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## Fair Trade and Indigenous Peoples: A Case Study of the Kichwa in Ecuador

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## Abstract

Capitalist business ventures have a long history of exploiting traditional societies, such as indigenous groups, for their labor and natural resources. The Fair Trade business model has recently emerged as a step towards more equal international trade norms, and strives to create mutually beneficial relationships between producers and business entities. However, due to disparities in the values of each party, tensions arise as Fair Trade entities attempt to “bridge the gap” between capitalist endeavors and indigenous communities. Though such tensions are challenging, they do not represent failures and should be seen as components in the ongoing process of evolution towards more sustainable and equitable international trade norms. This thesis uses library research to investigate the goals and difficulties present in the Fair Trade movement, and uses participant observation, formal interviews, and pile sorts to present a Case Study that explores the ways that an indigenous Ecuadorian community views and engages in a Fair Trade tea initiative.

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FAIR TRADE AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: A CASE STUDY OF THE KICHWA IN  
ECUADOR

By

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Recent decades have witnessed a surge in Fair-Trade and “green” businesses that sell products that are marketed as being socially responsible and environmentally sustainable. These laudable attempts to balance profit with social and ecological goals raise a number of questions about motivations, values, and relationships between business enterprises and local communities who produce these products, as well as the impacts of such partnerships on local peoples and their environment. The potential contradictions that emerge as Fair Trade companies seek to preserve traditional cultures through market involvement, and the likely tensions due to miscommunication and disparate values systems, fundamentally challenge attempts to promote the shift from free trade to Fair Trade.

For over a century, global development has focused on economic growth in order to bring developing countries in line with the world’s wealthiest nations – economically and, subsequently, culturally. Because of this, indigenous communities around the world have suffered as a result of exploitation of natural resources by capitalist entities and loss of traditional values due to globalization. Fair Trade is an example of resistance to this notion of development and profit maximization in that it has brought noneconomic factors such as human rights, environmental protection, and local cultural contexts to the fore (McGregor, 2007). Though Fair Trade, by definition, challenges the unequal nature of global market exchange, it nonetheless works within the existing economic system to produce transparent and mutually beneficial relationships between producers, Fair Trade organizations, and consumers. The complex nature of this market position creates inevitable tensions within the movement regarding implementation and expansion, and such tensions have been addressed by scholars and ethnographers alike.

A host of tough questions emerge in the interactions between Fair Trade companies and indigenous peoples: What motivates communities and Fair Trade companies, respectively, to be involved with each other? What does each gain from it? What values motivate these market decisions? Are companies and entrepreneurs motivated by social and environmental goals or do they see Fair Trade as one more profitable marketing scheme? On the other hand, how do people in indigenous communities view these new opportunities to market their traditional products, and how do the new activities affect their livelihoods and worldviews? This thesis seeks to answer these questions by drawing on information collected during fieldwork carried out among an indigenous group in South America.

In the Summer of 2012, I participated in Dr. Michael Uzendoski's Summer study abroad program in the Ecuadorian Amazon province of Napo. Through Dr. Uzendoski and the FSU Department of Undergraduate Research, my research partner, Evan Marcus, and I received a Public Service Research Fellowship to carry out a research project that was to be completed during the 4-week study abroad session and a 2-week internship at a Fair Trade tea enterprise called Runa. Our goals were to investigate how an indigenous *Kichwa* community called Sapo Rumi, who traditionally practiced a subsistence economy, views and engages in relationships with Runa tea, which works with *Kichwa* farmers to sell a culturally significant indigenous tea on the international Fair Trade market. Our initial hypothesis was that the community's existing involvement in a Fair Trade *guayusa* (*Ilex Guayusa*) tea initiative would be offering them new economic alternatives to other potentially harmful activities (such as logging or cattle ranching). However, our actual research revealed a more complex situation whereby the *guayusa* initiative was fit within community priorities and an existing effort to develop tourism. Also, on site we learned that the community's involvement in the Fair Trade initiative was in more beginning

stages than we initially anticipated. My argument purports that because indigenous people do not act in accordance with the ideological principles of capitalism, complex tensions emerge during the implementation of Fair Trade initiatives. However, these tensions should not be dismissed as a failure in the proposed system; rather, they should be viewed as forces which push the Fair Trade movement to evolve in a way that is more satisfactory to the actors involved.

Living in Sapo Rumi and having the chance to interview members of the community, as well as working as an intern in a Fair Trade company gave me a “bottom-up” view of the way that one Fair Trade initiative has actually played itself out on the ground. In order to put the case study materials into context, I divide this thesis into four sections. I begin with an overview of the global trade environment, a discussion of the transition from free trade to Fair Trade, and a summary of what Fair Trade means (Section 1). With this information as background, Section 2 reviews the major criticisms of Fair Trade policies and the way the policies have been implemented. One issue with the way Fair Trade initiatives have been implemented focuses on indigenous peoples, who endorse a distinctly anti-capitalist world view, as described in Section 3. The results of the case study are presented in Section 4, followed by a conclusion.

## **1. From Free Trade to Fair Trade**

### ***A. The Global Trade Environment***

The years between 1800 and 1900 were characterized by unprecedented growth and accumulation of wealth through trade and manufacture. However, a financial collapse in 1873 revealed an array of problems with the capitalist system, including an increased need for the supply of raw materials. In response, American and European investors began looking for opportunities to secure supplies from South America, Asia, and Africa. As a result, people all

over the world were forced into becoming export crop farmers rather than simply supplying their own needs. Instead of increasing producer revenue, this development in fact began a pattern of exploitation through unequal exchange where the producing economy was forced to re-import goods in the form of finished products, at a higher price than what they were paid for the raw material (Robbins, 2005).

This pattern continues today and is exacerbated by neoliberal policies, which have proliferated over the last 30 years in the form of institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and World Trade Organization, the latter of which imbued neoliberal policies with the force of law, enabling member countries to force others to remove “illegal” restrictions on the international transfer of commodities (Moberg & Lyon, 2010). Hence, countries in the global South have become trapped in a vicious cycle where they are forced to subject themselves to transnational investment and to contribute to a global market that offers them no viable returns. Due to their immense power through capital control and prevailing neoliberal policies, corporations are able to avoid blame for negative externalities like negative producer impact or environmental degradation (Robbins, 2005).

Within a capitalist system of production and distribution, every producer is compelled to live by a simple goal: to attain the highest possible profit on an investment. As capitalist entities, Western corporations operate on this goal of profit, and act in concordance with an ideology that includes the following principles: 1) sustained economic growth is the path to human progress, 2) free markets result in efficient and socially optimal allocation of resources, and 3) economic globalization, free trade among nations, and unfettered competitive markets are, in the long run, beneficial to everyone.

The worldview associated with the capitalist mode of production is based on a number of assumptions. For example, there is the assumption that humans are motivated by self-interest in the form of financial gain, the assumption that competitive behavior leads to more socially optimal outcomes than cooperative behavior, and the assumption that human progress is measured by increases in the value of societal consumption (Robbins, 2005). This leaves us looking for ways that globalized markets can operate in a way that accounts for cultural differences in values and worldview. As this thesis will show, not all members of the global community can be expected to act in accordance with the ideological principles of capitalism.

### ***B. The Emergence of Fair Trade***

With the expansion of Neoliberalism came the increased need for fairer international trade policies. Small-scale farmers must now compete with industrial agriculture who enjoy greater technological advantages, as well as price supports in the form of tax credits. Additionally, the abandonment of commodity price regulation has caused producer prices to reach record lows, while multinational corporations such as Wal-Mart benefit from unprecedented market control, further intensifying price competition. As a result, producers on the local level struggle to survive as they are forced into a market system that continually puts them at a disadvantage (Moberg & Lyon, 2010).

The cycle of producer exploitation has been perpetuated by limited approaches to value creation, which overlook the negative social and environmental impacts of their operations in order to optimize their short-term financial performance. With a presumed trade-off between economic efficiency and social progress, even companies that endorse in “corporate social responsibility,” often function with a mind-set in which societal issues are not their core concerns (Porter & Kramer, 2011). The seemingly irresolvable chasm between the interests of

profit-driven capitalist corporations and those of community-level producers has not been mitigated by non-market solutions such as government agencies and non-profit organizations, despite their efforts to do so through charitable aid. The Fair Trade movement proposes a different kind of solution to the problem of producer exploitation by seeking social justice and environmental sustainability through markets themselves (Moberg & Lyon, 2010). It emerged as a response to the negative effects of contemporary globalization. Rather than an “anti-globalization” movement, Fair Trade instead can be described as a transition towards “new globalization.” Following World War II, Alternative Trade Organizations (ATOs) such as Oxfam and Ten Thousand Villages sold the first fairly traded items when they began purchasing handicrafts from poor producers at above-market prices and selling them directly to ethically motivated consumers. Between the 1960’s and 1970’s, individual ATOs proliferated (mostly in Europe) but it wasn’t until 1997 that these separate country initiatives were united under one umbrella organization, the Fair Trade Labeling Organization (FLO), who standardized the certification and labeling processes (Raynolds, Murray, & Wilkinson, 2007).

As dictated in FLO’s most recent version of their *Charter of Fair Trade Principles*, Fair Trade is defined as “a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers – especially in the South. Fair Trade Organizations, backed by consumers, are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade” (2009). Operating on those principles, the goals of Fair Trade are as follows:

1. To improve the livelihoods and well-being of producers by improving market access, strengthening producer organizations, paying a better price and providing continuity in the trading relationship.
2. To promote development opportunities for disadvantaged producers, especially women and indigenous people, and to protect children from exploitation in the production process.
3. To raise awareness among consumers of the negative effects on producers of international trade so that they exercise their purchasing power positively.
4. To set an example of partnership in trade through dialogue, transparency and respect.
5. To campaign for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade.
5. To campaign for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade.
6. To protect human rights by promoting social justice, sound environmental practices and economic security (Moore, 2004).

One of the strategies employed by Fair Trade organizations to achieve these goals is the certification of producers and products. In order to be certified under Fair Trade specifications, producers must satisfy FLO's criteria such that goods are grown or manufactured under conditions of social equity and environmental sustainability. Certification standards vary according to the commodity and the scale of the enterprise that produces it: small-scale farmers working without hired labor must be members of a democratically run producers' organization, whereas plantation-style farms are required to abide by International Labor Organization (ILO) standards which include the right to join unions, freedom from discrimination, prohibition of

child labor, and workplace safety. Traders and consumers are required to pay a set price to producers which not only covers the costs of sustainable production, but also contributes 15% to a social premium fund which is then democratically allocated by the producers' organization. Premiums support socioeconomic development as producer groups see fit, and are a large factor in distinguishing Fair Trade from other markets (Linton, 2012). Various environmental criteria apply at all levels, including chemical limitations and protection of wildlife. To ensure adherence to the designated standards, products and production processes are monitored by FLO-CERT, a third-party auditing body reportable to FLO (Moberg & Lyon, 2010).

The Fair Trade approach to market exchange integrates social responsibility and commerce by placing importance on the strengthening and empowerment of small producer organizations, as well as increasing their access to markets (FLO, 2011a). The movement's success ultimately hinges on the willingness of socially concerned consumers to pay an increased price for fairly traded goods, but statistics from the past decade do not indicate this to be a problem. Between 2008 and 2009, the number of certified Fair Trade products increased by 15%, now encompassing 827 Fair Trade certified producer organizations in 58 countries, which represent over 1.2 million farmers and workers (FLO, 2011b). Fair Trade has certainly succeeded in heightening the discussion concerning a change in the norms of trade and consumption, which represents a significant step towards creating an international market which incorporates sustainability and social responsibility. Advocates believe in the power of Fair Trade to promote more ethical, transparent, and sustainable business models, while strengthening local communities. From this view, Fair Trade successfully challenges global relationships as value chains are transformed from narrow business relationships employing low transparency and high power asymmetry, to sustainable relationships based on respect and fairness (Linton, 2012).

## **2. The Contested Nature of Fair Trade Policies and their Implementation**

Though the positive effects of Fair Trade have undoubtedly improved the lives of many producer families and communities worldwide, the movement is not without its difficulties. Given the rapidly increasing scope of Fair Trade initiatives, it becomes important to take a critical look at areas of contention concerning Fair Trade both from external and internal actors. Within the body of literature there emerge two distinct categories of critics: those who disagree with Fair Trade based on its market principles, and those who accept the underlying logic of Fair Trade, but question its effectiveness.

### ***A. Objections to the Fundamental Logic of Fair Trade***

Among the first category of Fair Trade critics, the most vocal are Free Traders, people who endorse the idea that unfettered markets will maximize efficiency. For them, Fair Trade amounts to protectionism which creates distortions in the market, offering a “cure worse than the disease” (Lindsey, 2004). This argument acknowledges the problem of excessive supply relative to demand, (as in the coffee market, for example), and the ways that Fair Trade exacerbates this problem by incentivising new entrants to the market.

Scholars from this view dismiss the sincerity of environmental and social concerns, attributing them to a desire to protect jobs and security at home. In this way, most Free Traders view Fair Traders as “protectionists masquerading as moralists,” with preferences supporting Fair Trade indistinct from those supporting Protectionism (Moore, 2004). However, a study done by Sean Ehrlich using public opinion data shows that a large portion of those supporting Fair Trade express sincere social and environmental policy motivations, and also exhibit characteristics that are opposite from those who support Free Trade or protection. Therefore, supporting Fair Trade can be a preference distinct from supporting protection (Ehrlich, 2010).

A large body of literature examines Fair Trade critiques from the view of politically conservative Free Traders. However it is interesting to note that at the other end of the spectrum are radical Marxists who also find fault with Fair Trade, though for different reasons. It may seem that the underlying goals of Fair Trade, such as the commitment to reconnecting products to the places and people that made them, may satisfy leftist concerns by addressing core theoretical issues such as Marx's idea of "commodity fetishism." However, the fact that Fair Trade operates within the existing economic networks and markets is what, in the Marxist view, calls attention away from the need for fundamental change in the organization of production and political power, and thus calls attention away from the necessity of a completely new system that is more equitable in the way that people, production, and consumption are organized. Supporters of Fair Trade believe that reforms to trade standards, even without a fundamental transformation in global power relationships, still present viable mechanisms for the combatance of global inequality and injustice (Fridell, 2007). Radical leftists therefore disagree with the movement because of its effectiveness in creating a more accepted form of capitalism, which appeases consumers and businesses alike. While extremists from the right and left both disagree with the general premise of Fair Trade, their reasons are highly disparate, and are cast at a different level compared to the criticism that arise among Fair Trade advocates.

### ***B. Criticisms From Within Fair Trade Activism***

Another distinct category of people presenting critiques of Fair Trade are those who accept the fundamental ideas of the movement, but express concerns regarding its operations. Such concerns include the difficulties of implementation, the level of producer impact (financially and/or culturally), and the risk of dependency among producers. Also, there exists a great debate among Fair Trade supporters regarding the entrance of large corporations into the

Fair Trade market, or the “mainstreaming” of Fair Trade. While some view mainstreaming as a success in expanding a specialty market, others view it as a distortion of Fair Trade objectives.

Firstly, it is important to recognize that a deep paradox underlies the Fair Trade movement. As explained by Sarah Moberg and Mark Lyon, Fair Trade’s position as a market-based solution to social injustice and environmental degradation “[embraces] the deregulated markets that are themselves often responsible for deepening poverty in rural communities” (Moberg & Lyon, 2010). Because of this, the movement’s potential for success in accomplishing social justice is constrained by the structure of the existing markets in which it operates. Thus, Fair Trade’s simultaneous position as a working model and a challenge to orthodoxy creates an inevitable amount of tension as organizations attempt to operate both inside and against the market (Moore, 2004). Comprehension of this paradox is important because it gives way to many of the complex problems which arise during the implementation of Fair Trade initiatives at the ground level.

### ***C. Implementing Fair Trade Initiatives***

One element of Fair Trade participation that has elicited critical evaluation is the amount of paperwork necessary for farmers and organizations to be certified. Some farmers may be producing a variety of crops which need to be certified through different organizations, and these farmers may experience a certification overload imposing on them multitudes of documents with varying standards, all presented through rhetoric that may be unrelatable or incomprehensible to small-scale farmers. The bureaucratic element of Fair Trade relationships cannot be avoided due to the strict standards needed for certification, but it is necessary for Fair Trade and other ATOs to understand that farmers may see little difference between FLO standards and the previous dictates from authoritarian importers (FLO, 2010c). From this view, producers would regard Fair

Trade operatives as simply another middleman (Moberg & Lyon, 2010). A lack of understanding regarding the purpose of paperwork may create distaste on the part of producers, and could ultimately obstruct the implementation of Fair Trade initiatives.

In an attempt to combat such miscommunications with producers concerning the role of Fair Trade companies, training is provided, most often in the form of workshops. These workshops aim to increase farmers' knowledge about the system that they engage in by covering topics such as where their product ends up, what expenditures occur, and what the goals of Fair Trade are in terms of social justice and solidarity. Even so, many ethnographic studies report that producers often relate to Fair Trade only in terms of stable prices, market access, and organic production, with little or no mention of empowerment or sustainability. In fact, many producers will report a complete unfamiliarity with the term 'Fair Trade,' indicating a breakdown in communication between producers and the Fair Trade entities with which they collaborate (Linton, 2012). Again, miscommunication between actors within Fair Trade indicate shortcomings within the movement that could hinder its success in the future.

Even when a Fair Trade company implements a profitable plan, the level of impact upon producers remains an issue, mostly involving questions concerning the way that the Social Premium is spent. Varying opinions can make it difficult for the producer organization to come to an agreement on how the extra money should be spent. They may decide to fund public goods which benefit the whole community such as clinics or schools, or they may decide to fund 'club goods' which benefit only the members of the group. Examples of club goods include access to family health or education, or in many cases, reinvestment into the business through infrastructure such as trucks or storage facilities. In some cases, the producers chose to receive money, citing a desire to see the cash itself (Linton, 2012). These decisions concerning how to

spend the social premium lead to varying levels of municipal and farmer impact; the subsidation of public goods leads to community-wide benefits, while decisions to fund club goods influences farmers at an individual level.

#### ***D. Social Concerns Regarding Fair Trade***

The social impact of Fair Trade initiatives within traditional communities must also be considered. Often, the development that has occurred has meant an imposition of Western values which privilege market rationality over cultural traditions (Moberg & Lyon, 2010). For example, even well-intentioned Fair Trade companies may be guilty of the assumption that indigenous people and other culturally diverse populations will orient their resources to markets, and are confused when this fails to occur. As entities embedded in a capitalist culture, Fair Trade initiatives must understand that a traditional community's investment in a new economic activity has the potential to create a ripple effect that affects all other elements of the livelihood system. For example, diverting subsistence activities to market-oriented activities undercuts food security, which could lead to dependency on the part of farmers. The risk of dependency is increased further by the potential for crop failure, global market crises, and a reliance on consumers to continually purchase a specialty product (Piñeiro, 2012). Producers are left ill-equipped to weather such challenges when social capital has been undermined as a result of a prioritization of business success (Schmink, 2004).

Another social risk arises as some producers gain access to the Fair Trade market while others do not. This has the potential to create inequalities, as opposed to solidarity, at the local level. Apart from contributing to local stratification, including some and not others in an economic initiative could actually harm those on the outside, as price depressions are caused by stimulated production (Moberg & Lyon, 2010).

### *E. The “Mainstreaming” Debate*

Nestlé recently introduced a Fair Trade certified coffee to the market in what amounted to an abrupt change from its previous opposition to all Fair Trade policies. Only one coffee line out of their 8,500 products was certified, but heated debates swelled concerning the irony of certifying a company whose market control has enabled it to force down producer prices, creating the unequal distribution that made Fair Trade a necessity in the first place. With the ability to market their products as “coffee that helps farmers, communities, and the environment,” Nestlé reaped the benefits of an improved consumer image, while leaving most of their business practices unchanged. This improved image made the corporation better suited to harness the “niche-market” of Fair Trade consumers (Moberg & Lyon, 2010).

Corporate adoption of Fair Trade supply models is a relatively recent development that has sparked heated debates within the movement. Historically, the Fair Trade movement was rooted in a close-knit set of producer-buyer relationships with emphasis on the producer as the key stakeholder. However, its vision of providing a critique of conventional trade practices and a practical example of an alternative trade model, along with its increased desire for producer impact, led to Fair Trade moving into the mainstream (Moore, 2004). Also, consumer interest in socially responsible products has proliferated along with the movement due to the sense of moral satisfaction that consumers feel as a result of purchasing Fair Trade products, causing corporations to view Fair Trade retail prominence as a valuable market. Within our highly commodified Western culture, consumers are comforted by the idea that “shopping can change the world,” and fairly produced products gain an advantage over others as businesses profit from an increasing level of ‘commodified morality.’

Large-scale businesses have become aware of the economic opportunities accompanying the entrance into the Fair Trade market. Murray and Reynolds speak of “transnational corporations... constantly seeking to capture these initiatives and redefine them in ways that advance not progressive agendas, but their own private profits” (2000). Corporations are realizing the potential for creating economic success by addressing the needs of society, and may not necessarily be trying to conceal their motives for profit. For example, Harvard Business Scholars Michael Porter and Mark Kramer published an article describing the need for companies to create ‘Shared Value,’ which is defined as the pursuit of profit in a way that simultaneously creates value for society (2011). The article outlines the ways that social harms create internal costs for firms, and explains that creating shared value is a way to combat these costs. The authors explicitly state that this should not be considered “a philanthropy, social responsibility, or even sustainability, but a new way to achieve economic success” (64). They describe social needs as powerful and overlooked markets, which when addressed by businesses create competitive advantages (2011). Fair Trade involvement from this view takes on a very different set of goals from that of mission-driven enterprises aimed at promoting social change both at the producer and market level. Because of this, many activists oppose the integration of large-scale companies into Fair Trade, fearing the dilution of the movement’s initial goals.

Due to the Fair Trade movement’s lack of a political presence apart from the retail market, the certification of large-scale corporations certainly presents a high level of risk regarding the potential for Fair Trade goals to be diluted (Moberg & Lyon, 2010). However, there are some benefits to mainstreaming, causing supporters of Fair Trade to be divided in their stances towards it. On one hand, corporate involvement in Fair Trade leads to an increased customer base, which could in turn increase income for farmers. Mainstreaming therefore

represents the successful use of standards and certification to expand an alternative market and redistribute capital to Southern producers. On the other hand, some Fair Traders uphold staunch political beliefs and criticise the certification of corporate entities due to their ability to neutralize the supposed transformative power of the movement, while taking advantage of the profits offered by niche products and the integrity they represent to consumers (Jaffee, 2010).

While both opposing positions rest on elements of truth, April Linton believes that the two sides need not be at odds. In her book, *Fair Trade from the Ground Up*, she asserts that the economic success of Fair Trade through mainstreaming is helping the political objectives of the movement, at the same time that it is increasing revenues to farmers and communities. She does not believe that businesses are forced to dilute the message of Fair Trade in order to be competitive (Linton, 2012). Within this logic, integrity can be maintained during growth as long as strict regulations of corporate participants are maintained, and obligations to increase percentages of Fair Trade volume are in place. Corporations may not be acting out of sincere concern for the social impacts of their products, but it may be a mistake to discount the potential advantages to their involvement in Fair Trade simply because one disagrees with their motives for doing so (Jaffee, 2010). Anna Tsing presents a similarly optimistic conclusion in her work discussing the “awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference,” and the ways that these things create metaphorical “friction,” which in turn creates energy for positive growth (Tsing, 2005).

### **3. Indigenous Peoples**

#### ***A. Lifestyle and Values***

Due to the abundance of natural resource in the hemispheric South, many companies (Fair Trade and otherwise) engage in market exchanges with local producers who are embedded

in cultural systems which predate those of industrialized nations of the North. One such region is the South American Amazon, a region far removed from our commoditized urbanity, where large groups of people live their lives based on attitudes that are antithetical to the ideologies of capitalism. Unlike citizens of developed nations, these people continue to create their livelihoods through direct and constant interaction with the natural environment, giving way to a completely different approach to business than those living in a consumer-based culture.

In order to survive, Amazonian Natives have developed “economic” systems within nature by using available resources while reciprocating with respect and concern for the environment through the sustainable use of natural resources. They also operate within an egalitarian system where no individual or group controls the “means of production,” and labor is performed as an informal group. Philippe Descola and other ethnographers have documented the ways that indigenous peoples conduct themselves in relation to their surroundings and have described their interactions with the environment as almost social in nature (1996). That is, they do not treat the forest as an inanimate resource but rather as a member of the extended family. Whereas the Western school of thought typically defines “nature” as a system of occurrences that are completely uncontrollable and separate from human interaction, Amazonian people live within a paradigm that incorporates all entities, whether human, plant, animal, or spirit, into its sphere of social interaction (Vivieros de Castro, 1998).

Just as indigenous people strive to create mutually beneficial interactions with the environment around them, they also view commercial exchange as an act of reciprocity. Because of this, indigenous exchanges occur most frequently through gifts, as opposed to commercial transactions. A typical Western transaction consists of an immediate exchange of money for a tangible good between two people with little to no social rapport. In such a transaction, value is

given to the commodity itself and what is obscured is the amount of real labor or environmental impact expended to produce the object (Hudson & Hudson, 2003). Though gifts are certainly exist in Western societies, they are typically only given on special occasions that are often personal. The vast majority of material acquisitions for capitalist societies occur in the form of monetary exchange for a commodity between two unrelated people. .

Indigenous people, however, value the “chains that link relations between things to relationships between people,” (Gregory, 1997) and have therefore engaged in a regular system of exchange in the form of gifts given not for immediate payment, but with expectation of gift return in the future. Though monetary commodity exchanges do occur, there is much more emphasis on a social cycle of gift exchanges. This system of reciprocal giving sets up a lasting relationship between the giver and the receiver, and these relationships can be intrinsically valuable as they can unite tribes or families, and perpetuate a cycle of exchanges within and between generations. Moreover, what they exchange is not limited to material “goods,” but includes acts of politeness, rituals, dances, women, and other social services, which contain value outside of the financial realm, including the intrinsic value instilled in the total context of people and exchange relationships (Uzendoski, 2005). Under this paradigm, labor would certainly be considered a gift. Labor is therefore expended with the expectation of an economic or social reward that is often never delivered through capitalist systems, creating what indigenous people perceive as an exploitative gift relationship. Unlike capitalist societies, indigenous communities do not prioritize material possessions and view stability and happiness through terms other than material wealth (Mauss, 1990). As a result of this social philosophy of life, it is not surprising that native Amazonians view resource extraction and commerce very differently than those

subscribing to the neoliberal and capitalist ideals, and, necessarily, to many of the ideas that underpin Fair Trade.

### ***B. Intercultural Differences***

Though many indigenous communities aim to maintain traditional practices, virtually all have been affected by the ever-expanding global market and are attempting to figure out a balance between their ancestral traditions and their increasing involvement in a monetized world. On one hand, Amazonian natives continue to subscribe to values such as family cooperation, cosmology and reciprocity, while on the other hand they must find a way to integrate these values into a world where money is needed. The successful integration of indigenous values into market operations is not possible within the traditional capitalist paradigm because it means forsaking its foundational principles of wealth as an ultimate goal and indicator of social progress. For example, expectations of business success may collide with other community priorities, causing the undermining social capital that is the basis for maintaining solidarity in the face of changing cultural conditions (Schmink, 2004). Though both capitalists and indigenous people inhabit the same earth at the same time, the thoughts that govern their lives are highly disparate. Because of this, efforts to amalgamate the two, even for the purpose of social good, will be fraught with difficulty. Fair Trade is an example of such an effort when it is seen as a means by which solidarity and mutual respect are created between regions, substituting these values for the traditional capitalist motives of consumption and profit maximization (Moberg & Lyon, 2010).

Due to the complexity of relationships embedded within Fair Trade operations, it can be difficult for even the best intentioned companies to understand the scope of their influence within traditional communities. There has been a heightened amount of theoretical discourse

surrounding ethical and environmental issues in business, however these discursive approaches offer limited insight into how the intended beneficiaries interpret, accommodate or resist its policies. Abstract claims about the globe must be studied as they operate in the world, and it is here that ethnographic documentations of communities and their involvements with market initiatives becomes the most valuable source for information about the way that Fair Trade operates in practice (Moberg & Lyon, 2010) (Tsing, 2005).

In the next section, I will document my experiences living in an indigenous *Kichwa* community as it takes the initial steps towards involvement with a Fair Trade tea company, as well as my observations during a short internship performed directly through said company. Though my research extended for a short period of 6 weeks, I was able to gather information that will be a valuable addition to the literature concerning the successes and failures in the implementation of Fair Trade initiatives at the ground level<sup>1</sup>.

#### **4. The Case Study**

##### ***A. The Kichwa Community of Sapo Rumi***

During our ethnographic study, my partner and I used a variety of research methods, though participant observation proved to be the most valuable source of information. I was able to learn the most about indigenous views and beliefs simply through listening carefully to the stories told at the dinner table, whether they were myths or simply recounts of the activities of the day. Frequently, I found myself running back to my room after dinner to write down notes on interesting conversation. Additionally, we performed formal interviews where we sat with a community member and asked them standardized questions about an array of subjects. Some

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<sup>1</sup> This project was approved for Human Subjects research through the IRB.

questions included: Do you drink guayusa? When? When you do drink it, why? What does it mean to you? We recorded answers immediately as we received them.

Finally, we did two different pile sorts on a very small number of community members. The purpose of a pile sort is to elicit judgments of priority or similarity among items in a cultural domain. In practice, this means making notecards each containing a culturally relevant word, such as “family,” “clean water,” or “ancestral knowledge.” The participant is then asked to arrange each card by order of importance in daily life. I performed one pile sort to distinguish importance among cultural items and my partner did another to obtain a list of everyday expenses per household. These methods guided us as we began to take our first look at the ways that indigenous communities navigate the involvements with a newly formed Fair Trade company.

The *Kichwa* community of Sapo Rumi, within the scope of this research, consisted of about 30 adults and children divided into 4 households, all within the same extended family. Dr. Uzendoski has been involved with this community for over 20 years, so we were warmly welcomed by all residents, who kindly opened their homes and hearts to us. In fact, Dr. Uzendoski has long been married to a native member of this community, so our arrival was not only an introduction but also a family reunion.

I quickly realized that Federico, the designated community leader or “president,” would be a primary source for insight into the significance of *guayusa*. Historically, *guayusa* was consumed daily during a community-wide ceremony held before dawn; the women would brew the tea while the men would sing songs and tell stories. The ceremony was a time to recount and interpret dreams, which for *Kichwa* people serve as indicators for performing in or avoiding certain actions that day. For example, a bad dream would call for a strong brew of black *guayusa*,

and maybe even cause the dreamer to stay inside all day. Ceremonies are no longer performed on a regular basis, but Federico was excited to lead a handful of them on our account, giving us a chance to experience the traditional practice and learn about stories and ancestral beliefs surrounding the plant.

*Guayusa* has significant chemical attributes such as high levels of caffeine and antioxidants, and during the ceremony the tea is ingested but also rubbed over the face and hands as a way to cleanse the body and give energy for the day. Traditionally, however, much value has been placed on the spiritual significance of *guayusa*, rather than its chemical properties. Federico described the plant as “part of his family,” and expressed a social responsibility to respect its cosmological and cultural significance. He also explained that “by drinking regularly, one follows a strong path and eventually with old age will be able to turn into other beings; after death, a strong soul will live on, only not in the human form but in the form of another animal or plant.” Federico’s views about *guayusa* and the way that he incorporates it into his life clearly demonstrate a personal commitment to the ancestral *Kichwa* traditions, and the need for these traditions to be upheld.

### ***B. Runa Tea***

*Guayusa* has been cultivated by indigenous people for hundreds of years, but was only recently introduced into the Western market through Runa Tea. After experiencing the physical benefits of drinking while conducting ethnographic field research in Ecuador, Runa Co-Founders Tyler Gage and Dan MacCombie began imagining how a Fair Trade business could share this beneficial tea with a global audience, and provide a proactive and culturally valuable way for the *Kichwa* people to participate in the global economy (Runa, 2012).

By 2010, a Runa headquarters was established in Brooklyn, NY with offices in Ecuador in Quito and the Amazonian town of Tena. The organization is comprised both for-profit and non-profit arms: the former handles the supply chain and all business transactions, while the latter (referred to as Foundation Runa) conducts environmental and social research, community development projects, and includes an internship program. The enterprise is officially Fair Trade Certified and buys *guayusa* leaves from over 2,000 family farmers from 180 *Kichwa* communities, which are then processed and packaged into various forms of tea including loose-leaf ground, individually bagged, and even pre-bottled varieties, and then sold at retailers such as Whole Foods (Piñeiro, 2012). Runa's goals are to create a successful and profitable Fair Trade business that shares its benefits with the world but also empowers indigenous farmers through increased income, environmental preservation, and cultural celebration.

In accord with Fair Trade standards, Runa has assisted in the formation of a producer's organization, known as the Producer Executive Body (PEB). Members of the PEB will work with Runa to decide how to allocate the Social Premium Fund, based on needs assessments done through surveys given by Runa interns. With the help of *Kichwa*-speaking *técnicos*, presentations on Runa are given to contract farmers in each region, in an effort to combat the problem of farmer misunderstanding. Then, community and regional representatives are elected by public vote. Through the process of forming the PEB, Runa has striven to respect the farmers' autonomy through flexibility in voting practices and zoning: election was done through the *Kichwa* system of public votes (to guarantee legitimacy), and community zoning has occurred in concordance with PEB representatives to ensure that each community's zone matches the perceptions of how farmers identify themselves geographically and culturally.

Fair Trade USA standards decree that within six years, Runa must facilitate the transition of the PEB into a cooperative. Based on the definition of a cooperative as dictated by the International Labor Organization (ILO), this means that the PEB must evolve into an organization that is governed according to basic principles such as: voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, member economic participation, autonomy/independence, education/training, and concern for communities. The cooperative would then allocate work for shares, and hold meetings to discuss growing methods, the allocation of the Social Premium Fund, and others issues involving the commercial relationship with Runa. In order for this transition to occur successfully, members must actively attend and participate in meetings, but because producers do not feel the same urgency from their end to prioritize participation, Runa has created incentives for attendance, such as transportation to meetings or providing lunch at meetings (Piñeiro, 2012). Runa recognizes that the transition from PEB to small producer organization will present challenges, but is attempting to foresee such difficulties and counteract them through research, communication, and flexibility.

### *C. Guayusa and Runa in Sapo Rumi*

When we arrived in Sapo Rumi, the community was in the beginning stages of involvement with Runa. The workshop given by Runa had already been completed, but the *guayusa* garden had not yet been started. We participated in the first step of the process by working in the field with the locals for approximately four weeks to clear a 50 X 50 meter plot, then planted 150 *guayusa* saplings donated to us by the Runa. Since *guayusa* is not traditionally grown in direct sunlight, we also planted an additional 100 hardwood trees to provide shade and biodiversity. The men in every household participated in the labor, creating a community-wide plot. Following planting, however, the community must wait one full year for the plants to reach

the maturity level necessary for Runa to purchase them. In the meantime, much upkeep must be done to ensure that the plants are not overtaken by weeds or disease.

During our daily activities, we remained consciously aware of when and where we saw *guayusa*, and how people seemed to regard it. All community members continue to drink *guayusa* every day, but it is not brewed in the context of a ceremony and is instead served alongside breakfast. In interviews, it was clear that people maintain the belief that drinking *guayusa* is the best way to prepare the body and mind for the day, however most referred to the physical benefits of ingestion such as increased strength and clear-headedness, as opposed to the plant's spiritual significance. These factors do indicate a transformation in the relationship between community members and *guayusa*, as compared to historical traditions. However, such cultural evolutions were underway long before Runa's involvement in the area, and therefore cannot be attributed to their initiatives within the community.

Predictably, Sapo Rumi's president Federico was the sole member of the community to express reservations towards selling *guayusa* to Runa<sup>2</sup>. His worries are based on cosmological and symbolical reasons, and though he ultimately supports Sapo Rumi's involvement with Runa, he is concerned that if Runa doesn't conduct honest business and treat the people and plants with respect, the guardian spirits of the forest and of the *guayusa* plants will punish him as well as Runa. Though only one member of the community expressed these feelings to us, I believe that his view is significant to the anthropological findings of this study, particularly due to his elevated political and cultural status.

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<sup>2</sup> Federico was the only one to explicitly express these feelings to me; there could have been other members who felt this way and were not interviewed, or did not feel comfortable discussing those feelings during the interview.

Investigations into the financial implications of Runa within Sapo Rumi provided results that were somewhat surprising to us. We found that Sapo Rumi's economy is relatively stable and that most of their basic survival needs are met. We knew little about how much income they earned before our research began, but once we arrived we found that Sapo Rumi's main economic endeavor was local tourism. Unlike most communities in the area, Sapo Rumi is uniquely suited for tourism because of its natural beauty and small size. Local tourists come from neighboring communities to swim in the lagoon, play sports, and listen to music, and residents are able to charge for entrance at the gate and also operate a small store, which brings in money for each household. Though participation with Runa would indeed bring extra income to the community, residents explained that they planned to use these extra funds to supplement their tourism endeavor which has long been underway. Along with using the income to build infrastructure, members of the community were excited by the prospect of being able to bring visitors to the *guayusa* garden, showing them how it is grown, and explaining its significance to their culture. This use of the new *guayusa* patch for cultural education suggests the possibility that marketing could actually revive, rather than undermine, some of their fading traditions.

Because of this relatively sturdy economic base, we realized that our initial idea of Sapo Rumi's involvement with Runa as an "economic alternative" to other activities was not entirely correct. Our initial hypothesis was that, given the means to gain extra income, the community would bypass cattle ranching or other environmentally destructive economic activities. What we learned was that they had already employed a method of bypassing such activities through income gained from tourism and that involvement with Runa could help them make this source of livelihood even more successful. A combination of natural assets, as well as the arrangement

with Runa, makes it possible for Sapó Rumi to avoid environmental destruction, though the Runa initiative does not act as an economic alternative on its own (Wood, 2013).

As a whole, Runa's presence has not yet made a significant impact one way or another in Sapó Rumi, financially or culturally. Overall, my personal observations coincided with the general community's positive perception of the enterprise, though nobody expressed particularly passionate feelings about future implications of involvement with the company. However, even in this case study which illustrates largely benign interactions between a Fair Trade company and a participating indigenous community, tensions arise in certain areas.

For example, follow-up visits to the *guayusa* patch by my partner after my departure revealed that after our group left the community, nobody who had participated in the planting had returned to maintain the garden. We cannot be sure of the reasons for this, yet we can speculate. Perhaps, lack of continued participation is due to a lack of communication on the part of Runa. Because *guayusa* saplings take upwards of one year to reach maturity, the first certification inspection cannot occur until after that time. Runa has not sent a representative to visit Sapó Rumi or the *guayusa* garden since the initial workshop and planting, and community members may feel that the company has forgotten about them. As a result of this, community members may prioritize other things, such as the maintenance of their primary food garden (or *chakra*) or upkeep of their tourism industry, as opposed to the maintenance of a *guayusa* patch which offers potential income only after an intangible amount of time.

Additionally, social relationships within the community could have contributed to the neglect of the *guayusa* patch. Because all members of the community were involved in the initial setup, none may feel a personal responsibility to perform upkeep. Some members of the community may have felt that they did more work than others, making them prone to abandon

the operation out of frustration and a perception that their work will not yield benefits that are worth the labor. Also, our own social influence in the process cannot be ignored. As international visitors conducting research and assisting in planting, community members may have felt a sense of excitement in participation that faded after we left. The most recent update from Sapo Rumi revealed that a student from the 2009 Study Abroad group returned to visit the community, and with the money earned from his lodging fee, one household returned to the plot to clean up and replant 5 saplings that had died. This further indicates that community members associate the cultivation of guayusa with their international student visitors – past, current, and future. There are many different factors that could contribute to Sapo Rumi’s failure to prioritize the *guayusa* patch, and though the community has not experienced negative effects due to Runa Tea, the case study within Sapo Rumi proves that Fair Trade interactions do not occur in a vacuum and it provides a basis for looking at the reasons why difficulties arise as Fair Trade entities attempt to integrate indigenous communities into market systems that they do not fully understand, and that may not seem relevant to them. Life is extremely complex for indigenous peoples, and the many pressures within communities constitute a whole “politics of daily life.” These politics may be difficult for NGOs and researchers to understand as they try to make sense of the ways that communities prioritize their activities.

#### ***D. Runa Internship***

After my departure from Sapo Rumi, I spent two short weeks working as an intern for Runa. During my time there I was most involved in the process of performing “*encuestas*,” or needs assessments of various *Kichwa* communities in the area. As a team of two or three interns, we accompanied two Runa *técnicos* as they traveled to various communities per day and purchased leaves from certified farmers whose plants were at the mature age. After the *técnicos*

weighed the leaves and paid the farmers, we performed the assessments via questionnaires aimed at determining what problems are most prominent in each community. For example, farmers were asked how they received their water, whether they purified it, and whether anyone from their family had become sick from dirty water. This was only one of many subjects addressed, ranging from education and health, to juvenile delinquency and women's issues. Preceding each survey, we made it explicitly clear that any question could be skipped, and that the information acquired was to be evaluated as a means for understanding community issues that could be improved using development projects funded by the Social Premium. Due to transit conditions and long distances between communities, we were only able to perform 1-3 *encuestas* per day, representing 1 family per *encuesta*. Thankfully, my arrival came after a year's worth of *encuestas* had already been performed, and I was fortunate enough to be involved in the consolidation and evaluation of the data for the purpose of a Final Report, giving me a more broad view of community needs within the area. This Final Report was to be used to communicate the results of the *encuestas* to stakeholders within the company, and give advice to the PEB as to what projects could be implemented using the Social Premium Fund.

Performing and evaluating *encuestas* was not my only duty during my time at Runa. Each week, all interns received a Fair Trade-related article as an email, and was asked to read it before engaging in an active discussion with a Runa staff member about the topics discussed. The discussions were held in an environment that was open to critical evaluations of Fair Trade and encouraged inputs on any relevant issues, even those that raised argument with subjects related to Fair Trade operations; I felt comfortable with speaking my mind, and was even encouraged to do so. Other activities I participated in as an intern included a tour of the processing factory and participation in the maintenance of a botanical garden which held a variety of culturally

significant *Kichwa* plants, accompanied by a small lesson about each one. During my time at Runa, I witnessed a dedication to the social mission of providing a source of income for *Kichwa* farmers while upholding their cultural integrity. Staff members have a sincere desire to make decisions based on a holistic body of knowledge that does not simply shy away from areas of potential conflict, and have created a work environment that is conducive to such informed evaluations.

For example, a report written on behalf of Runa by former intern-turned-staff member Aliana Piñeiro outlines potential difficulties to be faced by the company, such as the formation of the PEB into a formal cooperation, and the risks associated with the export of *guayusa*, such as risks of environmental unsustainability, farmer dependence, and the disembedding of a cultural symbol through commercialization. In the report she addresses what measures are taken to avoid such risks, and ways that Runa can counteract potential problems in the future (2012). The existence self-reflective reports such as this, as well as a variety of other factors, indicate that Runa is truly driven by the values of Fair Trade. For example, Runa training programs go above and beyond FLO standards in an effort to increase farmer comprehension. Also, in-office rhetoric while discussing *encuesta* data and objectives revealed a commitment to produce accurate and helpful data, and the employment of those data to improving the lives of farmers. Overall, I witnessed a high level of respect towards *Kichwa* cultural values, exhibited through all levels of operations, at least on the foundation side.

### **Conclusion**

Though my time working directly for Runa was even shorter than my limited time living in the community, both experiences lent me information that I was able to use in my pursuit of understanding the issues concerning Fair Trade and indigenous peoples. During my time at Sapo

Rumi, I was able to form relationships with modern-day *Kichwa* people and experience life in their shoes, giving me an invaluable insight into Fair Trade and market engagements through the eyes of indigenous communities. While performing my internship at Runa I gained a wider view of communities within the area, and was able to directly engage in the operations and discussions within a Fair Trade company.

Due to time constraints, a longer ethnographic study is certainly necessary to fully answer the question that we posed to ourselves before embarking on our research journey, which was: what are the financial and cultural implications of Runa within Sapo Rumi? For future research, follow-up questions would need to address issues such as plant mortality, community sentiments towards Runa and guayusa, and the negotiation of tensions both between the community and Runa and within the community itself. Also, it would be necessary to track Runa's scope as a company as it expands and matures.

As the Fair Trade movement grows it captures an increasing amount of interest from scholars and consumers alike. Its unique position in the market involves the formation of trade relationships between highly diverse groups of people in an effort to achieve mutual satisfaction, but it also creates an amount of friction in the process. However, the presence of such friction does not necessarily indicate a failure of the system, and can even be productive. As a metaphorical image, Ana Tsing writes, "rubbing two sticks together produces heat and light; one stick alone is just a stick. [Friction] reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power" (Tsing, 2005). Within this view, the complications which arise as Fair Trade initiatives attempt to amalgamate two disparate values systems are in fact beneficial in that they help the movement positively evolve. In an effort to present a holistic picture of the Fair Trade movement, this thesis provides a brief snapshot of Fair

Trade from its inception and evolution, to its goals and contentions, and its relationship to indigenous communities. The short case study, though it may have addressed only a limited number of issues discussed in this thesis, certainly provides material and context for future theological and ethnographic studies concerning Fair Trade, its policies, and its effects on producers, such as indigenous groups. Fair Trade may not be a simple term, but it is certainly one that has heightened ethical discourse surrounding the nature of the global market environment, and its effects on the traditional producers that drive its profits. Additionally, the tensions that arise during the negotiations of conflicts between Fair Trade entities and indigenous groups are the inevitable result of the culture and values differences, and should be viewed as productive and informative steps toward more sustainable global development.

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