

Give Me A Name, Give Me A God, Give Me A Land: The Waorani'S History of Contact and Evangelism

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Abstract

For generations, the Waorani people were known as the "Aucas," a term used to designate their family groups. However, in September 1955, missionaries from the Summer Linguistic Institute-Wycliffe Books Translators (SLI-WBT) and Fellowship-Christian Mission in Many Lands (FAM) were hired by the Ecuadorian government to evangelize, pacify, and civilize these indigenous groups. This marked the beginning of the so-called Auca's operation, aimed at contacting and evangelizing a clan of Waorani near the Curaray River settlement. Employing strategies such as dropping steel objects from airplanes as gifts, the missionaries sought to build trust with the Waorani. This paper utilizes extensive ethnographic data and the lens of orientalism to explore how colonialism transformed the mindset and ethos of the Waorani people. It examines the cultural changes resulting not only from physical domination but also from the colonization of the mind, which reshaped their perception of places, people, and history. By analyzing the hegemonic construction of the other, it seeks to elucidate the impact on modern Waorani identity in the Ecuadorian rainforest.

Keywords: *Waorani, Evangelism, Civilizations, Religion, Amazon Cultures*

INTRODUCTION

In the 1940s, the Dutch Shell Oil Company initiated exploration activities in the territory of the Waorani people, located in the Ecuadorian Amazon area, particularly between the Arajuno and Curaray river basins. They established an initial camp to conduct seismic prospecting operations across this vast region. The term *Auca* (meaning naked savage in the Kichwa language) had been used for some time to designate or identify family groups within the Waorani community. However, in 1956, a new chapter began in the relationship between the Waorani and the Ecuadorian state, marked by the intervention of the Summer Linguistic Institute-Wycliffe Books Translators (SLI-WBT), an evangelical Baptist organization from the United States. The Ecuadorian government had contracted them to civilize, pacify, and evangelize the Waorani, who had been causing disturbances in the Pastaza and Napo provinces. Rodolf Blonberg's book "The Naked Auca" (1957) accurately chronicles these events, contributing to the creation of the image of the fierce *Aucas* – groups of warriors from the tropical jungle who were resistant to Western contact and civilization. Leaders such as Moipa, Iteka, Wepe, and Guikita fiercely defended their territory, frequently attacking oil workers, resulting in casualties on both sides. These conflict-ridden encounters persist in the oral history of today's Waorani (1).

Modern Waorani history began when missionaries from the SLI entered Waorani territory with the intention of civilizing and pacifying them. However, they became the first martyrs of civilization, as they were killed by the very people they sought to civilize following initial contact. The so-called "Auca operation" commenced with an aggressive contact strategy, followed by the arrival of anthropologists and linguists who undertook the challenging task of understanding a culture resistant to contact and assimilation. Catalina Peek and James Yost, two scientists from SLI, gave the Waorani a new name – "Waorani." The word "wao" in the Wao tededo language means "man," and "Waorani" translates to "the true men" or "the real men." This self-identification established ethnic boundaries against other groups, whom they referred to as "cuwuri" or "non-Waorani," often

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perceived as hostile or even cannibalistic. These ethnic boundaries long defined the warlike relations between the Waorani and neighboring ethnic groups, including indigenous peoples, settlers, loggers, and oil workers (2).

Subsequently, the "Auca operation" initiated a rapid process of reconfiguring Waorani territories. At that time, the Waorani inhabited a vast territory of over 20,000 square kilometers, divided into four main nomadic groups, totaling approximately 500 individuals. According to James Yost (1981), a group of 50 individuals from the Piyemoiri group joined the Guequetairi group along the Teweno River. The Piyemoiri group consisted of around 104 individuals, located in the headwaters of the Tiputini and Tivacunao rivers. By 1968, the Guikitairi group established contact with the rest of the Piyemoiri group, merging with them. In 1959, the Bahuairi group, residing in the lower Tigüino, was located by air and subsequently relocated to a protected area. In 1970, SLI made contact with the Wepeiri group, a remote faction separated from the Tihueno group four decades earlier. They had sought refuge along the Gabaro River, a tributary of the Nashiño River, establishing new family ties. Yost also noted that between 1971 and 1976, several relatives of the Wepeiri group settled in the so-called Waorani protectorate, increasing the population to nearly 500 individuals residing in an extensive jungle area (3).

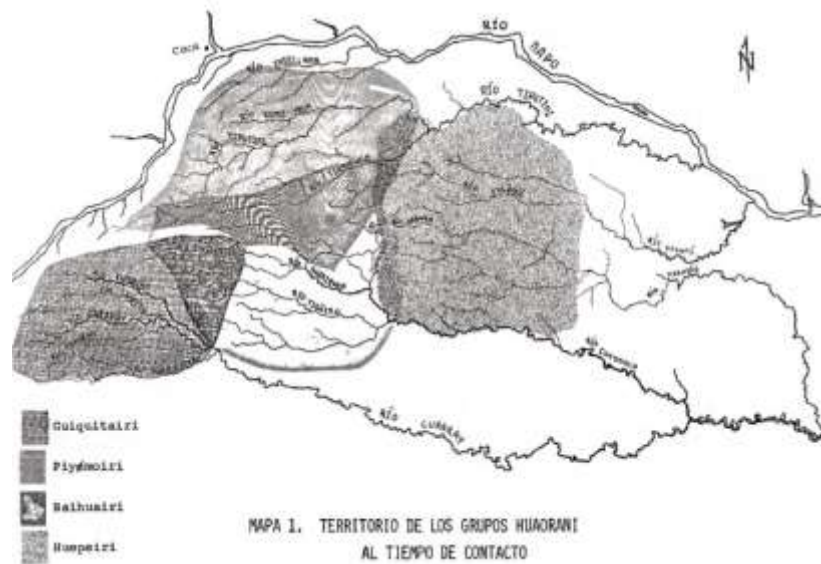


Figure 1: Waorani Territory according to SLI (1955)

Source: Yost (1981)

The ancestral territory of this cultural group was located between the Napo (Bataaboro) and Curaray (Ewengono) rivers, with several clan groups or extended families controlling different areas. James Yost located the following groups before contact with western culture:

- ✓ Guikitairi: Upper Curaray
- ✓ Kempereire: Tivacuno-High Tiputini
- ✓ Piyemoiri: Tiputini-Cononaco
- ✓ Nenquimoiri: Cononaco
- ✓ Bahuairi: Cononaco-Curaray
- ✓ Wepeiri: Lower Tiputini-Yasuni-Nashiño

The historical settlement pattern of the Waorani group was modified with the evangelization and simultaneous civilization process imposed by the missionaries of the SLI to control them. They created an area called the protectorate where they were gathered to group them in small villages and change their nomadism and warfare for spaces of peace (4).

METHODOLOGY APPROACH

Traditionally, Western civilization has held the view that its culture is superior to all others. Edward Said (1990) asserts that Western societies consider themselves more civilized and educated than the rest of the world. This perception has historically justified Western colonialism, where Western civilization sought to dominate and impose its values on different ethnic groups and countries under the guise of "civilizing" them. Said describes this phenomenon in his book *Orientalism*, which outlines how Western powers approached Asian territories through methods such as Anglo-based propaganda, erasure of local history, and assimilation of native cultures (5).

Similarly, Talal Asad (1973) argues that colonialism is driven by ethnocentric beliefs that justify the superiority of the colonizer's morals, values, technology, and culture over those of the colonized. These beliefs, rooted in racist and pseudo-scientific theories, date back to the 18th and 19th centuries and perpetuate the idea that Western society is inherently superior to non-European cultures (6).

This paper employs the concept of orientalism to elucidate how colonialism manifests not only through physical domination but also through the colonization of the mind. Panivong Norindr (1996) explores similar themes in his book *Phantasmatic Indochina*, demonstrating how colonial ideology constructs imaginary representations of places, people, and history (7).

We aim to explain the hegemonic construction of the "other" and the relationship between religion, ethnography, and colonialism through two examples:

a) **Racism and the construction of the "other"**: Western colonizers often portrayed colonized cultures as inferior and in need of civilization. This perception justified colonial exploitation and control. Classic ethnographies reinforced these stereotypes, depicting colonized peoples as uncivilized and savage compared to the "civilized" colonizers.

b) **Cultural assimilation of indigenous peoples**: Colonizers believed it was their duty to "civilize" indigenous peoples by imposing their own religious beliefs and cultural practices. This paternalistic attitude reinforced colonial power dynamics and perpetuated cultural imperialism.

The concept of the "other" served to dehumanize and marginalize colonized peoples, reinforcing the hierarchical and racist worldview of Western culture. Eurocentrism, which posits Western values and institutions as universal and superior, has deeply influenced the ideologies of colonialism and racism, perpetuating a legacy of domination and exploitation in regions like Latin America (8). The classic notion of the other, starkly contrasts with the developed and civilized Western world, often depicted as savage, barbarous, and primitive, associated with superstitions, childishness, ignorance, and underdevelopment. The Other is viewed as exotic and innocent, perhaps noble, yet potentially violent and dangerous, and thus deemed necessary to be subjugated in accordance with civilized rationality. The concepts of superiority and inferiority have long been used to measure civilization, contributing to an implicitly hierarchical and racist imaginary map of the world within Western culture.

Identifying as Western European or White American has historically implied a sense of superiority over other peoples. Western values and institutions have been portrayed as having universal significance or representing universal history, largely due to the hegemonic influence of Western culture. Eurocentrism has pervaded the bodies and minds of peoples in what is commonly referred to as the third world, perpetuated through various ideologies, including colonial racism. In Latin America, feelings of inferiority vis-à-vis Europe, often perceived as superior, are widespread. This sentiment stems from the belief that Latin American cultures and genetic heritage were shaped by the conquest and colonization carried out by Spanish conquerors (9).

DISCUSSION: MISION, INDIGENOS PEOPLES AND CULTURAL CLASH

Two U.S. evangelical missionary organizations expressed interest in contacting and converting the Waorani people during the 1950s. In 1950, the Fellowship Aviation Mission (FAM), associated with the Christian Mission in Many Lands, provided aviation services from the Shell settlement to the Summer Linguistic Institute

(SLI), a missionary service based in the Loreto and Limoncocha villages. The SLI aimed to translate the Bible into indigenous languages such as Kichwa and Waorani, and to convert Amazonian indigenous groups to Christianity.

In September 1955, missionaries from both FAM and SLI initiated Operation Auca, a plan to peacefully contact the Waorani near a settlement on the Curaray River. Utilizing reconnaissance flights, the missionaries located this family group, naming the first site "Teweno" or "Terminal City." Over several months, as part of their contact strategy, they dropped steel objects (axes, machetes, knives, pots, etc.) from airplanes as gifts, in the hope of gaining the trust of the Waorani.

On January 8, 1956, a group of five missionaries (Nate Saint, Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, Ed McCully, and Roger Youderian) landed on a narrow sandbank on the Curaray River, which they called Palm Beach, near Terminal City. However, this initial contact ended tragically, with the missionaries found dead, killed by spears in a confusing incident that remains incompletely understood (10).

The Dayuma'S Memories

Raquel Saint, an SLI missionary, learns about an Auca woman who appears on a property owned by Carlos Sevilla, a prominent rubber planter in the region. This encounter leads to the meeting with Dayuma, the woman who would play a crucial role in pacifying the Waorani and transforming them from savages to human beings (11).

The circumstances surrounding Dayuma's appearance on the Sevilla hacienda are unclear. Cabodevilla suggests that she fled there due to inter-clan massacres that had nearly wiped out her family. Other accounts implicate Carlos Sevilla himself, who ventured into Auca territory and, in a retaliatory "raid," killed several members of the group, including kidnapping Dayuma, as revenge for a previous attack on his men and supplies downstream of the Arajuno river.

Sevilla subsequently employed Dayuma on his ranch, where she bore a son (Caento) and later married a Kichwa man from the area. When Raquel Saint found her, she engaged in a prolonged conflict with Capuchin Catholic missionaries over Dayuma's protection and that of the Waorani in general. Dayuma came under the care of the SLI, where she was clothed, introduced to the Christian God, and converted. Raquel Saint viewed the discovery of Dayuma as a divine revelation and a significant step toward civilizing the Waorani (12).

Dayuma's return to Ecuador saw her fully committed to evangelism, while Raquel Saint, having learned the Waorani language, resumed her missionary work in the Amazon jungles as a divine envoy of peace. Her mission was to return to her territory, reunite with her family, and convey the message of the new God, urging them to abandon violence and embrace a new way of life. Dayuma became an emissary of the SLI and the evangelical God, striving to unite her people in a single area and convert them to Christianity (11-12).

The Wind That Speaks of a Christian God

In 1958, Raquel Saint and Elizabeth Elliot, sister and wife respectively of two of the slain missionaries, returned to the United States to raise funds to continue Operation Auca. With increased financial support, they returned to Ecuador and began peaceful contact efforts with the Waorani. Utilizing small planes, they dropped gifts from the sky and used loudspeakers to convey messages to the Waorani, urging them to cease violence and meet with their Christian brethren (13).

Between 1959 and 1968, Dayuma and Rachel Saint relocated the Waorani to the settlement known as Teweno or Terminal City, enticing them with promises of peace, food, and a new, benevolent God. During this forced contact period, the Teweno population swelled from 50 to 525 individuals, representing 90% of the Waorani population at the time. The relocation brought together rival clans, dramatically impacting Waorani material and symbolic culture.

However, the transition was challenging, as the relocated Waorani faced food shortages and inter-group rivalries, requiring intervention from Rachel Saint to ensure their survival. Concerned about dependency on

missionaries, the SLI dispatched anthropologist James Yost to monitor the situation and advocate for the creation of new Waorani communities with sustainable resources (14).

By 1969, the Ecuadorian state allocated 1,600 square kilometers to the ILV, known as "the Protectorate," where they concentrated efforts to pacify the majority of Waorani clans. However, not all clans accepted relocation, with some choosing to remain in the jungle, maintaining traditional lifestyles. During these early years of contact, Waorani culture underwent significant transformation, with missionaries discouraging traditional practices and introducing Christianity. The Waorani entered the monetary economy, leading to increased interaction with missionaries, oil workers, and later, tourist companies. Despite these changes, pockets of Waorani maintained traditional lifestyles, resisting outside influences. The missionary endeavor led by Rachel Saint came to an end with her death in 1994, after four decades of working with the Waorani (16).

CONCLUSION: IMPACTS OF THE CHRISTIAN REDUCTIONS

In the 1960s and beyond, problems escalated with the arrival of various oil companies in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Oil workers were periodically injured or killed when they came into contact with the Aucas. Due to a requirement from the Ecuadorian government, the Summer Linguistic Institute (SLI) and Rachel Saint initiated an intense campaign to relocate some Waorani families, particularly the Niwairi group from Napo and Curaray, who were attacking the oil workers, to the initial protectorate.

The classic portrayal of the other is radically different from the developed and civilized Western world. It is often depicted as savage, barbarous, and primitive, associated with superstitions instead of religious beliefs, childishness rather than law, and characterized by ignorance and underdevelopment rather than a lack of resources. The other is seen as exotic and innocent, yet potentially violent and dangerous, and thus must be subdued according to the rationale of civilized society. Concepts of superiority and inferiority have long been used to measure civilization. The Western cultural worldview implicitly included hierarchical and racist elements, with Western Europeans or white Americans considering themselves superior to other peoples. Western values and institutions were often seen as having universal significance or a universal history, linked to the power of the dominant culture. Eurocentrism has permeated the bodies and minds of people in the so-called third world across various ideologies, including colonial racism. In Latin America, there is a common feeling of inferiority in comparison to Europe, attributed to the belief that people are shaped by the culture and genetic heritage of races defeated and colonized by Spanish conquerors.

The reductions involved the forced abandonment of traditional hunting grounds and cultural reproduction territories, which are now delineated by Yasuni National Park and the Waorani Ethnic Territory. Interestingly, this relocation of populations facilitated oil operations in the area, as the primary obstacle (the indigenous people) had been moved. This altered the historical settlement patterns of the Waorani, with evangelization and simultaneous processes of civilization imposed by SLI missionaries. Not all Waorani families migrated to the protectorate; some groups remained in the jungle, continuing their traditional way of life. Groups from the so-called lower Cononaco, living near Yasuni, including Nampahueiris, Wepeiris, Waneiris, Baihuairis, and Kempereiris, never moved to the SLI village, remaining in their territories for several more years without contact (16).

Presently, most Waorani population groups reside in the area known as the protectorate, corresponding to those evangelized by the missionaries. The missionaries significantly influenced the transition from a "wild" existence to a modern one, achieving their main goal of civilizing and modernizing the Waorani. The pacification of the Indians and their consolidation into villages had three significant impacts on Waorani cultural life: a) The emergence of large, b) uninhabited jungle spaces., c) an explosive demographic increase, resulting in reduced intra-group homicides and diseases through vaccinations, thereby lowering morbidity and mortality rates. In less than 50 years, the Waorani population increased from around 500 to 3000, and finally, d) the aggregation of former rivals generated discontent and internal conflict among them.

By 1972, the majority of the Waorani had abandoned their traditional residential territory and relocated to the protectorate, situated at the southwestern extremity of their territory. Many were transported by plane with their belongings, leaving thousands of kilometers of land empty and uninhabited.

The pacification of the Aucas or Waorani was one of the most ambitious projects of the Ecuadorian state, driven not only by the presence of remnants of "savage" people in the country but also by the immense natural resources found in their territories. The ultimate questions remain: ¿Did the SLI have the right to change the Waorani people and their culture? Who granted them the power to impose new moral rules, ethos, and worldview on the Waorani? The final answers to these questions are complex, but this brief narrative reflects the unequal conception of the world and of others.

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