

Savages: Update

Joe Kane

Last November, on a trip to Lago Agrio, I saw Moi for the first time in four years. There is now an airstrip in Quehueire Ono, so Moi was able to fly from there to Coca and to travel by road to Lago. Still, he made his trip very much in the Huaorani style. He arrived “alone” – that is, with his sister-in-law, her daughter, and a young Huaorani man who was related to Moi in some way that Moi couldn’t quite explain to me. They were dressed in their best cowode clothes, intent on a paseo. They came by taxi rather than bus and Moi elected to keep the taxi waiting at our rendezvous point until I arrived, which turned out to be some five hours later. By Huaorani standards, of course, the bill was exorbitant. It would have cost Moi about two months’ wages, had he been employed. But he didn’t ask me to pay it. Not exactly. What he said was, “I do not have any money.”

As always, Moi greeted me as if we had seen one another just yesterday, but he had suffered through some big changes. In November 1996 he was in a small plane, flying from the territory to the airport at Shell, when the pilot got lost in bad weather, ran out of gas, and crashed. Moi broke his back in two places, and after he’d been in the hospital for a week his doctor discovered that he had also punctured his abdomen. It was two months before Moi could walk, and even then, as he said, “I could take only two steps.” To show me what he meant, he opened his eyes wide and shuffled one foot slowly forward, then the other, as if he were a robot.

Moi was noticeably thinner than the last time I saw him. When he took off his shirt, the skin over his spine was crosshatched with thick scars from his neck to his waist, and on his belly there was another scar from his navel almost to his scrotum. Still, he had recovered most of his former strength, and his eyes were bright and his mind so full of ideas that the words came pouring out in a rush. He laughed when he described his accident: His string bag had flipped upside down and everything had fallen out of it and been lost, including the picture of him standing in front of the White House with the cardboard cut-outs of Bill and Hillary Clinton. Could I get him a copy?

Over plates of chicken and rice – Moi attacked his food, but the other Huaorani ate slowly, carefully, and silently, as if not quite sure how to behave – we discussed the past few years. Ali Sharif had left Ecuador for Manaus, in the Brazilian Amazon. Judith Kimerling now lived in New York City. Rachel Saint had died, of cancer, in November 1994, but her work was being carried on by the Christian Mission, and, in particular, by Steve Saint, Nate Saint’s son. In fact, Moi said, Steve Saint’s principal follower was the Condorito himself: Enqueri had become some sort of Christian minister. What was more – and at this Moi laughed so hard it seemed he might choke on his food – he had heard that Steve Saint was teaching Enqueri how to fly an airplane! Now there was a frightening image.

Meanwhile, two years after it sent its investigative team to the Oriente, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights finally got around to issuing its report (Blasco Penaherrera, whose son had worked for Maxus, was still Ecuador’s ambassador to the commission’s parent body, the Organization of American States). It concluded that the oil industry had indeed made a mess of the Oriente. Among other things, the report noted that the Company had dumped more than 30 billion gallons of raw petroleum and other highly toxic, untreated waste directly into the Oriente’s rivers and lakes; that oil development had led to severe health problems, cultural devastation, and economic hardship for the people living in the area; and that “conditions of severe environmental pollution” violated fundamental human rights. However, the commission concluded that the Ecuadorian government was not violating the rights of the Huaorani, because the petition the Huaorani had filed was “prospective” – it addressed the consequences of what would happen if

oil development were to be permitted in the territory. Since development had not yet begun at the time of the commission's visit, in other words, no rights could have yet been violated.

Maxus now has more than one hundred and twenty wells operating in the Huaorani territory; according to oil industry experts, it is the largest heavy-oil project in the world, with an investment to date of some \$800 million. Maxus has been bought by Y.P.F., and Argentine oil company and the fourth-largest in the world. Colonists have now settled along both sides of the Maxus road between the Napo and Tiputini rivers, roads are being cut across the breadth of the Huaorani territory by both Maxus and the French oil company Elf Aquitaine, and a new oil block adjacent to Block 16, in the heart of Yasuni National Park, is being developed by another Argentine oil company, Perez Compac.

Meanwhile, Oryx energy, which has the concession that includes Quehueire Ono, has cut a road almost to the village. Occidental Petroleum and Elf Aquitaine have expanded work on their projects. (To induce the Secoya people to sign an agreement for permission to extract some 155 million barrels of oil from their land, Occidental gave the Secoya three cooking stoves, three water pumps, some tin roofing, three first-aid kits, and an outboard motor. Asked by a reporter from The New York Times whether that represented a fair exchange, an Occidental spokesman replied, "They have a very clear picture of what they want.") Royal Dutch Shell is about to start work on a block that contains what is, by most accounts, the richest and least disturbed corner of the Oriente, near the Colombian and Peruvian borders. Indeed, as of this writing, virtually the entire Oriente is under contract to the Company in one way or another.

Ecuador now has several laws that address oil exploitation, but there is no enforcement of them, and for the most part the oil companies do as they please. Predictably, local people have begun to take things into their own hands. In 1993 the Cofan shut down an exploratory well, burned a Company heliport and threw oil workers out of their territory; the Company has not attempted to re-enter Cofan lands. This past February, the Atchuar took hostage five oil technicians who had entered their territory for exploratory work. The Quichua in Block 10, who have been resisting ARCO for years, detained executives from Tripetrol, a British- and American-backed company that is also trying to develop oil in the Quichua lands.

The Huaorani briefly shut down the Maxus operation at spear point in 1995, and relations with the government and the Company have been mixed since then. Earlier this year, the military invaded the ONHAE office in Shell and destroyed the computers the Huaorani had been learning to use for email communication; the new ONHAE president, Juan Huamoni (Nanto's brother, and a man Moi speaks highly of), reportedly attacked the soldiers the following night and briefly wound up in jail. As near as I can tell, the authorities have quietly allowed the incident to die, as neither the Company nor the government stands to benefit by publicizing violence in the oil zone.

Moi hopes to run for president of ONHAE in May. Meanwhile, he has received a number of international awards for the ecotourism program he is developing in Quehueriono to give the Huaorani a cash-generating alternative to working for the Company. With the help of Tropic Ecological Adventures, an ecotourism operator based in Quito, the people of Quehueire Ono built tourist cabins and cooking facilities upriver from the village, and over the past year they have brought in about a dozen groups. Of course, it remains to be seen whether the project – or, for that matter, the Huaorani themselves – can survive in the face of the developed world's tremendous demand for oil.

As we stood in the streets of Lago Agrio, soaked to our ankles in mud and oil, Moi made me promise to come to Quehueire Ono to visit the People and see the new project for myself. I

promised I would. I gave him a new backpack and a poncho and he bear-hugged me in farewell. He might have been thinner than I remembered him, but he felt as strong as ever, and his eyes had lost none of their sparkle.

– Joe Kane

For further information on the Oriente and the Huaorani visit the Web sites at www.tropiceco.com (look under environmental news) and www.ran.org (look under campaigns).