

ALEKSANDRA WIERUCKA

Huaorani  
of the  
Western  
Snippet

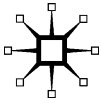


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*Aleksandra Wierucka*

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HUAORANI OF THE WESTERN SNIPPET

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*To my first guides in the tropical forest,  
Héctor Vargas and Antonio Panteras de Navarra,  
and most of all, to Czarek, thanks to whom I have learnt that  
the most important part of a journey is  
the return back home.*

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some reason next year's planned visit would not come through. In September 2012, when I was embarking the boat, Miñe came to the river bank, gave me a big hug, and repeated *huapponi* several times. This is a traditional greeting in Huao Terero and it gave me hope for future meetings.

# Abbreviations

AMWAE	Asociación de Mujeres Waorani de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana (Association of Huaorani Women of Ecuadorian Amazon)
CONAIE	Confederación del Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador)
CONFENIAE	Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de La Amazonia Ecuatoriana (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon)
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FOIN	Federación de Organizaciones Indígenas del Napo (Federation of Indigenous Organizations of the Napo)
ILO	International Labour Organization
ITT	Ishpingo-Tiputini-Tambococha
NAWE	Nacionalidad Waorani del Ecuador (Waorani Nation of Ecuador)
NRDC	Natural Resources Defense Council
ONHAE	Organización de las Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana (Organization of Indigenous Nations of Ecuadorian Amazon)

ONWO	Organización de Nacionalidad Waorani de Orellana (Waorani Nationality Organization of Orellana)
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
OPIP	Organización de los Pueblos Indígenas del Pastaza (Organization of Indigenous People of Pastaza)
SIL	Summer Institute of Linguistics
WEF	World Economy Forum
Yasuní-ITT Initiative	Yasuní National Park ITT project
ZI	Zona Intangible (Intangible Zone)

# Prologue

**M**y friend, an Indian from the Amazon, once told me that every researcher tries to be different and unique. He claims that scientists want the knowledge they gain and describe in books or articles to be a revelation, a discovery about the truth of people and other cultures. He summed this all up by saying it is an issue of their craft. Science should complete general knowledge, aim to fill the gaps, and enable the understanding of a subject on multiple levels, instead of trying to present data as unique or extraordinary. My friend is also one of my informants and interpreters, an expert on the Huaorani culture. Considering the above, this book reviews current knowledge about the Huaorani, adds new information, reflects on statements made by other researchers, and sometimes interprets data in new and different ways.

My statements, conclusions, and interpretations are based purely on the information I have received from members of the studied culture and direct observation of people. Discrepancies in information given by different researchers analyzing the same topic may be a result of studying only one kin group, yet forming conclusions for the whole ethnic group. However, it does not seem very probable that different groups within the same culture would vary so significantly. There may be another reason for these inconsistencies—the acquired knowledge and information may depend on the informant or situation in which the data was gathered, the mood of the interlocutor, or other various factors that we are not able to assess or reconstruct. Research in humanities is characterized by the subjectivity of every study—each formed conclusion is only one of the possible interpretations. Therefore this book is yet another evaluation of various aspects of the Huaorani culture.

## **Book Structure**

The Amazon region stretches from the Brazilian coast to the foothills of the Andes. Its westernmost part—the eponymous “Western Snippet”—is located in Ecuador and is referred to as the Oriente.

This part of the world, its certain aspects, and most importantly, the people living there will be the subject of this book. The volume consists of three linked parts. From discussing general issues concerning the Amazon, the presented information slowly narrows down to reviewing various elements of the Huaorani culture, and finally presents the biography of one person—a Huaorani shaman.

The first part gives a brief review of the history of Ecuador in reference to indigenous cultures of the Amazon region as well as issues concerning the tropical forest. Problems regarding oil extraction are divided into two chapters. Despite being interlinked they had to be placed in different chapters. When writing about the history of the country I included a fragment about oil extraction and the threats it poses. The indigenous political and social movement (triggered by the operations of oil companies) is mentioned when describing the history of the Oriente, as indigenous ethnic groups inhabiting the tropical forest of Ecuador have initiated the indigenous movement and represent its majority to this day.

The second part describes the Huaorani culture. Apart from a review of the current knowledge about this ethnic group, it also includes data I have gathered during my fieldwork between the years 2007 and 2012. Based on this information I dispute some of the statements made by other researchers. In humanities, reality can be interpreted in various ways; therefore, it is important to look at the facts from different points of view and take into account multiple possibilities before forming conclusions. I do not question the reliability of information given by other researchers, I just present other ways of approaching certain aspects of the Huaorani culture.

In the third part I present the life of a member of the Huaorani society. For many reasons that I explained at the beginning of this part, it is impossible to describe the shaman's biography in a very precise way. My goal was not to give a detailed description of his life but to present important events that have shaped him as a person.

My research was conducted over the years 2007–2012. During my fieldwork I spent several months in the Huaorani and Quichua settlements coming back every year for a month or two. My interviews with the shaman took up most of the time during my visits to his village. He speaks exclusively Huao Terero. Therefore, his Spanish-speaking grandsons served as translators. To avoid any misunderstandings as to the information or its interpretation, my Quichua guide who speaks fluent English, Spanish as well as some Huao Terero was always present during the interviews, ensuring that the information I was given by the shaman was understood correctly.

Studying indigenous cultures in the Ecuadorian Amazon is important for several reasons. First, six years of my research have proved that there are still many gaps and inconsistencies in knowledge about the Huaorani culture (I expand on this in the second part of the book). Second, presenting new results and information allows for a novel interpretation of certain aspects of the Huaorani culture.

Data regarding the Huaorani culture that I do not give a reference for were gathered during my field research. When possible I gave the year of the acquired information; however, findings that were confirmed multiple times were left without annotations.

If all information in a given paragraph came from the same source, only one reference was added at the end of the paragraph. This allowed to avoid repetitions of the same annotations throughout one paragraph. However, in some instances when the information given by the cited author was crucial or unique, specific citation has been added.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Finding a system clearly defining subcategories or sections within humanities has been an issue over the last several years. This is the case especially for sciences regarding people's place in culture. Many studies are interdisciplinary, balancing on the boundaries of various fields. They utilize knowledge from various disciplines, yet they are unable to be fully defined by any of them. Somewhere between ethnology, cultural anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, and cognitive science lie certain niches that are not fully defined but apply particular elements of each of these disciplines. For example, they may use the methods of gathering data of one, yet ways of interpreting facts or perceiving matters from another. Wojciech Burszta wrote, "A turn towards culture seems to bring a deeper, humanistic meaning to an experience" (Burszta and Januszkiewicz 2010: 20). Therefore, applying any known and available methodologies enables a more precise description of experiences, people's lives, and their place within the society or culture. Researchers approach interdisciplinary methodologies as they allow the interpretation of facts in a broader context and help avoid being limited by only one way of reality perception. Being a relatively young discipline in Poland, cultural studies embody a unique combination of various perspectives (due to lack of a better term for an anthropological approach to studying culture in Poland, I use "cultural studies" throughout the book. The term is not very clear in Polish science as it is influenced by different anthropological traditions from around the world.

Cultural studies in Poland differ significantly from cultural studies in Great Britain or United States, in theory as well as in practice. The differences are a result of historical, sociological, and political issues. Cultural studies in Polish science present an interdisciplinary approach and encompass such subdisciplines as cultural semiotics, film and theater studies, cultural anthropology [focusing on contemporary aspects of culture], media studies, studies in popular culture, and so on). In this context, Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska cites a theory proposed by Jerzy Kmita, who saw cultural studies as “integrated humanities” forming “a theoretical framework for all humanities, enabling all comparative and inter- or transdisciplinary research” (Zeidler-Janiszewska 2013: 530). Traditionally, separated disciplines are not capable of addressing the “intrinsic integrality and complexity of the world, requiring a very flexible and integrated approach. If culture is everything that involves people, then cultural studies could be defined as a trans- or postdisciplinary science” (G. Piotrowski, personal communication, 2013). Therefore, applying multiple ways of world perception and the rendition of one’s place in culture is assigned to cultural studies. This allows researchers to utilize a broader range of tools, and consequently enables an increased number of elaborate interpretation possibilities. Furthermore, scientists note the relationship between cultural studies and various types of anthropology (ranging from cultural to philosophical) has its roots in subjects involving human experiences (Burszta and Januszkiewicz 2010: 20). Despite being so widespread and commonly used in various contexts around the world, anthropology is not that obvious in Poland. Theoretical frameworks deriving from the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, and other countries (Barnard 2006: 31–45) meet and intertwine in Poland, resulting in vague, disharmonious, and inconsistent structure and division of humanities. This gives an opportunity for niches utilizing knowledge of different sciences to arise.

During my research I used techniques and tools applied in ethnology and cultural anthropology (fieldwork, anthropological interviews, participant and nonparticipant observations, etc.). The conceptual apparatus and methods of interpretation implemented in my work are typical for cultural studies (as practiced in Poland). Despite the fact that fieldwork practices for humanities were developed by ethnologists, researchers representing other sciences commonly use them in a creative and flexible way. Almost every discipline referring to one’s place in the world (especially their place in culture) involves fieldwork, but it not always have to be a physical phenomenon, yet of course it can be. As Barbara

Czarniawska wrote, “Fieldwork is an expression of curiosity of the other—of people who construct their world differently than we researchers construct ours” (Czarniawska 2007: 9). However, ethnology exceeds its boundaries by addressing many aspects of human experiences that could be classified within other disciplines (examples of such research could be studies looking into modern issues—examining and describing people in a popular or “modern” culture). As ethnology explores topics belonging to cultural studies, there are no contraindications for the latter discipline reaching for elements of the first. An exchange of methodologies or conceptual apparatus between given sciences is beneficial for all parties involved.

My research as well as later analysis and interpretation of results were accompanied by a sense of crossing boundaries that involved shifting between various disciplines when needed. Nevertheless, I decided that my study topic should be included within the broadly defined cultural studies. As James Clifford said, each researcher should find their own path in science. He emphasized that his books would be written differently if he were an ethnologist. However, as a historian implementing ethnological topics, his perspective on matters is disparate (Clifford, comment during lecture in Poznań, Poland, May 2, 2012). Interpretation within a cultural studies framework is where my experience lies and that is how I decided to approach my research. The comparison of my research with other studies discussed in further chapters of this book also bears a cultural studies character—by recognizing various points of views and possibilities of interpretation. In the words of the former president of Ecuador, Jaime Roldo Aguilera, “Only the clash of ideas can ignite the light of truth” (Whitten 2003b: 4).

### Note on Orthography

#### *Ethnonym*

I use the ethnonym “Huaorani” throughout the book; “Waoarani” or “Waoarani” is used by some authors, nevertheless the Spanish spelling is the one most commonly used by the Huaorani themselves. The noun “huaorani” means “people” and “huao,” “a person”; the latter can also be used as an adjective, for example, “huao house.”

#### *Spelling Words in Huao Terero*

Words in Huao Terero are written the way my informants pronounced them, thus some of these words may differ from the ones given by other

researchers. As Huao Terero uses slightly different sounds than English, below I present some rules I applied when writing down words in the native language of the Huaorani:

- a. Vowels:
  - “a” as in “after”
  - “e” as in “ten”
  - “i” as in “week”
  - “o” as in “omelet”
  - “y” as in “yellow”
  
- b. Nasalized vowels:<sup>1</sup>
  - “ñ” as in “aneurysm”
  - “ë” as in French word “enfant”
  - “î” as in the French word “câlin”
  
- c. Consonants:
  - “b” as in “bat”
  - “m” as in “men”
  - “p” as in “pot”
  - “n” as in “nut”
  - “hu” as in “wall”
  - “c” as in “car”
  - “g” as in “get”
  - “qui” as in “keen”
  - “k” as in “car”

The word *nanicabo* is used in two forms—*nanicabo* for the singular, and *nanicaboiri* for the plural form (Rival 2002: 94).

To express an ambivalent attitude toward a term or phrase I use quotation marks (e.g., “peaceful contact”). I also differentiate “Huaorani Territory” from “Huaorani territory”—I use lower case when the term refers to the lands that traditionally belonged to this ethnic group, however the same phrase written with a capital letter stands for the administrative unit—the area officially acknowledged by the Ecuadorian government as belonging to the Huaorani.

### The Snippet’s Culture<sup>2</sup>

The Huaorani Indians inhabit the Ecuadorian part of the Amazon. This area differs from a typical tropical forest as it is hilly (due to the

proximity of the Andes). Currently, similar to other ethnic groups of this region, the Huaorani live alongside rivers. Prior to acculturation they used to build houses on hilltops, in remote areas far away from main communication routes and adapted to living in different environmental conditions. The settlements used water from small, local streams, the diet consisted mainly of meat (of hunted animals) complimented by vegetables and fruits cultivated in gardens or gathered in the forest.

For centuries the Huaorani have been reported to be fierce warriors, who did not hesitate to kill anyone who entered their territory. This may have been a reason for the long-lasting partial isolation and delayed the influence of the Western culture. Settlers, officials, and oil companies' employees feared the Huaorani and did not enter their lands allowing the Indians to remain secluded. Despite many changes this culture underwent within the last 50 years (since the official contact was made in 1958) and war traditions being only one aspect on this group's complex culture, the image of the Huaorani as fierce people is still common in Ecuador.

The Huaorani culture developed in partial isolation, over centuries. Despite changes in traditions and customs, its spiritual as well as material elements still exist (with certain modifications). The group's seclusion is often discussed by researchers and two reasons for it are recognized: occupying a different territory and speaking a unique language (Rival 2002: 43).

As I mentioned before, Huaorani settlements were located on hilltops, close to streams. Most ethnic groups of the Amazon built their houses alongside rivers, which ensured access to food, allowed daily hygiene, and enabled transport and communication. The Huaorani found different ways of meeting these everyday needs and adapted to living far away from bigger rivers. Settlements consisted of single kin groups that were often at war with each other. People of different ethnicity were considered "non-people," "outsiders," and "cannibals" (*cohuori*) and contact with them was not maintained. When settlers entered Huao territories the Indians would either attack or escape further into the forest. The spatial isolation of this ethnic group was not a result of geographic barriers but a choice made by a culture that perceived all others as non-people. This isolation came to an end in the 1960s when most Huao families were relocated to an area controlled by a mission.

The Huaorani language (Huao Terero) is also a unique element of this ethnic group—it has been classified as an isolated language. As is the case for other isolated languages it is possible that languages similar to Huao Terero used to exist, however, they have not survived

to modern times. Taking this into account, the lingual isolation of this group is obvious: it was possible for almost all other cultures of the region inhabited by the Huaorani to communicate with each other, as their languages were more or less similar, while Huao Terero differed from them significantly. This may have been a reason for considering others as non-people—*cohuori* spoke a “nonhuman” language.

War traditions are strictly connected to the group’s partial isolation. Since non-Huaorani are not considered people, when they enter the group’s territory an attack seems to be the only way of removing them from the area. However, the Huaorani did not kill only *cohuori*. It has been stated that wars between kin groups and killing raids avenging the death of family members (allegedly caused by members of other kin groups) were a very important element of the Huaorani culture (e.g., Yost 1981a, 1981b, Robarchek and Robarchek 1998, Rival 2002). This issue will be discussed multiple times throughout the book.

The two reasons for partial isolation influenced the Indians’ everyday life and the perception of Huaorani people by others. These issues will be further described and evaluated in subsequent chapters.

The social organization of this ethnic groups is based on a social unit called *nanicabo*. It consists of a kin group inhabiting the same settlement. Members of a *nanicabo* unite through everyday tasks, ceremonies as well as rituals, and are bound by many social responsibilities and commitments.

The Huaorani culture is often considered “flexible” and “pragmatic” (Yost 1981a). There were never any leaders or people in power among this ethnic group and every member had to rely on their own knowledge and experience. Furthermore, no one was allowed to intrude their opinion upon another Huaorani. Trying to convince to a different point of view was permitted, however, one could not force another member of the group to act against their will.

The Huaorani are perceived in a particular way by the Ecuadorian society. Following the incorporation of this ethnic group into the Ecuadorian nation, the fierceness (“savagery” expressed by killing raids) of the Indians was often discussed. Opinions that “people from the stone age” found themselves in “civilization” were also common. Although these statements were clearly preposterous, the image of the Huaorani is still largely based on stereotypes. In Ecuador, instead of “Huaorani”—the correct ethnonym of this group, the term “*Auca*” is used. This word (of Quichua origin) means “savage, barbarian.” The term is widespread and people who do not speak Quichua most probably do not even realize its offensiveness. The name “*Auca*” is used by the