

**Primary Education in Ecuador's Chota Valley:
Reflections on Education and Social Reproduction
in the Development Era**

by
Kevin Lucas

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Reflections on Education and Social Reproduction
in the Development Era

Kevin Lucas
March 2000

"There should no longer be either workers or scholars,
but only human beings."

-- Mikhail Bakunin

"Development is not an end in itself, but a means to an end."

-- Kwame Nkrumah

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INTRODUCTION

Through a program organized by the University of Minnesota and the Fundación CIMAS del Ecuador, I had the opportunity to spend six months, from November 1998 through May 1999, living in Mascarilla, Ecuador. Mascarilla, a village with a population of approximately 850, is located in the northern highlands' Chota Valley, which is one of two small regions in Ecuador where persons of African descent form the majority. While there, I worked as the profesor de inglés (English teacher) at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez." In addition to my teaching duties, I conducted research designed both to evaluate the performance of the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" and to identify and suggest reforms that might potentially improve the education received by the community's primary school students.

While preparing my research proposal, prior to my arrival in Mascarilla, I worked under the assumption that I would find the education received by the students at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" to be substandard. This assumption was based on a number of different factors, including information learned during two months spent in Quito and data taken from the cursory review of literature on education in Latin America that I had completed before leaving for Quito in September 1998. Most of the relevant literature contends that the performance of Latin America's public school systems during the 1990s has been rather poor. Texts which explore in greater depth the present condition of education in Latin America demonstrate that rural populations and ethnic or racial minorities generally have less access to quality education than do members of the region's urban populations and dominant ethnic groups. As such, before my first day as profesor, I was led to believe that the student population at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" was thus twice cursed -- the Chota Valley is unquestionably rural, and roughly eighty-five percent of the student population in Mascarilla belongs to a racial minority that makes up only six percent of the national population. Moreover, the Chota Valley is a relatively poor area, a further fact which led me to assume, given my familiarity with the disparities between public education in rich and poor areas in the United States, that the education received by students at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" would be insufficient.

In October 1998, during my first visit to Mascarilla, I spoke with Salomón Acosta, president of the Federation of Black Communities and Organizations of Imbabura and Carchi Provinces (FECONIC). As we discussed the aims of my internship and my research project, he confirmed many of the suspicions that I had developed. That day, I learned that many students from Mascarilla, upon completing the sixth grade, have been required to repeat the final year at another escuela before being granted entrance to a colegio, because they were not sufficiently prepared to continue their education². A number of other graduates from the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" have entered colegio, only to be forced to repeat their first year due to unacceptable performance. Such is the dissatisfaction with the performance of the local escuela that a number of families pay to send their children to Mira, the nearest non-black community, or to Ibarra, the nearest urban area, so that they will receive an adequate primary education.

As a result both of my first visit to Mascarilla and of the observations I subsequently made during the first month I spent living in the community and working in the escuela, I added a third aim to my research project. Not content to direct myself towards answers for the two initial "what" questions I had posed, I also asked myself a "why?" As such, the focus of my research -- the formal interviews I conducted, the informal conversations I took part in, and the observations I made while in the escuela and in the community -- was broadened considerably. Evaluating the escuela's performance -- the first "what?" -- remained an important goal. So did the second "what?" -- uncovering practical ideas that might improve the education received by Mascarilla's primary school students. Yet it is the "why" that emerged -- why does the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" provide its students with an inferior primary education? -- that inspires this text.

The following chapter provides an introduction to the research setting. The first section of this chapter situates the Chota Valley within Ecuador, noting the geographic and demographic features that make the region unique. Following sections examine the region's history, dating from the middle of the sixteenth century, when Spanish colonists first appeared in the area, to the present day. Within this account of the history of the Chota Valley, the recent history and contemporary reality of the region as a whole, and of Mascarilla in particular, are examined in the greatest detail. In recognition of the fact that any attempt to describe the Chota Valley solely by presenting the region's history, its geography, and its population's racial composition would provide only a very shallow introduction to the region, this chapter also includes a discussion

of some of the unique cultural practices that are characteristic of the Valley.

Chapter three presents the information I gathered while living, working, and conducting research in Mascarilla. Working as a teacher at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" gave me an ideal opportunity to employ the techniques of participant observation to gather behavioral information about the day-to-day operations at the escuela. My daily interaction with the other teachers and with the students allowed me to compare the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" both to my recollections of my own experience as a primary school student, and also to the generalized accounts of primary school operations that exist in other scholars' analyses of education in Latin America. This information is complemented by the attitudinal data I was able to gather by living in the community, with a family whose two children attend classes at the escuela. Through informal, unstructured conversations with a number of community members -- including current Escuela "Hernando Táquez" students, students from Mascarilla who attend escuela in other communities, recent graduates, and parents -- I learned how members of the community regard the performance of the local escuela. Combining my observations with the comments of community members, I formulated an evaluation of the escuela's performance. In order to validate this evaluation, and also to identify reforms that would improve the education available to Mascarilla's primary school students, I conducted detailed formal interviews with ten recent Escuela "Hernando Táquez" graduates who ranged in age from thirteen to eighteen. The conclusions that emerged are detailed in this third chapter.

Chapter four demonstrates how the various observed failings of the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" are symptomatic of problems that plague the performance of public school systems throughout the developing world. In order to describe the context within which the Escuela "Hernando Táquez" is situated, the chapter presents generalized accounts of educational performance in Latin America as a region, and in Ecuador in particular. So as to situate Mascarilla within the experience of the developing world's rural areas, problems generally associated with the unsatisfactory performance of public schools in poor rural areas are discussed as possible explanations for the shortcomings that are observed at the Escuela "Hernando Táquez." The conclusion of this chapter introduces an important consideration -- perhaps the state does not invest more heavily in education because it does not view the poor performance of public schools as a dysfunction.

The fifth chapter addresses a single question -- what is the purpose of education? The evolution of education in Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century is examined in order to demonstrate how the current state of the escuela in Mascarilla relates to the historical trends that have governed the relationship between education and the state in the region. This historical review demonstrates how conceptions of the potential benefits of public education and definitions of the purpose of the school have evolved over the course of the past fifty years. The final two sections of this chapter question the state's commitment to quality public schooling and the creation of an educational institution designed to enhance national economic development and to facilitate social mobility. Perhaps the state, as the representation of dominant class interests, designs its public school system with the intention that this system will ensure the social reproduction of injustice and inequality based on ethnic, racial, and class differences.

By presenting an attempt to redefine development and reconstruct the relationship between development and education, the sixth and final chapter seeks alternatives to the reigning education-development-reproduction triad. By examining the Western notions of progress and development that have been dominant during the post-war development era, this chapter illustrates how these Western notions of development have impacted the political and social planning efforts implemented by developing world governments. A driving force throughout this final chapter is the concept of utopia, defined as "the tension between the denunciation of a present becoming more and more intolerable, and the 'annunciation,' announcement, of a future to be created, built -- politically, esthetically, and ethically -- by us women and men" [Freire (1994) 91]. This understanding of utopia, which appears quite frequently in Latin American scholars' discussions of the potential benefits of public education, provides critics and would-be reformers with a basis for hope. That which is today has not always been, nor must it always continue to be -- the structural forces that have contributed to the poor performance of state-provided education in Mascarilla, and in thousands of other similar communities throughout the developing world, can be altered, and redirected towards the creation of high-quality public school systems that better serve the social, cultural, political, and economic needs of their target populations.

SETTING THE STAGE

Finding and Defining the Chota Valley

The Chota-Mira River begins at an altitude of roughly 3,000 meters as the Río Blanco. After receiving the waters of a number of other tributaries during its descent of the western slope of the Ecuadorean Andes' eastern chain, the river takes on the name Río Chota at the confluence of the Mataquí and Escudillas Rivers, four kilometers east-northeast of the town of Pimampiro, at an altitude of roughly 1,800 meters. The Chota River becomes the Mira River where it receives the waters of the El Ángel River. The Mira River continues westward across the inter-Andean highlands, crosses the western chain of the Andes at an elevation of 1,169 meters near the villages of Santa Lucía and Cuajara, and then crosses the coastal lowlands before depositing its waters into the Pacific roughly forty kilometers east-southeast of Tumaco, Colombia. Along its journey, this river carves the Chota Valley³, a region whose history, climate, economy, population, and culture are unique in Ecuador.

The center of the Chota Valley is located nearly ninety kilometers north-northeast of Quito, and fifty-five kilometers southwest of the Colombian border at Rumichaca. This valley, which covers an extension of roughly eighty square kilometers and boasts of a perpendicular depth that exceeds 1,500 meters, is the deepest of the series of basins that cut across Ecuador's inter-Andean highlands. One author presents a vividly accurate description of the Chota Valley's unique topography: "Repulsive and attractive, possessing warm lands and inconsolable dryness, broken ground and wrinkled slopes, it offers from its peaks a glacial atmosphere, leaves behind in its footsteps a variety of microclimates, and heats up in its depth, an oasis of indescribable vegetation that makes it one of the most beautiful valleys in the Americas" [Coronel Feijoo 21].

At the middle and higher elevations (above 2,000 meters), the region experiences temperate climates like those of areas at similar altitudes throughout the inter-Andean highlands. At the lower elevations, the Valley enjoys a semi-arid tropical climate. The region typically experiences a short dry season each December, and a longer dry season that generally lasts from May through July. There is no wet season; rather, precipitation is fairly evenly distributed throughout the rest of the year. Significant variations in rainfall are observed across the area's east-

west extension. The central portion, stretching roughly from El Chota to Salinas, receives the lowest amount of precipitation. Both to the east and, more dramatically, to the west of this central region, the quantity of rainfall increases in correlation to the distance from the center of the Valley. While no part of the Valley truly possesses a wet tropical climate, these variations in precipitation are great enough so as to affect the types of crops that are grown in different communities.

A geographer's definition of the Chota Valley would include all the lands situated between the eastern and western chains of the Andes that are drained by the Chota-Mira River and its various tributaries. While this definition is correct according to the hydrographic features of the region, it is neither practical nor useful when considering the Chota Valley as a meaningful social and historical entity. Such a definition binds together climates that range from the semi-arid tropical climate found at low altitudes along the banks of the river, to the semi-polar páramo⁴ climate found above 3,600 meters. Furthermore, a strictly geographic definition of the region would lump together communities that possess histories, populations, and cultures that are as disparate as are the area's various climates.

The remarkable depth of this valley carved by the Chota-Mira River, responsible for the tremendous variety of microclimates found in this compact region, is but one of the many features of the Chota Valley that make it unique within Ecuador. The lower altitudes of the Valley are inhabited largely by persons of African descent. This population exhibits various shared traditions and characteristics that distinguish the region's culture both from Ecuador's dominant blanco-mestizo culture, and also from the culture displayed by the black populations of the coastal Esmeraldas Province⁵. As such, definitions of the Chota Valley that include only those areas of the Chota-Mira River basin that share a common history and a common culture are more useful.

The Federation of Black Communities and Organizations of Imbabura and Carchi Provinces (FECONIC) operates using just such a definition. FECONIC defines the Valley to include those communities located in the low-altitude, semi-arid tropical basins surrounding the Chota-Mira and Ambi Rivers that have sizable black populations. According to FECONIC's definition of the region, there are thirty-eight communities in the Chota Valley [see page 151]. In many of these communities, people of African descent account for upwards of ninety percent of the population. Some communities in the region do have significantly larger blanco-mestizo populations. And in one community

included by FECONIC (San Vicente de Pusir), blanco-mestizos form the majority.

I will alter only slightly the definition of the Valley used by FECONIC: When referring to the Chota Valley, I will not include San Vicente de Pusir. While this community's racial composition is one important factor, it is not the only factor -- across the Valley, many small blanco-mestizo populations are considered as integral parts of nearby black communities⁶. However, San Vicente stands out from these smaller communities because it possesses its own schools and its own church, social amenities that allow San Vicente's blanco-mestizo population the opportunity to live apart from the surrounding black communities. San Vicente's sense of separation from the Valley was reflected in early 1999 when it chose not to participate in a series of workshops, held under the auspices of FECONIC, that were designed to plan future development projects in the Chota Valley. That said, the population of San Vicente does enjoy a closer, more harmonious relationship with the black communities of the Valley than do other large blanco-mestizo communities in the vicinity, such as Mira and Pimampiro, whose populations are often labeled as racist by the Valley's black residents. Nonetheless, San Vicente de Pusir does not truly belong to the Chota Valley -- it just happens to be situated there.

The following section will provide a history of the Chota Valley, a unique region where people of African descent, a group that makes up approximately six percent of the national population, constitute an overwhelming majority. This history will focus on the series of changes that have transformed what once was a region inhabited by indigenous Andean populations that cultivated cotton and coca into a region inhabited by transplanted African populations that cultivate short-cycle fruits and other food crops. Following this history of the Chota Valley, I will briefly examine the social reality encountered by blacks in the region as they experienced an extended era of involuntary servitude. This section will be followed by an introduction to Mascarilla, the community where I lived, worked, and conducted the bulk of my research. This in turn will be followed by a detailed look at the current state of affairs in the Chota Valley in which I will highlight some of the major economic and social trends of the past quarter-century and focus on some of the challenges that face these communities at the end of the millennium. This introduction to the setting of the case study concludes with a brief discussion of some of the more significant aspects of the Chota Valley's unique culture.

The History of the Chota Valley, 1550-1973

The Chota Valley experienced six distinct historical eras between the arrival of the first Spanish colonists and the end of the plantation system. The first era, which lasted until 1610, is commonly referred to as "the bonanza of local products." This was followed by an era of conflict, crisis, and transition, which lasted until 1680. From 1680 until 1767, the Jesuit Order expanded and consolidated its presence in the Chota Valley; the Jesuits' power and influence grew to such an extent that they were viewed as a threat to Spain's colonial administration, and were ultimately expelled from all Spanish possessions in the New World. Between 1767 and 1802, the Valley experienced a gradual transition from Jesuit to private ownership. The private plantation system that emerged thrived until 1918. Beginning in 1918, the private plantation system experienced a gradual decline that ultimately resulted in its demise and the commencement of the current era of peasant agriculture in the Valley.

It is commonly reported that the first Spaniards arrived in the Chota Valley sometime around the year 1550. Those first Spaniards would have found in the Valley a semi-arid tropical landscape and a local indigenous population that based its economy on the communal cultivation of cotton and coca, grown using traditional Andean irrigation methods. These crops were grown both for internal consumption and to be traded for products from higher elevations with merchants who came to the Valley from the Otavalo culture to the south and the Pasto culture to the north. As would happen throughout the Americas, the arrival of the first Europeans would bring colossal changes to the Chota Valley. Change would not occur immediately, however, as coca and cotton would remain the dominant crops in the region until 1610.

Nonetheless, the initial rumblings of tremendous impending change could be felt during this era of local products. As per the Spaniards' belief that the indigenous Andean population was suited only to the colder climates of high-elevation regions, the Royal Ordinance of 1573 prohibited the relocation of indigenous peoples to warm regions such as the Chota Valley. In hindsight, this would prove to be simply the first of many measures taken by the Spaniards that led to the depopulation of the Valley. In 1576, colonists who believed that the Valley's climate was similar enough to that of southern Spain to enable them to cultivate that region's key products planted the first grape and olive vineyards in the Chota Valley. Black slave labor first became present in the Valley no later than 1582. The Compañía de Jesús (The Jesuit Order), a group that would later become the most influential actor in the Chota Valley, arrived in Ecuador in 1586. September 28, 1606 saw the foundation of

the city of San Miguel de Ibarra, fifteen kilometers south of the Valley; Ibarra's creation accelerated the Valley's depopulation by attracting indigenous laborers with the promise of construction work, and it greatly enhanced the Spanish Crown's administrative presence in the region [Coronel Feijoo].

The Valley suffered through an era of conflict, crisis, and transition from 1610 until 1680. By the 1660s, the indigenous population of the Valley, which had been in a state of rapid decline since the close of the sixteenth century, had fallen by perhaps as much as ninety-five percent⁷ [Coronel Feijoo 78]. The Spaniards' preference for wool led to a sharp decrease in the demand for cotton. The demand for coca also dropped precipitously, both because its traditional consumers, the local indigenous populations, were fleeing from the region in search of agricultural and construction work elsewhere, and also because the Spaniards' religious convictions opposed the cultivation of the crop. This era was also characterized by disputes over water rights and over the scarce labor supply.

During this transitional period, the Spanish advanced their vineyard project, introduced sugar cane, and substituted canals and acequias⁸ for the existing Andean irrigation methods -- all in their attempt to find a suitable replacement for the region's most important crops, cotton and coca. Experience would eventually prove that the Valley's climate and soils were capable of producing only low-quality grapes and olives, products that were unable to compete with those being imported from Peru. Throughout this period, the Jesuit Order gradually increased its presence in the region. The Jesuits made their first purchase in the Chota Valley in 1615, and shortly thereafter began to acquire more land in the region. Their expansion in the Valley was facilitated in 1661, when the colonial administration in Ibarra decided to make it a priority to provide irrigation for only the larger, more profitable landholdings in the Valley. As the Jesuits' presence increased, so did the number of black slaves brought to work in the Valley.

By 1680, the Jesuit Order had achieved a monopoly over the water rights in the Valley, and they officially replaced the Spanish administration in Ibarra as the arbitrator of conflicts in the region. At the same time, the Jesuit Order made the decision to abandon the failed vineyard experiment and focus almost exclusively on the formation of sugar cane plantations in the Valley. These actions resulted in an accelerated expansion of the Jesuits' presence in the Valley -- by 1740 the Jesuits' administrative control over the Chota Valley was so complete (their nine plantations comprised fifty percent of the Valley's land area)

that they threatened to usurp the Spanish Crown's sovereignty in the region, and their sugar cane plantations were so successful that they posed a credible threat to the colonial economy [Voight]. Throughout this era of expansion, the number of black slaves forced to work in the Chota Valley continued to increase⁹.

Competition and conflict between the Jesuit Order and the Spanish colonial authorities dominated matters in the Chota Valley during the mid-1700s, until the Spanish Crown expelled the Jesuits from the New World in 1767. An extended transition followed. Upon the expulsion of the Jesuit Order, the Spanish Crown immediately expropriated all of its assets, including the black slaves who provided labor on the Jesuits' plantations in the Chota Valley. Literally overnight, the Spanish Crown became the largest slave owner in the Americas [Lucena Salmoral]. From 1767 until 1784, private individuals administered the plantations in the name of the Spanish Crown, because the colonial administration in place was insufficiently developed to assume direct control over the expropriated properties [Voight]. Production on the Valley's sugar cane plantations soon dropped off considerably, prompting the Spanish authorities' 1784 decision to sell all the former Jesuit holdings in the Chota Valley to private individuals. The process of transferring ownership of the Valley's sugar cane plantations was completed in 1802.

Once the Spanish Crown had completed its sale of the plantations to private individuals, the plantation system that was reestablished in the Chota Valley operated just as it had during the heyday of the Jesuit era. The eight sugar cane plantations formerly owned by the Jesuit Order continued to cultivate sugar cane almost exclusively. The use of black slave labor continued; indeed, slaves were considered to be no more than "pieces"¹⁰ of the plantation, so their ownership simply changed hands whenever the plantations were sold. In 1821, the Spanish Crown officially prohibited the international traffic of slaves and ordered that those who had been born slaves be freed upon reaching their eighteenth birthday. However, enforcement of this legislation was extremely rare, and the ruling itself became moot when Ecuador gained its independence from Spain as a part of Gran Colombia the following year. Slavery was not formally abolished in Ecuador until the ratification of the Fifth Constitution, on September 27, 1852. According to the provisions of the Fifth Constitution, landowners were to be compensated by the government for liberating their slaves. The Ecuadorean government never entirely fulfilled this commitment. By the same token, however, the former slave owners' compliance with the spirit of the abolition legislation was often minimal:

"Some of those who received government payments forced their ex-slaves to sign multi-year labor contracts, while others acted as if no laws whatsoever had been passed. In 1859 and 1860, landlords in the Province of Imbabura were still whipping their Negroid laborers, setting their cabins afire for petty reasons, and locking them up at night to prevent their escape. As late as 1867, black and mulatto workers were still attempting to purchase their freedom from certain plantation owners. . . . Not until 1894 would other freedmen be released from mysteriously dissoluble work contracts."

[Rout 230]

Sadly, the abolition of slavery had very little if any immediate impact on the relationship between black laborers and blanco-mestizo landowners in the Chota Valley and elsewhere in Ecuador. The majority of the newly-freed black residents of the Valley chose (or were forced) to remain on the plantations where they had worked as slaves, in order to work as salaried agricultural laborers. As *huasipungueros*¹¹, the black agricultural workers in the Valley were now entitled to receive monetary wages. However, these wages were not always paid. Lacking any effective legal recourse, most free black laborers soon became re-enslaved through the process of debt peonage [Espin]. Even when plantation owners did meet their legal obligation to pay their *huasipungueros*, the wages received by black laborers in the Valley were pitiful at best -- when the private plantation system ended in 1974, laborers in the Valley were receiving roughly ^{US}\$0.12 for each ten-hour work day [Vallejo R. 22]. Slavery had yet to end in the Valley; it had just taken on a new form. In most respects, the situation of black agricultural laborers in the Chota Valley was the same at the beginning of 1918 as it had been in 1680.

The year 1918 brought the first of a series of legislative changes that would eventually lead to the dismantling of the private plantation system. That year, Ecuador's government repealed the law that had prohibited *huasipungueros* from leaving their plantation until they had repaid all their debts. Changes in the composition of the national economy during the 1930s and 1940s brought about a substantial decline in the profitability of the Valley's sugar cane plantations. Throughout these two decades, the sugar cane plantations in the Chota Valley were purchased and partitioned with regularity -- an abrupt break from the remarkable continuity of the previous 130 years [Voight]. During this same period, peasant pressures for agrarian reform began to emerge.

The 1950s witnessed the formation of Ecuador's first popular cooperatives and peasant organizations. Throughout the country, peasants organized so that the government in Quito would hear their demands for land reform. One such organization that would go on to have a large impact on the imminent transformation of the Chota Valley, the Carchi Peasant Federation (FCC), was founded in 1956 under the influence of the Communist Party. In 1964, Ecuador's military government enacted the First Agrarian Reform Law, "destined to change precapitalist relations in agriculture" [Ayala Mora 106]. That same year, the Tababuella Sugar Refinery (now known as IANCEM) began its operations in the Valley¹². The Second Agrarian Reform Law, enacted in 1973, officially put an end to the plantation system that had existed in the Valley for centuries.

Blacks in the Chota Valley -- Ecuador's Hidden Social Actor

As demonstrated above, the documented history of the Chota Valley exists almost exclusively as the history of the dominant outsider. Few details are known of the day-to-day existence of the black slaves who transformed the Chota Valley. Most of the information that is available focuses not on the actions taken by these people, but rather on how they were treated (and frequently mistreated) by their masters and by the laws of the land. Their customs and their beliefs, their triumphs and their tragedies, their leaders and their heroes, the stories of all the individual men and women who contributed to the formation of the unique African-American culture that still clings to the banks of the Chota River remain anonymous. Their actions and their voices silenced by historical neglect, the generations of black slaves who labored on the Chota Valley's plantations appear in the region's history not as subjects, but as objects.

The various procedures that governed the operation of slavery in Spanish America were dutifully recorded for the historical record. The gruesome details of the slave trade and the horrors of the middle passage are well-documented. Contemporary accounts describe the humiliating physical inspections forced upon these black men, women, and children, first upon their arrival by government officials, and again on the trading block by potential buyers. Documentation of the legal framework that ensured their involuntary servitude for many generations is readily available. Examples of the legal restrictions placed on them and the punishments they endured were also recorded for posterity. One law pronounced that "slaves may not cut down trees or pick fruit or corn. First offenders receive 100 lashes . . . a second offense results in loss of a genital member of the slave;" another stated that "slaves may not ride

horses. 10 lashes for the first offense, 200 for the second" [Rout 329]. Accounts of the many forms of abuse suffered by black slaves in Ecuador at their masters' hands -- the dissolution of families, dangerous and inhumane working conditions, beatings, rape, torture, murder -- do not differ from the many accounts of slavery's horrible indignities elsewhere in the Americas.

However, all of this information comes from highly generalized, impersonal accounts that are almost anecdotal in their anonymous nature. Again, very little is recorded about the lives of the generations of black men and women who suffered through various forms of involuntary servitude other than their treatment. Their history is presented as if they were dogs, or cattle, or tables, but not human beings. One might become quite familiar with the black slave's life as an object, and yet remain completely ignorant of his life as a subject. Presented with all this generalized information about slavery, one might be tempted to reach the conclusion that each and every individual slave was indistinguishable from all the other slaves in the Chota Valley -- past, present, and future. Worse yet, upon discarding this implausible conclusion, one must accept the fact that, at present, information about the black slaves as subjects in the creation of their own culture may simply be unavailable. With no knowledge of how the slaves interacted with one another or how they reacted to the system that enslaved them, the Chota Valley's black population appears in the region's history merely "as a hidden social actor, mentioned by their owners as pieces, counted as pieces and marked as such in their work. It would appear as though they were found without dreams or hopes, passive and without plans" [Coronel Feijoo 131].

Indeed, while conducting the research for this work, I encountered the names of exactly four Ecuadoreans of African heritage who lived between the 1526 arrival of Bartolomé Ruiz, the first Spaniard to land on the coast of Ecuador, and the year 1900. Yes -- through the course of 374 years, only four individual black men are found to be worthy of mention in the nation's official history. Moreover, the African heritage of the most influential member of this group, the eighteenth-century intellectual Eugenio Espejo, is frequently omitted both from the textbooks used in Ecuadorean schools and from the works of Ecuadorean scholars¹³. Of these four men, not a single one hailed from or is known to have ever lived in the Chota Valley.

Even the abolition of slavery did little to allow the Chota Valley's black populations to make their voices heard. Indeed, perhaps the only immediate change brought on by abolition was one of terminology --

black laborers who had been *piezas de indias* became *huasipungueros*. The historical powerlessness of the Chota Valley's black population dictated that they become a "hidden social actor" condemned to silence:

"Every society, every country has another history, the one that was not told because it was swallowed up by the silence that accompanies the official history, and by the dominant ideology of each era that intends always to legitimize the reigning power. The official history, for one reason or another, does not consider the small populations, the exploited minorities, etc., since they are considered to be without history, without any value worth mention."

[Savoia 199]

In Ecuador, as in a number of other Latin American nations with large indigenous populations such as Mexico, Peru, Bolivia, and many of the countries of Central America, because "the plight of the [indigenous] population is the most glaring problem . . . the Afro-Ecuadorean minority is simply neglected" [Rout 235]. As such, Ecuador's indigenous population "remains the officially recognized sufferer from oppression, and there is no desire to add another group to this category, or to delve into the issue of African cultural contributions" [Rout 282]. As the nation's third population, the members of Ecuador's black population routinely see their problems ignored by government agencies, private organizations, and international observers alike. Just as their present problems are ignored, their history is also dismissed.

The History of Mascarilla, 1956-present

Mascarilla is located at the center of the Chota Valley, roughly 1,500 meters northwest of the union of the Chota and El Ángel Rivers, alongside the old Pan-American Highway. It is one of the newer populations in the Chota Valley -- during the Jesuit era, the area that now includes San Pedro de Mascarilla and its surrounding communities remained apart from the plantation system that was being established throughout most of the Valley and, as such, was virtually ignored. Black slaves were never introduced directly to the present-day location of these communities. Rather, the area's population traces its ancestry to slaves, and later *huasipungueros*, who were transferred to the immediate area from other parts of the Valley once private plantations had been established in the area. In particular, Mascarilla's black population can be traced to older slave populations in La Concepción and Cuajara

[Vallejo R.]. So, while the land where Mascarilla sits did not experience every phase of the Valley's history, the ancestors of its population certainly did.

The transition from the eras of slavery and huasipungos to the present era of peasant agriculture took its first step in Mascarilla in 1956, when the Mascarilla Workers Union (STM) was formed as one of the original components of the FCC. The following year, anticipating the reforms that were on the horizon, Abelardo Páez, the owner of Pambahacienda, sold 150 hectares of his plantation to an agricultural cooperative formed by blanco-mestizo landowners from Ibarra. This action forced the black workers who had lived and worked in Pambahacienda to abandon the area and relocate to other communities in the Chota Valley, including Mascarilla and Dosacequias [Vallejo R.]. Plantation owners in many parts of the Valley took similar actions, either forming cooperatives themselves or selling their plantations to existing groups. During the early 1960s, Carlos Puga Vaca, who had purchased Mascarilla in 1942, sought to follow the example set by Páez and sell the plantation to a cooperative from Ibarra. However, with the help of Dr. Bolaños, a lawyer from San Gabriel, the Mascarilleños who had organized as the STM succeeded in blocking this sale [Vallejo R.].

As agrarian reform proceeded during the 1960s and 1970s, Puga Vaca remained very reluctant to comply with the new laws and transfer the ownership of his plantation to the workers. According to the provisions of the Agrarian Reform Laws of 1964 and 1973, each adult worker was to have received six hectares of land. Instead, in the case of Mascarilla, the land parcels that were devolved to the workers ranged from one-half to two hectares. And many workers received no land at all. Determined to force Puga Vaca to sell to them the section of the Mascarilla plantation known as El Sabilar, thirteen younger workers who had not been granted plots of land formed the Precooperativo 24 de Mayo (the May 24th Pre-Cooperative) in 1973.

The formation of the Precooperativo divided the population of Mascarilla into factions, as some members of the community remained loyal to Puga Vaca while others supported the Precooperativo. After a rather brief period of conflict, in 1974 the socios¹⁴, or members of the Precooperativo, received 35.5 hectares in El Sabilar. With the help of Misión Andina (Andean Mission, an Ecuadorean non-governmental organization), the rocky terrain of El Sabilar was cleared, and the socios began to cultivate cotton, which they sold to the Andrade Marin textile factory in Atuntaqui. Initially, this land was worked collectively by the thirteen socios; later, it was divided into individual plots. After the