

# | The Zápara Indians: the Consecration of an Endangered People

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*Two years ago, UNESCO declared the oral heritage and cultural manifestations of the Zápara people of Amazonia a 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'. The Zápara thus gained worldwide recognition while remaining completely unrecognized, and even unknown, in their own countries, Peru and Ecuador. Although international public opinion is now showing interest in their fate as a result of the UNESCO distinction, these people, who are threatened with extinction, should be urgently provided with the means of preserving their language and culture which are being increasingly supplanted by the neighbouring Quechua culture.*

The Zápara are an Amazonian people who live on both sides of the border between Peru and Ecuador. The confluence of the Pindoyacu and Conambo Rivers (Ecuador) and the Tigre River (Peru) forms the heartland of their territory, although the Zápara can also be found from the Pastaza River as far as Curaray. They are estimated to number some 250<sup>1</sup> in each country and belong

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to a Zápara language cluster comprising the Iquito, the Arabela, the Andoa and the Zápara themselves. They include less than ten speakers of the Zápara Language. All the younger members of the ethnic group speak forest Quechua. This is without doubt one of the reasons for the absence of the Zápara from the ethnic map of Amazonia. They have become confused with their neighbours because of resemblances and their low numbers. In fact, in the mid 1970s, the Zápara were officially declared extinct, and therefore no longer existing, in Ecuador.<sup>2</sup> The Zápara were completely unknown in Peru before 2001. No one had heard about them, although they maintained a mysterious presence on the linguistic map of the country, no doubt a survival from the faraway past when Zápara people were known to live there.

The Zápara, who are threatened with extinction, began to undergo a process of cultural disintegration many decades ago when they drew closer to Quechua culture, either to merge with it or in order to escape other warlike neighbouring groups.

Today, thanks to the worldwide recognition promoted by UNESCO, the Zápara are receiving attention. Given sacred status, as it were, they have become visible and more active than ever in their fight to recover their ancestral lands, language and practice of shamanism, the three aspects which they proclaim as being essential to the reassertion of their identity. The recognition is helping to provide knowledge of Zápara culture and put the people once again on the ethnic map of the region. Caught between two worlds, the West and the forest, they have been consecrated by the 'outside world' and they themselves consider their environment and certain aspects of their culture as sacred.

### How the Zápara achieved sacred status (in the eyes of the world)

Having set up their organization in 1997 and ensured their recognition by the confederations of the indigenous regional and national organizations, the Zápara began to appeal to foundations and national and international bodies, which reacted positively to their views and the alarming situation of a people threatened with extinction. The 'smallest nation of equatorial Amazonia' received initial assistance from the Prodepine Project, financed by the World Bank, which initially provided the Zápara with financial support for the administration of the organization and, then, rapidly with a budget to carry out work on the Zápara language, with the collaboration of four Zápara communities and a few mother-tongue speakers who were employed to teach small children the language they had not taught their own children. The Zápara also gained the support of several national institutes, NGOs and foreign foundations<sup>3</sup> which financed activities including health programmes, the first meeting between the Zápara of the two countries after a separation of sixty years (due to the border war that separated them in 1941), as well as the recovery of certain myths in Zápara and Quechua (the main communication language of the Zápara today) in order to 'establish documentation on Zápara culture', all of which was carried out at their request and in order to preserve the Zápara people and their culture.

The House of Ecuadorian Culture and the NGO ICCI (Instituto Científico de Culturas Indígenas, Quito, Ecuador), whose director is the indigenous leader Luis Macas,<sup>4</sup> took the joint initiative of submitting the nomination of the Zápara to UNESCO. The nomination was prepared

by Carlos Andrade, the linguist working with them who informed them of the required procedure.

The Zápara were prompt in showing the greatest enthusiasm and had the highest expectations with regard to a recognition that would be experienced as a victory by a minority people, threatened with extinction, who had begun a process of reviving their language and identity. In fact, they dedicated the recognition to all the peoples of Amazonia, and wished that it would help to bring the world's attention to the minority peoples of the Amazon region and their diversity.

As in the case of the NGOs in charge of the environment and organizations responsible for the protection of nature that have begun to interest themselves in the indigenous peoples, what is at stake is the preservation of specific forms of knowledge and a culture for what they can contribute to humanity as whole.

The distinction accorded by UNESCO to their culture was first of all experienced by the Zápara as a recognition, a response to the appeals they had been launching for many years, reasserting their existence and that of their original culture. 'The recognition gave us the feeling that our elders who had been dead for long years, that they were all coming back to life. That was what we felt. *That was what the whole Zápara nation, all the different communities, felt. Listening to it all was an extremely moving experience*' (Bartolo Ushigua, President of the Zápara Organization).

Although they are still marginalized, and largely unrecognized and unknown in their own countries, they have 'become heritage' in distant lands, among white people, as witnessed by the

interest taken in them by the NGOs and foundations, and the messages of support coming from distant nations, from both governments and individuals.

The Zápara people, once declared extinct, have now achieved sacred status. Their renaissance,



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6. In the village of Masaraka (Ecuador), the cultivation of manioc is transmitted by women from generation to generation.

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combined with their organizational dynamism, have given them benchmark status in the eyes of certain organizations and institutes which all congratulate them for so much success, the most outstanding of which is the distinction – which some people<sup>5</sup> considered improbable – of ‘Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity’. In Ecuador,<sup>6</sup> in particular, they are, at one and the same time, the most unrecognized and, perhaps, one of the most prominent people in the media. The same interest is not taken in them in their country as in the West.

### The Zápara and the concept of the sacred

The Zápara use the word ‘sacred’, in Spanish *sagrado*, when referring to the outside world, to the world of the non-Zápara and, more generally, to the non-indigenous world. In the Quechua language, which is the main language of communication, the term ‘*sinchi*’, which denotes force and power, is what best conveys their conception of the sacred. Thus, the mountains that the Zápara term sacred in Spanish are *sinchi* in Quechua.

Today, the Zápara say that the forest is sacred. Before, this was not an issue. The forest was there, full of meaning and representations that there was no need to name.

The intensive exploitation of the forest and the growing need to ensure its defence and protection led the Zápara to begin to associate it with the idea of sacred. It thus became sacred when it became threatened. ‘*There are many sacred plants and animals in our land, and what’s going to happen if oil companies are going to come in and destroy us? Where shall we go?*’ asked Bartolo Ushiga at the

National Congress of Ecuador. But this is not the same definition of the sacred as that of the environmentalist movements. Nor that of the biodiversity as defined by westerners in the search for a supposedly ‘virgin’ or ‘pure’ nature – which is now known to be false since the work of W. Balée,<sup>7</sup> for example. It is that of social life, the social organization and relations that men and women maintain with the forest, plants and animals. For the Indians, there is no discontinuity, no rupture between nature and culture, between human beings and the non-human animals and plants.

The Zápara believe that certain mountains, certain sites are the loci of a particular history; that certain lagoons are sacred. In their fight against extinction, everything linking them to the past becomes sacred: objects passed down from generation to generation continue in existence and defy the passing of time, they sometimes include material objects (pottery, wooden artefacts, stones). Likewise, objects obtained through the agency of dreams, sometimes from an ancestor, become sacred because of their inherent force.

When the Zápara talk about the ‘sacred’, what they call sacred identifies them as being Zápara, asserts their belonging to their territory and denotes their inclusion in regional history. In short, they are asserting their historic existence in a present from which they had long been excluded. This is an inclusion in space as well as in time, given that the sacred places and objects in question are to be found in a cultural space to which they also lay claim: ‘*We all have our territorial as well as cultural space. Each culture has its own way of managing its forest.*’<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the concept of cultural space, combined with the different cultural

manifestations, is at the root of the distinction accorded by UNESCO. The Zápara see the concept as the linchpin of their priority project of reviving their identity: *'We were practically finished as a nation. But, with this declaration [from UNESCO], we are going to work, we have plans, to rescue our culture, our identity, our language, and defend our territory, because they are our life. We function best in our forest.'*

The word 'sacred' has been taken over by everyone, the Zápara, the Westerners, but it is still impossible to define it. Its definition is of little account, however. What is important is the value attributed to the term and the issues raised. Our common definition of the sacred, namely something that is inviolable, intangible and of immeasurable value, is not enough to define the term (what they call *sagrado*) from the point of view of the Zápara. The sacred for them is no doubt that, but it is also something of which they are being increasingly dispossessed, something which is escaping from their control and being lost but which, none the less, defines their Zápara essence. The forest and all that it contains: forces and spirits. Lagoons, mountains, all the different elements that enable them to reassert their identity in a crisis situation.

The process of 'Quechuzation'<sup>9</sup> notwithstanding, they have been able to preserve certain aspects of their culture: fragments of their language, songs the meaning of which is not always clear to non-Zápara speakers, myths, such as those of Tsitsano, Akamaru and Piatsaw, stories dealing with the past, the oral history that is passed down the generations, knowledge of the beings that inhabit the world (both the knowledge of animals taught in the myth of Tsitsano and that acquired

when learning to hunt), the knowledge of plants and their most common and most secret uses (the knowledge shamans transmit to their pupils).

The Zápara have thus maintained their 'way of seeing the world', their world-view which they intend to transmit, perhaps seeing in it, given their moribund language, the only way they can continue to exist as a specific people. In fact, it is essentially their language and shamanism, the most accomplished expression of their world-view, that distinguish them from their neighbours.

Their two greatest worries, at the present time, are the loss of their language – with less than ten speakers – and that of their shamanism. Although the recovery of their language is their first priority, they also place great value on the knowledge of the shamans. The Zápara say, though, that they will no longer be able to recover the knowledge of their ancestors, shamans *par excellence*, because of the degradation of their relations with the plants and animals as well as the exploitation of the forest (especially since the arrival of the oil companies in the 1920s).

The interest shown by the West was, perhaps, what led the Zápara people to begin to ascribe a sacred character to their endangered language. This is a recent development, and it started with the contact with the NGOs which showed interest in the Zápara people because they were threatened with extinction. When the Zápara saw that the concern of the Western world (North America and Europe, in particular) was growing in proportion to their progression down the road to extinction,<sup>10</sup> they understood that their threatened extinction gave their language and very existence



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greater value and, even, consecrated them in the eyes of the West.

They have now adopted corresponding views, and are defending them as do other endangered peoples who are visited and redefined by the outside world.

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In the days following the proclamation, the Zápara took pleasure in calling one another 'heritage' or 'intangible'. These self-derisive exchanges in Spanish also showed that they were putting the consecration in perspective: a recognition by the outside world, given and prepared from the outside, and which they did not even initiate (at least, not at the initial stage). Although well aware of the importance of the distinction, they have yet to measure all its implications. What are the consequences of this heritage status? How is it all to be explained to the elders? The leaders of the Zápara organization of Ecuador have told them that the entire world now knows that they exist and wishes that they continue to exist as a people, and that they will, therefore, be able to relearn their language and consolidate their status as the Zápara people.

Such is the full import of the distinction accorded by UNESCO: facilitate the continuing existence of the Zápara world-view (knowledge, relations, myths, etc.) and its transmission; this means the continuing existence of forms of knowledge, and of a world-view and praxis which are all unique. What UNESCO has consecrated is the originality of a way of seeing and being in the world that is being lost and of which humanity risks being forever deprived.

## | NOTES

1 They comprise the Zápara and their descendants.

2 Piedad and Alfredo Costales, 1975, 'La Familia Etnolingüística Zápara', *Ethos*, 1, 11.

3 They include Ecorae (Ecuador), Pharmacists without Borders (France), Pachamama, Seeds (United States).

4 Luis Macas was one of the founders of CONATE (Confederación Nacional de Nacionalidades Indígenas) and one of its most charismatic presidents. He is also the Vice-Chancellor of the Intercultural University of the Indigenous Peoples of Quito.

5 The Ecuadorian Minister of Education, Roberto Hanze, reacted to the nomination in this way: 'If there were such a recognition, I would see it as stupendous because this is an ethnic group that was on the verge of extinction', *El Universo*, (Guayaquil, Ecuador), 22 May 2001.

6 In Peru, the Zápara have no legal existence which is recognized by the indigenous confederations or a territory in their own name. As recently as 2001, there was no information on the existence of the Zápara of Peru in the Ministry of Education or Aidesep (the Inter-ethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Forest). To date, no announcement has been made about them in Peru.

7 Amazonia, as we know it, is the product of several millennia of occupation. The highest levels of biodiversity are to be found in the garden sites that have remained unoccupied for several decades. Cf. William Balée, 1994, *Footprints of the Forest: Ka'apor Ethnobotany*, New York, Columbia University Press.

8 Bartolo Ushigua, President of ONZAE, Radio Luna, 30 May 2001, Quito.

9 By Quechuanization, we mean the process of the spread of the vehicular Quechua language and culture initially spearheaded by missionaries.

10 For proof of this, one need only read the special press editions on the 'forgotten peoples' or 'custodians of the earth' of certain magazines. For example, in France, *Terre Sauvage*, No. 171, 2002, 'les peuples gardiens de la terre', *Grands Reportages*, No. 227, 2000, 'peuples oubliés: franchiront-ils le siècle?', with '20 voyages pour découvrir les peuples en sursis'.



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7. Vaudou dances and rituals are an important part of traditional culture in Haiti where they are used as a means to come into contact with the divine.

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