
DISPERSION AS A LONG-TERM PERSISTENCE IN THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS OF ECUADOR

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Dispersion is a long-term structure in southern highlands of Ecuador and not simply the result of stereotypical suburbanization as it is frequently problematized by local urban studies. The concept of long-term structure is key to understanding how since the colonial era, a very centralized and hierarchical socio-political system transformed but didn't erase long-standing logics of dispersed territorial occupation in this part of the Andes. The study develops Cuenca and its surrounding territory as a case study. As other Andean cities, Cuenca was founded during the colonial period over previous Inca and indigenous settlements. The city is surrounded by a constellation of small and medium-sized rural centralities, whose space of occupation often dates back to pre-colonial times.

Three main topics are analysed across time and in its current condition in order to unpack dispersion in the territory of Cuenca: People as a resource, Water, and Human Mobility. A careful consideration of the interactions between spatial, social and cultural factors across time, in combination with interpretation of the structuring elements of its landscape, allows to reconsider and define the qualities of this landscape of dispersion. Openness, diversity and flexibility seem to characterize a landscape, so far defined mostly as chaotic and shapeless.

Keywords

dispersion, long-term structure, landscape structure, in-betweenness, territory, Andes Figure 1 – System of settlements in the Cañari territory today

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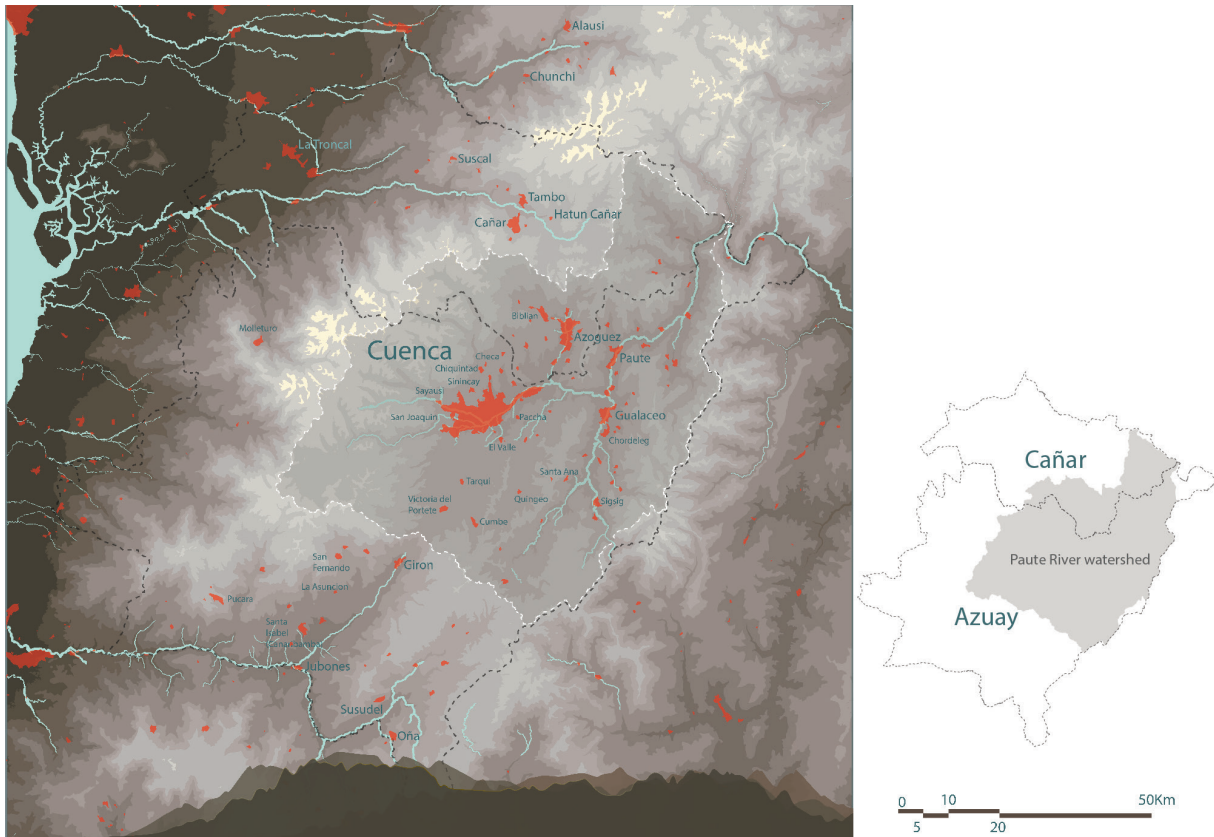


FIGURE 1 System of settlements in the Cañari territory today

INTRODUCTION

Disperse patterns of occupation are characteristic of the southern highlands of Ecuador, which in precolonial times were occupied by the Cañari culture, and in whose center today is Cuenca, the third largest city in Ecuador.

While the province of Azuay has about 700.000 inhabitants, the city of Cuenca concentrates about 331.000, in an area of approximately 4120 hectares. Surrounding the city, in an extended *in-between* territory of 22.000 hectares reside other 130.000 inhabitants. This *in-between* territory is a heterogeneous space, splattered of smallish concentrations of diverse morphological configuration and blurred borders, where urban functions tightly intertwine with rural uses of land (figure 1).

Influenced by North American studies on urban sprawl, the discourse on the need for a compact city has become recurrent in the local Spatial Planning and Territorial Development plans (known in Spanish as PDOT's), leading to diagnose the studied context with the same generic dispersion. Such a diagnosis, which considers the increasing occupation of the surrounding territories to be the result of urban explosion, glosses over other rationalities, like the logics of occupation in the Andean space, or the historical trajectory of the groups that ancestrally had inhabited those lands, as well as their political and social transformations during colonial times.

Disperse occupation is a long-term structure in the Cañari territory, a condition which has undergone transformations along time, and which has to be understood in the interplay between spatial, political and social factors in the territory.

The territory of Cuenca can be understood as a system composed by urban and rural centers of Spanish foundation; newer and small centralities that result from the intensification of specific activities; and an in-between territory of low-density population, high occupancy of land, and diverse economic productions.

The current study develops three main subtopics across time and in its current condition in order to unpack the interplay between current conditions and long-term structures, that continue to reproduce disperse patterns of occupation in the valley of Cuenca: Natural resources, Water, and Human mobility. Emphasis is given to the study of the contemporary conditions that contribute to the continuation and re-articulation of the pattern in the territory.

THE CITY AS A CONSTELLATION OF SETTLEMENTS

Situated at the centre of the ancient Cañari territory –now divided into two provinces: Azuay and Cañar- Cuenca is the major urban centre in southern Ecuador. Cuenca is located also in the centre of the Paute river watershed [fig.1], it's enclosed by mountains and crossed by four rivers. Like other Andean cities, Cuenca was founded during the colonial period. The Spanish city superimposed itself over Paucarbamba, an Inca settlement, which on its turn was placed on Guapondelig, as the Cañaris denominated to the territory of today's Azuay.

Cuenca articulates around its urban area a constellation of rural parishes (figure 2), whose main seats are small sized centralities which organize the space that surrounds them. This colonial schema, centralized and hierarchical, is overlaid by another one, less obvious but of longer presence in the territory; one that has its origin in the geographical and ecological diversity that the Andes is able to engender, and the logics of its space occupation.

The concept of *structure* as “a reality which survives through long periods of time and is only slowly eroded”¹ is key to understanding not only the radical initial difference between two cultures during early colony but also why in spite of the undeniable establishment of a dominant class, this one couldn't totally impose to the other its own ways of inhabiting the world, and instead a mutual transformation took place, defining new structures. This is related also to the idea that culture development and function depends on up to a certain degree of the ecological circumstances. Without being determinant, these circumstances influence some traits within a cultural system,² traits which might persist across time, and in spite of forced transformation.

The Andes is a zone where all transitions occur, from cold to warm, from dryness to extreme humidity, from steep slopes to expansive planes, from the thick jungle to the bare ground, in a very high degree of natural geo-systemic combinations, which results in the multiple ecosystems that can be found in relative short distances from each other. Development of the agricultural techniques encouraged migration and occupation of the different ecological floors in the Andes, from its bases up to the upper limits of vegetation almost in the 5000 meters of altitude³.

The desire to simultaneously control different climatic zones was a shared Andean ideal, common to ethnic groups of very diverse economic and politic organization, and geographically distant from each other⁴, which developed several patterns of “vertical control of maximum ecosystems” in the Andes during the XV-XVI centuries. Murra⁵, found that each ethnic group, regardless of its size, tried to appropriate and control as many ecologic floors as they could in order to attain food autonomy and self-sufficiency. For doing so, they would settle “colonies” of production in the places they wanted to gain for their group. Oberem⁶ argues that for the case of the Ecuadorian highlands, where the human groups were less numerous, people practiced what could be called *micro-verticality*, what means that people had crops at different ecological floors, but reachable in the same day.

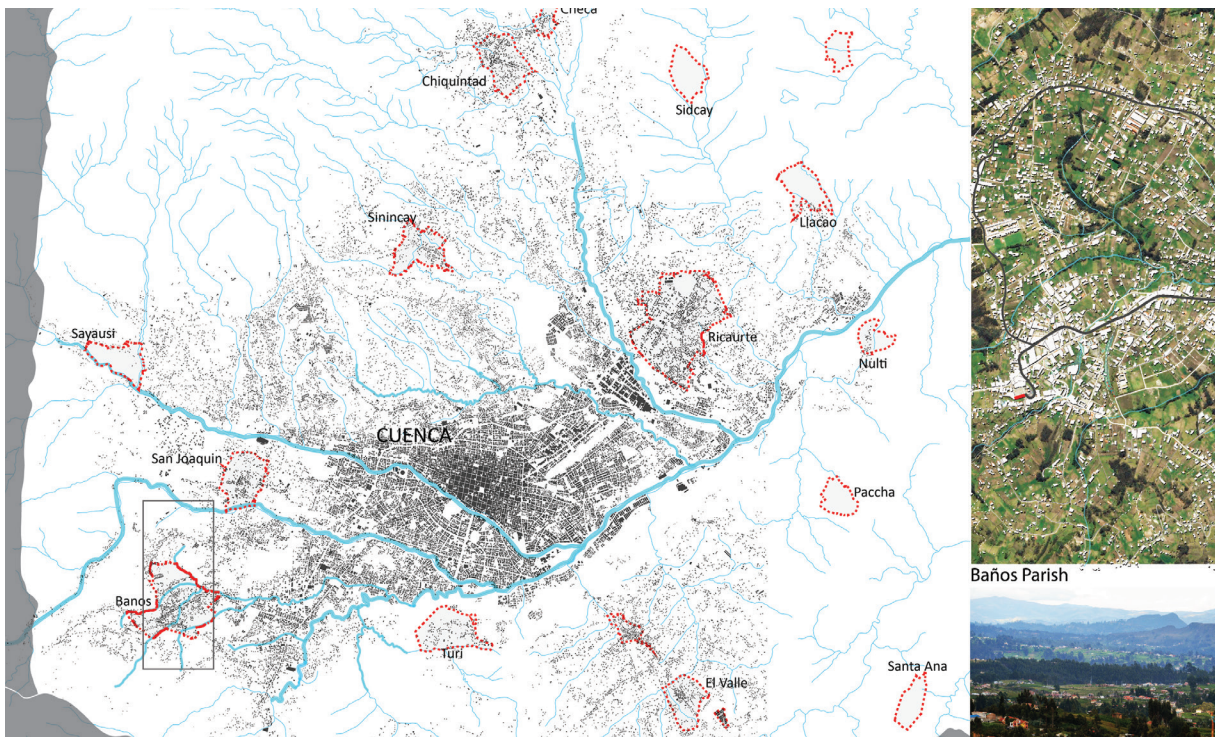


FIGURE 2 The city of Cuenca and surrounding parish seats.



FIGURE 3 Schema of vertical control and spatial organization of Cacicazgos.

In any case, it seems that the *Ayllu*, the basic socio-politic unit in the Andes, multiplied its “colonies” and developed into the *Cacicazgo*, a regional unit of political organization, which controlled the spatial occupation and production of its diverse groups, and which had a centre of cohesion, the *Llajta* (figure 3). This nucleus, which was the seat of the ethnic authority, could also be a place of production, but most importantly it was the politic and symbolic core of the group. Then, when we talk about the Cañaris, we are talking about a cultural system formed by numerous autonomous groups (*cacicazgos*) spread across the territory, and related through heterarchical political relations.⁷

Chacon⁸ gives an account of the numerous towns in the Cañari territory. They were so many, he concludes, that they were as numerous as numerous are the small valleys, and slopes in the region where they could have practiced irrigated agriculture. By the time that the Spanish came, the Cañari territory was occupied by a constellation of *Ayllus* and *Llajtas*, still organized as *cacicazgos*. This would explain why in Cuenca’s early council minutes some *caciques* (highest indigenous authority of a *cacicazgo*) are referred as the maximum authority of several locations.⁹

The diverse parish seats surrounding Cuenca are not the result of a modern process of polycentrism. Many of them were either *llajtas* or important spaces of occupation by the time of the Spanish arrival. These seats spread across the territory, are located at different altitudes, the majority of them between the 2450 and the 2750 meters of altitude. During colonial era, they were reestablished as *pueblos de indios* and doctrines¹⁰. Main and secondary towns were articulated into parishes¹¹, in order to concentrate indigenous population and to accomplish several objectives at stake: controlling indigenous labour, liberating land for concessions to colonisers, and to facilitate evangelization of indigenous people.

According to Spanish dispositions, each *pueblo de indios* should have a seat where are the council house, the community house, and the Church of the doctrine,¹² usually spatially organized around a central plaza. Around this center, the indigenous population would settle, what in practice, didn’t happen. The indigenous population continued to live dispersed across the parish, and the *pueblos de indios* remained, even after the middle of last century, like a small nucleus formed by a church, an earthen plaza and very few houses around it.

The incomplete adoption of the colonial urban framework in rural parish centres highlights the tight interdependency between space production and socio-cultural values, as well as the limits of power and counterpower to prevail over the underlying logics of space occupation. The relative emptiness of these centres is contrasted by the copious population that attends and participates in religious festivities, still very frequent in the parishes. This last fact exposes the persistence of cultural and spatial Andean references¹³ and the fundamental differences between them and the colonial structures. While for Spanish urbanism the meaningfulness of the centre is performed and “enacted” by inhabitation for the indigenous population inhabitation of the centre is alien to their model, instead, it has to be enacted periodically.

The Spanish colony meant a substantial transformation in the spatial relations of indigenous populations, fundamentally the pass from a system of heterarchical relations between groups, disperse occupation of space, and productive complementarity, to a centralized system of hierarchical relations, where the possibilities for a settlement to survive would increase or reduce in relation to its closeness to the city, the place of concentration.

It is out of the interplay between scales of spatial control (the big scale of the colonial regime, whose hierarchical schema remains intact, with the city at its center; and the small scale of the “lived space” with the continuation of communal social practices and reciprocity) that the population of these places is building their capacity to develop the own territories, and counteract centralization.

NATURAL RESOURCES AND PEOPLE AS RESOURCE

The territory of Cuenca is better understood if we conceptualize it as a system of primary and secondary spaces, of complementary functions and mutual interdependencies. The parish's territory is a space of openness and flexibility, capable of accommodating a wide array and scale of functions like agriculture, housing, manufacture or commerce. Due to the closeness between city and parishes, parish's population constitutes an available pool of workers that the city takes and releases at convenience, especially blue collar workers and artisans.

Control of indigenous population was essential to the success of the colonial enterprise, without them there was not enough labour force for exploiting the resources in the territory, nor for the very construction of the city. Together with the hierarchical organization of the territory, there was the desire for spatial segregation between white and indigenous people. That was the schema, however, the reality proved to be much more complex. The spatial organization of the colonial city established two parishes at the eastern and western extremes of the city, as centres of control for the indigenous population in the rural areas, and to define their closest permitted dwelling places. Nonetheless, it seems that the very authorities stimulated and even forced indigenous population to live and serve within the city, in order to learn trades and attend the needs of the whites. The account by Hernando de Pablos gives us an idea of the panorama of Cuenca's population activities towards 1582,¹⁴

The custom in this city is that all the settlers that live here plow and farm, and they live off that. Some have cattle, sheep, and horses, from where they got to dress and eat. All this is done with so much effort, because of the scarcity and expensiveness of people of service in this city (...) The natives work as servants to the settlers, and with their salaries, they pay their tributes.

The council minutes during the colony are full of petitions requesting the services of the indigenous population. Building constructors, carpenters, brick-makers, stonemasons, among others, came to fulfill these requests as part of their tributes to the crown. Many of them stayed, attracted by the possibilities of work in the city, their places of residence becoming neighbourhoods of specialized trades, still persistent in the urban fabric.¹⁵

It was in this context that the parishes started to weave strong ties of dependency and complementarity with Cuenca. It was in the constant interactions between its rural and urban territories that Cuenca shaped the physiognomy of an *in-between* landscape of dispersion, where urban and rural practices give place to new forms of inhabitation.

The degree of specialization that people in the parishes have acquired in construction-related trades and artisanal works is the result of a long tradition, which is reflected in the larger proportion of construction workers in the parishes in relation with those in the city.¹⁶ Interviews performed during fieldwork in several parishes of Cuenca¹⁷ showed that this degree of specialization, which is common especially among men, allows them to access better-paid jobs either in the city, or when they decide to emigrate abroad.

Additionally, the new trades that people learn in the city, like auto body repair and painting, mechanic and car repair, steel and aluminium carpentry, among others, find fertile land to be reproduced in the parishes. Availability of land in combination with easier loans from credit unions operating in parishes are contributing to the emergence of new small and medium scale productions which intermingle with traditional activities like agriculture and animal husbandry (figure 4). This developing condition is stimulating the economy in the parishes, at the same time that the intensification of urban functions increases their attractiveness for new residents.



FIGURE 4 Diverse economic productions in Sinincay parish



FIGURE 5 Housing landscape

WATER AND WATER SYSTEMS

For quite a while now, in Cuenca, potable water distribution systems are not exclusive to the city. Natural abundance of water and profusion of communal water systems in the rural areas have democratized the management, production, and distribution of this service, previously available only to urban population. There are about 390 communal water councils in Azuay, half of which are in the area of Cuenca¹⁸. They manage potable and/or irrigation systems of diverse scale.

Around the fifties of last century, the morphology of the high profusion of disperse settlements in the region, which had been until then only influenced by the natural availability of water and later by road infrastructure, started to be stimulated also by drinkable water infrastructure implemented by communities in the parishes. Parish seats saw their population increased and their size enlarged. Over time, the water systems have expanded beyond the parish seats towards the inner lands and the roads have multiplied, which continues to define as disperse, the urban production in the parishes. The *minga*, an old form of communal work in the Andes, continues to be today one of the most effective ways for rural communities to achieve common goals, from building construction, to the opening of roads and construction of infrastructure.

Relying on the existing social networks, the church has played a central role in reviving the *minga*. For instance, in Baños, the first parish to implement a water system in Cuenca, what started as an effort to bring drinkable water to the convent, resulted in a broader project of irrigation for the parish. During the seventies the project upgraded to a still very rudimentary purification water system, which encouraged urban development in the lower lands of the parish. The system was modernized and equipped fifteen years ago, and currently, it provides service to about 6500 households. Additionally, the system continues to provide untreated water to households located above the level of water treatment, in areas thinly populated.

The initial objectives of improving inhabitation conditions for residents have already gone beyond the expected material achievements. Further, the social tactics employed became models of social empowerment replicated at different scales and with different objectives all across the parish. The success of their social tactics was anchored in a sustained and structured social effort, which was able to turn a water community organization into a basic service provider. Both, the social tactics and the outcomes (more cohesive communities and better served places) are increasing the potentiality of disperse urbanization in the parish.

HUMAN MOBILITY AND MIGRATION

Migratory movements shaped the population and the spatial relations of power in the Cañari territory during the colonial era. The failure to concentrate indigenous population, and the prevailing smallholder pattern of landownership developed along this era in the Cuenca region, determined the continuity of disperse inhabitation in this part of the Andes. Currently, transnational migration is redrawing once more Cuenca's population, by stimulating building construction, empowering existing social practices and transforming styles of life, especially in the rural areas. The transnational migration reproduces in a new version a tactic repeatedly used in the territory. Migration as an economic tactic is inherent to the logics of Andean space occupation and political organization, as it can be inferred from the spatial conformation of the *cacicazgos*, whose multiplace occupation demanded frequent displacements of population and products between "colonies". Forced migrations were also part of Andean precolonial geography. *Mitimaq*¹⁹ was applied by the Incas to Cañari population in order to control and neutralize them. The system reduced severely their population, which was further decimated by the subsequent Spanish application of the same scheme²⁰.

Looser colonial control and relative availability of land due to the notoriously smaller indigenous population increased the attractiveness of the region as migratory destination during XVIII century. Dreadful indigenous exploitation and high tributes during this period triggered intensive migratory movements of impoverished

groups in general, and of the indigenous population in particular, who come from the northern regions. The population of Cuenca increased considerably during this period, becoming by the end of XVIII century the administrative unit with most population in today's Ecuador.²¹ Migratory flows and the high level of land ownership between the indigenous population in the rural areas and villages surrounding Cuenca²² interplayed with looser social constrictions in these areas. The result was the *mestizaje*²³ of the rural space, with the emergence of a peasantry of mestizo and poor whites, on the one hand, and the spread of the small landownership as the prevalent form of land property in Cuenca region, on the other.

The implications of population *mestizaje* are significant. As whites or mestizo, peasant population was better able to protect and retain their land from Spanish land grabbing. They were less susceptible to be subjugated as the indigenous population was, hence that they were perceived to be an independent and privileged population already in Spanish chronicles.²⁴ Later on history, the highly fragmented character of landownership in Azuay and Cañar was a crucial factor in determining the scale that transnational migration acquired in southern highlands of Ecuador since the last quarter of twenty century.²⁵ Without access to bank credits, because of lack of formal employment, landownership provided to cash-poor peasants the means to access to fast loans to pay their journey abroad, by pawning their property titles to illegal usurious lenders. Housing and land investments are a priority for emigrants after finishing to pay debts acquired to emigrate,²⁶ what has transformed much of rural Cañar and Azuay provinces into “a peri-urban, even gentrified, landscape of cultivated real estate”.²⁷

At the parish scale, collective initiatives are also frequently fueled by transnational remittances,²⁸ which are used to sponsor religious festivities, communal equipment construction or infrastructure improvement, with similar results, the renewal of community ties as a form of social support. The transnational remittances contribute to developing territories frequently neglected by the central government, what results in the improvement of living conditions and the consequent intensification of building construction in the parishes (figure 5). Intensification of urban functions and increasing urbanization in the parishes goes hand in hand with their increased economic and social dynamism, and decreased city dependence, what might suggest a regained autonomy of for the future of the rural parishes. The impact of transnational remittances in rural and in-between territories go beyond the material assets that migrants achieve for their households, they have repercussion in broader scales, defining morphological and social patterns of occupation in their landscapes. Family and communal strategies practiced at different scales, and the investments that households do, are strengthening their agency in the transformation and conformation of their territories, what in its turn, is reshaping their collective identity.

CONCLUSION

Along this paper, I have offered a reading of dispersion as a pattern of inhabitation rooted in the logics of space occupation in the Andes. Attention to the traits and interactions in the studied territory has allowed to elaborate on the specificity of this territory, defining as *in-between*, this type of disperse occupation. The openness and heterogeneity of this *in-between* territory are understood as positive traits. The diversity of activities happening in the landscape contribute to the complementarity between people's activities in the parish, what could signify more sustainable ways of inhabiting the territory. The multiple interactions between landscape and population have been highlighted in order to understand the transformation of these relations across time. While the city-parish interaction has been dealt with, our focus allow us to understand rural lands and the role that their population plays in the transformation of their space.

Because the way of defining a problem can determine its solution, this paper is understood as a tool to envision and explore future possibilities for the studied territory. By redefining dispersion as *in-betweenness*, a new perspective on the subject has been offered, and simultaneously a new discourse put forward, an alternative to the ones that repeatedly label as chaotic and irrational all that cannot be understood from conventional points of view.

Notes on contributor

Monica Rivera-Muñoz is a PhD researcher at the Department of Architecture, within the group of Urban Planning at KU Leuven University. Central to her interest is the question of how issues such as heritage and landscape can be integrated in/through urban planning. Her thesis studies Cuenca, in the southern highlands of Ecuador, as her case study, and it inquires into the nature and development of the dispersed patterns of inhabitation present in its peri-urban and rural landscape. The relevance of the study stems from the need to consider the landscape as an existing and available resource/recourse for the sustainable development of the city, as a way to counteract the pressing market-driven urbanizing processes that threaten to render these polysemous territories, monosemous.

Endnotes

- 1 Braudel, "History and the Social Sciences," 151
- 2 Oberem, "Sobre la formación Social y Económica Aborigen. El acceso a recursos naturales de diferentes ecologías en la sierra ecuatoriana (siglo XVI)."
- 3 Dollfus, *El reto del espacio Andino*.
- 4 Murra, *Formaciones económicas y políticas del mundo andino*, 60.
- 5 Murra, *Formaciones económicas y políticas del mundo andino*.
- 6 Oberem, "Sobre la formación Social y Económica Aborigen. El acceso a recursos naturales de diferentes ecologías en la sierra ecuatoriana (siglo XVI)."
- 7 Although several authors describe in a very similar way the ayllu, the basic socio political unit of the Cañaris, there is not consensus they conforming a cultural or political unity. For more about the Cañari culture see: Hirschkind, "History of the Indian Population of Canar"; Gonzalez Suarez, *Estudio Histórico Sobre Los Cañaris Pobladores de La Antigua Provincia Del Azuay*; Poloni-Simard, *El mosaico indígena*.
- 8 Chacón Zhapán, *Historia del corregimiento de Cuenca (1557 - 1777)*.
- 9 Ibid
- 10 Pueblos de indios and doctrines were types of reducciones or settlements for the concentration of indigenous population.
- 11 The parish was during the colony era a territorial unit of conjoint religious and political administration. Nowadays the "parish" is the smaller unit of autonomous governmental administration, however because of separation between Church and State, it is not associated anymore to the "parish" as unit of religious administration.
- 12 Chacón Zhapán, *Historia del corregimiento de Cuenca (1557 - 1777)*.
- 13 See Makowski, 2008
- 14 Hernando de Pablos (1582) in Ponce, *Relaciones histórico-geográficas de la Audiencia de Quito*, 378. Translation by the author.
- 15 Carpenters who were brought from their communities asked for lands close to the Yanuncay river, today a urban neighborhood where persists this trade as an specialization. The same can be said about the Tejar neighborhood, where people was brought for the making of tiles and brick. See Poloni-Simard, *El mosaico indígena*.
- 16 From the population economically active in the parishes, the 14% works in construction activities, versus only 6% of population in the city. Source: INEC, "Censo Nacional de Poblacion y Vivienda 2010 [Ecuador Census]."
- 17 Fieldwork was developed by the author in 5 parishes of Cuenca during 4 months between 2015 and 2016.
- 18 El Comercio, "La Juntas de Agua Marcan La Vida de Las Comunidades En La Sierra."
- 19 Mitimaq system was a twofold system that forced resettlement of local population to other parts of the Inca State, at the same time that loyal Quechua speaking population (the official language of the empire) was introduced among locals. The system was introduced mostly in places where alliances were difficult to maintain, to dilute disruptive influences and reinforce Inca dominion.
- 20 Garzón, *Los Cañaris*.
- 21 Espinoza, Achig, and Martinez, "La Gobernación Colonial de Cuenca. Formación Social y Producción Mercantil Simple."
- 22 Chacon et al., *Ensayos sobre historia regional*; Gomez, Deler, and Portais, *El Manejo del espacio en el Ecuador: Etapas claves*; Palomeque, "La Sierra Sur 1825-1900"; Kyle, *Transnational Peasants: Migrations, Networks, and Ethnicity in Andean Ecuador*.
- 23 Mixing of races and cultures.
- 24 See i.e. de Merisalde y Santisteban, "Relacion Histórica, Política y Moral de la Ciudad de Cuenca, 1765."
- 25 Emigration depened during the late nineties, when a new crisis translated into the most dramatic "migratory stampede" of Ecuador, which drove out nearly 14% of the economically active population between 1999 and 2007. See United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA-Ecuador and FLACSO, *Ecuador: la migración internacional en cifras*.
- 26 Gray and Bilsborrow, "Consequences of out-Migration for Land Use in Rural Ecuador"; Jokisch, "Migration and Agricultural Change"; Vasco, *The Impact of International Migration and Remittances on Agricultural Production Patterns, Labor Relationships and Entrepreneurship the Case of Rural Ecuador*; Mata-Codesal, "From 'Mud Houses' to 'Wasted Houses'"; Mata-Codesal, "Material and Social Remittances in Highland Ecuador"; Kyle, *Transnational Peasants: Migrations, Networks, and Ethnicity in Andean Ecuador*; Jokisch and Kyle, "The Unintended Consequences of Migration: Exploring the Importance of Transnational Migration between Ecuador and New York."
- 27 Jokisch, "Migration and Agricultural Change," 523.
- 28 Mata-Codesal, "Material and Social Remittances in Highland Ecuador."

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Image Sources

Figure 1: Elaborated by author

Figure 2: Elaborated by author

Figure 3: Elaborated by author

Figure 4: Photographs and collage by author

Figure 5: Photograph by author