

Lazy Labor, Modernization, and Coloniality

Mobile Cultures between the Andes and the Amazon around 1900

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Abstract

This article examines two distinct yet overlapping cultures of mobility in turn-of-the-century Ecuador. On the one hand, there was a modernizing culture that sought to implement utopian modes of transportation between the Andes and the Amazon. On the other hand, there were indigenous porters and pilots, who had nonhegemonic ideas about mobility and labor. This article argues that (1) indigenous labor was based on the performance of colonial habits, which I refer to as coloniality; (2) within this framework of spatial practice, native bodily rhythms could be interpreted as successful tactics of everyday resistance; and (3) the conflict between Indians and non-Indians reveals a universal, modern tension between machine and humanlike mobilities.

Keywords

Amazon, coloniality, ethnomethodology, labor, local knowledge, mobility, modernity, the body

The hand of the diligent will rule, while the slothful will be put to forced labor.
Proverbs 12:24.

In turn-of-the-century Quito, the expanding middle-class was witness to the spectacle of a pulsating modernity, quickly unfolding in the newly paved quarters of the city center. Once a sleepy Andean town reminiscent of colonial times, the Ecuadorian capital was now in the grip of change, crisscrossed by tramways, telephone cables, and a handful of thunderous automobiles.¹ Three thousand meters below, on the Pacific coast, the port city of Guayaquil thrived on international trade, providing the world with cocoa and bananas, grown on large commercial plantations where a wage labor system was in the making.² A railway between the two cities was also under construction and, when traveling on the road, it was now possible to avoid many of the problems caused by the treacherous swamps of the western lowlands. Bandits waiting



on the side of the road had always been a problem, but around 1900 they were quickly becoming a footnote to the tales of journeys that were ever more common and ever more predictable.

There were no bandits on the main route between Quito and the eastern lowlands of the Amazon basin. This fact alone gives an indication of the volume and value of traffic along the Camino de Papallacta, as the trail was known in Spanish (Figure 1). Economic flows between the resource-rich Amazon and the Ecuadorian Andes were reduced to occasional deliveries of forest products, sold in the street markets of the capital. The government, though, was increasingly concerned about the taming of a region that was simply too distant to be incorporated into the orderly rhythms of the nation-state.³ The rubber boom was under way, and neighboring Peru was making considerable profits out of it. Ecuador felt excluded and robbed, as Peru occupied rivers that were allegedly Ecuadorian.⁴ Having the chance to dispute Peruvian dominance—and gaining access to a fraction of this wealth—involved, first and foremost, the fundamental problem of *getting there*. Between 1880 and 1920, all efforts at improving communications with the Amazon frontier failed or were too timid to turn matters around. Railways and roads were planned, the trail was improved, and a postal service was set up. However, no effort was consistently carried out, and the Papallacta Trail remained almost unchanged throughout this exceptional age of revolution in communications. Still, in 1920 traveling between Quito and the headwaters of the Napo River, about 180 kilometers distant, took eight to twelve days, as much as it had always taken. The journey to the Peruvian border also involved a 400-kilometer stretch of river in which Ecuadorian travelers paddled along in indigenous canoes, only to encounter the machine sounds and metallic shapes of a Peruvian steamer. Most important, every official journey required the assistance of native porters and pilots, whose vernacular modes of movement ruined all pretense of officialdom and progress. On the eastern slopes of the Andes the journey had to be made on foot. The only available workforce was that of the Napo Runa, Quichua-speaking peoples of the Upper Napo. To the authorities' dismay, the Napo Runa were not always willing to walk, and when they walked, they did so at their own pace.

Using both published and unpublished sources, this article investigates two opposing mobile cultures—a grounded, nonhegemonic Napo Runa culture that moved in rhythms dictated by history and nature, and the mobile culture of modernity, based on abstract projections and nationalist ideology.⁵ Thus this article contributes to the academic debate on bodily mobility, particularly in relation to indigenous labor.⁶ The main argument is that Napo Runa mobility undermined modernity's foundations, while reinforcing the pact of coloniality. Coloniality, in my understanding of the term, is the modern performance of colonial habits: embodied submission, the ever renewed actuality of tired rituals of domination.⁷ Unlike Iberian colonialism, medieval

in origin, modern coloniality was fueled by an industrial mentality. Disciplining native labor entailed the “mechanization of footwork,” a typically modern project, and an obsession among Ecuadorian policymakers.⁸ It goes without saying that the Amazon forest provided ample room for native autonomy. Coloniality partly explains why the Napo Runa worked regularly as porters, pilots, and assistants, even though they could leave the limits of the Ecuadorian state by simply walking past the first line of trees.

Economic incentives do not operate in a cultural and historico-geographical vacuum. In the late 1840s the Italian traveler Gaetano Osculati noted how the Napo Runa, who at the time paid tribute to the authorities and priests using gold dust, a metal found in the rivers, met their obligations and simply threw any leftover gold back into the water.⁹ The question of labor is critical and will be discussed in some detail throughout the essay. In an archival document from 1926 we read: “What they [the Indians] call work [*trabajo*] is *tarabana*, although it is not real work.”¹⁰ In Quichua, *tarabana* implies “work undertaken for others.”¹¹ As Blanca Muratorio explained, the Napo Runa “use no single term to refer to ‘work’ in general, but because they worked for the whites since colonial times, they use the Spanish word *trabajo*, Quichuanized as *tarabana*.”¹² Around 1900, *tarabana* was the kind of messy manual work that the Napo Runa did under white supervision—occasionally drunken work, alienating work, consciously lazy work. *Samai* (“breath” and “power,” both literally and figuratively) is another local concept that, intertwined with *tarabana*, mediated Napo Runa mobility. *Samai* has not been studied in relation to transportation systems, although Michael Uzendoski has written that it is inherently mobile within Napo Runa communities: “To speak of *samai* is to stress a circulatory notion of the soul as stretching across kinship pathways, time, and space.”¹³ Even though I will insist on *tarabana* and *samai* as important qualifiers of Napo Runa (im)mobility, I wish to avoid essentialist explanations. *Samai* itself was as cultural as it was biological; furthermore, there was nothing particularly unique about Napo Runa resistance. It was above all, an all too human response to a modern desire for standardization.

From a nonnative perspective, any kind of transportation to and from the Amazon was desperately slow and unacceptably erratic. Officials often complained about the many natural obstacles to the success of their duties, such as bridgeless rivers and knee-deep mud along the trail, but in their narratives the Napo Runa were also to blame for the sorry state of communications.¹⁴ In fact, in the eyes of the white Ecuadorian settlers of the frontier, any kind of transaction with the *Indios* was bound to be delayed or inconclusive. Consider this comment, made by a local official in 1890: “The [Jesuit] fathers are waiting for the *Indios* to come and finish the church. When they are asked about it they say ‘sorry father’ and work a little, and badly, and then leave [into the forest]. ... They lie more than they speak, and they get drunk.”¹⁵ *Tarabana* meant that the Napo Runa were always, by default, testing the limits of unproduc-

tivity. Drunkenness, foot-dragging, and dissimulation, among others, were the specific reasons why non-Indian observers resented the Napo Runa. This characterization corresponds to the myth of the lazy native that developed alongside western colonial enterprises.¹⁶ However, we should not lose sight of the fact that industrial factory workers were also accused of similar faults. Frederick Winslow Taylor, known as the father of scientific management, whose seminal book on the matter aimed to maximize body movements in factory spaces, was convinced of the universal inclination of workers toward laziness. “For every individual ... who is overworked,” he wrote in 1911, “there are a hundred who intentionally underwork—greatly underwork—every day of their lives.”¹⁷ This article shows that Napo Runa laziness (a slow and unstructured bodily rhythm) was a modern construct that had at least as much to do with *actual* resistance to discipline and efficiency as it had to do with racial stereotyping.

Sloth is a deadly sin in the Christian tradition, and it may also be understood in contraposition to modernity. In 1883, the Cuban-born, French Marxist Paul Lafargue famously celebrated *la paresse* (laziness) as the natural condition of humankind, a trait that defined not only tribal societies but also ancient civilizations and yet-to-be-industrialized parts of contemporary Europe. “For the Spaniard,” Lafargue wrote, “in whom the primitive animal has not been atrophied, work is the worst sort of slavery,” whereas the “Greeks in their era of greatness had only contempt for work.”¹⁸ A number of anarchist writers (esp. Kropotkin) also embraced these or similar ideas, and anthropologists have been traditionally sympathetic toward contested notions of labor, mobility, and profit in “ethnographic” societies. One of the most iconic books on this matter is Marshall Sahlins’s *Stone Age Economics* (1972), which aimed to rationalize the use of time among African hunter-gatherers. Sahlins put forward the suggestion that these groups were not living in poverty, as it would appear by comparison with our consumerist lifestyles, but instead in a world of organic plenty, self-sufficiency, and long lazy hours with nothing much to do.¹⁹ James C. Scott, drawing on Michel de Certeau’s celebration of instinct over science in the walkable city, developed the notion of peasant “everyday resistance” in 1985, and eventually encountered the Aristotelian concept of *metis*, or “practical wisdom,” in 1997.²⁰ Again, tarabana may be interpreted in terms of everyday resistance that relied heavily on local or practical knowledge.

This is a study of modern, universal forms of domination and resistance, but it would be incomplete without a careful consideration of the indigenous perspective. How are we to couple tarabana with coloniality, for instance? Ethnomethodology has done much to explain the nonwestern experience of time and space. In a recent book on Amazonian mobility, the editor distinguishes several kinds of territorial movement among indigenous peoples, including: individual and collective; residential mobility that “denote[s] movement between different dwelling sites”; logistical mobility, signifying the kind of “lo-

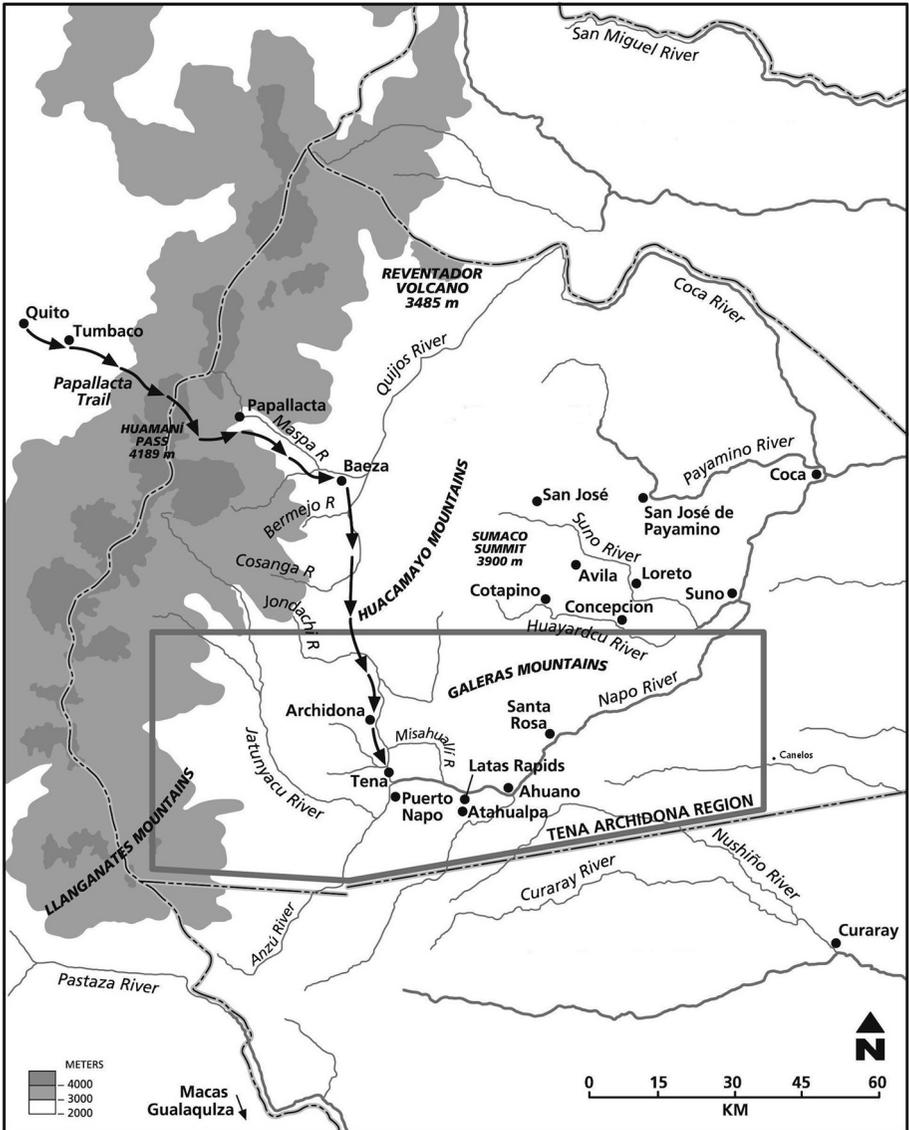


Figure 1: Highlands (where Quito is located), Andean range and Upper Napo Region. The pueblos, mountains, main rivers, and rapids are indicated. The arrows show the Papallacta Trail. The border with Peru, down the Napo River, does not appear on the map.

calised movements related to foraging and around a particular dwelling site”; long-term, circular mobility of groups between different areas; and trekking, a type of mobility that involves resource management across landscapes, naming and place-making.²¹ In the case of the Napo Runa of turn-of-the-century

Ecuador, yet another type of territorial movement may be identified: submissive mobility, for reasons that have to do with a deep history of colonialism.²² Tarabana was lazy labor, but it was labor after all.

Coloniality, Exchange, and the Logic of Napo Runa Compliance

In a world of railways, telephones, and rising patriotism, the Ecuadorian inability to conquer the overwhelming natural space that laid east of the Andes was the cause of much anxiety among policymakers. However, geographic isolation was at least partly the result of colonization. In pre-Columbian times, the Papallacta Trail was a busy commercial route between the highlands and lowlands. At the time of European contact the Amazon provided cinnamon, coca, wooden objects, foodstuffs, and slaves to the Inca Empire. The native peoples of the Upper Napo, named Quijo by the conquistadors, obtained clothing and agricultural produce from the highlands. Early colonial sources mention the existence of politically sponsored traders known as *mindaloes*, who arrived from the Andes and traded with the Quijo.²³ During the Spanish conquest of the Eastern Piedmont in the mid-sixteenth century, the region became depopulated through violence, epidemics, and native flight. When the first rush of conquest and colonization was finished, the main artery that connected the Quito basin with the Upper Napo via the four thousand-meter pass of Huamaní (a trail later known as Camino de Papallacta) became neglected and nearly impassable until the mid-twentieth century.²⁴

Around 1900, the Upper Napo region, a vast triangular space between the Napo and Coca Rivers and the Andean massive, had a population in the order of eight thousand Napo Runa Indians, and never more than thirty or forty white Andean colonists. There were more settlers downriver, near the rubber fields, where Peru virtually controlled all commercial transactions taking place in the middle and lower Napo. Many Napo Runa men and families migrated to Peruvian and even Bolivian territory during these years, although no structural demographic imbalance seems to have taken place. As in the case in which gold was thrown back into the river, the Napo Runa and other indigenous groups left traders scratching their heads when they showed little or no interest in entering the profitable world of rubber tapping.²⁵ The Napo Runa did, however, depend on manufactured goods—axes, plates, cloth, and also the Western-style clothes that began to be adopted in the late nineteenth century. For four hundred years the Upper Napo was slowly but surely colonized, and in fin-de-siècle Ecuador all transactions between Indians and non-Indians were informed by a set of shared assumptions about who was whom in the social order of things. The Napo Runa were seen and saw themselves as servants, and all instances of everyday resistance happened within this mutual framework of reference—a *longue durée* condition that has been re-

ferred to as coloniality, and that in 1900 was inseparable from the practice of modernity.²⁶ Samai sheds light on the Napo Runa intellectual justification of coloniality. As indicated above, it may be translated as “power” and “breath.” For the Napo Runa, each living thing has a fluctuating amount of samai. Evangelical missionaries, for instance, are believed to be powerful because God has blown his breath into the Bible.²⁷

Coloniality, as a crossroads between Indian and non-Indian worldviews and livelihoods, pervaded economic and social exchange, which invariably required geographical mobility. Natural resources in the Amazon tend to be scattered over large areas, and their extraction has traditionally required a great deal of trekking and paddling. The relationship between Napo Runa and white authorities, priests, and traders was based on a system of credit and patronage, whereby the natives were given goods in advance—the most common being cloth or *lienzo*—and they had to bring forest products in return. The unwritten rules of coloniality also dictated the arrangement of settlements. In the Upper Napo there were about a dozen *pueblos*, hamlets that were clearings in the forest with two or three buildings made of palm, and sometimes a church. Each pueblo had a number of native residences or *carutambos* attached to it, but Napo Runa dwellings were “hidden” in the forest, two or more hours away. In other words, the carutambos were linked to the pueblos by back-and-forth communications, but were scattered in the jungle and at a safe distance from the white settlers. Colonists hardly ever ventured into the thicket, so the Napo Runa became effectively untraceable as soon as they left the pueblos. They would visit the pueblos in order to acquire manufactured goods, but also to attend mass and to socialize. They were semi-Christianized Indians, and they were distinguished—and distinguished themselves—from the *aucas* or “savages” who roamed the forests beyond the Upper Napo. The Jesuits who lived in the region between 1870 and 1896 commanded respect among the natives (priests were thought to have shamanic skills), but the strict Christian calendar was seen with much suspicion.²⁸ The fathers negotiated church attendance with the elders, and during the performance of this and other rituals they took the opportunity to assign agricultural, construction, and transportation duties. The missionaries, however, were time and again demoralized by the halfhearted commitment of the Indians.²⁹ In theory, the Napo Runa would visit the mission station on Saturday evening and attend mass on Sunday, but irregularity was the rule. Since the pueblo was also seen by the natives as a space of conviviality, Saturday evenings were devoted to drinking *aguardiente* (cane liquor), and these “orgies” enraged and depressed the fathers. Similarly, the few public officials who were sent to the pueblos around this time had to cope with the dilemma of keeping the Indians under surveillance, as law-abiding citizens of the growing Ecuadorian state, while formally or informally allowing their escapades into the wilderness in search of tribute.³⁰

Mobility Interrupted: Patriotic Dreams and Unconquerable Rivers

On 26 November 1903, while patrolling downriver along the middle Napo, and passing by the hamlet of Angoteros, a small group of Ecuadorian soldiers came across an equally small Peruvian crew. One of the parties opened fire and in the subsequent exchange the Ecuadorians were promptly defeated, leaving two soldiers dead. The incident came to be known as the Battle of Angoteros.³¹ A rush of nationalism followed this event, and the distant Amazon frontier became the focus of Quito's modernizing fever.³² A society of patriots, the Junta Patriótica Especial, was created among the highland bourgeoisie to pay tribute to the victims. Nationalist poems were read and calls were made to the *progreso* of Ecuador. More specifically, the Junta aimed to work, along with the central government, in the improvement of communications with the eastern lowlands.³³ The fact was that, in Angoteros, the Peruvians fought on a steam-powered boat, while the struggling Ecuadorians paddled on canoes.

In 1908 the railway line connecting Guayaquil and Quito was finished, and the government turned its eyes toward the Amazon. Railways—fast, unnatural, predictable machines—were the way to go. The idea that Ecuador had a privileged location, placed between the Pacific Ocean and the Amazon River, was widespread. “We,” an Ecuadorian railway planner wrote, “own the Equatorial zone.”³⁴ This was the classic age of engine-powered transcontinental travel, and coast-to-coast communications was a favorite topic of discussion among policymakers.³⁵ Sentimental voices retold the story of the conquistador Francisco de Orellana who left from Quito and “discovered” the Amazon by traveling down the Napo in 1541.³⁶ There was among urban Ecuadorian elites a sense of entitlement, opportunity, and duty. Railway plans were plentiful and their scientific and financial calculations provided the otherwise vague nationalist rhetoric with a layer of rationality.³⁷ Several options were discussed, and the route through the Andean city of Ambato was finally chosen. The new railway would rely on the Quito–Guayaquil line, which stopped at Ambato, and would cross the Andes into the Curaray River, and eventually into the Napo. Since it is not the purpose here to narrate the story of the unfinished railway, it suffices to say that even though the construction of the so-called Ferrocarril al Curaray did start, it was discontinued in 1916 and never crossed the Andes. In the tropical forest, things were not improved in the patriotic years that followed the Battle of Angoteros, and in 1909 Peruvian launches were spotted near Coca, incidentally at the limit of steam navigation. An Ecuadorian official then sent an angry and dispirited note to Quito: “it is hardly possible,” the missive said, “to administer 300,000 square kilometers without having a damn canoe of our own.”³⁸

Tarabana—lazy native labor that sustained the pact of coloniality—was an important obstacle to the Ecuadorian efforts toward mechanization. Mobility

was ruled by various overlapping degrees of nonnative compromise and native tarabana. This was the kind of work that was inefficient *precisely* because it was done for the authorities. Tarabana combined white hegemony and Indian consent with the eternal possibility of everyday resistance. Regardless of native agency, we have seen that the weight of the Ecuadorian state in the Amazon was in itself unimpressive. Soldiers traveled by canoes, made and owned by the natives. Canoes were unfit for all kinds of military transport, as they were clearly not designed to contain the weight of men, arms, and ammunition.³⁹ Native agency only added to these frustrations. First, canoes and their pilots were not always available. Absence was the most frequent challenge faced by all employers. Not turning up—when they knew they were being awaited—sent a powerful message. Absence, more specifically absenteeism, was a nonconfrontational “art” of resistance that made everyone painfully aware of the fact that, in the forest at least, the natives had the last word. Travelers were routinely left stranded on beaches, and government officials were sometimes abandoned during the night, halfway through their journeys to the border.⁴⁰ In a few cases, their contempt for indigenous ways turned into dread. Several non-Indian authorities confessed their admittedly paranoid fear that alienated Napo Runa were plotting their murder by forcing the canoes to capsize on the rapids.⁴¹ Second, native pilots exclusively held practical knowledge of the rapids, the resting areas where fish and fruits were abundant, and the shifting sandbanks on the river. The establishment of customs docks on various points was proposed in order to facilitate a rational, infrastructural transition between land and water, but it was never attempted.⁴² Explosives were used in the highlands to open up roads, and an attempt was made to introduce them in the Amazon for the purpose of removing some of the most notorious rocks that created the rapids on the upper reaches of the river. Explosives, however, do not appear to have been used for this purpose, and no motor boat was owned by the Ecuadorian military during this period.⁴³ A legal code for the administration of the Amazon frontier, issued in 1904, took a pragmatic and somewhat defeatist approach. It stated that one of the duties of the local governors was to bring the “troops to the river [so they can] learn how to swim.”⁴⁴ As the dreams of mechanization failed to be realized, the human body became the government’s last and only resort.

The Postal Service: Walking and Breathing along the Trail

The dialectic between the unreliable native laborer and the modernizing state was manifested in the government’s efforts to establish regular communications with the Amazon frontier. Tarabana was dutiful work that included slacking off, disappearing acts, and other expressions of dissidence. It was not uncommon for the porters on the Papallacta Trail to abandon their cargo al-

together, and native pilfering was a taken-for-granted loss in every delivery made between Quito and the Upper Napo.⁴⁵ When the government tried to make improvements to the Papallacta Trail, it was faced with the unsettling prospect of employing Napo Runa labor. Work gangs were assembled and instructions were given to build bridges over treacherous streams and to provide portions of the trail with a regular width.⁴⁶ However, none of this mattered if the Napo Runa decided, as they often did, to return to their dwellings after a few days' work leaving repairs on the trail unfinished. Modernizers knew that dependence on the natives was inevitable, and they regarded the indigenous refusal to "move properly" as something of a curse.

In 1908 and 1909 two separate documents dealt with the postal service between the Andes and the Amazon. The first document was a plan, based on modern extrapolations and drafted by one A. Zapata.⁴⁷ The second document was a report, written by the then local governor of the Amazon frontier, Genaro García.⁴⁸ The contrast between the two, the plan of 1908 and the report of 1909, is telling with respect to the attitude of the Ecuadorian state toward the Amazon frontier in general, and toward the problems of transportation in particular.

Zapata's plan was a tentative contract for the establishment of the postal service (Servicio Postal) between Quito and Archidona-Tena, the main pueblos in the Ecuadorian Amazon. The new service aimed to modernize weights, measurements, and times, and was one of the Ecuadorian state's successive decrees of standardization, which included: the synchronization of the delivery of post from Quito with the arrival of steamers at the port of Guayaquil (1850);⁴⁹ the official application of the metric system to all commercial transactions (1854); the Ecuadorian adherence to the International Standard Time (1884); the establishment of the sucre, divided into céntimos, as national currency to do away with the old peso (1884); and the expansion and improvement of the municipal postal system in the capital (1899).

Zapata's plan of 1908 predicted that the extension of the new postal service into the Amazon would be carried out according to the following schedule:

- Departure from Quito at 6:00 p.m. on the 10th, 20th and 30th of each month
- Arrival in Papallacta at midday on the 12th, 22nd and 2nd
- Departure from Papallacta at 6:00 a.m. on the 13th, 23rd, and 3rd
- Arrival in Baeza at midday on the 14th, 24th, and 4th
- Departure from Baeza at 6:00 a.m. on the 15th, 25th and 5th
- Arrival in Archidona at midday 19th, 29th, 9th.⁵⁰

The post was to be delivered by a non-Indian agent. The government's opinion of the white settlers was by and large negative—their morals were relaxed by urban standards—but at least they could not escape into the forest with

the dexterity shown by the Napo Runa. Thus Zapata appointed a postman and postal administrator named Anastasio Torres, recently established in Baeza. The government was to pay Torres fifteen sucres per journey, and always upon arrival in the capital. Torres was given authority to hire an assistant to cover part of the distance. The two postmen were to carry a maximum of ten kilograms each, although an extra ten kilograms could be added if necessary. For each of the extra kilos, twenty céntimos was to be paid. Also, if the post was delayed at either end, every hour after the second hour behind schedule the postman responsible would be fined fifty céntimos.⁵¹ The aims were consistency and speed, and overall to provide the whole process with a veneer of “civilization.” Zapata’s plan shows these aims in the use of the metric system, and in the attempt to get rid of various colonial weights and measurements, mainly the *arroba* (approximately 11.5 kilograms) and the *legua* (some 5 kilometers), widely used to quantify cargo and distance throughout the nineteenth-century. Also, payments were to be made a posteriori in an attempt to overturn the traditional credit system.⁵² Once the Quito–Archidona line was in order, the argument went, regular communications with the distant border with Peru would be secured.⁵³

Zapata’s ambitious proposal had several precedents. In the Amazon, the first recorded attempt to create some sort of postal route dates from 1878.⁵⁴ Such regularity was also implied in the legal codes issued for the region from the late nineteenth century, but no piece of legislation was able to correct the uncertainties of transportation between the Andes and the Amazon. In 1889 the idea was raised that all postal deliveries should be made by two native porters, which in theory would increase the chances of punctuality.⁵⁵ Four years later, the number of postmen per journey was raised to four (two of whom would “escort” the other two).⁵⁶ Letting the natives team up was certain to be a bad idea, as a traveling gang would be more likely to question the strictures placed on local modes of moving. By the time Zapata drafted his detailed plan in 1908, the postal service was still in disarray and the aforementioned Torres was appointed to deliver letters and parcels. Yet, there is no trace of Torres in any other documents. It is possible that he had second thoughts, and he might have been the target of some of the accusations commonly lodged against white colonists: drunkenness and indolence, precisely, and passive resistance to the rule of law. At any rate, we can safely assume that the Napo Runa continued to be the only Amazon postmen of the Ecuadorian government (Figure 2).

The success of modernization depended on those whose world was being modernized. The natives knew faster routes than the one taken by the government officials, but kept this knowledge to themselves. A local resident explained how in the 1880s he once overheard some Napo Runa speaking in Quichua about “a better and shorter route” that avoided a difficult part of the trail, and cut down the journey by one day. But because they “feared that more

people would migrate [into the Amazon] through a better trail," they had traditionally been quiet about it. Also, the alternative path crossed a solitary mountain range called Huacamayos, which required significant physical effort and which, in Napo Runa cosmology, is a dangerous place where life-as-breath (*samai*) may be at risk.⁵⁷

What stands out is the degree of autonomy of the Napo Runa, mainly but not only in the forest. In Quito, the porters could independently sell small amounts of Amazonian products such as *cascarilla* (the basis of quinine), and they could return with knives, cloth, and other items to be distributed in the pueblos of the Napo. Stealthy mobility between carutambos, behind the backs of the white authorities, also speaks of Napo Runa freedom, and it created flows that were external to the pueblos. Manuel Villavicencio, who lived in the region around 1850, is the only observer to have mentioned the existence of Napo Runa messengers. These were called *shimi* ("mouth" or "message" in Quichua) and their role was to deliver news whenever a "notable episode took place," especially when a government official traveled from one *pueblo* to the next.⁵⁸

In 1909, one year after the release of Zapata's plan, a new document was drawn up concerning the establishment of the postal service between Quito and the eastern frontier. Its author was Genaro García, a local official who had just been promoted to governor of the Amazon. In sharp contrast to Zapata's vision, García's document was not a declaration of intentions. It was an empirical report or *informe*—the first comprehensive account of Ecuadorian communication systems between the Andes and the Amazon—in which Napo Runa rhythms and ways of traveling were effectively added into the rhetoric of the state, as facts of administration.⁵⁹ What García provided was indeed a description of local practices, and these in turn reflected the hybrid contents of Ecuadorian modernity. For example, each Napo Runa porter customarily moved a maximum of three arrobas, approximately thirty-five kilograms. García's report stipulated that porters would carry no more than thirty-five

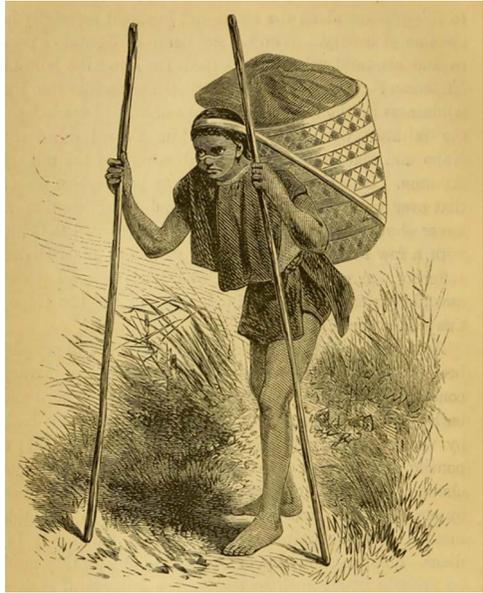


Figure 2: A Napo Runa porter.

Source: James Orton, *Across the Andes and the Amazon: Or Across the Continent of South America* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1870), 184.

kilograms, the word *arroba* having been removed from the official documentation.⁶⁰ Also, García's document admitted that payments were meant to be in *sucres*, but that the aforementioned *lienzo* or cloth would have to be used for practical purposes:

For all payments it is convenient to carry either white or blue *lienzo*, since the indigenous [porters] would rather have cloth than cash, and they receive it with great pleasure, as a currency exchange of 0.40 *sucres* per meter of white *lienzo* and 0.50 *sucres* per meter of the blue one.⁶¹

Despite the official use of the metric system, in the 1900s and 1910s we see a combination of modern, colonial, and native units of measurement. The same pattern applied to the rhythm of transportation. The Quito–Guayaquil railway guaranteed the regular delivery of letters and parcels between the two cities. However, overall communications between most places depended on indigenous porters. It was known that the Napo Runa traveled at their own pace; however, even if they were thought to be unpredictable by birth, from their rhythm a natural pattern emerged, believed to be around one *jornada* per day. *Jornada*, a medieval concept, meant “working hours” and also referred to any distance traveled in one day. According to García's metric version of 1909, each *jornada* corresponded to journeys of either fifteen or twenty kilometers. Traditionally, each *jornada* was divided into *leguas*, five-kilometer stretches in García's text.⁶² The time and distance covered between stopovers depended in practice on the weight the porters carried and on the capacity and willingness of each of them, as well as on the conditions of any given part of the trail and rivers. But it was known that porters walked somewhere between forty or fifty minutes and one hour before taking a break. As the U.S. traveler Hamilton Rice observed on the Papallacta Trail in 1903: “From time to time the human train halted for a respite, fifty minutes to an hour being the stretch a peon could go with 60 to 75 lbs. [between approximately 27 and 34 kilograms] upon his back without stopping for rest, food, or drink.”⁶³ In Napo Runa terms, this break was taken when the porters ran out of breath or *samai*, a concept that was as central to Napo Runa culture as the watch was to the modern traveler. *Samai*'s connotations of physical and spiritual strength informed the porters' attitude toward labor. Napo Runa youngsters had to go through rites of passage in which they had their eyes rubbed with *aji* (red pepper) and were given words of advice and *samai* by the older men, by means of breathing vigorously “into” the crown of their heads—just like God is believed to have blown into the Bible.⁶⁴ The more *samai* Napo Runa porters had, the better equipped they were to deal with adversity, and the more respect they commanded, and the better they represented Napo Runa culture. Therefore, running out of breath while carrying things for the white authorities meant “losing spirit” and feeling physically vulnerable, as well as eroding the natives' dignity and capacity for negotiation. The notion of *samai*, flexible and “premodern” as it

was, was nonetheless incorporated into García's metric Amazon itinerary. In short, each five-kilometer stretch coincided with a *samai*. These calculations were of course approximate and corresponded more to the places where the Indian porters used to stop than to actual metric measurements. It is interesting to note that the places García neutrally writes down as local markers for each of the five-kilometer parts of the journey, had been identified as *samais* by earlier witnesses.⁶⁵ Transportation was arranged around indigenous ideas of time and space, and the soul and body, even if the labeling was modern.

Only the strongest, more skillful, and preferably Spanish-speaking porters were chosen to carry burdens along the trail. This decision was generally made not by the Napo Runa themselves but by their employers.⁶⁶ Yet it paid off among the Napo Runa too, as being a postman improved all the skills necessary to deal with the authorities, and was in turn a way to gain *samai* and consequently social recognition. The task of traveling to and from Quito was very demanding, and often unbearable, to the extent that some Amazonian porters perished in the freezing conditions of the Huamaní Pass. Excessive weight given by careless patrons, poor payments, and high risks along the way were among the many downsides of the job.⁶⁷ For the Napo Runa, these were customary yet important events, and every journey out of the Amazon was preceded and followed by nightlong celebrations. Trans-Andean expeditions were liminal crossings, and something of an adventure.

Conclusions

Non-natives were forced to deal with native ways of moving, which both parties interpreted as belonging to the realm of *tarabana*. In many ways, turn-of-the-century *tarabana*—"not real work"—is another term for laziness.⁶⁸ Irregular walking patterns were not the only problem. Lateness, absenteeism, drunkenness, pilfering, feigned ignorance, foot-dragging, all are terms that partake of the same semantic field. *Samai* was the physical, social, and religious logic behind *tarabana*'s seemingly chaotic nature.

The government was forced, on paper as well as in practice, to admit its dependency on Napo Runa rhythms. Foreign modernizers took notice and suggested importing laborers. When a group of American oil prospectors arrived in the Upper Napo in the 1920s, they wrote: "the use of Indian labor to any large extent is, in the writers' opinion, out of the question; construction of railways, pipe-lines, highways etc., will have to depend on white labor brought from cities [and] from the West Indies."⁶⁹ This comment should not be interpreted in racial terms exclusively. It is worth repeating here Frederick Winslow Taylor's words: "For every individual ... who is overworked, there are a hundred who intentionally underwork ... every day of their lives."⁷⁰ White labor was not believed to be free from the curse of laziness, but employers felt

that these settlers would be more accustomed to work in a factory-type setting, and also more manageable without the comparative advantage of Napo Runa local knowledge.

In turn-of-the-century Ecuador, all transitions between Andean and Amazonian worlds were ruled by (1) an undercurrent of *longue durée* peonage, (2) a biocultural element of friction in the form of samai, and (3) what could be described as a universal suspicion of modernity and its demands on the body. Tarabana, however culturally and historically specific, is a pristine example of the latter. In this respect, the wishes of the Ecuadorian elites, excited by the rapid modernization of Quito, were not different from those of Frederick Taylor, who dreamed up his perfect factory by “eliminating unnecessary motions” and other more or less sinister visions of time-space compression. Equally, Napo Runa (im)mobile resistance is comparable to that of the worker “who intentionally underworks” in the industrial factory—a natural response to the mechanization of the body.⁷¹

The modernizers and the modernized were tied together by the pact of coloniality. The Napo Runa, despite their role as protagonists in this drama, are hardly mentioned in the wealth of official documents produced in Quito, which increased as Peru lurked in the distance and the Amazon became the subject of a string of patriotic fantasies—the unfinished railway being the most symbolic. Every official who spent some time in the region, though, had something to say about the natives’ uncooperative attitude. Napo Runa labor was riddled with resistance, but also contained a deep-rooted sense of submission and responsibility. In 1989, anthropologist Regina Harrison recorded a song that, once again, illustrates this point: “Whatever tarabana they want me to do, I’m [there for] that, for sure, all kinds of work, never diminishing, standing up.”⁷² Ultimately, the slow and unstructured labor of the Napo Runa and the modernizing anxieties of the Ecuadorian elites revealed a primal tension between machine and humanlike mobilities.

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Notes

1. For example, Ernesto Boland Capello, “City Fragments: Space and Nostalgia in Modernizing Quito” (PhD diss., University of Texas, 2005).

2. O. Hugo Benavides, *The Politics of Sentiment: Imagining and Remembering Guayaquil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006).
3. See, for example, Natàlia Esvertit Cobes, "Caminos al Oriente: estado e intereses regionales en los proyectos de comunicación con la Amazonía ecuatoriana, 1890–1930," in *La construcción de la Amazonía andina (siglos XIX–XX)*, ed. Pilar García Jordán (Quito: Abya-Yala, 1999), 287–334.
4. Ronald Bruce St. John, "The Boundary Dispute between Peru and Ecuador," *American Journal of International Law* 71, no. 2 (1977): 322–330.
5. The archives consulted are the uncataloged Archivo General del Napo (AGN); the partly cataloged Archivo Nacional of Ecuador (AN) in Quito; the Archivo Biblioteca de la Función Legislativa (ABFL) also in Quito; and the Jesuit Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (ARSI) in Rome.
6. Inspiration has been drawn from Sherry B. Ortner, *Life and Death on Mt. Everest: Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). See also Hanne Kristine Adriansen, "Understanding Pastoral Mobility: The Case of Senegalese Fulani," *Geographical Journal* 174, no. 3 (2008): 207–222.
7. Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality, and the Grammar of De-Coloniality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 1 (2007): 449–514.
8. Tim Ingold, "Culture on the Ground: The World Perceived Through the Feet," *Journal of Material Culture* 3, no. 3 (2004): 315–340, esp. 321.
9. Gaetano Osculati, *Exploraciones de las regiones ecuatoriales a lo largo del Napo y los ríos de la Amazonía* [1854] (Quito: Abya-Yala, 2000), 105.
10. AGN, an official to the Ministro de Oriente, 15 January 1926.
11. Blanca Muratorio, *The Life and Times of Grandfather Alonso: Culture and History in the Upper Amazon* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 210.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Michael Uzendoski, *The Napo Runa of Amazonian Ecuador* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 36–37.
14. Every official complained about the state of the trail, and virtually every document that deals with Napo Runa labor, along the trail or otherwise, mentions their inability to work consistently or to be trusted. See below (AGN, AN, ARSI) for examples.
15. AGN, Antonio Estupiñán to the Ministro de Estado, Tena 21 July 1890.
16. On Southeast Asia, see Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London: Frank Cass, 1977).
17. Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* [1911] (N.p.: Cosimo Classics, 2006) [ebook].
18. Paul Lafargue, *The Right to Be Lazy* [1883], trans. Charles Kerr (Auckland: Floating Press, 2012), 8.
19. Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine Atherton, 1972).
20. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

21. Miguel N. Alexiades, "Mobility and Migration in Indigenous Amazonia: Contemporary Ethnoecological Perspectives —An Introduction," in *Mobility and Migration in Indigenous Amazonia: Contemporary Ethnoecological Perspectives*, ed. Miguel N. Alexiades (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 1–43, here: 4–5.
22. By using the term colonialism, I am not referring only to the Spanish period but also to Ecuador's post-independence period, which began in 1830. Nation-state building since then, especially as regards indigenous peoples, may be best seen as a process of internal colonialism.
23. Frank L. Salomon, "Northern Andean Status Trader Complex under Inka Rule," *Ethnohistory* 34, no. 1 (1987): 231–246.
24. Anne Christine Taylor, "The Western Margins of Amazonia from the Early Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century," in *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas, Vol. 3, South America, Part 2*, ed. Frank Salomon and Stuart B. Schwartz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 188–256, here: 216.
25. Muratorio, *Grandfather Alonso*, 107.
26. See Mignolo, "Coloniality" and also Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America," *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (2000): 215–132. Patron–peon relations, in Jaime Moreno Tejada, "Castles in the Air: The Rise and Fall of the Hacienda System in the Ecuadorian Amazon, 1910–1940," *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 40, no. 1 (2015): 1–21.
27. Uzendoski, *The Napo Runa*, 58.
28. On Jesuit "magic," see Muratorio, *Grandfather Alonso*, 226.
29. Jaime Moreno Tejada, "Microhistoria de una sociedad microscópica: aproximación a la misión jesuita en el Alto Napo (Ecuador), 1870–1896," *Revista Complutense de Historia de América* 38 (2012): 177–195.
30. Francisco Andrade Marín, *Informe del Gobernador de la Provincia de Oriente* (Quito: Imprenta del Gobierno, 1884); Francisco Andrade Marín, *Leyes para el Oriente* (Quito: Imprenta de J.P. Sanz, [1884]), 328.
31. Hildebrando Fuentes, *Loreto: Apuntes geográficos, históricos, estadísticos, políticos y sociales. Tomo II* (Lima: Imprenta de la Revista, 1908), 152–154.
32. Fever seems to be the most appropriate word to apply here. In 1914 one speculator would compare the population density of countries such as Belgium and France with the Ecuadorian Amazon, envisioning 150 million colonists moving into a region that at the time had no more than thirty or forty white settlers. Eudófilo Álvarez, *Conferencia sustentada en el Colegio 'Vicente Rocafuerte' sobre el Oriente ecuatoriano el 12 de Octubre de 1914* (Quito: Imprenta y Encuadernación Nacionales, 1915), 7.
33. For example, Pío Jaramillo Alvarado, *Tierras de Oriente* (Quito: Imprenta y Encuadernación Nacionales, 1936).
34. Emilio Arévalo, *El problema del ferrocarril al Oriente ecuatoriano* (Quito: Imprenta Nacional, 1907), 30.
35. The construction of the Panama Canal, which was completed in 1914, was well under way by 1908. Other transcontinental plans may be encountered, for example, in W. S. Barclay, "The Geography of South American Railways," *Geographical Journal* 49, no. 3 (1917): 161–201.
36. For example, Darío R. Astudillo, *El Oriente Ecuatoriano* (Guayaquil: Gutenberg, 1916), 9.

37. A. Cárdenas, *Contrato ... para la construcción de un ferrocarril de Ambato al Río Arajuno* (Quito: Imprenta Nacional, 1906); Arévalo, *El problema del ferrocarril*; José Mora López, *Arbitraje de España: Ferrocarril Bolívar-Amazonas* (Quito: Minerva, 1911); Pío Jaramillo Alvarado, *Ferrocarriles al Oriente* (Quito: Editorial Quito, 1922).
38. AN, Ministerio de Gobierno, Oriente, [unknown author], "reformas," Quito, 1909.
39. AGN, Emilio Recalde to the Gobernador de Oriente, Quito, 24 August 1909; AGN, Enrique Hurtado to the Gobernador de Oriente, Quito, 28 August 1909.
40. In 1875, for instance, the British traveler Alfred Simson spent forty days abandoned in one of the pueblos. Alfred Simson, *Viajes por las selvas del Ecuador y exploración del Río Putumayo* [1874-1875], trans. César O. Bahamonde (Quito: Abya-Yala, 1993), 125-178.
41. Even if the fears were genuine, the murders were never consummated. See, for example, ARSI, Aequat. 1001-XII, 5, Justo Pérez, "Breve memoria," Archidona 12 April 1877.
42. ABFL, "Se establece una aduanilla en el Aguarico y otra en La Coca," Quito, 26 February 1901.
43. AGN, Emilio Recalde to the Gobernador de Oriente, Quito, 24 August 1909.
44. Juan Elías Albán, *Proyecto de Ley Especial ... para la provincia oriental elevado al congreso de 1905* (Quito: Imprenta del Clero, 1905), 21.
45. For example, Manuel Villavicencio, *Geografía de la República del Ecuador* [1858] (Quito: Corporación Editora Nacional, 1984), 390.
46. AN, Ministerio de Gobierno, Oriente, Enrique Hurtado to the Ministro de Obras Públicas, Archidona, 10 November 1898.
47. AGN, A. Zapata, "Correo entre Quito y Archidona," Archidona, 23 November 1908.
48. Genaro García, *Informe del Gobernador de la Provincia de Oriente* (Quito: Tipografía de la Escuela de Artes y Oficios, 1909).
49. AN, Fondo Especial, Caja 340, 1850-51, vol. 3, "Diego Noboa decreta," Quito, 1850.
50. AGN, A. Zapata, "Correo entre Quito y Archidona," Archidona, 23 November 1908.
51. *Ibid.*
52. Lorenzo López Sanvicente, *La misión del Napo* (Quito: Universidad Central, 1894), 42-43.
53. AGN, A. Zapata, "Correo Quito al Aguarico," Quito, 31 July 1909.
54. AN, Ministerio de Gobierno, Oriente, José de la Guerra to the Ministro de lo Interior, Archidona, 11 February 1878.
55. AN, Ministerio de Gobierno, Oriente, Jorge Villavicencio to the Ministro de Estado, Archidona, 2 January 1889.
56. AGN, Lucio Salazar to the Gobernador de Oriente, Quito, 17 June 1893.
57. Albán, *Proyecto de Ley Especial*, 18n1.
58. Villavicencio, *Geografía*, 106.
59. García, *Informe*.
60. Note that Torres was instructed to carry no more than twenty kilos.
61. García, *Informe*, 54.
62. *Ibid.* 42-44. For a typical explanation of mid-nineteenth-century traveling, see Villavicencio, *Geografía*, 389-392.
63. A. Hamilton Rice, "From Quito to the Amazon Via de River Napo," *Geographical Journal* 21, no. 4 (1903): 401-418, here: 405.

64. On samai, see Muratorio, *Grandfather Alonso*, 55, 205.
65. Mid-century travelers noted that their porters walked “from one *samai* to the other,” covering a number of them every day. For a list of samais, see Osculati, *Viaje*, ch. 5–10; and Marcos Jiménez de la Espada, *El gran viaje* (Quito: AECL, CICAME, Abya-Yala, 1998), 119.
66. Muratorio, *Grandfather Alonso*, 124.
67. *Ibid.*, 124–125. Until the mid-nineteenth century it was not rare for natives of the Piedmont to carry white men on their backs across the Andes, and it was certainly seen as a curiosity by western artists. See Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). The practice, however, hardly ever appears in early twentieth-century Ecuadorian documents.
68. Muratorio, *Grandfather Alonso*, 210.
69. Joseph H. Sinclair and Theron Wasson, “Explorations in Eastern Ecuador,” *Geographical Review* 13, no. 2 (1923): 190–210, here: 209.
70. Taylor, *Scientific Management*, n.p.
71. *Ibid.*
72. This is a woman’s song, which would require a gender-specific analysis. Regina Harrison, *Signs, Songs, and Memory in the Andes: Translating Quichua Language and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 139–140.