Ecuador: Siekopai siege, dispossession and resistance

*From the first contact with the Western world, the Siekopai have had to resist and fight for their territories and lives. The Amazonian people are affected by the expansion of the oil frontier, the monoculture of African palm, the invasion of settlers, forced displacements, and the contamination of their food sources. These people, who suffered division through the borders created by the States of Peru and Ecuador, now fight against extractivists in a Justice system and a State that does not guarantee their rights to their ancestral territory.*

By Pablo Ortiz-T. - March 1st 2023

"A little beyond them live the Siona who have died. The ñanserapái live at the end of the earth, where it ends [the margins of the world]. They do not die either; they live forever. They live as we live, but they do not die. They live near a huge lagoon where there are many toucans, ñansé, that is why they are called ñanserápai [the people of the toucan lagoon]. These people have crowns made of toucan feathers and para jé e saipé. The feathers of the crown are very blue. They live there; I saw them".

*The Fascination of Evil - Maria Susana Cipolletti and Fernando Payaguaje*
Like most indigenous peoples of the Amazon, the Siekopai have experienced the dramatic and perverse effects of expanding Christian, capitalist, and Western civilization. Today, the dispossession of their territories has intensified, while at the same time, a resistance movement has emerged that seeks to defend the last remaining Siekopai territorial stronghold. In a markedly adverse environment, the resistance seeks to reunify a nation separated by an inter-state border, along with recognition of their rights to self-determination.

**Elements of place and memory**

Today, the Siekopai people are distributed in four communities along the middle course of the Aguarico River and a small area of the Lagartococha River. However, their ancestral territory was much more significant. During colonial times, they resisted the Spanish and Portuguese and managed to maintain their independence. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they suffered the consequences of the rubber boom: exploitation, slavery, death, and the extermination of other Amazonian peoples. Despite the collapse of the rubber economy, the Siekopai remained tied to work on the hacienda under critical conditions.

After the 1941 war between Ecuador and Peru that fixed the border limits, some Siekopai families left Lagartococha and settled with their Ziona relatives in Cuyabeno to live harmoniously. Attracted by the Ecuadorian Siekopai’s freedom, new groups left the Peruvian side in the following years to return to their ancestral territory and try to reunite the Siekopai nation divided by the border. This process accelerated with the signing the Peace Agreement between the two countries in 1998. To this day, the Siekopai government seeks cultural, political, and territorial integration: one of the focal points that mobilizes its agenda.

After the rubber cycle came the oil economy; in 1963, the U.S.-based Texaco expanded exploration beyond the Aguarico River, invading the Siekopai territory. Later, other operators would arrive and intensify the process of dispossession and aggression until the present day. One of the most significant social and environmental impacts of the expansion of the oil frontier and its corresponding road infrastructure would be the
entry of settlers and indigenous people from outside the area, especially Kichwa. In turn, the roads would facilitate the access of land traffickers.

The colonization promoted by the State under military control forced the settlers to deforest half of the forests and replace them with pastures or monocultures as a requirement to obtain a land title. At present, the land adjudication situation is critical for the Siekopai. The Siekopai has more than 100,000 hectares, of which the State has recognized only 42,614, and 10% are in the protected area of the Cuyabeno Wildlife Production Reserve.

**From evangelicals to Oxy oil company**

The dynamics of dispossession and territorial control by external agents have always been accompanied by missionaries, whether Catholic or evangelical. The latter acted in association with the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), which, in 1952, entered the country within the framework of United State cooperation and a process of capitalist modernization linked to the presence of extractive capital, colonization processes, and rural development. SIL ([originally the Wycliffe Bible Translators Corporation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wycliffe_Bible_Translators)) proposed a project with a scientific appearance: the study of aboriginal languages. It is how anthropologist Jorge Trujillo explains it: "The missionaries would seek a real and effective control of the indigenous peoples, to the point of submitting them to the dictates of the bureaucratic apparatus, eliminating any form of autonomous and organized expression of the indigenous people."

In this way, the Summer Institute of Linguistics missionaries contributed to the destruction of indigenous cultures through the Practical Services Program. Later, these methodologies and approaches were taken up in the 1970s by U.S. companies such as Texaco and Occidental (Oxy). Lawyer Judith Kimmerling describes the second case: "At the beginning, they promise to respect local culture and seek 'welfare forever,' but when oil exploitation is underway, the company's interest changes.

In 1996, Occidental became the concessionaire of Block 15, which it operated for ten years until its contract expired and oil activities were transferred to the state-owned
company Petroecuador. The companies should have applied the free, prior, and informed consultation procedure, although Ecuador had already signed ILO Convention 169 and even incorporated this right in the 1998 Constitution. It would be the preamble to an endless list of violations of the Siekopai's rights, to the point that the Secoya Indigenous Organization of Ecuador (OISE) denounced in 1998 the company's non-compliance and abuses.

In response, Occidental deployed a strategy of persuasion and division within the organization until it signed a "Code of Conduct" that eliminated the possibility of vetoing the Siekopai's community and environmental projects promoted by the company. The agreement was limited to providing specific infrastructure to local communities, such as community houses, basketball courts, toilets, and scholarships to send children to school. It also offered training courses in agriculture, mechanics, dressmaking, and ethnographic research on the Siekopai.

**Oil and palm oil companies: damage and disarticulation**

Over time, Occidental's community and environmental projects neutralized the actions and facilitated oil operations. The transfer to the state-owned Petroamazonas only meant abandoning most of the projects and replacing them with the public company's shares "Ecuador Estratégico". Like Oxy, the state company prioritized a focused and clientelistic type of intervention, which left aside the expectations of the Siekopai regarding their territorial problems and their conflicts with the colonists.

Simultaneously, in 2006 the oil company Andes Petroleum entered as a concessionaire of block 62: the share capital was made up of the Chinese state-owned companies China National Petroleum Corporation (55%) and China Petrochemical Corporation (45%). The operation was completed with the purchase of the assets of Canadian EnCana. In the words of the president of the Siekopai nation, Justino Piaguaje: "The operations of the Chinese companies in our territory have affected some communities that feed from the AriPokoya estuary, whose waters are now turbid. The company dug deep canals without prior consultation with the communities and failed to share and divulge the Environmental Impact Study".
Another area of siege and dispossession of the Siekopai territory has been associated with the agro-industrial capital of African palm companies. In the mid-1980s, during the government of León Febres Cordero, the State granted the Palmeras del Ecuador company a concession for 9,850 hectares within the ancestral territory of San Pablo de Katëtsiaya. Since then, monoculture plantations have expanded to the upper reaches of the Shushufindi River basin.

The indiscriminate use of agrochemicals and poor waste treatment have contaminated rivers and water sources within the Siekopai territory. The contamination has affected the availability of vital water for families and has wiped out the ichthyofauna, one of the primary food sources. Today, the four Siekopai communities, which have the area’s last remnants of tropical forest, are surrounded by agro-industrial monoculture.

**Conservation or dispossession? Protected areas and deterritorialization**

Another factor in the deterritorialization of the Siekopai is paradoxically associated with conservation. In 1989, the Ecuadorian State imposed the creation of the Cuyabeno Fauna Production Reserve (RPFC) without involving the ancestral peoples living in these territories. Neither the definition of boundaries, the establishment of objectives, nor the implementation of management plans for the protected area involved the Siekopai. Thus, the displacement and eviction of the region’s indigenous peoples were made in the name of conservation.

The creation of the RPFC also affected the neighboring A’i Kofán peoples who moved to the Siekopai territory. There, the A’i Kofán founded a community called Zábalo and, years later, signed a land use and management agreement. However, the State’s promise to conserve the territories was never fulfilled because the environmental authority could not prevent successive reserve invasions by land traffickers and settlers. One of the best-known cases was that of Nea Ña (Río de Aguas Negras).

“The lack of control, boundaries, and inclusive negotiations with the Siekopai led to the Aguas Negras sector being affected by colonization processes. After making the corresponding claims, we could temporarily evict the settlers”, explains Justino Piaguaje.
After a phase of persistent conflicts, the Siekopai signed an agreement to establish camps, hunting, and fishing trails. This agreement was never respected by the settlers who decided to invade these areas again. Celestino Piaguaje recounts how people witnessed the expansion of colonization: “The officials did not allow us to delimit our territory because the sector would be declared a protected area. They told us not to worry because the State would guarantee that there would be no invasions”.

**Resistance and struggle for reterritorialization**

Deception, unfulfilled promises, and negligence have marked the behavior of the Ecuadorian state authorities over the last three decades. The Siekopai nation has filed legal actions as a central means of processing their demands and defending their collective rights. However, these efforts have been in vain: those responsible for the evictions often must comply with court orders.

In one of the most representative cases, the Siekopai were forced to evict settlers who, in 2008, came to occupy 200 hectares of the San Pablo de Katëtsiaya Community. Similarly, in 2015 they filed a writ of protection for a claim of vindication against the invaders. Three years later, the Provincial Court of Sucumbios ratified the ancestral character of said territory and ordered the immediate eviction of the settlers. However, as of 2022, the ruling had not been enforced. "For us, this invasion process and the lack of timely action by the authorities has meant the dispossession of ancestral territory," says Piaguaje.

Faced with the persistent siege and the few guarantees provided by the State, since 2017, they have formally raised the free adjudication and legalization of 90,000 hectares of their ancestral territory in the sector of Pë`ëkë`ya (Lagarto Cocha) and Sokoro (Zancudo Cocha), within the Cuyabeno Wildlife Production Reserve. This claim has provoked new conflicts with the Kichwa communities of Zancudo and A'I de Zábalo. "Because of the war, I was left here and my sister on the other side. I want to go back to live with her, I want to go fishing in Pë`ëkë`ya, we want to continue being siekopai," says Roque Payaguaje.
Similarly, at 79 years old, Maruja Payaguaje explains that Pë`ëkë`ya is the reason for her existence because it was planted and cared for by her grandparents: "This territory cannot be forgotten by us, because spirituality is there, that is why I say that I am here, but when it is my turn to die, I will return to this place to reach the immortality that our grandparents always told".

Pablo Ortiz-T. is a sociologist with and Ph.D. in Cultural Studies. He is also the State and Development Research Group (GIEDE) coordinator of the Salesian Polytechnic University, Quito, and associate researcher of IWGIA. Contact: portiz@ups.edu.ec