

# THE ECUADOR

HISTORY,  
CULTURE,  
POLITICS

# READER



CARLOS DE LA TORRE AND STEVE STRIFFLER, EDITORS

THE  
ECUADOR  
READER

HISTORY, CULTURE, POLITICS

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# Nina Pacari, an Interview

*Carlos de la Torre*

*Translated by Mayté Chiriboga and Carlos de la Torre*

*Nina Pacari grew up in an urban indigenous family in the town of Cotacachi in the northern highland province of Imbabura. As an Indian girl living among mestizos, Pacari experienced racism, but also learned to negotiate the dominant culture while developing a strong sense of ethnic pride. Trained as a lawyer, Pacari went on to become one of Ecuador's most important indigenous leaders, eventually becoming the first indigenous woman elected to Ecuador's National Assembly as well as the minister of foreign affairs under the government of Lucio Gutiérrez.*

In September 2004, just after the indigenous movement was expelled from the government of Colonel Lucio Gutiérrez, the minister of foreign affairs, Nina Pacari, explained the short, strange alliance in these terms:

We were able to do something, despite having an ally who did not fulfill his program, a shortsighted ally who does not even know where he is going. We were able to shatter the stereotype of the incapacity of the indigenous people, and that is an accomplishment. We achieved an important objective; the indigenous people recovered their self-esteem. A second accomplishment was that we positioned the indigenous people at an international level, and this would not have been possible if we had remained at the margins. The third potentiality was the quality of our public work, ethical and visionary, in the Ministry of Agriculture as well as in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Thus ends the interview, a two-hour conversation that provides a window into the world of the first woman and indigenous person to be appointed minister of foreign affairs. Doctor Pacari began the dialogue with details about her childhood.

Altogether, we are eight siblings: five females and three males, of which five of us are professionals but for one sister and two younger brothers

who decided to become merchants and musicians. We are urban indigenous, and came from the few families, almost the exception, who lived in the urban area of Cotacachi. My father comes from a family of farmers from the Quinchuqui community. My mother, from the Peguche community. My maternal grandparents had settled in Cotacachi, where they set up weaving workshops. When my mother married my father, they settled in Cotacachi. My father improved his economic situation with the weaving business. He had prosperous moments as well as bad times. He did not accumulate for the sake of it, but to give us an education.

Being urban indigenous we lived a double exclusion—exclusion from the indigenous rural world because we did not live in a community, and exclusion from the nonindigenous world. In those times, we were almost the first indigenous students to go to school. My brother and uncle were forced to cut their braids during the first year. By the second year, when they transferred to the Franciscan nun's school, they made their first communion with their complete attire and full braids. [This change] was a result of the parent's struggle. An issue that had a very deep impact during school was a book reading contest, and the school had to be represented by the best student. In those times, I was their best student; nevertheless, I was not chosen to represent the school in the contest. I felt this was racism. It was a world where excellence was not acknowledged.

My father wanted me to become a teacher, and therefore I studied at the San Pablo del Lago School. The indigenous classmates did not mingle with the mestizo world; I got along with them, however. I also felt part of the urban world, which was my background; at times, my indigenous classmates were annoyed at me, and I felt forced to be exclusively with them. I did not agree with this and explained that I also wanted to relate with the *mestizas*. In order for them to understand that I was on both sides, I became part of a dance group with the indigenous classmates. Finally, it was established that an intercultural process is possible. It was a boarding school where indigenous and mestizo students from different provinces of the country "shared" together. This personal experience from our youth taught us to recognize ourselves and share with the different races we have in Ecuador.

At school I was taught history of the Incas, the Puruháes, the Caras; everything was in the past. I asked myself: And, what am I? I am indigenous, I have not died, how is it that they affirm that all has ended? This was a shock to me.

I studied law at Universidad Central in Quito, a very different experience from Cotacachi. I speak for myself, but I experienced more discrimi-



nation in Quito. For example, at a restaurant, we were not admitted. It was a restaurant along 10 de Agosto Avenue, I don't remember its name, but the four of us were not allowed to enter, and were left deprived of some Chinese rice. We agreed that the reason for this was that we were not carrying books: "We must bring books if we want them to believe that we are students," we said. So we started carrying books and notebooks with us for them to believe that we were students; even though we are still Indians, if we were seen with books, we were perceived differently. In fact, when we appeared before them as students, we were immediately admitted into the restaurant. Then we understood how such situations must be handled.

When riding a bus, we did not speak Spanish. We spoke Quichua, and the people in the bus said to us, "Talk like Christians." We just laughed. I think they must have been annoyed, as we did not take notice or confront them. We just continued as if nobody had said anything.

Once, we went on a trip to Baños with mestizo friends. When it was time to enter the swimming pool, my friends went in first. As we were about to enter, we were stopped: admittance to Indians was forbidden. Auki Tituaña [current mayor of Cotacachi] and my sister Arquí, Auki's wife, were also there. My friend was enraged and complained. The owner came out to apologize and make excuses. Our trip was ruined, so we ended walking around Baños instead.

In 1987, I had to go to a conference. As it turned out, it was the very same hotel where I was once denied admittance. This time, I was welcomed. I explained to the hotel people that I had come to the hotel in such and such a year and I was not allowed in. Naturally, those were other times, other circumstances. There has been a process in which the indigenous people have made themselves known, gained respect, and opened horizons; in general, people have become more sensitive. There is now a new openness as well.

After graduating as a lawyer at Universidad Central, I began to practice law in Riobamba. I was linked to the indigenous movement of Chimborazo; the movement took me in as their member. The communities of Colta and Cajabamba integrated me as a member of their community as well. Since 1989, at their request, I joined the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador [CONAIE], as a legal advisor to help manage the land and territory administration. I was the first woman to hold this position. At the end of 1995, we became the founding members of Pachakutik together with comrade Luis Macas as president, José María Cabascango as leader of the organization, and me as land and territory leader.

Within Pachakutik there are two paths, two criteria. One is that the indigenous movement is in charge and directs. The other is that the party should be more open, include more social movements, with the indigenous people being the backbone.

*How do you interpret the mobilizations and the alliances with the military that ended with the removal of president Jamil Mahuad in January 2000?*

The CONAIE Congress that took place in Santo Domingo de los Colorados in 1999 caused much concern among some sectors of the grass roots and some leaders, because of the relationship between Antonio Vargas and elements of the armed forces who were part of the high command. The army provided infrastructure, food, and field stoves for our congress. Second, when CONAIE decided to lead the mobilization against Mahuad, Pachakutik took a relatively subordinate attitude toward CONAIE. Some members of Pachakutik, such as Napoleón Saltos, stated that the same mistake of 1996 could not be repeated; that we needed a new strategy to forge an alliance with the military. My hair stood on end.

*Hence, why the alliance with Gutiérrez's party, Sociedad Patriótica, during the 2002 elections?*

Several scenarios arose. Our objective was to have common Center-Left candidates. There was a process of dialogue with Izquierda Democrática, but they sustained that we would only be admitted as subordinates. The second scenario was to have León Roldós as presidential candidate and Auki Tituaña as vice-president. But Roldós resigned his candidacy. So we ran alone. When Antonio Vargas became the candidate for Amauta Jatari, the Indigenous Evangelical political party, there were two Indian candidates. Hence, CONAIE, instead of considering that we would both go—thinking not only as Indians, but also as a prospect for society with Tituaña as an influential administrative role model—decided not to endorse any candidate. Therefore, Auki decided not to participate, since he would not go against CONAIE's decision. Consequently, we had to find a mestizo candidate. We spoke with Alberto Acosta, who did not show any interest. We were also talking to the Sociedad Patriótica simultaneously, and an alliance with ten programmatic points was agreed on.

*Was there any objection with allying with a Golpista [coup leader]?*

For us, the concept of coup d'état does not exist. Our analysis is different. But, despite the fact that he is an ex-military, there was still potential if the program is fulfilled.

*Let's talk about your transit through power. Wasn't it a contradiction between a leftist discourse, and on the other hand, government practices such as signing an agreement with the International Monetary Fund?*

First, you must understand that it was the government of an alliance and must not be perceived as if it were a single unit. Perhaps, the limitation was that the programmatic points could fail. In that case, we agreed to battle from within. Within the cabinet, we felt that the first draft of the economic measures proposed was absolutely appalling. Not all the measures were implemented, such as the increase of the price of gas. One of the political costs was that we had to sign the letter of intent with the IMF, which we could not stop because we were not "within" either the Ministry of Economy or presidency.

*Wasn't that the moment to break the alliance?*

I don't think the timing was appropriate. It was not fitting to leave after only fifteen days in power. We would have been perceived as if fleeing from political office. And we even thought that we would be perceived as unable to hold office and govern.

*What are you doing now?*

I continue with my work at the international level, since I have been in academics and in the political world for twenty years. For example, I was invited to go to Mexico by the university; I was invited to teach a seminar on anthropology in Bogotá, after which I will go to Puerto Rico. I belong to Confederación de los Pueblos de Nacionalidad Kichua del Ecuador. The Pachakutik congressional block has requested me to be their advisor. On women's issues it is the same, either one activity or another. I thought I was going to rest a little, but I am still intensely busy in meetings, events, etc. I feel well, working eagerly, always with the same disposition.