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## Analysis of the Indigenous Guard in Ecuador as a system of territorial defence and self-determination in a plurinational state

### Analiza Straży Rdzennej Ludności w Ekwadorze jako systemu obrony terytorialnej i samostanowienia w państwie wielonarodowym

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#### Abstract

The Indigenous Guard in Ecuador arose as a response to militarization, state control, and power hierarchies within the context of the Plurinational State, recognized in the 2008 Constitution after long indigenous struggles. Alongside Bolivia, Ecuador is one of the only countries to constitutionally adopt this model, granting Indigenous communities the right to protect their territories autonomously. Unlike the state's military system, the Indigenous Guard is collective, horizontal, and non-hierarchical, challenging both militarism and gender norms by ensuring equal participation in defending land, nature, and cultural identity. The article traces the historical struggle for a plurinational state, examines the Guard's development within Ecuador's legal framework, and analyses its resistance to state militarization, particularly highlighting women's leadership roles. Ultimately, the Indigenous Guard transcends its function as territorial defence, representing a broader act of resistance against colonial, patriarchal, and neoliberal state structures, and offering alternative visions of security, autonomy, and decolonial coexistence.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Guard, plurinational state, Ecuador, territorial defence, sovereignty, decoloniality, collective organization

## Streszczenie

Straż Rdzennej Ludności w Ekwadorze powstała jako odpowiedź na militaryzację, kontrolę państwa i hierarchie władzy w ramach państwa wielonarodowego, uznanego w konstytucji z 2008 roku po wieloletnich zmaganiach ludów rdzennych. Ekwador – wraz z Boliwią – należy do nielicznych państw, które przyjęły ten model konstytucyjny, gwarantując społecznościom tubylczym prawo do autonomicznej ochrony własnych terytoriów. W przeciwieństwie do systemu militarnego państwa, Straż Rdzennej Ludności działa w sposób kolektywny, horyzontalny i bezhierarchiczny – podważając zarówno militarizm, jak i normy płci poprzez zapewnienie równego udziału w obronie ziemi, przyrody i tożsamości kulturowej.

Artykuł przedstawia historyczną walkę o utworzenie państwa wielonarodowego, omawia rozwój Straży Rdzennej Ludności w ramach ekwadorskiego porządku prawnego oraz analizuje jej opór wobec militaryzacji państwa, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem roli kobiet-liderek. Ostatecznie Straż Rdzennej Ludności wykracza poza funkcję obrony terytorialnej – stanowi szerszy akt oporu wobec struktur kolonialnych, patriarchalnych i neoliberalnych, oferując alternatywne wizje bezpieczeństwa, autonomii i współistnienia w duchu dekolonialnym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Straż Rdzennej Ludności, państwo wielonarodowe, Ekwador, obrona terytorialna, suwerenność, dekolonialność, organizacja kolektywna

## Hypothesis

The Indigenous Guard in Ecuador constitutes a non-state defence system that, through its communal and decentralized structure, challenges the conventional military and state institution and redefines power relations within the framework of a plurinational state.

### The main research questions are:

1. How has the historical development of the plurinational state in Ecuador influenced the emergence and evolution of the Indigenous Guard?
2. In what ways does the organizational structure and functioning of the Indigenous Guard challenge the conventional logic of the military institution?
3. How does the participation of women within the Indigenous Guard challenge traditional gender roles in defence and security?
4. What implications does the Indigenous Guard have for sovereignty and self-determination in the context of a plurinational state?

The Indigenous Guard or *Guardia Indígena* is a collective formed by the indigenous nationalities of Ecuador that challenges traditional power structures and gender roles. This group emerged to defend their territories and assert their self-determination as indigenous nationalities within the framework of a plurinational Ecuadorian state. Women of all ages are common members of this collective, often serving as leaders in their communities. The organization's structure is characterized by a communal and decentralized approach. Additionally, their objectives include protecting nature, preserving indigenous cosmogony, and defending their traditions and customs. Thus,

the Indigenous Guard represents an alternative defence system that challenges conventional logics and practices of power.

This article analyses how the Indigenous Guard in Ecuador challenges the military institution and broader power structures through its origins, internal practices, and causes of mobilization. First, a historical context regarding the formation of the Ecuadorian plurinational state and the interests that shaped it will be addressed. Next, the historical struggle of indigenous communities for the recognition of a plurinational state will be examined, highlighting the implications of this model for the concept of the nation-state. Within this framework, the emergence of the Indigenous Guard and its development in the constitutional context of a plurinational state will be analysed. Finally, the article will explore how the Indigenous Guard acts as a resistance collective that challenges traditional power structures, such as the military institution, through its principles, objectives, and internal organizational practices.

## The emergence of the Ecuadorian nation-state

The Ecuadorian state was established in 1830, primarily reflecting the economic, political, and social interests of a small criollo elite. The criollos were the descendants of Spaniards born in Latin America, who did not enjoy the same social, political, or economic status as Spaniards born in Spain.<sup>1</sup> These elites led the independence wars driven by their own economic and social objectives. Furthermore, during the struggles for independence from the Spanish Crown, indigenous peoples, women, enslaved individuals, and exploited communities were involved under promises of freedom and equal treatment. However, after independence was achieved, the nascent 'Ecuadorian nation' developed as a 'Spanish-influenced subcontinent' led by the elites.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, despite the pivotal role played by indigenous, black, enslaved, and exploited peoples in the independence wars, there was no systematic change, and the promise of freedom was unfulfilled.

Mignolo Walter explains that the Latin American context was not very different, as the newly formed nation-states across the continent retained strong colonial ties and were continuously influenced by global powers such as England and the United States.<sup>3</sup> Within the 'Hispanic-mestizo nation' project, indigenous peoples and communities were excluded and marginalized. Almeida explains: "Since then, the Ecuadorian state has constituted a negative factor for the aspirations of indigenous peoples, practically condemning them to political, legal, institutional, social, and economic stagnation" (trans. C.A.).<sup>4</sup> As a result, the Ecuadorian nation-state project increased the social, political, and economic

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<sup>1</sup> I. Almeida, N.A. Rodas, L.O. Segovia, *Autonomía indígena: frente al Estado nación y la globalización neoliberal*, Editorial Abya Yala, Quito 2005.

<sup>2</sup> M. Walter, *The darker side of western modernity: Global futures, decolonial options*, Duke University Press, Durham 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> I. Almeida, N.A. Rodas, L.O. Segovia, *Autonomía indígena...*, op. cit., p. 17.

inequalities faced by indigenous communities, who, despite inhabiting the territory for millennia, were dispossessed of their lands and rights.

Almost a century later, World War I marked a turning point in the reconfiguration of nationalities and minorities, especially after the dissolution of empires such as the Russian, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian.<sup>5</sup> The creation of new states reinforced the ideal of a ‘homogeneous nation’, further excluding groups of individuals labelled as minorities. These groups did not fit the definition of a nation and were dehumanized as a result. Benhabib asserts: “A refugee, a minority, or a stateless person, one cannot find another polity to recognize one as its member and remains in a state of limbo, caught between territories, none of which desire one to be its resident”.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, during the era of modern states, inequality and dehumanization of minorities, including indigenous communities in every nation, increased.

In this context, Latin American nation-states used ‘citizenship’ as a fundamental instrument of power. In Ecuador, white, mestizo, and white-mestizo individuals obtained citizenship status by aligning with the white racial imagination that elites promoted as the national ideal of the country.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, indigenous communities were relegated to the category of ‘ethnicities,’ a classification that stripped them of their right to participate in the hegemonic nation project.<sup>8</sup> Yuval-Davis states, “In virtually all contemporary states there are migrants and refugees, ‘old’ and ‘new’ minorities, and in settler societies (where colonialist projects constituted new independent national collectivities) also indigenous people who are not part of the hegemonic national community”.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, indigenous communities in Ecuador were reduced to minorities within their own territory. Despite having inhabited these lands for millennia, indigenous peoples continued to be exploited and dehumanized under the nation-state system.

## The dream of a plurinational state

The 1990s in Ecuador were characterized by several indigenous mobilizations, including uprisings for land and dignity, as well as protests against neoliberalism. During this period, the Ecuadorian state was challenged by the indigenous movement’s proposal for a plurinational state project.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Schmitt explains that the Constitution of the State implies

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<sup>5</sup> S. Benhabib, *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents, and Citizens*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> J.Y. Mera Zambrano, *Análisis de la competencia de autodeterminación de los pueblos y nacionalidad indígena en materia de seguridad pública*, Bachelor’s thesis, Universidad Regional Autónoma de Los Andes, Santo Domingo 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> N. Yuval-Davis, *Citizenship and Difference*, [in:] Eadem, *Gender & Nation*, SAGE Publications, Los Angeles 2010, p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> E. Cruz Rodríguez, *Redefiniendo la nación: luchas indígenas y Estado Plurinacional en Ecuador (1990–2008)*, “Nómadas Critical Joournal of Social and Juridic Sciences” 2012, vol. 34, <https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/NOMA/article/view/41786/39819> [accessed: 3.01.2025].

the political unity of a people.<sup>11</sup> Within this framework, the State itself signifies a political unit or, alternatively, can be considered a special and concrete form of state existence. However, since this political unity historically includes only the elites of the Ecuadorian state, advocating for plurinationality entails re-signifying indigenous “ethnicities” as distinct nations, as well as redefining the notion of the state itself. Likewise, Yuval-Davis explains that historically, the concept of citizenship within the nation-state has been a tool used to exercise power, fundamentally based on distinctions between those who could be citizens and those who were excluded. Yuval-Davis mentions, “In the liberal tradition, citizenship has been constructed in completely individualistic terms. Liberal definition constructs the citizen as an individual member of a state”.<sup>12</sup> However, the plurinationality project demanded by indigenous communities involved an appropriation of the term nationality and, in consequence, an expansion of the liberal notion of the nation from an individualistic to a community sense. Cruz explains:

Indigenous leaders tactically affirmed their identification as indigenous nationalities to give their issue national status. They affirmed ‘nationality’ against ‘ethnicity,’ which they viewed as an external designation placing them as minorities. Moreover, they challenged the uninational state, refusing to subsume themselves under the mestizo national identity (trans. C.A.).<sup>13</sup>

This project challenged the very logic upon which the concepts of citizenship and nation had been founded, implying an expansion of the state’s definition to diversify and decentralize power. In fact, Schmitt explains that the people, in a democracy, are the subject of constituent power.<sup>14</sup> Every constitution, according to the democratic conception, is based, even for its element of the rule of law, on the concrete political decision of the people endowed with political capacity

However, despite Indigenous communities’ efforts, the Ecuadorian government/state and elites rejected the Plurinational project. Among the sixteen points demanded by CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador)<sup>15</sup>, the most controversial were the recognition of indigenous nationalities and the state as plurinational.<sup>16</sup> Elites and the government accused indigenous peoples of intending to fragment the country, maintaining that ‘mestizaje’ was the sole identity and arguing that “those who were not mestizo must transform themselves” (trans. C.A.).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> C. Schmitt, A. Francisco, G.-P. Manuel, *Teoría de la Constitución*, Alianza, Madrid 1982.

<sup>12</sup> N. Yuval-Davis, *Citizenship and Difference*, op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>13</sup> E. Cruz Rodríguez, *Redefiniendo la nación...*, op. cit., p. 9

<sup>14</sup> C. Schmitt, A. Francisco, G.-P. Manuel, *Teoría de la Constitución*, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> *Resoluciones del II Encuentro Nacional de Guardias Indígenas del Ecuador*, CONAIE, 2024, <https://conaie.org/2024/10/07/resoluciones-del-ii-encuentro-nacional-de-guardias-indigenas-comunitarias-de-la-conaie-4-y-5-de-octubre-de-2024/> [accessed: 3.01.2025].

<sup>16</sup> E. Cruz Rodríguez, *Redefiniendo la nación...*, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5

## The 2008 constitution: the fulfilment of a dream

After decades of historical struggle by Ecuadorian Indigenous Communities demanding their right to self-determination since the 1990s, the National Constitution of Ecuador was reconfigured in 2008. Its first article states: “Ecuador is a Constitutional State of rights and justice, social, democratic, sovereign, independent, unitary, intercultural, plurinational, and secular. It is organized as a republic and governed in a decentralized manner” (trans. C.A.).<sup>18</sup> This recognition of the plurinational state is crucial as it breaks with the logic of the homogeneous nation-state, a globally imposed ideal. Plurinationality allows indigenous nationalities to exercise sovereignty over their territories, governance, organization, and defence.<sup>19</sup>

According to Mera, Indigenous Nationality is defined as:

The character of the nation that represents a group of one or more peoples, linked by a shared historical origin, common cultural traits, a territory, a unique language, and a socio-political structure. The original Nations are governed by their own laws, customs, beliefs, unique languages, and forms of social, economic, and political organization within their territories (trans. C.A.).<sup>20</sup>

Indigenous nationalities in Ecuador identify themselves as groups conscious of being the historical continuation of the nations that populated the territories, now known as Ecuador, before Spanish colonization. These groups share cosmovision, culture, and socio-political organization preserved over time.<sup>21</sup> According to SISAWU (2020),<sup>22</sup> the Ecuadorian state recognizes fourteen indigenous nationalities and seven indigenous peoples. In the coastal region of the country, the nationalities recognized are Épera, Chachi, Awá, and Tsáchila. In the Amazon region, the recognized nationalities are Achuar, Andoa, Cofán, Waorani, Secoya, Shiwiari, Shuar, Siona, Zápara, and Kichwa (Amazon). Meanwhile, in the Sierra region, the recognized Kichwa peoples include those from Imbabura, Pichincha, Cotopaxi, Tungurahua, Bolívar, Cañar, Azuay, Chimborazo, Loja, Zamora Chinchipe, Napo, Guayas, El Oro, and Manabí.

The proclamation of the plurinational state in Ecuador was a historic milestone in the country’s politics, granting legal recognition to indigenous communities as nationalities, along with the right to exercise sovereignty over their territories within the framework of plurinationality. Article 96 of the Constitution of Ecuador (2008) defines popular sovereignty as all forms of social organization aimed at developing processes of self-determination and influencing decisions and public policies, as well as social control over all levels of government and over public and private entities that provide public services.

A plurinational state represents not only a significant advancement in recognizing collective rights but also challenges the liberal tradition of constructing nation-states. Yuval-

<sup>18</sup> Asamblea Constituyente, Constitución de la República del Ecuador, Registro Oficial No. 449, Quito 2008.

<sup>19</sup> J.Y. Mera Zambrano, *Análisis de la competencia...*, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> *Pueblos y Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador*, SISAWU, 2020, <https://www.sisawu.org/index.php/98-pueblos> [accessed: 6.01.2025].

Davis explains: “In the liberal tradition, citizenship has been constructed in completely individualistic terms. Liberal definition constructs the citizen as an individual member of a state”.<sup>23</sup> In this sense, indigenous governance, based on communal principles, stands as a form of resistance against the global imposition of the homogeneous nation-state model. Moreover, it is a tangible example that other, more inclusive state-nation concepts rooted in plurality are possible. This process of social struggle and resistance, led primarily by indigenous communities and peoples, has spanned over 100 years, culminating in the establishment of the intercultural and plurinational state through the 2008 constitutional reform.<sup>24</sup>

## Formation of the Indigenous Guard

The Indigenous Guard of Ecuador exists within the legal framework of a plurinational state but operates based on the principles, constructions, and determination of the original communities to protect their territories, cosmogony, and knowledge. Indigenous leaders assert their right to maintain an Indigenous Guard based on Article 416 of the Constitution of Ecuador, which addresses the right to self-determination of Indigenous Peoples and Nationalities, and Articles 8.2, 9.2, and 10 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples regarding the defence of ancestral customs and cultural preservation.<sup>25</sup> Jaime Vargas, president of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), affirms: “We must create our own army to defend the people, our security, from within our Indigenous community” (trans. C.A.).<sup>26</sup> In this context, the Indigenous Guard is configured as a key tool to guarantee the right to community security and the defence of the autonomy of indigenous peoples.

The Indigenous Guard is directly linked to Indigenous Justice, which is recognized as a constitutional right. Its purpose is to provide security to indigenous peoples within their territories. Its regulations are based on the Constitution, international human rights instruments, and cooperation between the ordinary and indigenous justice systems.<sup>27</sup> She states: The 2008 Constitution recognizes legal pluralism and indigenous justice as a valid legal system for the diverse nationalities existing within Ecuadorian territory.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the legal pluralism enables communities to operate their own legal systems, resolving conflicts swiftly and effectively without the need for intervention by the official judicial system.

However, the Ecuadorian state does not legally recognize the existence of the Indigenous Guard outside ancestral territories. Benhabib explains: “In a territorially bounded

<sup>23</sup> N. Yuval-Davis, *Citizenship and Difference*, op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>24</sup> F.S Pillajo, *Resistencia y lucha social indígena en los Andes ecuatorianos: Paro Nacional 2019*, [in:] R. Salas (ed.), *Luchas sociales, justicia contextual y dignidad de los pueblos*, Ariadna Ediciones, Santiago de Chile 2020, pp. 141–156.

<sup>25</sup> J.Y. Mera Zambrano, *Análisis de la competencia...*, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

nation-state system, that is, in a ‘state-centric’ international order, one’s legal status is dependent upon protection by the highest authority that controls the territory upon which one resides and issues the papers to which one is entitled”.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, although the Indigenous Guard is legitimized by various legal aspects, its mobilization outside indigenous territories can cause conflicts of jurisdiction between the public forces responsible for maintaining internal order within the territory and the national police. However, the contradiction lies in the fact that neither the principle of interculturality nor the ancestral customs governing the cultures of indigenous peoples and nationalities are considered in this context.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, although the Ecuadorian state recognizes itself as plurinational, it remains centralized.

Mera states that the armed forces and national police have the duty to protect the security of citizens both inside and outside the national territory.<sup>31</sup> However, this mandate is not always fulfilled when these forces focus on defending the current government and its reforms, repressing those who oppose them. Nevertheless, for indigenous communities, the Guard does not threaten national security; rather, it protects its members when they are outside their territories in unfamiliar and hostile environments, aiming to preserve their lives and safety while defending their rights against a State that seeks to violate them and suppress dissent. However, when indigenous communities have mobilized outside their territories to oppose extractivist projects threatening their existence, violent police repression from state forces, represented by police and military, has been done against the Indigenous Guard, community members, and civil society protesters.<sup>32</sup>

The manifesto of the second national meeting of the Indigenous Guard of Ecuador asserted that the Ecuadorian State is the primary agent of stigmatization, targeting, political persecution, criminalization, and assassination of social activists, environmental defenders, as well as Indigenous and Community Guards (2024).<sup>33</sup> It includes traditional media as allies in discrediting the role of the Indigenous Guard, accusing them of terrorism or drug trafficking, adding: “It reflects the structural and colonial racism of the State, which has perpetuated and supported systematic violations of our rights as Indigenous peoples and nationalities”.<sup>34</sup>

In conclusion, it is important to highlight that the military and police forces do not always act in the interest of the citizenry; sometimes they serve specific state interests. In such cases, they are not accused of failing to fulfil their mandate to protect the national territory but rather of acting under orders that may extend beyond their original function. On the other hand, the Indigenous Guard does not protect the concept of the state itself but defends its members, both human and non-human, their territory, customs, ancestry, and knowledge. This Guard is legitimized by national and international legal frameworks, and although it has roots in millennial practices, its legal development is possible

<sup>29</sup> S. Benhabib, *The Rights of Others...*, op. cit., pp. 54–55.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> *Resoluciones del II Encuentro...*, op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.



due to the recognition of the plurinational state. However, structural and colonial racism continues to generate conflicts within judicial pluralism. While, under the Ecuadorian constitution, the Indigenous Guard and indigenous justice are legitimized, in practice the State remains centralized, colonial, and racist. In response, the Indigenous Guard positions itself not as a state entity, but rather as an alternative form of resistance and community care.

## Organizational structure and practices of the indigenous guard

According to the *Resolutions of the II National Meeting of Indigenous Guards of Ecuador*, the Indigenous and Community Guard is recognized as a millennial and collective strategy of resistance for the defence of the environment, territory, and, consequently, life. Among its main elements are the cane, the spear and the atzial, symbols that represent the defence of the territory and the authority of the peoples and nationalities. Its manifesto states: “Our strength lies in spirituality, in the community mandate, and in the exercise of our collective and constitutional rights, in jurisprudence, in international norms, and in the right to self-determination of the Peoples and Nationalities”.<sup>35</sup>

The Indigenous Guards in Ecuador operate primarily in border areas. This is particularly significant as these territories have historically been targeted for militarization by governments. However, indigenous nationalities have resisted this and protect their territories from drug trafficking, extractivist projects, mass tourism, and militarization through communal resistance.<sup>36</sup> Enloe explains that militarization is not a neutral or harmless process, nor does it lack an impact on the spaces it occupies; instead, it profoundly affects all people and the habitat within those spaces. She states: “Militarization does make us pay more attention to people inside the military. Still, many people can become militarized in their thinking, in how they live their daily lives, in what they aspire to for their children or their society, without ever wielding a rifle or donning a helmet”.<sup>37</sup> She adds that militarization is a step-by-step process in which a person gradually becomes controlled by military institutions or begins to depend on military ideals. Enloe emphasizes that militarization impacts culture, ideology, and economics, thereby influencing every aspect of society. For this reason, one of the main objectives of the Indigenous Guard is to protect their territories from militarization.

Ancestral cosmogony also plays a fundamental role in the Guard. For example, Herbst notes, “Biological differences between men and women have been a contributing factor in the masculinization of war”.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, gender roles in militarization depend on the person’s body, with women relegated to caregiving and administrative tasks, while men are expected to strengthen their bodies for battle. In contrast, within the Indigenous

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> J.Y. Mera Zambrano, *Análisis de la competencia...*, op. cit.

<sup>37</sup> C. Enloe, *How do they Militarize a Can of Soup*, [in:] Eadem, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2000, p. 2.

<sup>38</sup> C. Herbst, *Shock and Awe: Virtual Females and the Sexing of War*, “Feminist Media Studies”, 2005, vol. 5(3), p. 312.

Guard, value does not lie in physical strength or the body but in spiritual strength.<sup>39</sup> One of the ancestral practices within the Indigenous Guard is the use of *yage*, a medicinal plant that grants the spirit or soul fundamental strength. For example, in the Wisuya community, there are Indigenous Guards with members of 80 years old who are respected more for their spiritual strength than their physical abilities.

Furthermore, it is important to note that there is not a single Indigenous Guard, as the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador recognizes 14 Indigenous Nationalities and 18 Indigenous Peoples.<sup>40</sup> Each Indigenous Guard differs depending on the community and nationality it represents. However, the principles of cooperation and community remain strong among all Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples in the country.<sup>41</sup> For instance, in the Sarayaku community, one of the Kichwa communities in the province of Pastaza, members of the Indigenous Guard are known as “*Wio*,” in 2003 consisted of 100 natives, both young and adult, tasked with protecting 135 000 hectares of forest.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, those who protect the Waorani territory belong to the Indigenous Guard Meñebai, which means “jaguar” in their language. In their cosmovision, when a Waorani dies, their spirit transforms into a jaguar that protects their human and non-human family.<sup>43</sup>

## Participation of women in the indigenous guard

Despite the military institution being historically characterized as a masculinized and violent space for women,<sup>44</sup> the inclusion of both men and women in the Indigenous Guard is a distinctive factor compared to the police and military institutions. Herbst emphasizes that while women have historically played roles in wars within military service, these roles were typically as secretaries, nurses, or workers in support industries, while men were the ones deployed to the battlefield.<sup>45</sup> Herbst states: “Scholars from a variety of disciplines have come to the same conclusion, namely that war has throughout time and across cultures been perceived as man’s business”.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, it is significant that within the Indigenous Guard, not only is women’s participation ensured, but they also hold leadership roles both within the Guard and in their communities.<sup>47</sup>

Yuturi Warmi is an Indigenous Guard led by Kichwa women in Ecuador, consisting of over 40 Kichwa women who are organized to defend their territory, primarily against

<sup>39</sup> J.Y. Mera Zambrano, *Análisis de la competencia...*, op. cit.

<sup>40</sup> Asamblea Constituyente, Constitución de la República del Ecuador, Registro Oficial No. 449, Quito 2008.

<sup>41</sup> J.Y. Mera Zambrano, *Análisis de la competencia...*, op. cit.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> G.E. Duque Orozco, L.V. Parra Romero, *Lecciones aprendidas para un trabajo social transformador: Manejo Territorial Vernáculo – Guardia Indígena Meñebai*, “Revista Científica Y Arbitrada De Ciencias Sociales Y Trabajo Social: Tejedora” 2024, Vol. 7, Núm. 13, pp. 183–197, <https://doi.org/10.56124/tj.v7i13.012>

<sup>44</sup> C. Enloe, *How do they Militarize...*, op. cit.

<sup>45</sup> C. Herbst, *Shock and Awe...*, op. cit.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 312.

<sup>47</sup> J.Y. Mera Zambrano, *Análisis de la competencia...*, op. cit.

mining projects threatening the area.<sup>48</sup> María José Andrade recounts the challenges they faced as the first women's Indigenous Guard:

The beautiful thing about this is that now men are joining us too. It has been a very, very difficult battle to break this still deeply rooted machista idea that we are a bit crazy, but now the support, truly, comes from the heart. The men know we are protecting the territory, not just for ourselves, but for everyone (trans. C.A.).<sup>49</sup>

Andrade explains that women's participation in the Indigenous Guard has been an empowering path for them. She explains:

We see ourselves and we don't recognize who we were three years ago. Back then, we would never have spoken in public, faced corrupt politicians, or stood up to judges who see us as crazy people and think our traditional knowledge is worthless. We are hopeful that we will continue resisting (trans. C.A.).<sup>50</sup>

Elsa Cerda, president of the Yuturi Warmi Indigenous Guard, mentions that the women in the group identify themselves as yuturi ants, "because they are very large, strong, and fierce. Their spines are their spears, just like the ones we have" (trans. C.A.).<sup>51</sup> Despite facing machismo within indigenous communities, women's participation in the Indigenous Guard serves as a space for emancipation and leadership development.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the Indigenous Guard represents an ancestral and community-based form of protection that predates the formation of the Ecuadorian nation-state. Its existence is formally recognized within the legal framework of Ecuador as part of the plurinational state, which acknowledges fourteen Indigenous nationalities and eighteen indigenous peoples, protecting their autonomy and sovereignty in various areas, including indigenous justice. The establishment of the plurinational state in 2008 was the culmination of decades of mobilization and demands by Ecuador's Indigenous movements, marking a historic achievement in the struggle for self-determination and recognition.

However, despite this constitutional recognition, the centralized, colonial, and racist structures of the Ecuadorian State often come into conflict with practices such as those of the Indigenous Guard. While the plurinational state introduces a multicultural perspective, in practice, its implementation remains inconsistent, leading to tensions within the plural justice system. The continued existence of colonial and racially biased institutional structures highlights the need for state practices that genuinely align with plurinational principles.

<sup>48</sup> A. Arellano, *Yuturi Warmi: la primera guardia indígena liderada por mujeres kichwas en Ecuador* | ENTREVISTA, Mongabay, 28.05.2025, <https://es.mongabay.com/2023/05/yuturi-warmi-primera-guardia-indigena-liderada-por-mujeres-kichwas-en-ecuador-entrevista/> [accessed: 12.01.2025].

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

Importantly, the Indigenous Guard is distinct from military institutions. Its strength does not reside in physical force but in collective wisdom, intergenerational knowledge, and community cohesion. It embodies diversity in age and gender, providing a space for female leadership and active participation of women in community decision-making, despite ongoing challenges. The Guard's objectives do not align with state directives; rather, it prioritizes the defense of territory, community, ancestral knowledge, and the environment, emphasizing the protection of both human and non-human life.

Historically, the formation of the Ecuadorian nation-state was shaped by the country's criollo elites, yet it has always been met with resilient Indigenous resistance against the imposition of neoliberal policies and centralized authority. The plurinational state project represents a rupture with the logic of a homogeneous, centralized nation, allowing indigenous peoples to exercise sovereignty and define their forms of self-determination, governance, and community defence. Within this context, the Indigenous Guard stands as a powerful example of resistance to militarized, patriarchal, and neoliberal institutions while actively fostering community care, environmental stewardship, and inclusive leadership.

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