



COMMUNALITY

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Interview with Luis Macas, Kichwa politician and founder member of CONAIE - Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, Quito ? Feb 2012.

When we speak of the community, we speak of both the human and natural community. They are never separate ? and this is the ?Pacha?, La Pachamama. And within Pachamama, human beings are but miniscule elements. It is guided by certain elements, one of them being the principle of ?relationality?. We believe everything is interrelated. Nothing is disconnected, nothing is separate. For us, everything, absolutely everything has life. This conception has made us see that the community is the community of all to all. The experience of our communities says, for example, that the means of production cannot be the property of one person. The introduction of the idea of ?sumak kawsay? in the Constitution comes from this ?communitarian matrix?.

In the word of today, how can we re-build this mode of life if we don?t think about Mother Nature? From the point of view of the western world, we can always make efforts and try to do some fixes and reparations? but as we know this is not working. As some colleagues from Bolivia say, the original sin of the western civilization is precisely to have appropriated nature, to have appropriated the ?means of production?, or as they say, ?natural resources?, because those are part of life itself, they are fundamental to everyone, for the human community as well as for the natural community. For us --- human-beings of this particularly people and culture --- nature is not an object but a subject. That is why our elders bring stones to the table, so the stones can speak to us, so we can talk to them... so we can say ?those stones, who have that many years, are of the same age as our ancestors, and are part of our common-living.? This is what we call community.

It is important to say that the actual system is very violent to our communities. The model of living of today is very aggressive to us. And many people in our communities are starting to adapt to this model, abandoning the notion of the communal and the collective towards values related to commoditization, privatization and, above all, I could say, towards ?individualization?. It sounds very odd to me when people say that this is freedom? that to abandon the fundamental rules of the collective, of the community and entering as one more individual in to the world of consumerism is what they call freedom. Those forms are very harmful to our communities, and recently they have been increasingly present among us.

Our struggle begins in the defence of our territories, to defend this vital environment that is fundamental part of life that is the territory. When we speak about territory, we are not saying 'the territory of the Kichwas' or 'the territory of the Achuar'. We speak about nature. Unfortunately, here, when we talk about territory, it is commonly understood as 'let's give them a piece of land so the community can live. Let's give them land-titles so this people can survive'. Those struggles were labelled by anthropologists as 'reclaim struggles': fight for land, for identity, for language, and that is all. But those forms of perceiving the indigenous people are changing, precisely because we believe that the indigenous movements are not struggling to reclaim something that is exclusive us, we're fighting for something that has to do with life itself.

The 70s and 80s were incredibly rich decades for us because there was an internal debate among ourselves, we had to look to each other and ask who were we? What we really need to do as indigenous peoples? Very strong discussions. I am recalling the Terenas in Brazil and other colleagues from Bolivia and Peru? before struggles were very much isolated, very localized. The moment of encounter between our people starts in the 70s, follows through the 80s and, of course, in the 90s it explodes. If was not for the mobilizations of the 90s, perhaps the people in Ecuador would be still saying that there are no indigenous peoples in this country. These mobilizations, these marches, this massive presence of the indigenous peoples, they were a form of 'language' to make ourselves understood. I don't know? maybe because we speak another language they never understand us, so we had to utilize another language, which is precisely the act of mobilization.

In the 90s there is the introduction of a very important theme in the debate that is the State. We manifested ourselves ' although semantically we are not understood --- by saying that we did not want that State no more. This is the moment when the project emerges, that is to say when it becomes visible for it has been a long process initiated with our elders, this project that contends that here we are a plurality of people, we are not a single society and culture, but different cultures, different peoples, different identities. So in the 90s we present this proposal to the government saying that this diversity should be recognized by the formation of a pluri-national State. But this project goes beyond the simple recognition of diversity. We do not want to be recognized in a descriptive manner --- 'ok, here there are that many nationalities, speaking those different languages etc?' as if this is the pluri-national State. No. We have to question the very structure of the nation-state itself.

The project of the indigenous movement is not a project for the indigenous people; it is a popular project. We have to be absolutely clear to say that it is not a project that comes exclusively from indigenous peoples, it is a project that emerges gradually from questioning the reality of the indigenous peoples, of the afro-descendants, of mestizos. We cannot say that all mestizos are on the other side against indigenous, this is absolutely impossible. We are not exclusive.

In the 70s and 60s, and we could go until the 40s, for example, there was a woman who fought hard to recover our lands who is Dolores Cacuango. Dolores Cacuango was a mother of our people, and she had many relations with left-wing parties. Unfortunately? as they say we are from ?the oral world?, right? No one took notes of our meetings, assemblies, congresses. I was young but I remember, there was an increasing presence of ?how was it called? The Christian left. I?m not sure where that movement was born. They were young people, not from the community but they were present in the discussions here. Through this process we have gathered left-wing intellectuals, sociologists, anthropologists and ecologists; people who have been close to us. We have grown together. I could mention, for example, Acción Ecológica, which is born almost at the same time as CONAIE.

But when did the Left understand us? For so much time it had tried to? how can I say? Trying to put Marxism into practice by the book. For example, ?proletarizing the indio?. We run many workshops here, in this place. One day, with other friends, we were discussing that if you take Marxism properly, sometimes it appears complementary to our thinking. Even Marx speaks of primitive communities? right? Marx supposedly doesn't want to return to the primitive? yet he says about communism that the means of production have to be communal. But we have to interpret it? it serves a lot to me, helps me to look into reality. But we have to stop thinking about these models that unfortunately prioritize solely the human being, and that is what Marxism says, it speaks about ?liberating man?. But what about the other? What about nature?

The struggles of indigenous, peasants, urban-workers have been converging, slowly gathering? There is still much dialogue to be built, dialogue in the sense of knowledge exchange, which is what we call ?inter-culturalirty?. Therefore we think that this recent incorporations into the constitution is a central element to decolonize the intellectual schemes of ? I don?t know how to call it, ?western system? or ?eurocentric system?? whatever you name it.

Cluster: Non-human Rights

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