the war in 1932, the Colombian government authorized the National Mortgage Bank to purchase from the Arana family all the rights which it had acquired according to Peruvian Legislation over the Putumayo Property” (INCORA 1988). In May of 1939 in a notary in Lima the “price of the property was agreed upon and [...] one fifth of the value was paid off,” in 1954 the Colombian government “commissioned the *Caja Agraria* [Agrarian Bank] to liquidate the National Mortgage Bak,” and in 1964 the cessionary of the Arana “ratified the sale previously made and transferred ownership to the *Caja Agraria*, which paid the sum owed to the Arana [family]” (INCORA 1988). In 1980, the property rights over the Putumayo Property were finally settled and the *Caja de Crédito Agrario, Industrial y Minero* [Bank of Agrarian, Industrial and Mining Credit] paid to the National Mortgage Bank the sum of US\$40,000.



peoples were the “best environmental conservationists,” as it said in an official resolution of a reservation given to Curripaco communities of the Lower Guainía River in September of 1989. *Política Amazónica* was also predicated upon the assumption of a strong relationship between the defense of indigenous rights and the conservation of areas with concentrated biodiversity such as the Amazon basin. The idea that natural resources and indigenous peoples could be protected creating *resguardos* meant a significant break with the way in which this same institution was used by the state during the Colonial and modern period (See Chapter 1).

Two years after *Predio Putumayo* was created, president Barco gave a speech to the GAIA Foundation at the Royal Botanic Kew Gardens in London. In this speech, Barco confirmed the main premise of the *Política Amazónica* when he argued that in the Amazon basin: “The forest and the indigenous inhabitants constitute a biotic-cultural structure of marvelously subtle integration. The work of centuries. The traditional forms of life matches nature’s” (Barco 1990:84). In order to substantiate his argument, Barco said that in the same place where he was giving his speech the Prince of Wales referred to native as “accomplished environmental scientists” (Barco 1990: 184). Referring specifically to “cultures of the Colombian Amazon,” Barco pointed out that “Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff showed fifteen years ago how the cosmology, mythology and ritual of the distinct groups show a precise ecological vision which expresses itself an equilibrium between their necessities and the capacity of their natural surroundings” (Barco 1990: 184-185).<sup>196</sup> These principles and ideas were the ones that guided

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<sup>196</sup> Reichel-Dolmatoff published in 1976 in the prestigious English journal *Man* his famous essay *Cosmology as Ecological Analysis: A view from the Rain Forest* about the Desana from the Vaupés region. The essay was based on the Huxley Memorial Lecture that Reichel-Dolmatoff had given at the Royal Anthropological Institute one year before it was published. In the essay, Reichel-Dolmatoff used a cultural ecological framework in order to “trace some connexions that exist between the cosmological concepts of these Indians, and the realities of adaptation to a given physical environment” (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1976:308). In his analysis,

the Colombian government, according to Barco, in creating the “World’s largest Indian reservation.” If the final aim was to preserve and protect the tropical rainforests against increasing deforestation and colonization, then the “knowledge, social structures and modes of life the Indian communities, in whose hands one of the country’s greatest resources has been placed, are the best guarantee of the preservation of that resource” (Barco 1990:185).

Despite, the fact that president Barco argued in the prologue to the book where *Política Amazónica* was published, that the new policy with regard to the “Amazon jungle” was designed “without international pressures,” the broader global context in which this policy was formulated cannot be ignored and should be included into any account of the new government policies towards indigenous peoples in Amazonia. In the midst of the ecological crisis, growing ecological awareness and environmental activism, the Amazon Rain Forest came to be known during the 1980s as the “Lungs of the World.” American anthropologists Beth Conklin and Laura Graham show that throughout the 1980s “media reporting on global warming, deforestation, declining biodiversity, and the extinction of species brought local Amazonian conflicts over natural resources to the attention of a broad international audience” (Conklin and Graham 1995:695). In this context, the idea of native Amazonians as “accomplished environmental scientists” or “ecological natives” suited perfectly the discourse and political agenda of environmentalists (Ulloa 2010, Del Cairo 2011). In the case of Brazil, for instance, “Indians and environmentalists discovered common cause in opposing ecologically destructive dams, roads, mines and colonization schemes” (Conklin and Graham 1995:695). This

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Reichel-Dolmatoff suggested that “cosmological prescriptions determine a ‘*should be*’ imperative for every individual, preventing him or her from altering the natural order of things; this order is characterized by maintaining equilibrium between the different material and spiritual components of the system” (Del Cairo 2011: 171; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1976).

convergence or equivalence between environmental practices and those of Amazonian indigenous peoples produces what Conklin and Graham call a “shifting middle ground” understood as a “political space, an arena of intercultural communication, exchange, and joint political action” (Conklin and Graham 1995:696). In the rest of the chapter, I analyze how that “shifting middle ground” came to be in Northwest Amazonia, looking closely at the interactions, intersections, and conflicts among NGOs, indigenous leaders or organizations and the state. One of the main environmental NGOs that has been working in Northwest Amazonia for more than 2 decades is GAIA Amazonas, which was founded in 1990 by Martin Von Hildebrand, an anthropologist of Irish and German descent, who was born in New York and later became a Colombian citizen.<sup>197</sup> Von Hildebrand was the Head of Indigenous Affairs during Barco’s presidency (1986-1990), helped in the design of *Política Amazónica* and “played a central role as Colombian representative in the negotiation of the Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ILO Convention 169), and in defining indigenous rights that were later recognized in the 1991 Political Constitution”.<sup>198</sup>

Von Hildebrand was part of the Colombian delegation that travelled to Geneva in 1988 as part of the ILO meetings to revise the ILO C 107 of 1957 (Del Cairo 2011: 186). The meetings and revisions in Geneva of C 107 lead to the draft of a new convention known as ILO C 169

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<sup>197</sup> In an interview that Von Hildebrand gave when he won the Skoll Award for Social Entrepreneurship in 2009, he narrated a personal story of how he ended up fighting for indigenous land and rights: “back in the 1970s, I went into the Amazon for the first time, I went in as an anthropologist, as someone that wanted to learn from the Indian, I travelled for about 4 months into the forest, and when I came to the people I was looking for, I wanted to meet, they were all working in a rubber camp, and they were being exploited by rubber tappers. We talked about this, and I asked one fellow “what was he doing there?” And he said he was working to pay for a sawing machine, a pedal sewing machine that he had got for his wife, and I said “how long have you’ve been working for this? He said 35 years, and that impressed me and since that day I said “I am going to accompany these people until they leave behind their debts, become autonomous and manage their own land and culture.”

<sup>198</sup> On line:<http://www.gaiaamazonas.org/es/el-origen-de-gaia>

(Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention) that was approved in a general assembly of ILO in June of 1989. The new convention left behind the assimilationist character of C 107 of 1957 and applied to “tribal peoples in independent countries whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community” (ILO 1989). By adopting the term “peoples” to refer to indigenous populations, the C 169 recognized to indigenous peoples a “set of specific cultural and territorial rights, the obligation to be consulted in regards to any public policy that could affect them, the right to define by themselves specific forms of development in a protected environment and the obligation of the tribunals to take into consideration “customary law” regarding the issues affecting them” (Gros 2000:124). Two years later, in March of 1991, the National Congress approved the C 169 of ILO. That same year, a new Political Constitution was drafted and approved, giving special rights to recognized ethnic and indigenous groups. One of the articles of the new Political Constitution declared that the “State recognizes and protects the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Colombian nation” (CP 1991). This article has been interpreted as the official recognition of the “pluri-ethnic” and “multicultural” essence of the nation, signaling a radical turn from the ways in which the nation was imagined as culturally homogenous since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>199</sup>

Among the most important rights given to indigenous peoples was the right to self-government through the colonial institution known as *cabildo* or any other “ authority of their own” (Gros 2000). The right of indigenous peoples to self-government was addressed in Articles 246 and 330. Chapter 5 of the Political Constitution regarding “special jurisdictions” opens up with Article 246: “authorities of indigenous peoples may exercise jurisdictional

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<sup>199</sup>More critical analysis show how the new Political Constitution became a mechanism for regulating social plurality, as well as for containing ethnic and cultural difference (Bocarejo 2008, Del Cairo 2011, Bocarejo y Restrepo 2011).

functions within their territorial scope, in conformity with their own norms and procedures, as long as they are not against the Constitution and the laws of the Republic” (CP 1991). Article 330 stated “indigenous territories will be governed by councils conformed and ruled according to the uses and customs of its communities” (CP 1991). Among the functions the new Constitution established for indigenous authorities were: “design the policies, plans, and programs of economic and social development within their territory, in harmony in the National Plan of Development,” “ensure the conservation of natural resources” and “collaborate with the maintenance of public order within their territory according to the instructions and disposition of the National Government” (CP 1991). The new Constitution also approved two permanent seats in the senate for indigenous peoples that were elected under a “special constituency.” In addition, the new Constitution established the popular election of governors (5 years after the popular election of mayors was approved in 1986), and the previous *intendencias* and *comisarias* (such as Guainía) were erected to the category of *departamentos* ruled by governors (as the rest of the provinces of the country), with the aim of promoting administrative decentralization and the modernization of the state, following regional demands of democratization and territorial autonomy. These changes in the national Political Constitution had direct effects on local and regional governability, as well as on regional electoral politics. Emerging elites who had the money and political machinery were able to access public office and have a privileged position within the regional state. At the same time, indigenous political organizations had to make alliances with national political parties that were constituted after 1991 with an indigenous agenda. Indigenous voters were also caught up in clientelistic networks that now were in charge of gaining support for the election of persons in local and regional public office.

In this sense, while the new Constitution recognized indigenous authorities and “traditional” forms of government as legitimate within their territories (i.e. *resguardos*), the state simultaneously restricted this autonomy to national laws, interests and policies. As it is clear from the articles and decrees that derive from the new legislation, *resguardos* and the indigenous authorities that were supposed to rule within them were not outside of the state, but were conceived as an extension of the rule of the state through other means and through the language of multiculturalism. Several authors have pointed out that the recognition of ethnic rights, such as territory and autonomy, cannot be automatically associated with a retreat of state authority. French sociologist Christian Gros argues that through the discourse of recognition of cultural diversity and traditional forms of government, the “state has never been so present in the internal affairs of the communities as it is now” (Gross 2000:105). In fact, the recognition of indigenous authorities becomes a necessity for “public action,” while the latter are “conducted by the State to become local agents of development” (Gross 2000:125). In the case of Amazonia, Carlos del Cairo shows how “*resguardos* created in peripheral areas of the country became territorial spheres of governance, and the *cabildos*, or authoritative bodies that oversaw the *resguardos*, acted as local guarantors of a new territorial management rhetoric within the framework of environmentalism” (Del Cairo 2011:192). In fact, most of the *reguardos* and natural reserves that were established throughout the 1980s and 1990s in Amazonia overlap with biodiversity hotspots and geostrategic regions that were, some of them still are, under control of F.A.R.C. and/or paramilitary groups.

In this context, GAIA emerges as a private environmental organization in the 1990s that works “within the framework of the new indigenous *resguardos* and the new Constitution,” claiming to “accompany indigenous people in the practical use and implementation of their

rights.”<sup>200</sup> Specifically, GAIA is concerned with promoting the “autonomous exercising of indigenous self-governance” through the creation of Associations of Traditional Indigenous Authorities (AATIs), that were officially “recognized” by the state in 1988 through the decree 1088. It is worth recalling here that the new Political Constitution and the reforms it brought were made in the context of neoliberal economic and social reforms that were implemented throughout the continent during the 1990s. While in some cases, neoliberalism led to the idea that civil society should become the “powerhouse of oppositional politics and social transformation” (Harvey 2007:78), in the case of implementing multicultural rights in Northwest Amazonia there seems to be no opposition between state policies and the agenda of environmental NGOs, such as GAIA Amazonas. Instead, the relationship between GAIA and the central state seems to be one of complementarity, although this might change on a local scale when conflicts arise with the regional state. However, it is not a mere coincidence that *Política Amazónica* was launched on the same year (1988) on which the decree 1088 (that gave legal birth to AATIs) was approved. In this regard, the work of Martín Von Hildebrand, leading the promulgation of *Política Amazónica* at the ministry of interior and simultaneously creating one of the most powerful environmental NGOs in Amazonia, should not be ignored. Mobilizing institutional and juridical discourses, Von Hildebrand was able to craft a new space of governmentality in which GAIA ended up mediating the access of indigenous communities to the ethnic rights that were guaranteed in the Political Constitution of 1991. However, parallel to the political and cultural projects of GAIA in the region, there were also local attempts at consolidating zonal and regional indigenous political organizations whose main agenda was also to make effective the indigenous rights approved in the new Political Constitution.

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<sup>200</sup> On line:<http://www.gaiaamazonas.org/es/el-origen-de-gaia>

Conflicts between indigenous organizations promoted by GAIA (i.e. AATIs) and local indigenous political organizations were common throughout the last decade, as well as conflicts between AATIs and state institutions. In this section, I look at the conflicts that took place among NGOs, indigenous organizations and leaders, and regional state authorities during the last decade. While most analysis focus on the alliances between environmental NGOs and indigenous organizations, I will look at the conflicts between different organizations and institutions that claim to defend indigenous rights and represent the interests of indigenous people in Guainía. Mediation here becomes a complex issue as the state, through legislation and policies, mediates and enables the relationships between natives and NGOs, while environmental NGOs such as GAIA also ends up mediating the relationship between indigenous communities and the state, as well as the access of these communities to the rights recognized to them in the Political Constitution of 1991.

### **Indigenous Organizations, NGOs and the Regional State**

During the early 1980s the first regional indigenous and pan-ethnic political organization was created in Guainía under the influence of broader indigenous organizations and movements. Some indigenous leaders from Guainía attended national meetings that led to the organization of the first National Congress of Indigenous Peoples in 1982. The congress took place in Bosa, a poor neighborhood in the outskirts of Bogotá and was attended by several indigenous leaders from different organization across the country. During this congress was founded ONIC (Indigenous National Organization of Colombia), the first indigenous organization that pretended to defend and represent on a national scale the interests of indigenous communities. ONIC defined a national agenda based on the defense of indigenous autonomy and the right to the collective ownership of *resguardos* (Laurent 2005:75). Among the lines of action defined by



the first National Congress of Indigenous Peoples was to consolidate the existing regional indigenous councils or create new ones where they did not exist.

The Regional Indigenous Council of Guainía (CRIGUA) was established in 1982, following the CRIC model. In May of 2005, as part of a research project with a colleague of mine about indigenous political organizations, we met several leaders that were part of the board of directors of CRIGUA. Fredy Castro, a Puinave leader, who is the actual president of OPIAC and was in 2005 a member of the board of directors of CRIGUA, told us that the organization was created in order to achieve the legal recognition of territories traditionally occupied by them in the form of *resguardos*. According to its statutes, the main objective of CRIGUA is to “fight for the rights and interests of the indigenous peoples of Guainía, for their unity, territory, culture and autonomy” (ASOCRIGUA 2004:2). Claims to unity, territory, culture and autonomy were the same that CRIC promoted first during the 1970 and ONIC later during the 1980s (Del Cairo 2011: 201). Between 1986 and 1989 more than 21 *resguardos* were constituted in Guainía, although this “political achievement,” as Cabría called it, cannot be attributed solely to the political work of CRIGUA and its leaders. Only one of the legal resolutions through which *resguardos* were constituted between 1986 and 1989 refers to CRIGUA. The resolution that constituted the *resguardo* of the lower Guainía River in 1989, opened up with the following paragraph: “Considering: that in the administrative procedures contained in the expedient. No. 41.650 there are requests from the Regional Indigenous Organization, CRIGUA, the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia, ONIC, the Division of Indigenous Affairs of the Ministry of Government and from the Curripaco indigenous communities of (...).” A long list of more than 12 indigenous communities followed, all of them located on the lower Guainía River and Upper Rio Negro. Other resolutions did not

made references to CRIGUA, but they did mention how “requests for legalizing ancestral territories in the form of *resguardos*” were submitted to INCORA by “*cabildos* and members of indigenous communities” in coordination with the Division of Indigenous Affairs from the Ministry of Government, which had a local office in Inírida during the 1980s and part of the 1990s. In this sense, there seemed to be an alignment and convergence between the interests of indigenous organizations, communities, NGOs and institutions of the state. This convergence seemed to be confirmed by the pronouncement of the Division of Indigenous Affairs made in September of 1989 when a *resguardo* was given to 10 Curripaco communities in the Upper Guainía River,

Finally, both you and us should have clear that the legal recognition of the right to property is just the first step in the solution of the problem of ethnic minorities in the country. From now on, we should think, as governmental institution that we are, in the realization of programs with these populations that involve the integral development of them, with no abuse [*maltrato*] or contempt for their cultures.

At the same time as local indigenous political organizations and communities were requesting and obtaining recognition of their traditional territories in the form of *resguardos*, during the early 1990s NGOs started to develop projects in Northwest Amazonia. Specifically, an alliance or program known as COAMA (Amazonian Consolidation) started to operate in Northwest Amazonia since 1990 with the aim of “accompanying indigenous peoples in the recuperation of the full management of their territories and the conservations of their habitat.” COAMA was an initiative of Fundación Etnollano, another Colombian NGO that works in the region and the Orinoco basin, and GAIA Amazonas. Among the actual members of COAMA is the GAIA Foundation from England and other allies including the Socio Environmental Institute (ISA) from Brazil, the Wataniba Foundation from Venezuela and several “indigenous organizations allies” that include several of the AATIs that were created under the influence of GAIA in the

region. Most of the financial resources that COAMA and GAIA obtain for their programs and projects come from the European Commission and other countries such as Austria, Denmark, Netherlands and Sweden. One of the first activities that COAMA did in the region in 1990 was a “Diagnosis of the Health and Education Policies and Programs for Indigenous Population in Eastern Amazonia” (COAMA 1992:5). This diagnosis was followed by “activities” with indigenous communities, leaders and representatives, about the “obstacles confronted in order to achieve an autonomous management of their *resguardos* and a sustainable development of the environment” (COAMA 1992:5). The document that was produced as a result of the diagnosis was focused on what “communities and institutions identified as problematic and priority,” which was “the role to be played by [health] promoters and teachers in the strengthening of the identity and autonomy of indigenous communities” (COAMA 1992:5). In this sense, there seems to be some kind of continuity between state policies and practices implemented in the region during the 1970 (explored in the first section of this chapter) and those that COAMA and GAIA started to implement in the region since the 1990s. In both cases, there is an attempt to transform indigenous societies through interventions in the field of health and education, which include the training of health promoters and teachers for specific purposes. While in the 1970s the project was to incorporate native populations into the body politic through specific practices that included bilingual education and ideas about community development and leadership; in the 1990s, the work of NGOs (such as GAIA) focused on promoting specific ethnic rights such as autonomy, self-government and the constitution of *resguardos* through interventions in pedagogical practices and political organizing. GAIA enacted in practice a particular form of governmentality by which indigenous leaders and

communities were “governed” through the process of teaching them how to “govern themselves” or how to exercise “self-government” in the context of a new political and legal framework.

As part of the COAMA program, since 1991 GAIA supported the organization of “communitary schools” in Guainía as an “own alternative of the communities that were not within the coverage of the Secretary of Education” (Proyecto Etnoeducativo, n.d.). These communitary schools worked with teachers elected by the communities and were initially payed with funds of the communities and the program of literacy for adults of the national ministry of education. During 1992 the schools were sustained with “contributions” of the community and the program of micro projects of GAIA Foundation. From 1993 to 1996, the schools were supported by DANIDA, the Danish agency for development. The initial work of GAIA was directed towards the use of Curripaco in schools and included the elaboration of “bilingual materials for different areas of study in order to start-up a process of construction of an intercultural curricula” (Proyecto Etnoeducativo, n.d.). The materials produced included a revised version of the Curripaco alphabet that was made by Sophie Muller as part of the translations of the New Testament. The new Curripaco alphabet was based on research done by anthropologists and was used for the elaboration of primers for teaching kids in early ages how to read and write in Curripaco. Other materials produced included books about the plant formations of Guainía and the native taxonomies associated to them, as well as books about Curripaco mythology. This later text was actually entitled “Natural Sciences in Curripaco Mythology” it contained a thematic index that corresponded to different elements of nature. The text intended to show the “close relationship between knowledge, ethics and cosmology,” whereas the “intervention of a natural being in a mythological text is explained both by its taxonomical or behavioral characteristics, and by its role in the cosmological order and in the

establishment of norms and rules of management [of resources]” (Proyecto Etnoeducativo, n.d.). The production of textbooks was accompanied of pedagogical reflections about the “development of oral processes in the mother tongue.” Among the pedagogical strategies recommended for teachers were included the “interpretation of sounds from nature: collect sounds [*cantos*] of animals, onomatopoeic sounds, and imitate them. Recognize the cultural meaning of the voices of some animals” (Proyecto Etnoeducativo, n.d.). All of these pedagogical strategies, reveals how the idea of native Amazonians as “ecological natives” was produced and reproduced at different levels. While the curriculum designed by GAIA claimed to be “intercultural,” it seems clear that the orientation of “communitary schools” was more suited to what anthropologists at GAIA considered what a native Amazonian should be, very close to what Alcida Ramos calls a hyperreal Indian (Ramos, 1998). The pedagogical texts designed by GAIA tend to ignore systematically the fact that most of the indigenous communities they were planning to work with were evangelical.

At an organizational level, GAIA promoted in 1992 the creation of AMCURIG (Association of Curripaco Teachers from the Guainía River) in order to “overcome the resistance of the regional administration that saw in communitary schools a threat to its programs” (Proyecto Etnoeducativo, n.d.). A Curripaco indigenous leader, told me that one of the reasons AMCURIG was created was to request the inclusion of the teachers of communitary schools in the payroll of the secretary of education, something that was later achieved. Between 1995 and 1998, through an agreement established between AMCURIG, the Pilot Experimental Center of Guainía and the Fundación Etnollano (member of COAMA) a program of professionalization of

teachers was developed and all the teachers of communitary schools acquired the title of “high school in pedagogy” [*bachiller pedagógico*].<sup>201</sup>

Some of the projects developed by GAIA established a direct correlation between promoting educational projects, self-government and the preservation of culture within indigenous communities in Amazonia. One of the overall objectives of an educational project designed in March of 1996 for international cooperation (the amount requested was of \$620,623 euros) was to,

Strengthen the organizational capacity of the Curripaco and Piapoco peoples and to develop new legal and institutional frameworks for state education, designing and implementing an intercultural educational program with the participation of the indigenous communities and based on the traditional values and cultural standards of relationships with the environment (Ortiz 1996).

In this sense, anthropologists at GAIA assumed that “strengthening the organizational capacity of the Curripaco and Piapoco went through the implementation of what they called an “intercultural education program” with the participation of traditional authorities and indigenous teachers. This program was based on “traditional language, culture, values and patterns in relation to the environment” (Ortiz 1996:1). The project was presented as furthering the spirit of the new Political Constitution, deploying a particular interpretation of the legal text: “according to the laws and the Constitution, the State must progressively delegate to the indigenous communities the full financial and pedagogic administration of education” (Ortiz 1996:1). In this context, GAIA presented itself as preparing indigenous communities for exercising the new

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<sup>201</sup> The Pilot Experimental Center of Guainía was established in 1988 as an attempt to work on the “qualitative improvement of education of this remote region.” Among the goals traced by the Experimental Center for regional education were: expand the coverage of the services of supervision, orientation or advice of the programs attended by the Center in Guainía; promote ethno-education through participatory research; through the New School Program and ethno-education undertake the program of recuperation and promotion of regional culture through the active participation of the magisterium and the integration of communities to the educative process.

rights and capacities the State had assigned to them in the new Political Constitution: “as currently the indigenous groups do not have the technical and organizational capability of assuming this administration, the project seeks to provide the communities with the institutional capacity to manage their educational programs” (Ortiz 1996:1). The “preparation” of indigenous communities for achieving “technical and organizational capability” included pedagogic, legal and administrative training for indigenous leaders and teachers. This paradoxical scenario, where indigenous communities had to be prepared and trained in legal and administrative issues in order to be able to fully exercise “their” new rights, is what makes “legitimate” and necessary the work of NGOs among specific indigenous groups. Among the results expected from the project was the “concrete management by the indigenous peoples of the relationship between themselves and the national society based on knowledge of the Constitution and the laws” (Ortiz 1996:3). GAIA saw itself as facilitating a new relationship between Amazonian indigenous communities and national society. Despite the fact that GAIA presents itself as solely accompanying indigenous political and pedagogical processes, evidence shows that the kind of mediation that GAIA developed between indigenous communities and the state is far more complicated. Even if there seemed to be an initial convergence between the agendas of indigenous organizations, GAIA and the state; the idea of giving to indigenous communities “the full financial and pedagogic administration of education,” ended up producing confrontations between indigenous leaders and communities, between GAIA and indigenous organizations, and between GAIA and regional state authorities.

While GAIA was developing cultural and political projects in Northwest Amazonia, different zonal indigenous organizations were created along the different rivers. Some of these organizations drew on previous organizational efforts, as was the case of ODAINGUA

(Organization of Indigenous Authorities of the Guaviare River), which was created in the 1990s, after UNIGUVI (see first section of this chapter) was divided into smaller organizations following the new jurisdiction entailed in the creation of CRIGUA. Other organizations included OIRCI (Indigenous Organization of the Cuyari and Isana Rivers), OPDEGUA (Organization of the Punave People of Guainía), OZIGUVI (Zonal Indigenous Organizations of the Upper Guaviare and Vichada) and OZIVIG (Indigenous Zonal Organization of Vichada, Guainía and Lower Guaviare). In the case of the Guainía River, Curripaco leaders and teachers that had participated in the organizational process of the Curripaco Teachers Association (AMCURIG), created in 1995 the Association of Curripaco Indigenous Authorities of the Guainía River (AICURIGUA). Jairo Cárdenas, a young Curripaco leader, who entered AICURIGUA when he was 16 in 1996 (one year after it was created), told me in December of 2009, that one of the main objectives in the creation of AICURIGUA was to “organize the social, politic and economic realms, and everything related to indigenous rights.” This leader emphasized that AICURIGUA was the second indigenous zonal organization established in the region, after the creation of CRIGUA in 1982. Between 1995 and 1996, AICURIGUA participated in a project developed by GAIA with the support of the Danish agency for development, about the translation of the new Political Constitution into Curripaco. In 1998, leaders of AICURIGUA participated in one of the pilot programs of auto-diagnosis of 6 indigenous groups funded by the Ministry of Education and coordinated by ONIC. Two years later, ONIC with the support of two NGOs (*Almáciga* and *WATU Acción Indígena*) presented a proposal to the Spanish Agency of International Cooperation and received funding for developing a life plan of the Curripaco and Yeral people between 2001 and 2002. The result of this project was a book published in 2002 entitled *Plan de Vida Curripaco y Yeral* (Curripaco



and Yeral Life Plan). The book included 5 chapters about the following topics: identity, politics, autonomy, organization, and how to make real the life plan. The life plan traces a direct connection between contemporary indigenous political organizations and evangelical churches, the later conceived as an antecedent of the former.

When I visited Guainía for the first time in 2005, conflicts and tensions between indigenous political organizations (such as AICURIGUA and CRIGUA) and GAIA or the AATIs they had sponsored and promoted were already taking place. Specifically, the hegemony that AICURIGUA had achieved as the main political organization of the Curripaco people, representing more than 41 indigenous communities localized on the Guainía River, was challenged by the project of creating 3 AATIs that corresponded to the 3 *resguardos* of the Guainía River (respectively located on the lower, middle and upper part of the river). In August of 2009, I had the chance to meet Carlos Casas, one of the Curripaco leaders that participated actively in the creation of the AATIs, he worked with GAIA and was by then the legal representative of the 2 associations of indigenous traditional authorities that were created on the Guainía River. In a conversation we had, Carlos told me that AATIs began with a decree, the decree 1088 of 1993. In fact, this decree, issued by the president in June of 1993, “regulates the creation of the associations of *cabildos* and/or Indigenous Traditional Authorities.” Carlos referred specifically to 2 reasons that led them to create Associations of Indigenous Traditional Authorities on the Guainía River in 2005. First, Carlos said they saw how the government was withering away from the river, referring to how education provided by the regional government had become worst during those years. Besides stories of sexual abuse, I heard in the field several stories about irregularities that happened in the boarding schools in charge of the regional government. The most concerning irregularities included delays in the academic

calendar, because the food or the teachers came late. Ironically, in Guainía was elected in 2003 the second indigenous governor of the country, with the support of CRIGUA and an indigenous political party of national scope called AICO (Indigenous Authorities of Colombia). The governor was dismissed of his office in 2006 for having violated the ineligibility compliance regime. While Carlos might be right in some of the critiques he had regarding the flaws of the education system in Guainía, alternative the came up with, the so-called “communitary” or “traditional schools”, brought a new set of problems that I will address later. According to Carlos, the second reason for which the AATIs were created was related to the new legal framework that existed since 1991 for indigenous peoples, specifically new rights that recognized how indigenous peoples can “organize themselves, manage and have their own self-government in their region.” In this context, the law emerges as a device that articulates and mediates indigenous initiatives of political organization, as well as regulates the relationship of indigenous organizations with the state and the ways in which indigenous autonomy should work. Nonetheless, the implementation of these laws and decrees brought conflicts among indigenous organizations and the regional government, as well as further conflicts between the AATIs and AICURIGUA (both of these organizations claimed to fight for the rights and represent the interests of the Curripaco communities that lived on the Guainía River).

Carlos told me about the problems or “clashes” they had with the regional government, once they expressed publicly their interest in providing educational services within their communities. Carlos was clear in saying that indigenous organizations (specifically AATIs) were not convenient for the regional government, because they have autonomy to administrate their “own” resources, meaning the resources that were assigned by the ministry of education to the regional government for the education of each kid in the region. In 2005 Carlos, as legal representative

of the 2 AATIs that were legally constituted, started to claim their right to administer the resources of education within their own communities. That same year both AATIs obtained “juridical personality” before the former Ministry of Interior and Justice. Given the initial refusal of the regional government, Carlos had to use all kind of available legal resources including lawsuits and tutelary actions. Carlos told me how “I used to live more in Bogotá than here, filing, replying, that’s it, for 3 years! Can you imagine! Giving the fight, until November of 2008, in November we won the sentence before the court 10<sup>th</sup> of Bogotá, it favored us. With that court sentence we started to claim the education, what belongs to the communities.” When I asked Carlos about the role of GAIA in all the process, he said that GAIA “gave us advice in the process, but the association as such, does not have a document signed or an agreement with the foundation.” However, Carlos recognized that GAIA “funded us for all the process we had, we are also grateful for that, because they supported us economically in order to negotiate [*gestionar*] this.” In fact, GAIA has in its team anthropologists as well as lawyers who are experts in indigenous legislation. The active role of GAIA in this process providing economic and technical support shows how the relationship between indigenous organizations and the state was also mediated by NGOs in ambiguous and unexpected ways. Paradoxically, the ideas of indigenous self-government promoted by GAIA entailed a separation of indigenous communities from the state, but the economic and political viability of these initiatives also depended on fiscal resources and legislation provided by the state in order to work out.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> In December of 2009, a young Curripaco leader that had worked with AICURIGUA, told me how some of the indigenous communities reached the point of demanding an absolute independence in all issues (health, education, etc) from the state: “Everybody knows this. They reached the point, I don’t know how much GAIA told them about it, I think they understood it this way: they had to reach independence from the government, let’s say, from the state, that they could, that stick in their heads, that they could handle everything. They understood they could not know anything about the regional government. There was a time when they said,

From the side of the regional government the constitution of AATIs on the Guainía River was seen as a threat to the control they had historically over the resources assigned by the central government for the schools of the Guainía River. In a similar way, the constitution of AATIs in 2005 was seen by other indigenous organizations (such as AICURIGUA and CRIGUA) as a threat to the political capital and representation they had in the region. Most of the regional government officers and indigenous leaders saw the AATIs as a foreign initiative leaded by GAIA. Marco Gutierrez, a young Curripaco leader from San José narrated to me the arrival of GAIA to the region,

At that time they came supposedly to organize the people, the lower part [of the Guanía River] was organized, the upper part and here. They had a lot of strength, a document was even signed, they gathered the people (...) they entered without any permission from AICURIGUA and it seems they came from Venezuela. They came with that story, that they come on the part of the ministry [*ministerio*], that were are going to gather all the *capitanes*, that we have to organize ourselves and we are going to work in this way. And they got like that the *capitanes*, with their eyes closed, with that story, that we are going to administer money, the schools, *capitanes* will administer resources directly. And they gathered us in Puerto Colorado and the document was signed by 22 *capitanes*, supporting GAIA and the juridical personality, to take to the ministry, saying they want the organization, do you understand?

Marco conceives GAIA's work as a clear intrusion in local political process when he insists that members of the staff of GAIA came with the "story" that "we have to organize ourselves," as if there were no previous efforts at political organizing in the region, ignoring for instance the work of AICURIGUA. Marco also seems to entail that the *capitanes* were duped by GAIA, when they signed the document supporting the organization, without knowing to much what was at stake ("with their eyes closed"). When the regional government, according to Marco,

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mostly the ones from Tabaquén: here we don't want to know anything about secretary of education and health. There was a time when they said: no here an [official] commission is not permitted."

came to know what GAIA was doing without any authorization or permission from them, they sent a commission to the region in order to investigate what GAIA was doing and talking about. “There started the fight,” in Marco’s words. The regional government, leaded by Efrén de Jesús Ramírez (the first indigenous governor of the region elected in 2003), convened a meeting with most of the *capitanes* and in the meeting “they explained well [what was supposedly going on], and the *capitanes* started [to say] yes, we are wrong.”<sup>203</sup> In such meeting, some of the Curripaco communities decided to support again the regional government and withdrew from the previous agreement they had signed with GAIA. The fight between the regional government and GAIA continued until all of the Curripaco communities from the Upper Guainía River decided also to renounce to the agreement with GAIA. The minutes of the meeting where this was decided were taken and sent to the regional government. In such minutes, Curripaco leaders from the Upper Guainía River expressed, according to Marco, that they “did not want anything with GAIA and that they would support the regional government either way [*sea como sea*].” Almost

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<sup>203</sup> In the elections of 2003 the indigenous leaders in charge of CRIGUA decided to make an alliance with a national indigenous party called AICO (Indigenous Authorities of Colombia). Initially, this alliance seemed to benefit both parts: CRIGUA provided AICO with the political networks and the mobilization of indigenous constituents in a region where AICO was barely known; and AICO had juridical requirements of a political party and transferred its reputation and political capital to the candidate chose by CRIGUA (Del Cairo 203). The person chosen for candidate of AICO and CRIGUA was Efrén de Jesús Ramírez, a *cabuco* or *mestizo* (his mother was indigenous and his father was *colono*) who had been member of the local council and had worked for state offices in the region. Soon after he took office in January of 2004, some of the leaders from CRIGUA withdrew their political support from Ramírez, given that he was not following the bureaucratic agreements they had made before, nor the political agenda he was supposed to represent. Ramírez was finally removed from office in 2006 for reasons that had not to do directly with his charge, but for having violated the regime of incompatibilities. Local explanations of why Ramírez failed to follow agreements with CRIGUA and his later removal from office, revolved around his ethnic status. On one hand, indigenous leaders argued that Ramírez did not follow the agreements with them because he was a *cabuco* or *mestizo*, Ramírez was seen by indigenous leaders as an opportunist “who had reivindicated his maternal lineage in order to achieve the support of indigenous organizations” (Del Cairo 203). On the other hand, *colonos* saw Ramírez as truly indigenous and his removal from office proved the fact for them that natives were corrupt and unable to handle money and political responsibilities.

simultaneously, some Curripaco communities from the Middle Guainía River also renounced to the agreement with GAIA and only 5 communities from the Middle Guainía kept working with them (all of the Curripaco communities from the Lower Guainía River did not resign the agreement and became part of the AATI called *Wayuri*, while the communities from the Middle Guainía River were organized in the AATI called *Jarami*). Along with these conflicts, according to Jairo Cárdenas, a young Curripaco leader who became president (*capitán mayor*) of AICURIGIGUA in 2006, the “division came and is maintained until today.” Jairo told me this in December of 2009, emphasizing also how “the fight of GAIA up to now has been for the education!” At different moments in my fieldwork the divisions among Curripaco communities and leaders that Jairo told me about, became visible and notable. One could see how the Guainía River was divided along the lines of the communities that worked with GAIA and those who didn’t. Relationships between some of these communities were tense as it happened between San José and Tabaquén, given that some indigenous leaders of Tabaquén developed cultural projects with GAIA, Tabaquén is also member of one of the AATIs of the Guainía River and a “traditional school” was established as part of the educational project promoted by GAIA in the region. Years before the regional government had decided to build one of the biggest boarding schools on the Guainía River in San José. Nonetheless, in Tabaquén there are also people that do not agree with the work of GAIA and, according to Marco, these disagreements have also led to internal conflicts within the communities that work with GAIA.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have described and analyzed how indigeneity was initially mediated in Guainía through official schooling programs and institutions that involved indigenous leaders

and teachers. Despite the fact that official educational programs designed since the 1960s were part of governmental initiatives aimed at “integrating” marginal and indigenous population to the body politic and the national economy, the ways in which this process unfolded on the ground was for more complex than a simple assimilation of these marginal populations. On one hand, bureaucrats showed a growing interest in adapting official programs in education and other fields to the cultural specificities of native Amazonians. On the other hand, white teachers hired by the national government, as well as indigenous leaders and teachers played an active role in appropriating a new language of the state based on specific ideas about community, leadership, rights, the state and, more importantly, indigeneity. The School of Leaders established in 1975 in Laguna Colorada and the 3d Congress of Indígenas organized by members of the School in 1977, became spaces where prospective indigenous leaders could learn what a leader, a community, or an official institution such as INCORA where. The School and the Congress became political spaces where emergent notions of indigeneity were articulated. Specifically, through the 3d Congress of *indígenas*, white teachers and indigenous leaders produced pan-ethnic notions of indigeneity that emphasized union among different ethnic groups, but also the idea that *indígenas* were a collective body (that transcended specific ethnic groups) with needs and rights of their own. One of the first indigenous political organization established in the region (after CRIVA –Indigenous Regional Council of Vaupés- was created in 1973) had the words Indigenous Union in its title and corresponded to emergent forms of political representation articulated around councils that were circumscribed to specific regions (provinces the state had previously created such Guainía).

At the same time, during the 1960s and 1970s, official notions of leadership, community, rights, and the state, were indigenized by white teachers and indigenous leaders in the process

of adapting them to local problems and concerns. For instance, official notions of community as a collective and homogenous entity with rights and needs of its own, and the leader as the person who knows and represents such community before others; were indigenized in order to include other issues such as land and culture. Prospective indigenous leaders were taught that they had a particular relationship with a land and a specific way of thinking that made them different from the white man or a white leader. Indigenous leaders were better suited for representing their own communities given that they “worry more about his indigenous brothers than a white person” and they know better their way of thinking. By 1975 indigenous leaders were already familiar with framing themselves in terms of communities with specific need and rights of their own. Since the early 1960s, the national government promoted the creation of JAC [Boards of Community Action] in most of the rural areas of the country, as way of organizing popular demands, centralizing political representation and domesticating popular politics. Interactions of indigenous leaders and populations with the state were mediated through collective forms of political organization and representation such as the Boards of Community Action. The creation of these Boards entailed that indigenous citizens had to frame their demands in collective terms, but it also implied a formalization of demands through letters and petitions that followed specific protocols and a particular wording. However, through letters and petitions directed to the regional government or even to the president of the republic as it happened in 1974, indigenous leaders and communities were able to make specific claims (to land, for instance, but would also demand through these means material things from the state) before regional authorities and some of the official decisions were contested through collective petitions that written in a formalized and bureaucratic language.



The second part of this chapter explored the political effects in the region of the convergence of public and private interests expressed in the consolidation of *Política Amazónica* that was launched in 1988 by liberal president Virgilio Barco (1986-1990). *Política Amazónica* reproduced and materialized ideas, already circulating in anthropological and ecological discourse, about native Amazonians as “accomplished environmental scientists.” The initiative aimed at recognizing huge portions of land to native Amazonians in the form of *resguardos* [reservations] also produced a strong relationship between the defense of indigenous rights and the conservation of the Amazon basin. In this process, the role of anthropologist Martín Von Hildebrand, first as Head of Indigenous Affairs during Barco’s presidency, designing and implementing *Política Amazónica* and then creating in 1990 one of the most powerful and influential NGOs in the region known as GAIA, was crucial in articulating new spaces of governmentality that entailed new kind of relationships between indigenous communities and the state. The approval of the new Political Constitution in 1991, also instituted ethnic rights (such as self-government and autonomy) that were already insinuated in *Política Amazónica*. In this context, I looked at the local effects of the multicultural reforms and the new ethnic rights that were guaranteed to indigenous groups in the new Political Constitution. NGOs such as GAIA became mediators, through political initiatives that included the conformation of AATIs (Association of Traditional Indigenous Authorities), in the access of indigenous communities to the new set of ethnic rights. Despite the initial convergence between the agendas of indigenous political organizations, GAIA and the state, the political and cultural initiatives of GAIA produced frictions and confrontations between indigenous communities and the regional state, and between GAIA and indigenous political organizations. These conflicts raised questions about the articulations between “civil society” and the state, but also about the limits of the new

ethnic rights guaranteed to indigenous peoples in the Political Constitution of 1991. During the 1980s, indigenous political leaders created different indigenous organizations based on ethnic reivindications. Some of these organizations (such as CRIGUA) decided, after 1991, to participate in electoral politics and had bittersweet experiences, as they were able to place in power the second indigenous governor of the country in 2004, but he was later dismissed of his office in 2006. Indigenous political organizations were also weakened by the work of GAIA that developed a parallel model of indigenous political organization based on the idea that, according to specific ethnic rights (such as autonomy and self-government), indigenous communities should have access to the “the full financial and pedagogic administration of education”. In the midst of these conflicts, indigeneity and issues about how a native Amazonian should be educated or how an “authentic” indigenous community should look like, have become contested fields where different political actors converge.

## Conclusion

This dissertation describes and analyzes how conversion and colonization have influenced emergent notions and practices of indigeneity in Northwest Amazonia, especially during the last century. It emphasizes the contribution of these processes to the production of indigenous subjectivities and historical understandings rather than the beliefs or practices that have been erased or destroyed in the process. In this work, I trace the historical configuration of different modes of colonization and evangelization that converged in Northwest Amazonia and competed for indigenous labor, bodies and souls. Scholarship about colonialism shows how colonial rule does not necessarily follow colonial policy (Steinmetz 2007). Similarly, in Northwest Amazonia there was no direct correspondence between colonial or civilizational projects and the agents that enacted them. Consequently, this work describes how colonization, as well as indigeneity, was configured through the interactions and conflicts between Catholic missionaries, rubber entrepreneurs, natives, evangelical missionaries and state agents, among others. Colonial agents changed their allegiances according to different circumstances. Catholic missionaries, rubber entrepreneurs, evangelical missionaries and settlers claimed to civilize indigenous populations, but their understandings of what civilizing indigenous subjects meant changed and led to different kinds of conflicts among them. For instance, Catholic missionaries confronted rubber bosses because they were seen as an obstacle to their evangelizing work, but later criticized evangelical missionaries because they were interfering with the work of *colonos*.

Among the conflicts between the different actors involved in “civilizing” indigenous populations in Northwest Amazonia, the conflicts between agents of the state, be they Catholic missionaries settlers or teachers, and evangelical missionaries deserve special attention. While the role of Protestant missionaries in colonial projects in South Africa and elsewhere has been widely explored (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, Meyer 1999, Keane 2007), less attention has been paid to the role evangelical missionaries have played in South American countries where the majority of the population population is still Catholic and where Catholic missionaries have usually been agents of both Church and State (Bolton 1917). Unlike Catholic missionaries who developed organic relationships with the state, this work shows how evangelical missionaries were seen as a threat to the authority of the state, while simultaneously fostering new forms of indigenous leadership, community and subjectivity. The tensions between *colonos* and the American missionary Sophie Muller shows that evangelical Christianity and colonization did not did not map directly onto each other. Instead, I try to show how indigenous communities developed complex and ambiguous relationship with colonization, embracing some aspects of it (evangelical Christianity) while rejecting others (Catholicism, assimilation).

One of the main questions that stems from this historical process is: Why did Puinaves and Curripacos convert to evangelical Christianity during the 1940s in contrast to previously unsuccessful attempts at converting indigenous communities by Catholic missionaries? I have tried to answer this question showing how differences in modes of colonization played out at different levels including the different methods of evangelization that were used by Catholic and evangelical missionaries. Catholic missionaries used the model of *reducción*, establishing nucleated villages, as a form of subjecting native populations to colonial rule, which was always mediated in frontier regions by Catholic missionaries. In contrast, evangelical missionaries were

more interested in “going native,” learning indigenous languages and translating the Bible into those languages. While evangelical missionaries were more concerned with adapting the Word of God to indigenous terms and categories, Catholic missionaries carried out their work in Spanish and were not interested in training indigenous pastors and missionaries.

In addition, Catholic missionaries have had historically limited presence in the actual province of Guainía in comparison to the Catholic missions that were established in what is today Vaupés (south of Guainía). In fact, between 1855 and 1859 Venezuelan politician Francisco Michelena y Rojas travelled to the Upper Orinoco and complained about the fact that: “there has been no conversion or *reducción* of indígenas (...) instead of new settlements the existing ones have decreased in number (...); there is an absolute scarcity of temples, doctrines, hospitals and schools, as well as priests that could assist them” (In Haro 2000:45). In addition to this, it was only until the 1960s that the Colombian state made presence in the region through the creation of the province of Guainía, which I explore in Chapter 2. The most common anthropological explanation of the massive Curripaco and Puinave conversion to Christianity has been that, following indigenous prophetic traditions that emerged in the past, especially among the Curripaco, they considered Sophie Muller as a messiah. Anthropologist Robin Wright argues that: “there are various indications –from the records of her [Muller] travels and from Baniwa memories of her [Muller]- that she came to be seen as a new messiah, as the one who announced imminent transformations in the world and its regeneration, and as one who had extraordinary powers, to produced things, to make gardens grow. In short, she [Muller] was seen according to the patterns of Baniwa prophets who had preceded her” [Muller] (Wright 2006:282). In a similar vein, Colombian anthropologist Sonia Uruburu explains the alleged success of Muller’s enterprise in terms of the “sociopolitical and economic situation” at the

moment of her arrival. Uruburu argues that the millenarian and apocalyptic discourse adopted by the different messiahs -today accepted and used by most of the indigenous communities of the region- could have derived from a specific sociopolitical and economic situation” (Uruburu 1998:160). In fact, when Sophie Muller arrived to Guainía in the 1940s rubber extraction had intensified, including physical violence directed towards indigenous workers and their women. The “sociopolitical and economic situation” should not be ignored when looking for explanations of the massive process of conversion to evangelical Christianity that started in the 1940s. It should be recalled that Muller opposed the exploitation and authority that rubber bosses exercised over indigenous labor and bodies. The enmities and alliances in which indigenous conversion took place are crucial for understanding why indigenous conversion occurred in that particular historical moment and not before. In a different context, Anthony Gill shows that while Protestants in Latin America “became the first to develop a preferential option for the poor” (Gill 1998:88), the Catholic Church had developed, in some countries, close relationships with authoritarian regimes and military dictatorships. However, attributing all the process of conversion to the “sociopolitical and economic situation,” leaves unexplained crucial aspects of the massive process of conversion to Christianity such as the indigenous meanings of conversion and how indigenous agency unfolds in this process. Furthermore, the context and meanings of indigenous conversion to Christianity have also changed during the last 70 years.

In this work I have tried to decenter Sophie Muller’s voice, agency and interpretation of the massive process of conversion to Christianity that took place in Northwest Amazonia since the 1940s. Foregrounding indigenous historical agency in their own process of conversion to Christianity shows how Christianity was not just imposed upon indigenous communities, but was also eventually embraced by several indigenous elders. Conversion to Christianity became

a way for indigenous peoples in Guainía to become modern in a context in which modernity has been mediated by the practices of missionaries, extractive economies, *colonos* and different state agents. Conversion provided a sort of leverage with the colonial settler community men, given that it entailed, among other things, learning how to read and write, using numbers, and displaying appropriate manners. For most of indigenous Christian elders, conversion is associated with “domesticating the white man,” which means the end of physical violence exercised over them by rubber bosses. However, the reasons for embracing Christianity have changed over time and this lead me to consider contemporary indigenous narratives of conversion as well. It is worth pointing out that later generations of indigenous Christians did not meet Sophie Muller or have any direct contact with her. Contemporary narratives of conversion tend to emphasize the idea of “making a complete break with past” and are triggered by specific events. As I show, the project of purifying a “pagan past” from a “Christian present” faces different semiotic and ideological limitations. Sorcery is present in different ways and material objects, whereas indigenous leaders have also to establish connections with their “ancestral” past when their authenticity is put into question by the state or NGOs. In a similar vein, contemporary evangelical missionaries argue that conversion is more about “personal” than “cultural” changes, trying to purify culture from religion, which is viewed as something personal.

However, when confronted by anthropologist like me, evangelical missionaries would often say that defining features of indigeneity, including subsistence practices and language, have been maintained over time and even reinforced through the translations made of the Bible into indigenous languages. In this sense, I am more interested in what Christianity produces in terms of practices and representations of indigeneity. I question explanations about indigenous

conversion as false consciousness or as a simple process of assimilation to settler society (“becoming white”), revealing how ideas and practices associated with conversion to Christianity articulate new meanings of civilization, modernity and indigeneity. In this context, new forms of Christian indigeneity emerged both in relation to other colonial projects and in opposition to them, transforming social relationships within indigenous communities as well as between natives and white settlers.

Nonetheless, when early indigenous narratives of conversion suggest that conversion brought huge changes in their relationships with the white man, it is necessary to ask: to what extent did conversion to Christianity changed or transformed colonial ideologies and practices? In order to answer this question it is necessary to point out that there are differences between indigenous understandings of conversion and what *colonos*, teachers and anthropologists think about indigenous conversion to Christianity. Indigenous Christian elders conceive conversion as a civilizational process that brought material and social changes such as: living in nuclear houses, having separate rooms for men and women, displaying appropriate manners and being educated, and living in a Christian community. Indigenous Christians have a strong sense that conversion to Christianity changed what *colonos* thought about them and the relationships they established with *colonos*, whereas *colonos* conceive indigenous conversion to Christianity as way of ratifying racial stereotypes they hold against natives as lazy, easy to deceive and spurious. On the other hand, anthropologists and teachers tend to see conversion as a process that only brought cultural loss as traditional practices and rituals were left behind. These different understanding of conversion reveal different understanding and conflicts around what Curripacos and Piunaves should look like as “authentic Amazonian indigenous cultures.” The fact that *colonos* and anthropologists do not see any value in indigenous conversion to



Christianity, does not mean that we should ignore the changes that Christianity brought to indigenous communities, which promoted new forms of self-recognition and new social relationships between themselves and the white man. It is necessary to recall here that “self-identification takes place in dialectical interplay with external identification, and the two need not converge” (Cooper and Brubaker 2005:15). What I have tried to emphasize in this dissertation is that Christian indigeneity challenges hegemonic understandings of indigeneity in Amazonia, and leads us to recognize other forms of historical indigenous agency that are not based on explicit resistance to every form of colonization. In a different context, anthropologist Bruce Knauft has developed the idea of “recessive agency” to account for how the Gebusi people of Papua New Guinea relate to modernity. Knauft defines “recessive agency” as “willingly pursued actions that put actors in a position of subordination, passivity, and patient waiting for the influence or enlightenment of external authority figures” (Knauft 2002:40). Nonetheless, the relationship between indigenous peoples and modernity is far more complex than this. As I have shown, indigenous communities developed complex and ambiguous relationships with colonization and modernity. While indigenous Christians embraced some aspects of colonization they rejected others, there were also indigenous communities and persons that never converted to Christianity and engaged in different ways with processes of colonization. Despite the changes that conversion brought in the symbolic and social relationships between indigenous societies and settlers, it is important to point out that there are still strong continuities in the political economy of the region, as extractive economies (now in the form of coca crops and artisanal mining) continue to rely on indigenous labor. One of the last governors of the province was called *el patrón* by some of its indigenous constituents.

In this context, Christian indigeneity articulated a specific relationship with modernity under specific moral standards and assumptions. In fact, some indigenous leaders regard Christianity as mediating new relationships between indigenous cultures and the West: “we have chosen the path of religiosity to come closer to western culture, because it provides us with elements to counter the most harmful of it and defend ourselves from external pressures” (PVCY 2002:37). In this sense, Christianity ends up mediating how indigenous subjects relate to modernity and might use Christianity against “external pressures.” In this regard, I once heard the following story from an indigenous missionary who encountered a *guerrilla* member and told him: “*the person that started your organization was a man with a weapon in his hands, the person that came amongst us was a woman who had a Bible under her arm. Both had a great vision. Your leader had a vision and an ideology, but a lot of people have used it in a different way.*” The missionary told the *guerrilla* member that they had killed innocent people and referred explicitly to the murder of 4 natives from El Paujil. This kind of encounter reveals how indigenous Christians might use religion in a context in which different legal and illegal actors dispute control over territory. This does not mean that indigenous Christians do not participate in extractive activities, sell some of the food they produce or participate in regional electoral politics. The ways in which Christian morality is articulated with broader political and economic practices require further examination.

After the Colombian Political Constitution of 1991 was approved, indigeneity started to be defined in terms of authenticity and ancestrality. The politics of recognition deployed by the Colombian state began to favor those groups that better fit established ideas of indigenous societies as living in remote areas and maintaining their ancestral culture, including stereotypes produced in part by anthropologists. While multicultural ideas of indigeneity emphasize

ancestrality and continuity with the past as criteria of authenticity, evangelically informed notions of indigeneity tend to emphasize the break with the past as a necessary condition for becoming an “authentic” Christian. Nonetheless, indigenous Christians are able to navigate these apparent tensions between different regimes of indigeneity. For example, I show how indigenous Christians draw on both languages of rupture and continuity, reflecting the complexities entailed in the process of claiming an indigenous Christian identity in a society in which essentialized notions of indigeneity are still predominant. Christian indigeneity brought new way of thinking about the past, whereas processes of self-estrangement from the past lead in turn to specific objectifications of “indigenous culture,” raising further question regarding what constitutes Christian indigeneity. Contemporary indigenous Christians tend to see a clear separation between the culture [*costumbres*] of the past and the Christian present in which they are supposed to live in. In a similar way, the idea that ancestral “cosmogonic organization” is now part of “our history” reveals how myths are relegated to the past and downgraded to simple stories. Even if evangelical Christianity did not produce a clear and cut break with the past, it did changed how indigenous Christians think about their own past and traditional practices.

The ways in which indigenous Christians understand their own culture and their relationship with the state became clear in 1991 when the NGO Etnollano (in association with the Pilot Experimental Pilot Center, the COAMA program and the office of indigenous affairs of Venezuela) organized workshops with Curripaco communities about education and the Curripaco alphabet. One of the topics discussed in the workshops was about “freedom of religion and culture” (the right to religious freedom was also included in the new constitution)/

One of the indigenous leaders that participated in the workshop about freedom of religion and culture, started saying that,

the previous Political Constitution “said bad things about us, it said that we were savages. Savages means that we are bad spirits, that we have tails [in reference to monkeys], that we don’t think, that we don’t know anything. But we do think, we make *conucos* [gardens], boats and we make lots of things, educate our children. We have our ideology as they [white people] do, but we are different.

In this context, some indigenous Christians conceive the new Political Constitution as a law that finally recognizes them as civilized people. At the same time, the idea of becoming civilized is associated with thinking, making things, educating children and having clean houses. *Capitán* Chicho from a Curripaco community said in the workshop “there is culture, religion, in the language of colonos, because we believe in God. In other words, to say it in Curripaco, we have to respect each other, because it is a culture.” From this perspective, what is commonly understood as “indigenous culture” does not have anything to do with what indigenous Christians think what culture is or what is entailed when we talk about culture. As I suggested in the introduction, indigenous Christians do not believe that Christianity and indigeneity are opposed to each other, instead they find ways of reconciling them and establishing continuities between them. Consequently, Christianity becomes a crucial element in local understandings of what constitutes indigenous culture. In fact, several of the participants in the workshop emphasized that what the new Constitution said was that they should not “dance again,” referring to the performance of traditional rituals. For instance, Tulio Salazar, a Curripaco leader, who opened the workshop said that: “Listen, to those who did not know, so you won’t make mistakes and talk to people about wrong things. We the Christians, should not dance again. That is the point.” Similar interpretations of the new Constitution emphasized that when the constitution refers to preserving indigenous cultures this means that Christian indigeneity should also be preserved and defended. Another Curripaco who participated in the workshop argued that: “(...) we should speak in our language, look how the *colonos* are, they speak in their

language and they are not ashamed. That is how you young people should be so you won't grow up speaking only in Spanish. Another recommendation: to the young people who are Christian, you should stand firm in your culture and the fact that you are in other places does not mean you can dance." It seems clear then that "standing firm in your culture" refers to defending Christian indigeneity. In this sense, Christianity is conceived as part of "indigenous culture" and preserving indigenous language and culture is not seen as opposed to defending Christianity and disregarding certain practices, such as ritual dances.

There was also dissent in the workshop, revealing that meanings of what constituted "indigenous culture" were not homogenous. A young Curripaco leader said that "we should not forget our culture, because the Constitution says that we should preserve it (...) all the history of our grandfathers we should preserve, we the young ones from now on. Look at Bogotá, in Bogotá they practice the culture of their grandfathers, then why shouldn't we?" This intervention suggests that the hegemony of Christian indigeneity in Guainía has also been contested.

After his first comments, Tomás Yusuino had a second intervention, in which he argued that,

"(...) the ones who want to practice culture, they can practice it, because that is what that [new Political Constitution] says, and the ones who want to practice it they can do it without any fuss, because the Constitution has been made. Because of that we, Christians, should think. If one of us wants to practice that, we should stay quiet, there is nothing you can do (...) We should strengthen our language."

Despite the fact that Yusuino argued initially that Curripacos should not dance again and this corresponded with the content of the new Constitution, in this second intervention Yusuino recognized that the new Constitution allowed Curripacos to return to "traditional culture" and indigenous Christians should remain silent if this happens. However, there was opposition in the workshop to the idea that indigenous Christians should remain silent if some of the Curripacos

decide to return to “traditional culture.” *Capitán* Juan García asked the people in the workshop: “I want to ask *capitanes* what do you think or say? If the culture of our grandfathers arises again, would you stay silent? Do we all have to remain silent? (...) it is written in our book [the New Testament], I don’t want to go back to the old custom, because I believe in the word of God.” Plinio Yavinape, another Curripaco leader, who participated in the workshop said: “we are not interested anymore in the old custom, because we already have what it is ours and we believe in it [New Testament], because of that we don’t want the customs of our grandfathers.” The interpretation of the new Political Constitution remains ambiguous and the meanings of “religious freedom” are highly contested. Some of the leaders even thought that the new Political Constitution was recognizing them as indigenous Christians: “because we are recognized by the new Constitution, because of that we are not anymore like before, because of the new Constitution.” In this sense, there is no consensus among indigenous Christians and non-Christian about what constitutes “authentic” indigenous culture or what kind of indigenous culture should be preserved or recovered. However, it should be clear that conversion to Christianity enabled the objectification of the past along certain lines, but also opened the space for the critique of the process of conversion to Christianity.

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