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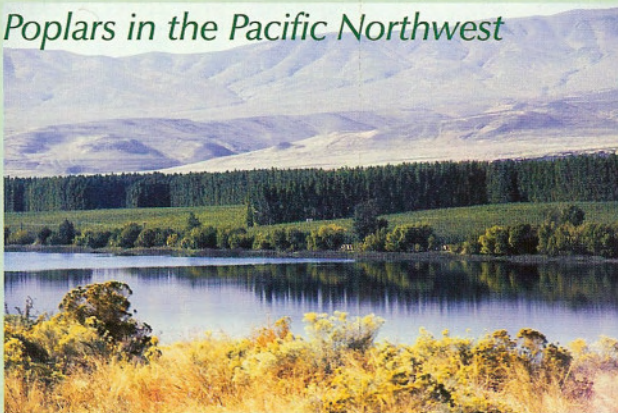
Amazonian Oil Explorations



Kibale National Park, Uganda



Poplars in the Pacific Northwest



Geography of War



Photojournal: Kazakhstan

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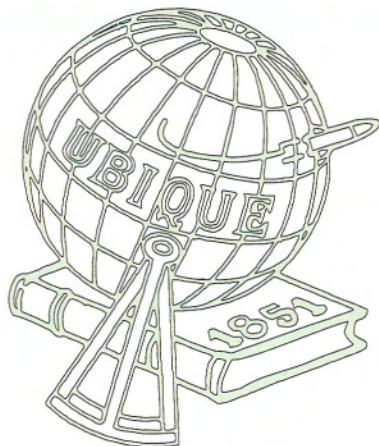
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Amazonian Oil Exploration: Contradictions in Culture and Environment

by
Maria Fadiman
Photographs by author

Adventure Ecology

"I can't throw up," I whisper into the dark as we stand in an indigenous Achuar agricultural field in the Amazon. I have dutifully drunk my gourds of tea and am now trying to do this part of the ceremony correctly. I cannot do it.

While researching oil exploration in the Ecuadorian rainforest, we spend time with the Achuar and participate in their morning ritual, which begins with drinking the Guayusa (*Ilex guayusa*) leaf tea (Figure 1). Having a hard time with the cleansing part of the ceremony, Zoe, our guide, tells me to stick a leaf down my throat so that I will properly vomit and we can get on with the activity. The Achuar are waiting, ready to analyze our dreams. Without the leaves,

the Achuar would not have the key element to their daily morning ceremony. Without the trees from which the leaves come, and the knowledge of how to use them, the Achuar culture and independence, as with most groups in the region, would tend to erode along with the forest. Oil exploration hastens this process. Like others, this group has a contradictory relationship with the industry.

I am included in a group founded and run by David de Rothschild, called Adventure Ecology. Adventure Ecology raises environmental awareness through visual and experiential mediums, which include the Web, stories, and art. For this expedition, Rothschild has gathered well known artists: Gabriel Orozco (installation art), Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin

(photographers), and Dustin Lynn (filmmaker). The journalist Kevin Conley accompanies the group, as he has been hired by *Men's Vogue* to document Orozco's experience. The assignment is to capture oil exploration in the Amazon in a way that reaches out to people, each through his particular artistic medium. Adventure Ecology also connects with classrooms all over the world, raising students' awareness through interactive web media. I was invited on this trip not for my artistic ability (since I do not have any) but for my training in understanding the situation from an academic angle. Traveling with artists who work with images and visual concepts opened my eyes in a new way, revealing to me the contradictions of oil drilling that I may have otherwise missed.

Originally, understanding and documenting open, unlined waste pits were the main goals of the trip. However, as we ventured into the rainforest, unexpected information came to light. Exploring this situation from the geographical angle, I look at the human landscape interface. This study goes beyond the most obvious results addressed by the international community and highlights the contradictory elements that are becoming a part of people's lives. Although these groups care and are connected with the land on which they live, this close relationship with the environment does not always dictate their actions (McSweeney and Jokisch 2007). With increased awareness, steps can be taken to address issues related to how the oil industry affects the land and to properly inform people elsewhere what oil development can mean for their landscape.

Amazonian Oil Exploration

The Amazon Basin is one of the most diverse areas in the world in terms of plants and animals, and it is also home to



Figure 1: Guayusa (*Ilex guayusa*) leaves boiling in an Achuar village.

numerous indigenous groups and colonists. Individuals from both groups work for the largest industry in the region - oil - which ultimately affects their well being, as most groups' ultimate livelihood still depends on a healthy ecosystem (López and Napolitano 2007). Hanging onto the metal bar, I tighten my grip as the truck bumps down the dirt road through the Amazon. We parallel the black pipes carrying oil, the reason why the road exists (Figure 2). An hour ago, we left the oil town of Nueva Loja (commonly called Lago Agrio) nicknamed after Sour Lake Texas (Figure 3). The oil executives of Texaco, many of whom originally come from Texas, made their base camp in this region. Their reverence for oil is exemplified by the large artistic oil pump standing in the center of the main plaza (Figure 4).

In 1964, oil exploration in the Ecuadorian Amazon began to intensify when the oil company consortium of Texaco-Gulf and Petroecuador (previously CEPE) obtained an exploration contract from the Ecuadorian government. Texaco signed a 20-year contract with them, giving the oil company responsibility for both production and environmental consequences in a concession area that grew to over five million acres. During this time, Texaco used technology below international standards, not adhering to normal precautions, such as safe disposal of wastewater through reinjection or other means (CESR 1994). Wastewater is mixed with gas and other toxic liquid substances, and responsible oil drilling requires that the wastewater be reinjected underground.

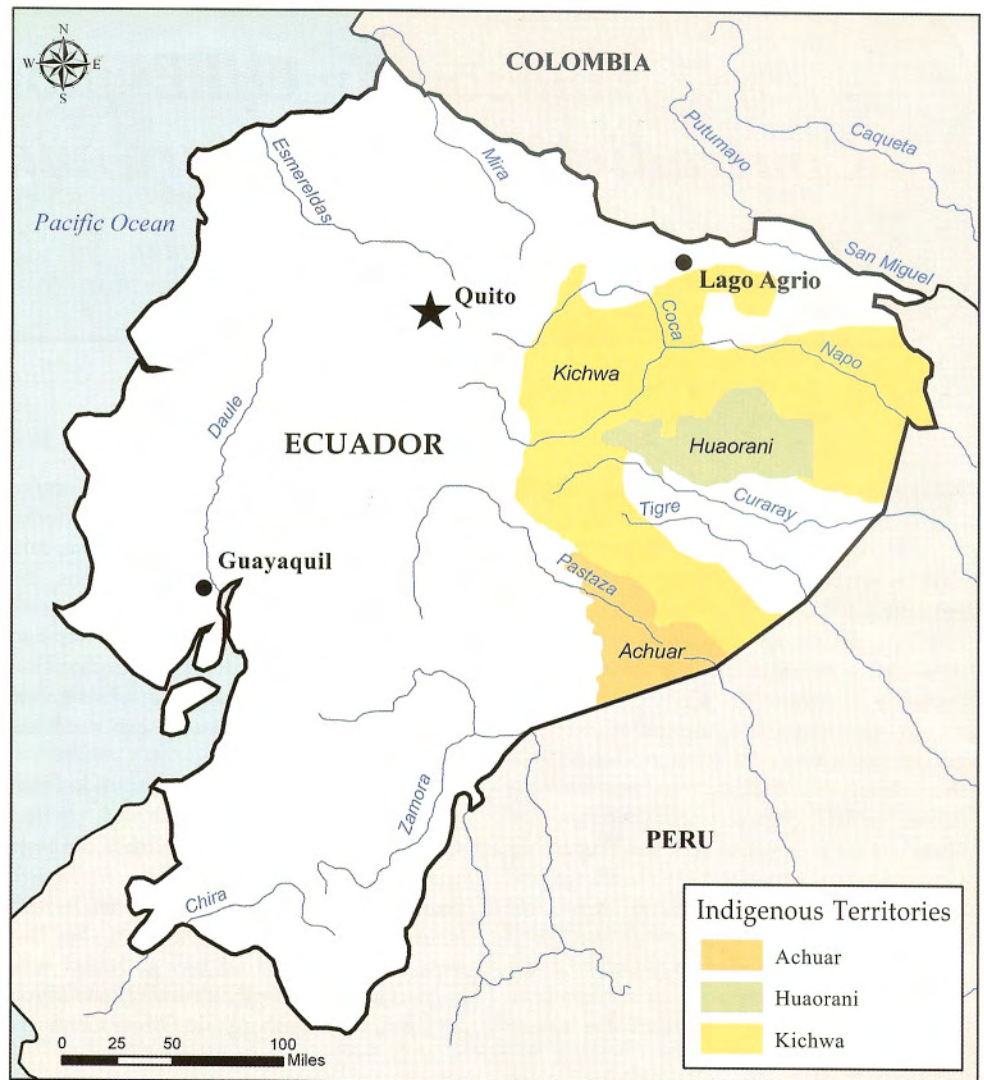


Figure 3: Map depicting Ecuador with the town of Nueva Loja (Lago Agrio) and the Huaorani, Kichwa, and Achuar territories highlighted.



Figure 2: School girl standing by oil pipes along the road to Nueva Loja (Lago Agrio).



Figure 4: Oil pump in the plaza of Nueva Loja (Lago Agrio).

When Texaco's contract expired in June 1992, assets and operations were turned over to Petroecuador. In so doing, Texaco also left them untreated waste in open, unlined pits, commonly called separation ponds (Hurtig and Sebastián 2002).

Because of these ecological and health issues, a class action law suit in 2003 between 13,000 people of the Amazon and Texaco (now Chevron Cooperation) was brought to court. Texaco was charged with environmental destruction from 1971 to 1992, caused by their use of substandard drilling and the dumping of oil and toxic waste into the environment, either directly or by leaving them in unlined pits, rivers, and estuaries (Widener 2007). The law suit sought reparations from Texaco Inc. for contamination (Sawyer 2002). Thus, indigenous people and governments are trying to make transnational corporations pay for previous transgressions. The case was theoretically settled, with Texaco required to clean up the still open pits, which it claims to have done (Widener 2007). However, open pits still dot the Ecuadorian Amazon. Consequently, the people in the region have developed a contradictory relationship with oil production between what it gives them and what it takes away.

We all depend on oil, and most exploration and production occurs far from where people live. Therefore, the consumer rarely recognizes or needs to contend with the consequences of production. However, there are some who do. That is what brought us to Ecuador. Going beyond the well-researched deforestation and cultural degradation that accompanies oil extraction, this project looks specifically at the contradictions that occur. Some of the effects include indigenous people dressed up by the oil company and paraded as "traditional," oil pits that theoretically have been cleaned up, dependence on Western doctors, and the oil company's resistance to conserve trees in forests. This is not the usual angle that we see in the news or mainstream conservation efforts. However, recognizing these results, which often exist below the surface, proves crucial to understanding the reality of oil drilling in the Amazon.

The Company's Portrayal

"I'm wearing them," I declare, adding my bit to the discussion about whether or not to wear cumbersome rubber boots. We are going to be clambering around an oil company and oil pits. I vote for boots. We

all make mistakes. Clomping in my boots, I take my seat in the helicopter. Green opens up beneath us, interrupted periodically by tall orange flames from the oil companies burning off natural gas. We land our helicopter in one of the compounds that produces these flames. Company workers greet us, while men with machine guns help us out of the helicopter. Seeing my look as I eye our armed protectors, the oil employee nods towards the gunmen: "To protect us from the Colombians," he says. Blame often goes to the Colombians despite the internal upset concerning oil. Local displeasure was made evident when we first deplaned in Lago Agrio and Ecuadorians immediately converged upon us handing out anti-oil pamphlets.

The blast of air conditioning dries our sweat as we enter the oil company office.

Officials offer us a bowl of apples and pears covered in cellophane, not fruits that grow in the rainforest the last time I checked. Inside the pristine office it is hard to believe that we are in the middle of the Amazon. No boots needed. Oh, well. The oil representatives bring out the project managers in their freshly ironed shirts and dress shoes, each one assigned to give us a slide presentation about what they do within the company. We have been invited, because this company is considered to be a more conscientious operation than other companies. In conscientious oil drilling, which can already be seen as a contradiction, the company pumps the excess toxic water back into the ground from which it came (Figure 5, 6). They also explain their efforts to prove their solidarity with the land and



Figure 5: Contaminated wastewater that comes up with crude oil while oil drilling.



Figure 6: Wastewater reinjection pumps.

the people, but this is where their words border on the bizarre.

After discussing the environmental integrity of the forest around the drilling sites, an oil speaker then shocks the whole room. "It is really the indigenous people who are to blame for rainforest destruction," he states. Certainly, no one should hold indigenous people to any different moral standard than anyone else (Ramos 1992). However, the fact that the oil company feels justified in blaming local rainforest people for the majority of environmental destruction in areas where the oil company is making severe environmental changes is pushing the fault angle in an odd direction.

It is well documented that colonists have gained access to the forest because of roads and that they are often encouraged to settle in remote areas through government land grants and promises (Kimerling 1991). In this case, however, the company's recognition of the road problem centers not on colonists but on one group of local indigenous people, the Huaorani. The Huaorani have received much media attention in relation to land loss and resistance against the companies (Kane 1996). The oil representatives explain to us that, as a favor, oil workers give the Huaorani rides in the company's trucks on the roads that the company builds. According to the company, the Huaorani exploit this increased access to the forest and now overhunt for profit. The ecological monitoring company (hired by the oil company) notes a decline in peccaries, tapirs, monkeys, guan, currawow, parrots, macaws, and toucans near to the roads. The company representative tells us "The Huaorani continue to hunt and sell, despite our [the oil company's] efforts to tell them to refrain from these activities." The speaker turns to us and says, "The Huaorani should be taking care of the forest for their future. They only live for today." Not a bad point, although somewhat odd coming from an organization that is irrevocably altering the Amazon for a finite resource. The company presenters conclude by saying, "How do you control local people? This is not the responsibility of the oil companies but of the government." Much effort is made by our group not to throw our apple cores at the well dressed company speakers.

Thus, a contradiction exists not only in how roads affect the environment and the culture of the hunters using these roads but more importantly in how the oil company portrays these people and the situation to outsiders. After the representatives of the

company state that they see indigenous people as one of the main environmental problems (because the locals are destructive when they have access to automobile transportation), they then proudly tells us how they compensate the local people with gifts for the rights to drill. Some of these gifts are cars! When looking at the contradictory actions of the company, it is evident that even gifts made out of potentially good intentions can result in inadvertent negative effects. This phenomenon goes beyond their material gifts.

A complicated indirect effect has to do with the company flying in Western doctors once a month to the remote indigenous areas. The initial problem is connected to the lack of reliability of the visits. Sometimes the doctors arrive, and sometimes they do not. Furthermore, what is initially a free service eventually requires money. Although the medical practitioners see the patients without charge, often the patient will subsequently need to purchase the prescribed pills in the city. Thus, money becomes necessary to buy the item and to pay for transportation. Furthermore, the situation facilitates the decline in local healing knowledge and the ability of the people to independently take care of themselves.

One Huaorani says to me, "Before, if a snake bit you, the shaman would cure you. Now, it is different. You go to town and you go buy pills." Thinking for a moment, he adds, "There are a few old people who know plants, but it is easier to take a pill. The problem is we need money to go to town to

buy the pill. It was cheaper from the forest." (Figure 7). However, the situation is not as straight forward as I initially thought. After a long interview in which a Huaorani criticizes the oil company's role in the region, he concludes by saying, "I worked for the company." Seeing my surprise, he answers my unasked question: "Sure, for money to buy medicine." This is the most common answer that I hear as a reason to work for the company to buy medicine. For people who live in the middle of the rainforest, one of the few opportunities to earn money is to work for the oil company. So, although presumably not the incentive of the oil company, the petroleum industry's medical generosity inadvertently creates incentives for the locals to work in oil and to support the company's presence on their land.

Despite the fact that it is not directly a fault of the company, offering people an alternative to their own traditional medicine moves locals away from curing themselves. A Kichwa man whose community is in an oil-explored area explains to me that that they, the indigenous people, learn about the forest and their own medicine through myth. One man says, "Using stories helps us to remember." Pausing, he adds in a quiet voice, "It is harder to remember with the oil companies here." In the Kichwa community, even though two shamans still practice, one man tells me, "There will be no more shamans in one generation. Young people would rather work for the company than learn the ways of the shamans." The lack of shamans is certainly not the overt



Figure 7: Traditional Kichwa medicinal plant bundle.

goal of the oil companies nor only evident where there is oil drilling. What is interesting about this example is that the loss is partially a result of the "help" from the company.

It is important to note here that I believe that all people should have access to any kind of health care they choose. The dilemma in this situation is that people are depending on a medical system to which they do not have true access since doctors are not always flown into the villages and patients usually need to obtain money for medicine. Being more removed from the forest, and increasingly needing cash to keep their families healthy, it makes sense to earn a living from the company, but the logic of relying on a company, which often causes increased cases of illness (Hurtig and Sebastián 2002), in order to maintain health, can certainly be questioned.

"Traditional" Huaorani Village

To further demonstrate the company's good relations with local communities, the company manager takes us to a local Huaorani village. The first time I went to a Huaorani community was years ago when I was looking into dissertation sites. During that first visit, the village members told me about how the oil company was encroaching upon them and that they were prepared to fight. As we spoke, a young man came into the hut, sat in the back, and nodded in agreement. He wore the orange uniform of the oil company. I was told that he was home on vacation from work, and I realized that the situation was far more complicated than what I understood. However, that did not prepare me for what I saw on this trip.

The company manager loads us into small, immaculate busses, explaining that we are going to a traditional village. About ten minutes from the main facility, we drive through metal gates and park in front of four wooden structures with tin roofs. One traditional thatched home stands at the far end of the compound. This last structure, covered mostly with blue tarps, reminds me more of a post-hurricane scene than the home of a rainforest group who presumably knows how to patch its own roof (Figure 8).

As we step out of our vehicles, Huaorani begin to come out decorated with red face paint and feathered headbands. Some wear only white underwear (Figure 9), while others don Western shorts and sweatpants (Figure 10). They dutifully assemble in front of us (Figure 11). Not quite knowing how to handle this, Oliver



Figure 8: Huaorani village shown by the oil company. Thatch house is furthest right.



Figure 9: Huaorani woman dressed in traditional headdress and Western undergarment.

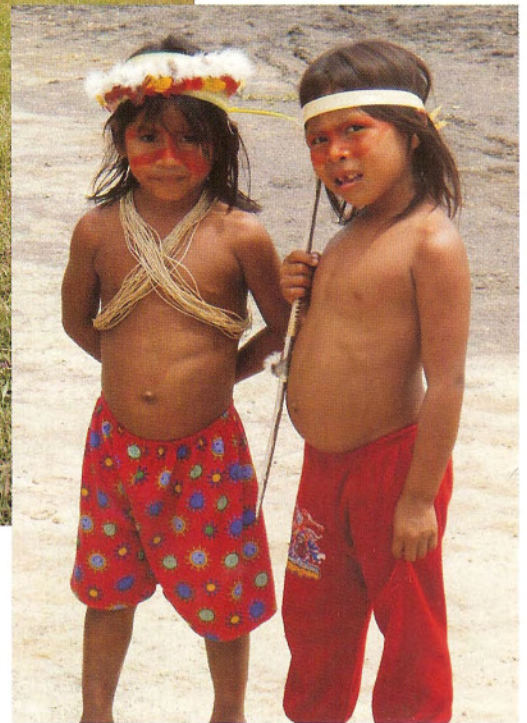


Figure 10: Huaorani children dressed in Western shorts and pants.

and Adam, the photographers, ask to take pictures of the community in the forest instead of the parking lot where we stand. The translator turns to us and says, "There is no forest." This is not a well-planned answer considering that we were just told that these people live traditionally. Then, in an effort to please us, the Huaorani are told to stand in an area where a cluster of trees grow. These indigenous people, known for their fierce independence, wait for directions and then pose for the cameras (Figure 12, 13).

As we drive away, the manager mentions that the community we just visited does actually work for the company. He explains that this particular family group, although still "traditional," chose to move out of their traditional territory to live on oil property and work for the company. Some of the indigenous people who are forcibly removed from their land and others choose to work for the company but both



Figure 11: Huaorani assembled in the parking lot.



Figure 12: Huaorani posing in the patch of green next to the village.

scenarios are a result of the oil company. This depiction of the Huaorani who work for the company, encouraged to look like people who do not (a phenomenon explored in detail by Conklin 1997), is a contradictory detail of how cultures are shifting and how these shifts are being both portrayed and hidden.

Non-Existing Oil Pits

In looking at the contradictory effects of Amazonian oil, some aspects are more obvious than others. Although the oil company's presentation was disturbing, they are indeed reinjecting wastewater back into the ground from which it comes. Yet, according to Texaco, they do not comply with this method of managing waste products (Widener 2007). After the lawsuit, Texaco declared that it had cleaned up its oil pits. Consequently, we should not have found any pits.

From the air, we see the various dark shapes on the landscape that in theory do not exist (Figure 14). After landing, dipping a blade of grass into a pit of oil waste is a sobering experience (Figure 15). Gabriel, the installation artist, sits by the river and places stones on the top of the pit and watches as the oil oozes over the top and gently envelops the rock (Figure 16). He calls Dustin, our filmmaker, over to film the submerging rocks. Oliver and Adam walk around the pit looking for an angle from which to capture the image (Figure 17).

Mesmerized by the oil, we suddenly hear a scream as Adam slips out of view. Panic! Running over, we are relieved to see that he has fallen into the water next to the pit and not the oil itself. Our giddy relief is later replaced with disgust when his rash erupts. Our group is staying where there is clean water; however, for the people who live here, this is their water.

Going back to the helicopters, the school soccer field where we have landed is suddenly full of people (Figure 18). It turns out that the local Kichwa community thinks that we are oil company workers, and for this indigenous community, whose residents live near to the pits, oil workers are not popular. After explaining our goals, we start the engines powered by the fuel we are criticizing and fly away from the scene.

No Oil Yet Achuar Territory

In order to understand another aspect of this situation, we head for an area of the Amazon where oil exploration has not yet arrived. We land in Achuar territory in



Figure 13: Photographers taking pictures of the Huaorani.



Figure 14: Open oil pits and gas burner.

southern Ecuador near the Peruvian border (Figure 3). We land, unload our gear, and watch as the helicopters fly out of view. Children rush out to us and begin to gently finger the bags and inspect the cameras. Zoe, our guide, turns to our group and says, "This is the wrong village." We have been

accidentally dropped off into a neighboring village's town meeting. Men in feather headdresses and face paint, this time not for our benefit since we are not supposed to be here, approach us. They give greetings and invite us to the meetinghouse, where women offer us bowls of chicha, fermented



Figure 15: Author dipping grass into the open oil pit.



Figure 16: Stone sinking into the oil.



Figure 17: Oliver and Adam looking for an angle from which to photograph the oil pit.

Figure 18: Kichwa gathered at the helicopter, mistaking it for oil company transport.



Manihot esculenta (Figure 19). As we politely taste the innumerable calabash bowls, each with a distinct flavor because each woman ferments her brew with her own saliva, we see that certain parts of the culture are clearly intact. Later, with full bellies and a slight buzz, we are in canoes headed to the village where we are expected.

Because of the effects of Texaco and other oil companies on the region, the populations from the southern areas where the oil industry has not yet been developed are conflicted. These people are at the same time afraid of the consequences and desirous of the material goods, roads, schools, western medicine, and money that the companies have to offer. They do use items that cost money, such as guns (Figure 20) and wheelbarrows (Figure 21). The Achuar community would like much of what comes with oil, but at the same time, they clearly recognize the importance of an intact forest. As one Achuar elder says to us while looking up into the branches of the ceiba tree (*Ceiba pentanda*) (Figure 22). "This tree is important. The oil companies cannot come into this area, because this is where the tree lives, and the tree is sacred."

The ceiba tree occupies an important place in the Achuar culture. They use wood from the female tree to make arrows and collect the cotton-like material that helps disperse the seeds. They use the male tree for spiritual purposes. One Achuar man tells us, "The tree makes a house for you. If you are sick, the tree becomes a doctor and it cures you. This is the house of the jungle where the ancestor spirits live (Figure 23)." For shamans, the tree is particularly important. As we walk out of the forest, an Achuar man points to the trees, turns to me, and says, "We won't let our land become like the north [the location of most oil drilling]. Nobody can live in the north." We walk on, while he hoists his gun, purchased with money, over his shoulder.

Art Exhibition: London

A few months after our return, I am standing in high heels in a London art gallery. My feet look a bit more chic and are far more uncomfortable than when I was wearing rubber boots. The exhibit is carefully constructed with eco-friendly paint and wood, which the curator confides to me, is not a simple endeavor. Covering one wall hangs Adam and Oliver's larger-than-life photograph of the Huaorani in their face paint and white underwear standing in the patch of trees found next to



Figure 19: Achuar man drinking chicha.



Figure 20: Achuar man with gun.

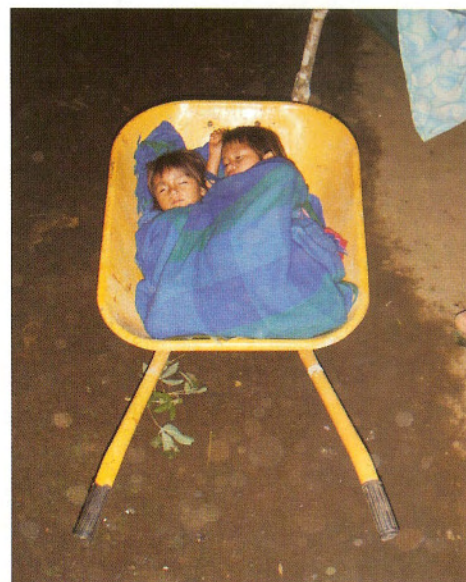


Figure 21: Achuar children sleeping in a wheelbarrow.

the company (Figure 24). Their oil pit photo oozes from the opposite wall. Dustin's movie plays on a third wall, portraying images of the forest, oil, and the artists themselves. In the middle of the room, arranged as if still on the rough wooden table in the village, rests Gabriel's paintings made from forest fruit, with pottery shards placed carefully on each paper. While painting in the Achuar village, the children originally placed the pottery on the pictures to keep them from blowing away. Gabriel incorporates these as part of the art.

David de Rothschild, the force behind the project, glides through the guests, who are predominantly London's elite. If the most powerful people care, then certain steps can be made towards a more beneficial scenario in the Amazon. These individuals tonight, perhaps interested in the environment, art, or just the event itself, are all taking in the work. This is a way for influential people to be exposed to, touched by, and ultimately to understand the effects of oil exploration in the Amazon.

In looking at the seemingly discordant



Figure 22: Achuar man pointing out the importance of the ceiba (*Ceiba pentanda*) tree.



Figure 23: *Ceiba* (*Ceiba pentanda*) tree.

realities of the oil industry in terms of health, western medicine, traditional medicine, truck rides, jobs, traditional lifestyles, and identity, there are clear contradictions. These conflicted issues exist in the northern Amazon, where oil dominates in many ways, and also in the areas where the oil industry has not yet been developed and where more trees still stand. When governments and conservation groups look to the health of the forest and human communities, it is important to understand the varied positions of the

people living in the area. Furthermore, a deeper understanding on the part of the oil companies could influence some of the decisions they make. These realizations could result in policy that encourages less harmful effects on the land where they drill and the people who live there and are affected most. More likely, oil companies' realization of their part in the perpetuation of these contradictions may move them to change how they do business to avoid future lawsuits. Most importantly, if the local people include their own conflicted



Figure 24: Adventure Ecology art exhibit, London.

positions into their own discussions, these individuals and communities could clarify what they see as the most important priorities for themselves.

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