



Monito eñemonipa waoto waemo kewinguimoni
We are learning to change

Mencay Patricia Nenquihui Nihua

My name is Mencay Nenquihui. I am a Waorani woman of the Ecuadorian Amazon region. Our territory is the Yasuní forest in the Napo, Pastaza and Orellana provinces. I am the president of the 'Association of Waorani Women of the Ecuadorian Amazon' (AMWAE). We represent 400 women in 35 communities in the Yasuní. We speak our native language Waotededo. In our communities, we dress traditionally with the fibers of the Chambira palm tree and we paint our faces with the red dye of the Achiote (*Bixa orellana*) nut.

I want the world to know our history because we are not a culture of the past. 'Learn to Change' is a good theme to describe our history of the past 50 years. It is since then that we have been in contact with western civilization. My parents were born free in the forest; they did not know anything about the world of the whites and *mestizos* (a person of mixed race, especially one having Spanish and American Indian parentage in Latin American usage).

In earlier times, each Waorani family lived deep in the forest; there were no communities or villages like today. We were not farmers; both men and women went hunting and the families grew only some yucca (cassava) and plantain trees close to the house. The forest provided us with the essentials, it was like a supermarket for us – always filled with plenty of everything we needed. From time to time, we met with other families or clans. Each clan had its own chants and spiritual power, represented by an animal like the jaguar, the boa or the harpy eagle.

Fifty years ago, everything changed. Many foreigners came with intentions that were not clear to us at first. It was the generation of my grandmother when there was violent confrontation due to the increasing intrusion of foreigners from the rubber industry, cattle ranchers, the military and the oil companies. They killed my

grandfather Ñihua who was a great Waorani leader with much power. Then came the evangelical missionaries that wanted us to live in a community called Tiweno. It became the first settlement ever in our culture where more than a family or a clan lived together. Many Waorani died of polio because they lived so close to one another and did not have natural defenses against this new disease. At the same time, the oil industry began to give us money and gifts, trying to buy up our consent to violate our territory through exploitation of crude oil.

It was also the moment when two Waorani groups separated from the rest of us: the Tagaeri and the Taromenane. They decided to go back to a free life in the Yasuní forest and leave beyond any contact with the Kowode (Non-Waorani) world. Up until now, they live in so-called 'voluntary isolation', but they are free people. Although there are conflicts and violence due to oil and mining extraction business that puts pressure on our people, the Tagaeri and Taromenane are our brothers and sisters. They are nomads and survive on hunting and gathering. Even though we are not in contact with them, but we raise our voices for them because they are not represented in the western world. They are the last free people. Waorani means 'the real people'. In Ecuador, the government used to call us 'Aucas', which means savages, and our right to life and territory were not recognized. My grandmother Epa Wamoni confronted the government, she said "We are not Aucas, we are Waorani!"

The contact with western civilization was accompanied by confusion, violence and fraud. There were family feuds and killings – some Waorani even killed other Waorani only because they had started to dress like Kowode. However, we tried to cope; my father translated written letters to our language, which was solely oral. He was a schoolteacher and taught us by pictures and images – a Spanish-Waorani dictionary with images. Then came a Kowode teacher to my school. He hit us with a stick when we dared to speak Waotededo. So we kids took his little children into the forest and put them into a deep hole, saying: "You will not get out of here until your father stops beating us – may the tigers eat you!" He stopped beating us after all. We Waorani know how to defend ourselves.

Afterwards, in Tiweno the food situation started to worsen, the village became too small to host so many of us. So we founded more communities like Toñampare, Damintado, Kiwaro, Dayuno. Currently, there are 58 Waorani communities in the Yasuní, the great



majority of them with no road access, no school and no medical institutions. They live with the ancestral knowledge, the wisdom of the forest.

I was born in Kiwaro, learning only Waotededo at first. I came to learn Spanish only at the age of 12. My grandmother taught me to work in the garden, to chant, to do handcraft, to use medicinal plants and to learn about the spirits that accompany us. It was my mother who taught me to speak up for other people, to claim my rights as a woman and a Waorani. She told me never to be afraid, but to confront problems, to ask for favors and give back favors. From a very young age, I had to take up responsibility for the family and to speak in our gatherings.

In 2005 I began to work as a schoolteacher in the Waorani community of Nemompade. Then the AMWAE association was founded and I joined them as an assistant accountant. We women soon realized that the men fight for their rights, but it is difficult for them to be united against the temptations of the 'modern world'. As women, we look ahead to the well-being of everyone in the communities and the diversity of life in our forest. In that particular moment, we were very worried about wild animals disappearing in the Yasuní, like the jaguar, the boar or the tapir. The illegal hunt for bush-meat had increased a lot because many Waorani families did not have a stable income. The promises of the petrol industry



and the government about employment never came true. It was sad and alarming to see how deforestation and poaching gained velocity. We Waorani have the right to hunt for our own needs, but hunting for selling the meat is prohibited; these activities destroy the sensible balance of our forest. As AMWAE we decided that we had to do something about it, we learned that we had to change. In 2011 we called for a big meeting and we asked our people – the pikenani (elders), youth, children and the community leaders – how we could stop this destruction. Do we have confidence in the government and the oil industry to provide us with charity or do we solve the problems with our own strength? Of all the ideas that came up to improve the economic situation of the families, growing organic native cocoa in the communities in the Yasuní seemed to us the most promising. Before, we used to suckle only the pulp of the wild cocoa seeds to refresh ourselves when walking in the forest; we had never used the beans.

However, we did not only want to provide markets with the raw material. We wanted to sell a final product, a processed gourmet chocolate that tells our story. So we did. And although until now

it has been difficult for us, being hunters not farmers, we learned that change always bears opportunities. In the year 2012, we held our first 'Chocolate Wao' in our hands, thanks to the support of the TRAFFIC program (Wildlife Trade Monitoring Network, a program from the International Union for Conservation of Nature). Nowadays, the Fundación Ecociencia supports us in organizing ourselves as an association and an enterprise, with funding from the Belgian Cooperation, BosPlus. Thanks to the cultivation of the cocoa, 400 Waorani families in eight communities are harvesting 1.5 tons of cocoa annually. We care for the cocoa trees, we do not use any agrochemicals or artificial manure, we ferment the cocoa beans, and we dry it and send it to a chocolate processing plant in Ecuador's capital Quito. The cocoa we use is a high-quality and native variety, called 'Fino de aroma'. The families grow it in small lots that had been previously deforested, near their houses. All the generated income goes directly to the AMWAE associated families.

We never thought the impact could be so immediate. In 2013 the largest illegal bush meat market in the amazon city of Pompeya was closed down. It is proven evidence that this happened due to our economic alternative, the 'Chocolate Wao'. It has become our symbol for change.

Our incentive received international attention: In 2014, we received the highest award from the UNDP (United Nations Development Program), the Equator prize in New York City. In 2015, we received the prestigious 'Premio Latinoamerica Verde' (Green Latin America Prize). Although these events gave us high international acknowledgement, the most important thing for us has always been a peaceful and dignified life in our communities. With the income from the chocolate, we could demonstrate what a sustainable life could be. Organic; going beyond fair-trade standards, our cacao project expresses our commitment for biodiversity and the Amazon forest. It gives us economic and political empowerment as Waorani women, allowing us to stand strong and saying 'no' to oil exploitation and mining activities in our territory.

Right now, we are optimizing the value chain of the cocoa, improving the growing techniques and the quality of the chocolate bar. Currently, we are developing agro-forestry systems that go beyond the organic products. Alongside, we want to start community-based, small-scale tourism in some of our communities. So we keep on learning and changing. As Waorani women, we

have learned to claim our rights and to make ourselves visible as indigenous people. We try to adapt to the market economy, and in the city, we wear T-Shirts and shoes. But we believe in a united community of men, women and nature – there is no separation between humans and nature. We keep on being Waorani, we walk the trails of our ancestors, we hunt the animals and we feel their spirits that give us strength. Finding this balance between diverse worlds is our *waemo kiwigimamo*, the 'good life'.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND THE COMPILER

Mencay Patricia Nenquihui Nihua is a Waorani, native from the Yasuní rainforest. Currently, she is the president of the Association of Waorani Women of the Ecuadorian Amazon. Previously she has worked as a primary school teacher. She grew up in a village called Kiwaro and still has a deep connection to her territory.

Recorded and compiled by *Christian Cray*, a Global learning facilitator and a member of the learn2change network. He lives in Quito, Ecuador as a communication and media specialist in the EcoCiencia Foundation.