Two Faces of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Ecuador

Waorani Egalitarian Health Responses in the Light of National Public Health Inequalities

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Abstract This paper reviews notes taken during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. It offers a contrast between early reactions and public health measures in urban areas of Ecuador, as opposed to the Ecuadorian Amazon, in particular the Waorani territory where most notes were written. The Waorani people remained in relative isolation until few decades ago, and still have families that refuse any peaceful contact with outsiders; the process of contact for the Waorani, as for other Amazonian people also meant dealing with several epidemics and territorial pressures. It is in this historical context that COVID-19 reached the forest; colonial history, and modern-day quasi-colonial relations between the state and indigenous people meaning that most diseases and deaths among indigenous people have not been acknowledged by the government. This silence contributes to inequality in health outcomes.

Keywords: Ecuador – pandemic – Amazonia – Waorani

Introduction

Returning to a year-old pandemic diary while still facing a COVID-19 outbreak is not easy. Still, the Curare Journal's proposal to think over these notes, might be a good chance to share worries, initial understandings, and hopes. Here, I review some notes taken during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. These notes were mostly written while quarantining in the Yasuní National Park[1], a territory that overlaps with the Waorani's ancestral land, up north in the Ecuadorian Amazonia. The last part of the diary was written in Cuenca, an Andean city located in the south of Ecuador, which is my home.

When Ecuador declared the first COVID-19-related quarantine, I was conducting research among the Waorani people focused on their notion of health, as part of an ongoing project developed alongside Waorani leaders and an interdisciplinary team of public health professionals[2], aiming to understand and –hopefully– address some of the contemporary social and environmental determinants of health affecting Waorani people living near oil camps. The results of this work have not been published yet, and the fieldnotes that I review here are part of a preliminary attempt to understand the pandemic, although the reflections are informed by previous long-term ethnographic work (see Bravo Díaz 2020a).

The first section includes a brief introduction to Waorani people, while considering their first responses to the pandemic. A second section discusses access to information and responses to pandemic-related news in the forest. A third section offers an analysis of the notion of isolation and the practice of it, noting different meanings applied to COVID-19 by people living in the forest. This is followed by a consideration of how public health measures were navigated in the forest and in urban areas. This paper finishes with a reflection on the lack of access to accurate and differentiated data about indigenous disease and deaths, and the position of the anthropologist while writing/thinking/feeling from the periphery throughout a pandemic.

A new disease in the forest, again?

The Waorani people with whom I have worked live in settlements located near oil camps and along roads that connect those camps. Living in permanent settlements in the oil milieu means changes in the Waorani livelihoods; they note that the for-

est near the roads is being depleted and the rivers contaminated. Hence, many families include processed food in their diet and rely on temporary jobs for accessing products from the market. Yet, permanent settlements are relatively new among the Waorani – the first village was stablished by missionaries after promoting a process of contact that started in the late 1950s – most settlements respond to the need to ensure political recognition by the Ecuadorian state and access to external resources, such as those delivered by oil companies. The Waorani seem to have remained in relative isolation for centuries and their language is different from other known phylum (Rival 2016: 49–50). They used to live on forest hilltops changing settlements every few months, organized in groups of related but geographically distant longhouses, each one formed by up to 35 close relatives and a few permanent followers and visitors (Rival 2002: 94–99). Contemporary villages in which I have conducted fieldwork reach up to 280 people, but tensions are frequent and when they arise people tend to abandon these large villages and form new settlements resembling the longhouse organization.

An analysis of the Waorani relation with the oil economy (Lu, Valdivia & Silva 2017) is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to note that the expansion of the oil frontier into Waorani territory started alongside attempts to contacting them. The Waorani lived in relative isolation in a vast territory until they were pushed to move to the missionary village in the South of their territory in the 1960s and 1970s (see Cabodevilla 1994: 383–393); when some families moved back to their ancestral land up North, there was ongoing oil extraction. In other words, they were forced to deal with the expansion of the oil frontier, a process that brought with it multiple waves of colonization. Young generations are currently dealing with the depletion of their forest resources, while struggling to find ways to access money, goods, and services without depending on the oil companies. In the areas where I have worked, the latter is expressed more as an aspiration rather than a current possibility. The oil-related economy is particularly difficult to navigate because there is an entanglement between the oil companies and the Ecuadorian state, resulting in social services being offered as compensations for people's agreement with new oil extraction (Bravo Díaz 2021).

While the Waorani have organized at a national level to protest against the extractive developmental model, and the national indigenous movement is the strongest social movement in Ecuador, their claims have not been listened to. The pandemic irrupted just a few months after the October 2019 indigenous national protest (see Altmann 2020). To calm the protest the government agreed to stop some of the austerity measures; however, in spite of this, similar economic measures have been implemented during the pandemic. After the 2021 national elections, the indigenous movement has a good representation in the National Assembly, but the conditions for indigenous people have not improved. It is in this context in which the pandemic reached the forest; and as noted in the following diary excerpt, COVID-19 is not the first foreign disease with which the Waorani had to deal in their process of contact:

> [In the company of some grandchildren in their teens 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 on coronavirus while recalling the polio epidemic that they experienced when they accepted peaceful contact few decades ago. (Diary excerpt, 25-03-2020 Yasuní-Ecuador)

The elderly woman did not manage to avoid the spread of the virus, and she and her community became ill early in May 2020. Over this pandemic diary review, I focus on the initial perceptions and responses that the Waorani developed for making sense and protecting themselves from the COVID-19 pandemic; although those perceptions and strategies changed over the course of the pandemic, in particular after recovering from the first mass-contagion of the disease.

> For the Waorani, as for most of Amazonian people, contact was intertwined with imported diseases (Diary excerpt, 11-03-2020, Puyo-Ecuador).

This was one of the first thoughts I recorded in my pandemic diary. It was a reaction to the ways in which Waorani people expressed their concerns regarding the COVID-19 pandemic; from the very beginning they related their understanding of the pandemic to memories of past epidemics. For elderly Waorani those first epidemics happened in their lifetime, and they particularly recall the polio epidemic as a devastating event. Even when official records refer to 16 deaths, Waorani narratives recall it as if it were hundreds. The polio epidemic happened in the late 1960s (Larrick *et al*. 1979: 168); since then they have dealt with flu, hepatitis B, tuberculosis, and more recently the COVID-19. As Antonio, a young Waorani leader said in one of our first pandemic conversations: 'we used to worry about HIV, now we only care about coronavirus' (conversation from diary excerpt, 12-03-2020 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador). In the process of making sense of the virus and its possible threats, Waorani people either repeated stories of past epidemics, or compared COVID-19 to other "foreign" lethal diseases. The following excerpt is an attempt to make sense of the first adjustments and worries regarding this new disease.

> 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 will have no strength." 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 *pi-ente*, 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.[3] (Diary excerpt, 6-05-2020 Yasuní-Ecuador)

To understand Ongai's reflections we should consider Waorani intergenerational knowledge transmission and its relation to wellbeing. Historic narratives and myths contain what can be seen as a manual for dealing with risks, most of them coming from outsiders being *kowori* (non-Waorani) humans or non-humans. Conklin (2015: 62) notes among the Wari', that they have overcome epidemics, interethnic violence and multiple colonial threats through an "egalitarian health-not-wealth orientation", which is precisely the approach that most Waorani people have developed during the pandemic. Their emphasis on collective wellbeing encompasses an egalitarian social organization, ensuring equal access to forest resources, but also freedom to decide their health-seeking trajectories in an autonomous way. Despite the Waorani's relative isolation until a few decades ago, their historic accounts recall several external territorial pressures – their recent history includes pressures related to rubber extraction, the oil boom and colonization. In other words, for the Waorani people, external threats are not new, and the knowledge of how to deal with risk and the related threats of *koworis* relies on the memories of elderly people. Since for the Waorani knowledge is embodied (High 2015) it is also a form of strength or vitality, which is sometimes shared through their sweat. Thus, when Ongai said 'when we lose our elderly, we will have no strength' she was summing up in one phrase a deep historical and cosmological understanding of how a society reproduces itself, and how that involves dealing with threats, for which elderly people's knowledge is essential. In contrast to other societies that have

isolated their elderly people, at the beginning of the pandemic the Waorani families gathered to listen to stories of past epidemics that their elderly people repeated, until some of them retreated to the forest for a few weeks. This strategy of isolation will be further discussed, I shall now review some excerpts regarding the access to news during the pandemic.

COVID-19 news

Making sense of the virus also required access to information. In the forest, most people have access to news from the city over the internet, when they manage to reach a Wi-Fi spot. Satellite TV is not affordable, but a few families pay for it when they can. The apps that people use most frequently are Facebook (primarily), WhatsApp and YouTube, though the latter rarely works with weak signal. The quality of news shared over social media is a recurrent concern in the pandemic diary; the following excerpt reflects on the news shared in relation to the first epicentre of the pandemic in Ecuador:

> People here are worried not so much about 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 in excess of the official reports. (Diary excerpt, 21-03-2020 Yasuní-Ecuador)

Later in March, the official Ecuadorian media would acknowledge that the situation in Guayaquil was indeed grim. The initial hesitation from official sources to acknowledge the number of deaths, generated distrust and might have influenced people's attitudes towards other news that circulated over social media. Social media conspiracies and fake news are still around, even when the topics might have changed – from the origin of the virus to vaccine speculations.

During the first months of the pandemic, the amount of pandemic-related information over social media was overwhelming. Pandemic-related content varied on different platforms; in addition to the news, there were collective efforts to reflect on the virus, and humour was an important part of how Ecuadorians dealt with it:

> 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 recordings of patients who explain their symptoms, and even some empirical recipes "against" the COVID-19. (Diary excerpt, 21-03-2020 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador)

Waorani people were particularly effective in using social media to strengthen their care networks. They would share news of people being ill, news of death, news of recovering with a detailed account of the recipes and bodily practices involved in such recovery, and after that they shared invitations to football tournaments and feasts to celebrate the – temporary – "end" of the pandemic. Efforts to distance themselves from the time of misfortune were striking; while there might be ontological reasons for taking physical distance from the corpses, the Amazonian approach towards distancing oneself from death as something from the past – or even something that should be forgotten (see Taylor 1993) – might be related to the understanding of life as a process of replenishment, which only happens after death and misfortune allows life to thrive again. Yet, with new variants of concern circulating in Ecuador, and considerable uncertainty regarding vaccination[4], the pandemic is still a concern.

Isolation

This section explores the notion of isolation as one of the main pandemic-related adjustments. I discuss here how isolation for people living in the forest has different meanings, and how it is reflected from an historical point of view. Proximity to the cities and roads influence the ways in which people pursue isolation, for instance:

> 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. (Diary excerpt, 25-03-2020 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador)

For the Waorani living near oil camps, the expression 'fleeing to the forest' draws a differentiation between 'the forest' which is a socio-biological being, and the places where people gather in communities often located along the oil roads – roads that were opened for the oil business. While for a Waorani person, living in the middle of the Yasuní Park, isolation meant getting far away from the roads and the oil company infrastructure, for Waorani people living in Amazonian cities, isolation meant moving to forest villages. These isolation strategies did not last long, some elderly people spent more time in forest camps, but most families opted to spend daily time in forest activities while maintaining residence in their villages.

After two months of not going to stores in the nearest town, people living in the forest run out of sugar, salt, and other essentials. These include simple things like using matches and lighters to start a fire that have become part of Waorani life after contact, and which make perfect sense considering the hardships of otherwise searching for the right wood, rubbing it in the right way, with enough strength so as to start a fire (and it is better if is not a rainy day in the dense moist tropical forest). Thus, total isolation for people living in villages could not last long.

While in the city, isolation as a public health measure meant staying at home, in the forest, people opted for restricting access to their communities. Domestic isolation of single households within a village did not make sense for the Waorani – unless they knew someone was sick – because most people who live in a same village are relatives. If isolating themselves from the *kowori* (non-Waorani) proved to be difficult, isolating themselves from other Waorani threatened the societal reproduction that relies on daily sharing among those who live together, and frequent gathering for extended sharing with relatives that live nearby. This is one of the reasons why after they recovered from the first wave of the pandemic, they organized football tournaments and feasts.

Pandemic-related isolation and mobility in the Yasuní Park was also marked by the presence of the oil company:

> 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 established by the Ecuadorian government at a national level. (Diary excerpt, 25-03-2020 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador)

Accessing the Waorani villages located within the Yasuní National Park is not an easy task. The nearest Amazonian city is at least a three hour driving to the Waorani village closer to the beginning of the oil road; in between those three hours the car would have to cross the river Napo in a flatboat, and pass through a sort of border control in the oil company riverine post. Thus, for most Ecuadorians, the Waorani living in the Yasuní National Park are already quite isolated. Yet, the Waorani living in villages do not consider themselves to be isolated, nor do they want to be. They instead consider that the ones who live in isolation are their relatives who never accepted peaceful contact with outsiders; the following excerpt reflects about the situation of those Waorani families in contrast to our pandemic-related isolation:

> 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. (Diary excerpt, 10-04-2020 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador)

The articles I was referring in this diary entry are part of a special issue dedicated to people living in voluntary isolation in Amazonia (Opas *et al.* 2018). Those articles show that the territorial pressures surrounding "isolated" people are such that the notion of isolation is contested, they refuse to establish peaceful relationships with outsiders while having to deal with increasing encroachment from colonizers, oil camps, loggers, state workers, missionaries, scientists, tourists, and other indigenous people. The Waorani families

living in isolation share some pathways for collecting seasonal fruit that overlap with the territory of Waorani people living in villages – those who maintain contact with outsiders. The former also collect goods that the others – including illegal loggers, oil workers and other Waorani – might leave on the way, from plastic to tins. This puts in perspective their isolation, but it also raises concerns regarding the public health measures that might apply to avoid spreading disease to their lands. The reflection about isolated people living in the Yasuní National Park gives us a lot to think about concerning our experience of isolation during the pandemic. If most of us have experienced some feeling of encroachment and contact-related anxiety, then, once we recover from this anxiety and feel less encroached, it is perhaps time to think about those people that have been born within the colonial encroachment, and during their lifetime that condition has only increased.

A final aspect of the pandemic-related isolation that was present in my diary was the issue of changes in the perception of time; this excerpt offers a reflection on that:

> *Temporality* – The quarantine was extended at least one week longer 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. (Diary excerpt, 11-04-2020 Yasuní-Ecuador)

Quarantine-related isolation changes our daily schedules and, in some cases, even our dreams, those working at home and parenting might agree with the suggestion that domestic time rarely works the same as office time; time at home is organized attending to the needs and unexpected changes in the domestic micro-cosmos. I suggest here that pandemic temporality is expressed overall in the form of uncertainty:

> 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 a long time experienced this kind of uncertainty in relation to the dangers of outsiders; since accepting peaceful contact their livelihoods have been increasingly uncertain.' (Diary excerpt, 11-04-2020 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador)

Risk and uncertainty, these are two conditions that people in the forest deal with frequently. The Waorani tend to make jokes to reduce uncertainty-related tension. From our isolated cubicles we have been trying to take control of the pandemic, but at least in Ecuador, uncertainty and tension is on the rise. I shall conclude that the pandemic-related isolation in the city is not the same as the pandemic-related isolation in the forest, which might sound obvious, but what I mean by this is that when a Waorani person walks in the forest they engage in a number of ecological experiences and relations, since the forest is considered to be a socio-ecological locus full of non-human beings –e.g., trees are considered to be intelligent sentient beings– thus, pandemic-related isolation in the forest is not isolation from life, as it can be in cities full of concrete.

Public health, differences between the forest and the city

This section offers a contrast between the forest and the city in relation to the forms in which pandemic-related measures were experienced:

> Governmental decisions for containing the outbreak have developed quite rapidly over the weekend, my family and friends in the city have not quite yet taken in 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. (Diary excerpt, 15-03-2020 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador)

Early in March, people in Amazonia expressed great concerns about the global pandemic, recalling oral narratives of recent epidemics, while in non-Amazonian cities most people with whom I talked –family, friends and colleagues– did not seem quite concerned, and some even expressed 'discomfort for the excess of information on coronavirus' (Diary excerpt, 10-03-2020 Quito-Ecuador). In contrast, once the quarantine was declared, people in the city started panic buying, while in the Yasuní, at least the first days, and apart from some mobility from Amazonian cities to the forest, village life seemed to continue as usual. From the forest we wondered about the changes in the city life:

> 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.... 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? (Diary excerpt, 19-03-2020 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador)

While the Waorani do not have a word that can be translated as poverty, in an attempt to define it, a Waorani leader pointed out to the children hungry on the street – in the cities – noting that the Waorani villages do not have that sort of poverty, because they would not refuse to feed a relative. The "hungry children" kind of poverty was in the streets of Ecuador before the pandemic, and now we know that during the pandemic that only has increased[5]. The first outbreak of the pandemic in Ecuador happened precisely in one of those unequal cities:

> 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, 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 .... I have seen videos -over social media – showing corpses abandoned on the streets. (Diary excerpt, 10-04-2020 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador)

For a country with great inequalities, facing a pandemic is an unimaginable task. Even when the Ecuadorian state had a good network of public health services, in big cities like Guayaquil, the pandemic was way beyond the public health capacity to respond. The news of what was happening in Guayaquil reached everywhere, only increasing the fears of the virus; it was then that some Waorani started planning to isolate themselves in the forest, while my family and friends in the city expressed great fears of going out, even to the store.

Everyone in Amazonia knew that if public health services where overwhelmed in the cities, people in rural areas have almost no hope of accessing a place in a hospital. Thus, people started to organize themselves, leaders generated alliances with anybody that might support their people; families in the forest started searching for medicinal plants, those that were known for treating respiratory diseases and increase strength. The provision of public health in Amazonia, in particular test and COVID-19 relief aids, depended on alliances with non-governmental institutions, some of them with problematic entanglements. Reactions to the first known case of COVID-19 in the Yasuní are recorded below:

> 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 an oil company worker, he is an indigenous Kichwa and there are not testing campaigns or other major actions being taken to prevent the virus from reaching recently contacted indigenous people.
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> 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. (Diary excerpt, 20-04-2020 Yasuní National Park-Ecuador)

The few health workers in Amazonian health posts have been heroes working with little resources, and they have little influence regarding how resources are distributed, since such distribution is centralized from the cities. Thus, indigenous leaders, academics and NGO formed allianc-

es to support the public health services, providing them with COVID-19 tests, and other resources. We also know that from the beginning of the pandemic a wave of loggers entered Amazonia offering economic relief in exchange for balsa logging, some of the virus spread is arguably linked to that informal economy, which grew alongside the pandemic in the Yasuní Park and elsewhere in Ecuadorian Amazonia.

Waorani strategies for preventing the spread of the pandemic into their territory worked until May, when most villages recorded COVID-19 cases; the following excerpt reflects on how people cared for each other in the forest after they faced the disease, often without access to public healthcare:

> One Waorani friend just recovered from the virus, once he felt better, he started sharing recipes and detailed 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). (Diary excerpt, 01-06-2020 Cuenca-Ecuador)

When I first started working with Waorani people in 2014, the power of the whites was epitomized by the power of biomedicine, and only few young people used to drink medicinal forest plants as a preventive practice for the maintenance of health. It is understandable since during these decades of contact they have faced some ailments that are only preventable with vaccination – such as hepatitis B – or effectively treated with biomedicine. Yet, the coronavirus surprised us with the reactivation of intergenerational sharing of medicinal knowledge. Young Waorani seemed to have the knowledge of how to collect and prepare medicinal plants, and if not, they needed no more than a few instructions from elders. Soon almost every family was drinking medicinal plants on a daily basis, and young adults were sharing their recipes over social media. As in the above quoted dairy excerpt, my Waorani friends would send messages trying to help with detailed accounts of their health treatments, because us, the *kowori* (non-Waorani) were helpless. Every time I went back to my hometown, my Waorani friends would reach me on my way off with medicinal plants and recently prepared syrups for my family, they wanted the *kowori* to survive. At the end of this pandemic diary the situation in the cities, as expressed in the excerpt below, has not improved:

> 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. (Diary excerpt, 27-06-2020 Cuenca-Ecuador)

If health services are overwhelmed, good and reliable infrastructure for collecting and sharing differentiated epidemiological data among the Ecuadorian population is almost non-existent. Thus, we do not have a detailed understanding of how the Waorani managed to survive the first wave of the pandemic in their communities –after testing positive to COVID-19 tests– with little access to ventilators, and with no more than two recorded COVID-19 related deaths, in a population of around 3000 people.

While we already had our first vaccination corruption scandal, mass vaccination has been slow; by May 2021 around a 10 percent of the Ecuadorian population was vaccinated, and new variants with potential for reinfection have already been detected in Ecuador. Most families including my own have lost relatives due to COVID-19 and I start to understand why in the middle of this uncertainty they "put themselves in hands of" their preferred deity:

> 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". (Diary excerpt, 15-06-2020 Cuenca-Ecuador)

> 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. (Diary excerpt, 30-06-2020 Cuenca-Ecuador)

The role of religion during this pandemic is a topic on its own, whether having a good healthcare system, pandemic relief packages, and clear guidance from the beginning of the pandemic, Ecuadorians –including the priests– would have followed social distancing rules, we do not know. What we know is that guidance was ambiguous from the beginning, and the government offered no help for those who have lost their jobs. Almost 50 % of people who have a job are working in the informal economy[6], after a few weeks of quarantine there was no other option than to go out and "trust" God. Added to the already complex Ecuadorian context, in Amazonia we witnessed environmental tragedies related to extractive activities:

> 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? (Diary excerpt, 10-04-2020 Yasuní, Ecuador)

Different activist and human rights organizations joined a campaign for compensation after the above-mentioned oil spill. This campaign, which showed detailed evidence of the damage, lasted months and it is still unknown whether people received adequate compensation and aid. In other words, while the pandemic has impacted people across the word, it worsened its effects in places where people were already facing previous inequalities, colonial oppression, and extractive-related dispossession.

Final Remarks

This pandemic review has noted that the Ecuadorian healthcare has been overwhelmed since the beginning of the pandemic. Then, Amazonian leaders generated a number of alliances and networks among different indigenous nationalities to develop what can be regarded as their own epidemiological strategy to tackle the pandemic; non-indigenous allies joined those networks and we have seen a blooming of collaborative initiatives, giving local responses even for services such as formal education. Still, it is not fair that the oil companies and the government keep avoiding their moral and social responsibility, as it is not fair that the wealthy of the world are accumulating the resources that might put an end to this pandemic.

While the Ecuadorian government was not able to provide reliable data about the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths at a national level, indigenous organizations in Ecuador managed to provide updates of the cases among different indigenous nationalities up to December 2020. The normalization of governmental silence regarding indigenous deaths is no doubt a continuation of our colonial history; even if we overcome the pandemic, we have not overcome the structural inequalities that are affecting people in Ecuador, and 'the bodies abandoned on the streets of Guayaquil are still in our hearts' (11-05-2020 Cuenca-Ecuador).

It is not news that writing from the periphery is a difficult task, but *senti-pensar* (feeling/thinking) from the border is a decolonial project (Mignolo & Tlostanova 2006). I am grateful to Waorani people for allowing me to navigate these difficult times with them, to learn from them, to collaborate in their projects, and for allowing me to record these memories. At this point we have cried together; we have walked together, and we have *anka totamonapa* (laughed a lot) despite the pandemic. It is through the privilege of digesting emotions in the forest, and the Waorani approach towards generosity and collective happiness as a form of care, that I have been able to gather strength to write from the periphery in a pandemic.

Notes

1 I was staying in a scientific station that is located in the Yasuní Park, only visiting nearby villages while I was allowed, and while COVID-19 had not yet arrived at this part of Amazonia. The Station is part of the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador (PUCE).
2 All working at the Institute of Public Health of PUCE.
3 An analysis of this diary excerpt was already included in a Spanish version of the pandemic notes published by the journal Periferia, and the magazine Anthropolitan.

4 Ecuador developed a mass vaccination programme after finishing the writing of this paper.
5 See for instance: https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Over-52-of-Ecuadoreans-Fell-Into-Poverty-in-2020- 20210101-0009.html [15.10.2021].
6 See for instance: https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/economia/persons-empleo-informalidad-ecuador/ [15.10.2021].

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