Andrea Bravo Díaz

“When we lose our elderly, we would have no strength.”

Ecuador, 10 March - 30 June 2020



A Waorani leader. Picture taken by Andrea Bravo Díaz.

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I am an anthropologist, from Ecuador. Recently back in my country, after finishing a doctoral degree at University College London. While in Ecuador, I have been collaborating with a health project among the Waorani, working with the Institute of Public Health at the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador (PUCE).

After one week of coming back to the Waorani territory in the Ecuadorian Amazonia, Ecuador stablished a national lockdown due to the COVID-19 outbreak. I remained in the forest during the first two months of the quarantine, in a scientific station within the Yasuní National Park. From May 10th I have written from Cuenca, in the Ecuadorian Andes. English is my second language, so the writing of this notes might have some "Spanglish" within it.

10-03-2020 Quito-Ecuador

Most of the people with whom I have talked in Quito and Cuenca (in the Ecuadorian Andes) appear to underestimate the dangers of COVID-19. They express discomfort for the excess of information on coronavirus. I am particularly surprised by the lack of empathy that Ecuadorians are expressing over social media and some in offline interactions – many xenophobic comments against Chinese people. Meanwhile, there are already 10 cases in Ecuador, the first one was identified in February 29. The first cases spread in the coast of Ecuador, particularly in Guayaquil, a port city. In Cuenca, which is only 3 ours far from Guayaquil, most people I know of – being Cuenca my hometown– still see the virus as somehow distant.

When the outbreak was in Asia, we had no cases in Latin America, but we seem to be much more connected (in terms of human mobility) with Europe, the cases in Ecuador were "imported" from Europe. Still, empathy towards affected people is not growing in my networks.

11-03-2020 Puyo-Ecuador

We have started our trip to the Yasuní, at the first stop in an Amazonian city we met an indigenous leader who expressed his worries about the coronavirus, they have been watching the news. His people, the Waorani, were in isolation until the late 1950, when the Summer Institute of Linguistics started a process of peaceful contact. For the Waorani, as for most of Amazonian people, contact was intertwined with imported diseases.

While I was aware that there were conspiracy theories around, this trip has provided a first-hand approach to how people consume these theories. When I was sitting next to a woman who was watching a video which argued that coronavirus is a man-made disease on Facebook, from time to time she turned to the person next to her and said "*si ve*?" (do you see?). An affirmative movement of head while listening gave the impression that she agreed with what she was hearing. When I asked her what the source of this information was, she replied "it is a researcher", as if the word "researcher" was equated to truth. Should I start a discussion about researcher's credentials? Or about the notion of fake news? I remained silent[1].

12-03-2020 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador

Already in the Yasuní National Park, we have little access to internet, so we cannot keep following coronavirus news as closely. Still, young indigenous people, from the villages around here, are well aware of the epidemic, to the point that one young man said, "we used to worry about HIV, now we only care about coronavirus".

15-03-2020 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador

We have heard the news about Ecuador being under lockdown from tomorrow, our national borders are closing today. Most of the people conducting research in the Yasuní National Park have already arranged ways to leave the park, going back to the cities for spending the quarantine at their homes. I decided to stay with other 10 non-indigenous people in a scientific station. I stay because we are part of a health project, so it makes sense to stay and understand things around here.

Governmental decisions for containing the outbreak have developed quite rapidly over the weekend, my family and friends in the city do not quite yet assimilate that they should not leave their homes from tomorrow on. Videos about panic buying in the city circulate over social media, it is quite hard to imagine the situation from here. There are already 37 cases of COVID-19 in Ecuador.

19-03-2020 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador

Every lunch and dinner someone has brought up a conversation about COVID-19, we know people in the cities are on their third day under lockdown; some people such as my family, have followed the advice of staying at home from the weekend, they are already six days without leaving home. We are wondering how people without homes are dealing with this, particularly many Venezuelan refugees who live each day from what they manage to get on the street, is Ecuador prepared for supporting those in need? While reflecting about this over lunch, I have heard some xenophobic reactions against Venezuelan people, how to argue with that? How are we not able to develop compassion in these times?

Today the cases of COVID-19 have risen to 199 in Ecuador (so far). Here in the forest, people are starting to get anxious about the news. It is hard to digest the news, walking in the forest helps for reflection, so I am becoming more familiar with

the pathways for trekking around the scientific station.

While the borders of the park were controlled from Monday 16, indigenous people were still coming and going, they travel to the nearest city to buy food. There is also a mobility trend of indigenous people moving from the cities to the forest, many indigenous people living in the cities have decided to spend the lockdown in the forest. Meanwhile, indigenous villages in the national park have decided to close their own borders, and many elderly people are preparing for isolating themselves in the forest depth –far from oil roads – younger people say they will also leave the roads if COVID-19 reaches their villages. They call COVID-19 "the diseases of the foreigners".

21-03-2021 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador

Eleven people have remained in the station, only I maintain contact with indigenous villages around, and most of our conversations are related to the coronavirus outbreaks. Walks in the forest help to deal with the quarantine, while digesting the news from the cities. People here are worried not so much for the rise in reported cases of COVID-19, but mostly about social media news, particularly those related to "hundreds" of deaths in the city of Guayaquil – the epicentre of the outbreak in Ecuador– which are said to be happening beyond the official reports. Again, as during the last days, I keep wondering about the power of social media for spreading fake news; why even my parents keep sharing fake news that they find in social media?

For people under quarantine here, the main source of information about the coronavirus is Internet. People circulate all sorts of material over social media, from jokes that help people dealing with the outbreak – Ecuadorians are good at making "memes" or jokes – to recorders of patients who explain their symptoms, and even

some empirical recipes “against” the COVID-19.

25-03-2021 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador

Mobility within this part of the forest is controlled by an oil company, they have a post from where they check park visitors, allowing -or not- their entrance. The oil company has banned mobility from today, a sort of curfew, which follows the one stablished by the Ecuadorian government at a national level. This means, I will not be able to visit indigenous villages around, but I can still walk in the forest. Here, I include some fieldnotes from the last days, mainly about coronavirus conversations with the indigenous Waorani people.

After I have left the car that took me to the village, an elderly indigenous woman stopped a car from the Ecuadorian government. She took a vine and started whipping the car, saying in *Wao terero* (indigenous language): ‘you should not go out, you should not carry diseases.’ I was able to talk with this woman afterwards, and she expressed her concern about the disease that she knew was coming from outside. She called it *kuyo* (flu), and she, as many other elderly people during these days, reflected about coronavirus while recalling the polio epidemic that they experienced when they accepted peaceful contact few decades ago.

‘My grandfather told me that they were only able to survive the epidemic by fleeing to the forest, now we will do the same’, said a Waorani friend. Indeed, we are seeing several trends of mobility among indigenous people due to coronavirus. First, indigenous people who live in the cities are coming back to the villages; second, elderly people are moving their residence to isolated places in the forest, or planning to do it any time soon; third, young families remain along oil roads, but are preparing themselves to leave the roads and isolate themselves in the forest depth when they hear about a positive case of coronavirus around.[2]

31-03-2020 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador

I have not visited the villages, but indigenous people are still visiting the scientific station, they confirm that several elderly people have left the village and are now living in the depth of the forest. That, they think is the most effective health measure, and I believe they are right at the moment, since our health system is collapsed. The Waorani are hunter-gatherers and the season of forest abundance has just started. However, a movement to the forest is not easy for the more sedentary young Waorani.

10-04-2020 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador

Day 31 in the forest, I have had little interaction with indigenous people nearby the scientific station, we are following a strict quarantine. People at the station seem less anxious about going back to the city, the forest isolation provides us with a momentary idea of safeness, while the number of coronavirus cases has reached 7161 in Ecuador; yet, we do wonder when we would be able to go back home.

I grow up with an awareness about Guayaquil, a city on the Ecuadorian coast, being a very unequal place, as it was a city with growing slums. But only now, when Guayaquil has become one of the worst affected epicentres of coronavirus in Latin America[3], it strikes me that we silently accepted inequalities to endure.

I have learnt from friends around the world about Ecuador being all over the news, the dramatic situation in Guayaquil is a grim sight of what can happen in other parts of the global south. Internet in the forest is not very good, so I have not been able to keep up to date. Yet, I have seen videos -over social media – showing corpses abandoned on the streets, a sort of “real time” covering of what is happening in

Guayaquil, while national news took a while to catch up with these dramatic stories. The *real time* benefits of social media have of course the shadow of fake news.

This week I have developed the awareness that we are living through the "great pandemic", that is how some people are already calling it. Yesterday, I submitted an article and expected a normal confirmation response, but the response moved my heart. The editor of the journal replied expressing his sadness about the news he is seeing from Ecuador; a very human and heart-warming interaction in an academic environment that otherwise tends to lack such warmth.

Today I have read some articles about isolated indigenous people, those who live in this national park and have trekking paths a few hours from here. Quite strange to read about isolated people while experiencing isolation in our own bodies, and globally! These people, who have been called "lost people", people in voluntary isolation, uncontacted people, have been silently dealing with our encroachment. We might now have a more emphatic understanding of what it means to be isolated, or even to fear contact with outsiders.

There is much more to say about Ecuador at this time but I will conclude with just one more "news". There has been an oil spill in Amazonia, which has polluted the rivers nearby this area, hundreds of Amazonian riverine people would be unable to access water and fish from these polluted waters. While Ecuadorian institutions are already collapsed with COVID-19, how can we expect some help/justice for these people? Is this not enough to think about different post-pandemic models? I am unable to reflect or make sense of what we are living at this time, I can only wonder.

"Temporality."

11-04-2020 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador

Temporality.- The quarantine was extended at least one week more in Ecuador; so far, for those who are safe at home, quarantining has already affected their relationship with time. My mother told me today 'hope you have a good Sunday', but today is Saturday. After laughing about it, in a family chat my father said: 'we do not know anymore what day we are living on, we only know when day light is and when night comes'. This struck me as being similar to the temporality in the forest, where I am spending this quarantine. For people living in the forest time goes on a day to day logic, it is organized not around "work" but in consideration of needs and ecological factors. Time is seasonal, we know for example that at this time of the year monkeys are eating fruits, it is a time of abundance in the forest, the season will end around June.

The reflection about temporality has been with me since yesterday, after listening Kristina Lyons[4] over a webinar, she referred to how Colombia's 'post-conflict' time is an exceptional time were the line that divide between past and present is not clear. Likewise, our temporality has changed in a way that we are not able to reach a post-pandemic time (it is over, we survived!) and we are not quite clear what sort of time is now. When the pre-pandemic schedule has faded, the post-pandemic is uncertain. But indigenous people here in the forest have for long experienced this kind of uncertainty in relation to outsider's dangers, after they accepted peaceful contact their livelihoods have been increasingly uncertain.

20-04-2020 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador

Yesterday, we received news of the first confirmed case of CV19 in this territory (the park). The case was identified an hour distance from where we are. 'We are encroached' said a quarantine mate, and I nodded.

This National Park is a complicated frontier, the presence of the central state equals a small health post and a park guard – some police are also around in recent days – whereas the presence of the oil company is ubiquitous. So far what we know is that the first positive case is related to some oil company's worker, he is an indigenous Kichwa and there are not testing campaigns or other major actions being taken for preventing the virus to reach the recently contacted indigenous people.

Meanwhile, the news of this case has circulated on social media, indigenous leaders have expressed their concerns about the wellbeing of their people. The concern is shared with a few NGOs and activists, but the state seems unable to properly address this pandemic. How are the Waorani in this area reacting? Are they finding refuge in the depths of the forest as they said they would do? Are we going to let this pandemic devastate Amazonia as in colonial times? As an anthropologist I have a thousand questions, but even being in the same territory we are unable to know what the real situation is a few blocks from here.

May 1 Yasuní-Ecuador

#Aisladosperonocallados Isolated but not quiet

From my 53 day of isolation in the Ecuadorian Amazonia, I am thinking about the 1st of May Ecuadorian online indigenous protest. "Isolated but not quiet" read the hashtag used for the occasion. This online protest follows last year indigenous street protests; however, the coronavirus pandemic has changed the sonic landscape of Ecuadorian protesters.

I started thinking about the sonic landscape of the Ecuadorian protest after listening a compilation of the Ecuadorian sounds of resistance from October 2019, when the Ecuadorians went to the streets to protest against austerity measures. This

compilation, published on Youtube by the collective Mazurquica[5] triggers several feelings of what we witnessed in the last protest, which despite being severely repressed by the government, had a sonic background of chants, banging pots, shouts, and claps. The resonance of these sounds was increased by online platforms, which is particularly relevant if we consider that the national media did not cover the magnitude of the uprising. Then, people took to the streets and made themselves heard by covering the protest on social media. Overall, the protesters at the October 2019's uprising, which were predominantly indigenous, used social media and digital platforms to facilitate their organization, but also to increase the resonance of their sonic landscape with a predominance of joyful and deeply affective sounds – such as elderly indigenous women chanting to ask the spirits for strength, for their children. After almost two weeks of intense protests, the government withdrew the austerity measures.

During the Ecuadorian lockdown aimed at containing the coronavirus spread in Ecuador, the government has implemented harsher austerity measures than the ones intended in October, but people could not go out to the streets and populate the soundscape with their sonic claims. In the absence of street protests, new claims have populated social media. In an interview with the Colectivo Mazúrquica[6] they note a predominance of the visual in the Ecuadorian coronavirus landscape. Indeed, what we have seen online are posts and articles expressing concern, but the sonic protest was missing until yesterday. Indigenous leaders and other social organizations called for a new bagging pot protest, which this time was circulated over social media, there was little recording of the bagging pots – different from October – but instead there were screenshots of zoom meetings with people holding pots to be bang.

May 6 Yasuní-Ecuador

Ongai, a Waorani friend, visited me to check how I was doing. We are both adjusting to the new rules of social distancing. She attempted to shake my hand, I replied "coronavirus", she smiled, and few minutes later we were both wearing masks and talking about the virus. In this conversation Ongai mentioned "when we lose our elderly, we would have no strength."[7] I have spent the past four years researching and writing a doctoral thesis, trying to understand what it means to "live well" for the Waorani people, a notion that includes peace, happiness and strength. The latter seems to be particularly important for informing Waorani's strategies to deal with the pandemic. Strength or vitality, which is called *piñe* or *piente*, is contained in the bodies of strong people (*teemo piyengue*). The Waorani perform a variety of daily caring practices as well as rites that allow for the intergenerational sharing of vitality, which is also maintained through certain ecological practices.

When Ongai reflected about what it would mean for the Waorani to lose their elders, she gave several examples of how their society might grow weaker without their elders. She suggested that the Waorani, as a society, are still making sense of contact with outsiders and as such rely on their elders, who "speak loud," to identify the best response in the face of potential dangers. This means that elderly people are not only at the core of social reproduction – ensuring a replenishment of vitality and knowledge – but that they are also more knowledgeable in identifying the dangers of outsiders, even when peaceful mediation with outsiders is developed mainly by younger bilingual Waorani. It requires the sensibility and experience of skilful adults and elders to protect the hunter-gatherer society as a whole from these dangers. This is how the Waorani survived colonial threats and incursions while protecting themselves in inter-riverine territories.[8]

May 11, Cuenca-Ecuador

I have arrived in Cuenca after a long trip by car from the forest, we had a special

permit because the lockdown is still quite restrictive. Surprisingly, Amazonian towns have implemented more protective measures such as disinfecting cars, while the police asked for documents – biopolitics? – they seemed to be concerned about new cases coming to Amazonia. In the Andes only one province (Tungurahua) had similar measures, the rest of the trip to Cuenca was quite relaxed in terms of controls. When I arrived home, I found my parents with a whole new set of hygiene practices: lots of alcohol and disinfectant applied to the car and shoes; nobody goes inside the house with dirty clothes; other objects are let outside or carefully cleaned before taking them into the home. They seem to be scared by the horrible news from Guayaquil, the bodies abandoned on the streets of Guayaquil are still in our hearts.

May 16, Cuenca-Ecuador

The first cases of coronavirus among the Waorani have been detected in a village along the oil roads. Their proximity to the oil camps and the Amazonian cities puts them in a more vulnerable situation, they have a need for accessing external food for supplementing their diet, so they cannot fully isolate themselves from the city. Only one elderly man from a nearby village have died, they say he had coronavirus symptoms.

June 1, Cuenca-Ecuador

We were fearing a terrible outbreak among the Waorani, but even when several Waorani have tested positive to COVID-19, few have developed severe symptoms. Could it be that the plants they are drinking are helping with the treatment? One Waorani friend just recovered from the virus, once he felt better, he started sharing recipes and detailed caring treatments over social media. He, himself, received recommendations from other indigenous people, mainly Kichwa people from el

Puyo. Since he has recovered, he is now keen in ensuring all his people and friends have the same chances for surviving. (I prefer not to make public the detail of the recipe and treatment). Overall, this Amazonian networks of caring and the role of social media is quite striking, and worth following up.

June 15, Cuenca-Ecuador

> "They put themselves in the hands of God"

My extended family have embraced the relaxation of the Ecuadorian lockdown in quite an extreme way, they have started to visit each other, around seven different families, all of them visit my grandmother without a mask. My mother is quite concerned and is starting to feel the pressure to engage in their intense social life. Meanwhile, the numbers of coronavirus cases in Ecuador, and in our city keep growing.

I ask my mother why our extended family does not follow the preventive measures (they do wear a mask when going outside, but only because it is mandatory). My mother explains "they put themselves in the hands of God", I do wonder whether the catholic relaxed Latin-American ethos has something to do with our behaviour – this does not mean that the death toll is due to this ethos, but I have been clear in expressing how ill-equipped our government has been for dealing with the pandemic. My own big extended family reminds me quite a lot the logics of indigenous people: you share food and care if you want to remain calling each other family.

June 23, Cuenca-Ecuador

My father used to work in the city centre, but he had to close his shop in May because the rent was too high for keeping the business open during the pandemic, he had that shop 40 years. He still has a depth knowledge from the city centre, so when he visits those streets, he makes interesting assessments about how they have changed with the pandemic. “More and more shops are closing”, “it is not the same”, and more recently: “people are relaxing, there is no more disinfectant in the shops, they do not care anymore about the coronavirus”. We speculate about this “relaxation”: most of the people around us are going out, and the shops have more relaxed measures compared to May. If people are going out, not only for work but for leisure, maybe the general feeling of relaxation is related to the length of the pandemic, here it is almost four months.

June 27, Cuenca-Ecuador

Several hospitals in Ecuador have reached their full capacity, even in Andean cities like Cuenca. The government advice is to go back to economic activities, there is more concern about the economy than about people’s health. Even with the awareness that there are no places in the hospital, my extended family keeps their relaxed way, they even confront my mother about her “fear”, they say “fear is worse”, while arguing that the Catholic God will not allow them to catch the virus.

June 30, Cuenca-Ecuador

My grandmother died on Saturday, it was not related to the virus, it was a gentle

death, she just went to sleep and did not wake up. When my mother found out about the death she run to the place where the corpse was. While I was also grieving, I became deeply concerned about my mother catching the virus (since cases of coronavirus in Cuenca have doubled in the last two weeks, and there are no empty beds in the hospital intensive care unit). While crying and grieving my family forgot about the pandemic, it was impossible to maintain the mask with so much crying. How do thousands of people who have buried their dead relatives have managed to keep safe during the pandemic? I wonder. We are a big family, more and more people arrived at the mourning gathering, most of them without mask, all hugging my mum, who is already 60. It was impossible to go against our culture of hugs at this moment of grieve.

An aunt called for a catholic priest, he arrived with a mask, and asked whether the police used to pass by often, he asked that while noting that we were “an illegal gathering”. My aunt responded assuring that “we are fine”, and the priest took out his protective mask. He then conducted the mass, getting quite close to the people with no protection at all. Only a person who is recovering from an operation maintained her mask, nobody else from the family. Some in-laws arrived with masks; they maintained the mask but decided to hug freely.

Because of the pandemic we had to bury my grandmother the day after her death, only 10 people were allowed to attend the burial, the rest of the big family remained outside the cemetery.

Today, after overcoming the worst of the grieve, my grieving mother has agreed to embrace again the coronavirus safety measures. Could she take distance from our big extended family during this time of grieve? Could our extended family forgive our distance? Are there other families facing similar dilemmas? I really do not want my people to die or to have another reason for grieving, but could that be possible with our weak government and our big families?

Footnotes

[1] The last paragraph of this entry was published in https://anthrocovid.com/1-2/contributions-ecuador/

[2] In following months, I have learnt that only few elders have isolated themselves, and even them have returned to the villages along oil roads after a few weeks. By July 2020, most villages have already faced a first COVID-19 outbreak.

[3] This has been recorder also in global news: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/03/theyre-leaving-us-to-die-ecuadorians-plead-for-help-as-virus-blazes-deadly-trail

https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-52116100

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-p42tiYw4c&t=1588s

[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5y3nPg19n0&t=1559s

[6] The interview is on press.

[7] An analysis of this encounter was published in https://revistes.uab.cat/periferia/article/view/v25-n2-bravo?s=09

[8] This ethnographic note and analysis were included in a paper accepted for publication in the UCL anthropology department's magazine, Anthropolitan.