

## THE DEMOGRAPHIC SITUATION OF THE COFÁN

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1. After reviewing a wide-ranging set of historic and ethnographic publications, it can be stated that the population of most indigenous tribes in the Ecuadorian Amazon (“Oriente”) suffered significant losses as a result of various diseases spreading among these tribes after their first contact with Europeans. The epidemics caused deplorable human losses to the indigenous populations up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As stated by Piedad and Alfredo Costales, in their book *Amazonía; Ecuador, Perú y Bolivia* (1983), on the one hand, most pre-Columbian indigenous groups (57%) in the region disappeared during that period. On the other hand, between 1534 and 1873, various indigenous groups of the Ecuadorian, Peruvian, and Bolivian Amazon were undergoing a process of “**demographic depopulation and biological extinction**”.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, 27% of the groups that inhabited the Amazon regions that are currently part of those three countries were in this condition. As stated by these authors, this was the specific case of the Cofán, a group of particular interest to us.<sup>2</sup> Regarding the mentioned Cofán group, in a book published in 1983 by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), the title of which is “*Las Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador*” [Ecuador’s Indigenous Nationalities], there is a document of the so-called A’i Cofán, which reads verbatim: “*The action of missionaries and explorers during the first years of colonization led us to widespread mobilization and relocation in order to flee from the dominion and contagion of diseases such as: smallpox, chicken pox, influenza, measles, etc., which gradually decimated our people.*”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the statement set forth that: “*At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the exploitation of rubber, our situation became more critical. Our lands were invaded by rubber planters who, through inhumane methods, made us work for their benefit.*”<sup>4</sup>

2. Furthermore, some indigenous groups experienced tribal identity loss and significant changes to their way of life as a result of colonization, the lack of territorial rights, and related governmental policies during the first and second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which were not favorable to Ecuador’s indigenous population. In recent decades, however, the indigenous populations in Oriente have stabilized and even grown due to the increased access to modern healthcare. Overall, it appears that the indigenous population of the Ecuadorian Amazon has entered the initial phases of the so-called **demographic transition**, where there is a relative decline in infant mortality rates in contrast to previous decades; a slight increase in life expectancy; and nonetheless, there still has not been a reduction in the number of children per woman of reproductive age. This enabled sustained population growth over the past two or three decades. In fact, according to the APFT Pilot Report, of the 182 ethnic groups known in the Greater Amazon (Ecuador and other countries), between 1970 and 1990 there was an 87% increase in population among these groups.<sup>5</sup> It should be pointed out that the commencement of the initial phases of the so-called **demographic transition** does not necessarily imply an improvement in or deterioration of the standard of living of the indigenous population.

3. Likewise, it is noteworthy that the environmental impacts that may have resulted from the processes of colonization processes and petroleum operations have not been shown to be an influential factor in the death of several tens of thousands of indigenous people in Oriente. In other words, colonization and petroleum operations did not produce a demographic catastrophe of great proportions among any of the studied indigenous populations of Ecuador. As stated previously in the case of the Cofán, the only significant population reductions resulted from diseases and occurred long before the start of oil and gas exploration in the region or the start of colonization processes by farmers arriving from other regions in Ecuador. The population statistics reviewed for most of the ethnic groups of the Oriente indicate that there seems to have been an increase, at an often slow but sustained rate, during the 1960s and, particularly, during the 1970s and 1980s in Ecuador. This has occurred to a notable

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<sup>1</sup> “Amazonia: Ecuador, Perú y Bolivia”. Piedad and Alfredo Costales. Mundo Shuar. 1983. Quito. Pp. 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibíd*: 27.

<sup>3</sup> “Las Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador”. Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). Tincui-Abya Ayala Publishers. Quito. Pp. 77. 1983

<sup>4</sup> *Ibíd*: 4.

<sup>5</sup> “APFT Pilot Report”, Université Libre de Bruxelles (Centre d’Anthropologie Culturelle) and CNRS (Laboratoire des Langues et Civilisations à Tradition Orale, Paris). March 1, 1992.

extent in five of the eight groups studied, including the Cofán. To this effect, a description of population trends in recent decades among the Cofán in the Ecuadorian Oriente is provided in the following pages. All the following is based on the review and analysis of scientifically credible sources, including: professional papers; reliable Internet sources (including those of the Cofán group itself); publications by recognized anthropologists; and Ecuadorian and international government organizations. In order to describe with greater clarity to the reader and to provide a comparative perspective, some of the elements of this analysis include the trends of seven other indigenous groups of the Amazon. The trends of these other groups indicate clearly that the Cofán are not an “isolated” or different group, but rather that, overall, the Cofán reproduce a general demographic behavioral pattern of other groups in the Ecuadorian Amazon.

4. Based on available data, the statistics for each of the 8 indigenous groups discussed below show a linear trend line for population. It is apparent to the eye that the population trends for all 8 of the tribes are increasing. However, because the population data comes from diverse sources (due largely to the factors mentioned in the preceding paragraph), a more rigorous statistical analysis on the data was performed. To this end, the non-parametric Mann-Kendall test—a standard trend test for the analysis of all types of scientific data—was used. The data for this analysis were taken from the references listed at the end of this document. The results summarized in the table below, show that five of the eight indigenous groups living in the area of the former Texpet Concession reveal a statistically significant increasing population trend. The remaining three groups show ‘no significant change’, suggesting that populations of these groups are statistically stable. It is noteworthy that none of the eight indigenous groups have experienced a decrease in population.

**TABLE 1. Mann-Kendall Statistical Results**

Group	Sample Size	p-value	Decision
Ashuar	9	0.2085	No Significant Change
<b>Cofan<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>24</b>	<b>0.0019</b>	<b>Significantly Increasing</b>
Huaorani	12	0.0001	Significantly Increasing
Quichua	12	0.0266	Significantly Increasing
Secoya	7	0.3335	No Significant Change
Shuar	11	0.0013	Significantly Increasing
Siona	7	0.3335	No Significant Change
Zaparo <sup>2</sup>	4	0.0420	Significantly Increasing

<sup>1</sup> excludes years 1602 and 1900

<sup>2</sup> excludes year 1850

The Mann-Kendall test offers a statistical confirmation of the results in the form of the ‘p-value’. The p-value represents the probability that populations bearing the observed trend could be randomly drawn. Therefore, a p-value of 0.05 means that there is a 5% chance that the observed trend is random. Expressed in another form,

$$(1 - p\text{-value}) \times 100\% = \text{confidence in trend}$$

As shown in the table, the population increases are statistically significant among the Cofán, Huaorani, Quichua, Shuar, and Zaparo groups. Among the Ashuar, Secoya, and Siona groups, the population data are too widely scattered to support a decision of ‘significantly increasing’. These groups show neither a significant increase in a statistical sense, nor a sharp decline in population, and are thus considered relatively stable. In the specific case of the Cofán, the confidence test indicates that there is a 99.81% probability that the growth trend is reliable.

5. As stated above, introduced diseases had a major impact on indigenous populations of the Oriente, beginning as far back as the 16<sup>th</sup> century. As an example, estimates from missionaries in the 17<sup>th</sup> century put the pre-contact Cofán population as high as 60,000 people. The Declaration of the A’i Cofán nationality and the book by the expert Costales indicate that the Cofán had a population of 70,000 and inhabited the higher lands along the

Aguarico River.<sup>6</sup> Despite the differences, we believe that the precise figure is somewhere between 60,000 and 70,000. However, after centuries of contact and disease, and finally a devastating outbreak of measles in 1923, the Cofán population was reduced to no more than a few hundred— an insignificant fraction of previous numbers (according to the official Cofán website). Again, epidemics like these were common among tribes of the Oriente during the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

6. The Cofán are part of the Shilli Panu ethno-linguistic family.<sup>7</sup> The other groups belonging to this linguistic family are the Quijos, Coayqueres, Zatchila (Colorados), and Chachis (Cayapas). At present, the Cofán inhabit the northeastern region of Ecuador and a sector of this group lives in south-eastern Colombia, that is, on the other side of the border, although there is no significant contact between the two, apart from the knowledge of each other's existence.<sup>8</sup> It is extremely important to point out that, in 1973, according to population data presented by researchers Piedad and Alfredo Costales, the Cofán group was the smallest sub-group of the Shilli Panu ethnic people. Specifically, the Quijos accounted for 1,070 inhabitants; the Coayqueres, for a total 800 people; the Zatchila (or Colorados) totaled 1,213, and the Chachis (Cayapas) accounted for the majority, with a total 2,785 people. These figures are in contrast to the 300 Cofán referred to in the same book by Piedad and Alfredo Costales and which, therefore, only accounted for 4.86% of the Shilli Panu family, which totaled 6,168 inhabitants in 1973.<sup>9</sup> The previous population figures were taken from the National Rural Directorate —Capuchin Mission of the Aguarico Vicar's Office—Ecuadorian Institute of Anthropology and Geography. Although the figures date back to 1973, they can be considered valid for the 1960s and the early 1970s. Overall, the figure of 300 Cofans is exactly the same number that, in his study titled "*Hacia una nueva comprensión del Shamanismo Cofán*" [*Toward a New Understanding of Cofán Shamanism*], Robinson stated were living at the beginning of the 1970s. It is noteworthy that, in 1971<sup>10</sup>, Robinson quoted two bibliographic sources by author Oberem: one from 1960 and the other, from 1962. In both, he states that the Cofán accounted for 300 people along the Aguarico, Putumayo, and San Miguel rivers. **In summary, at the beginning of the oil exploration era and during the expansion of the colonization process in the region, there were only 300 to 400 Cofán inhabitants.**

7. Finally, petroleum operations in the area have been mentioned in some publications as an additional factor that greatly affected population decline among the Cofán. Nonetheless, the population data shown in Graph 1 do not support the assertion that there was a decline in population during the time of petroleum operations in the Oriente. Furthermore, R. Borman<sup>11</sup> affirms that there has been an increase in the Cofán population from 1955 to 1982 and attributed this to the ease of access to medical care via the Summer Institute of Linguistics' (SIL) radio and air network, contributing to the sustained increase of population in each of the villages on the Aguarico.

8. As stated above and illustrated in the following Table, significant population changes occurred long before any possible effect of the colonization furthered by IERAC or of the petroleum industry. Since the 1950's there have certainly been stressors on indigenous people's culture such as colonization and its resulting deforestation, missionaries, industrialization, and development of large plantations. **However, there is no evidence that any of these factors was as significant as the events between 1534 and 1873, when between 27,000 and 37,000 Cofán died and, on the other hand, the results of the 1923 measles epidemic, with more than 15,000 deaths, reducing the Cofán population to less than 500 people.**

9. **The latest official figures from the Population and Housing Census of 2001<sup>12</sup>, indicate that, in 2001, there were 1,044 Cofán. Of this total, 51% are women and 49%, men. Furthermore, 77% lived in rural areas and 23% in urban centers. The census shows that two thirds lived in the Amazon region, 22% on the coast, and 11% in the mountains [Sierra] (see table 2).** The latter data reveal a high migration rate (67%), both temporary and permanent. Due to the sustained population growth over the past two decades, it can be estimated that approximately 1,200 Cofán currently live in the entire country of Ecuador. On the one hand, neither the data of percentages of men and women and, on the other hand, nor those regarding the rate of femininity suggest a

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<sup>6</sup> Piedad and Alfredo Costales "Amazonia: Ecuador, Perú y Bolivia". Mundo Shuar. 1983. Quito. Pp. 84; "Las Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador". Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). Tincui-Abya Ayala Publishers. Quito. Pp. 77.

<sup>7</sup> Piedad and Alfredo Paredes "Amazonia: Ecuador, Perú y Bolivia". Mundo Shuar. 1983. Quito. Pp. 74.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*: 75.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*: 85.

<sup>10</sup> Robinson, Scott. Geo-Demographic Data and Current Status of the Indigenous Groups of the Coast and the Ecuadorian Amazon. *En la Situación del Indígena Sur Americano*. Pedro Agostinho da Silva. Montevideo. Pp. 136.

<sup>11</sup> Borman, R., Survival in a Hostile World: Culture Change and Missionary Influence among the Cofán People of Ecuador, 1954 – 1982. In <http://www.cofan.org>

<sup>12</sup> Population and Housing Census –INEC, 2001. Prepared by SIISE, 2004.

drastic decline in population over the past decades. **This might have been reflected, for example, in extremely unbalanced percentages of men and women:**

**TABLE 2. COFÁN POPULATION**

POPULATION	No	Percentage
RURAL	803	76.90%
URBAN	241	23.10%
TOTAL	1044	100%

POPULATION BY REGION	No	Percentage
COAST	236	22.61%
SIERRA	111	10.63%
FOREST	697	66.76%
TOTAL	1044	100%

POPULATION	No	Percentage
WOMEN	536	51.34%
MEN	508	48.66%
TOTAL	1044	100%

MIGRATION RATE	67%
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Source: Population and Housing Census –INEC, 2001. Prepared by SIISE, 2004

10. On the other hand, according to the cited census, the distribution by ages among the Cofán in 2001 reveals that 16.5% of the population is between 0 and 5 years old; 14% between 6 and 11; 12.64% is 12 to 17 years old; 11% is 18 to 23 years old; and 45% is 24 years old or more. In this regard, when reviewing the distribution of the various age groups, it is not apparent that a demographic catastrophe occurred over the past 30 years. **This would have been evident in Table 3, below. At least groups of 18 or older would record percentages far below the rest, but the data does not reflect this. Both groups add up to 57%.**

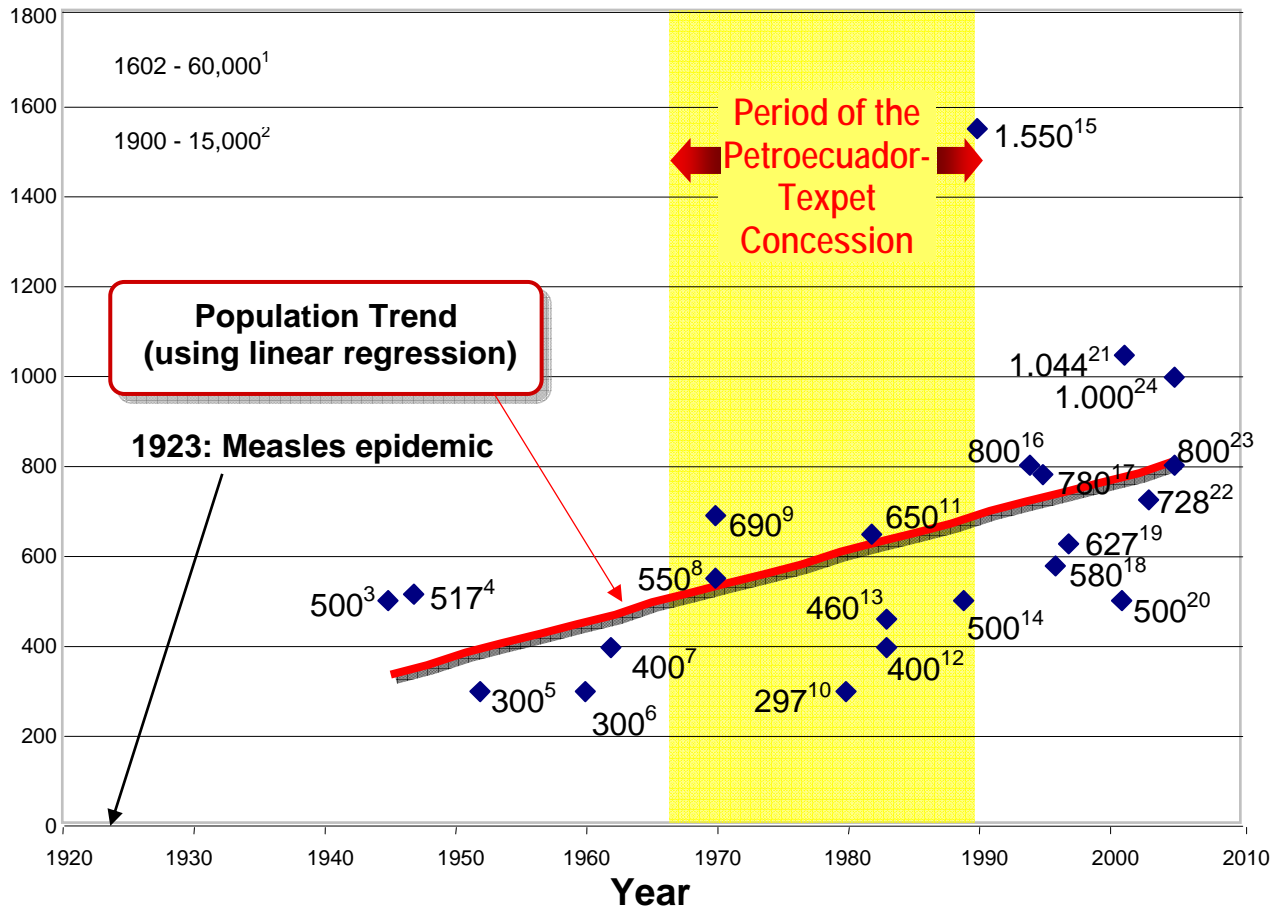
**TABLE 3. POPULATION DISTRIBUTION BY AGE AMONG THE COFÁN**

AGE RANGE	No.	Percentage
0 - 5 YEARS	173	16.57%
6 - 11 YEARS	147	14.08%
12 – 17 YEARS	132	12.64%
18 – 23 YEARS	119	11.40%
24 AND ABOVE	473	45.31%
TOTAL	1044	100%

Source: Population and Housing Census –INEC, 2001. Prepared by SIISE, 2004

11. Lastly, we have found no evidence of a sharp demographic decline in ethnographic material compiled by other authors, such as stories, proverbs, myths, oral history, that would, in one way or another, illustrate such a population catastrophe. Furthermore, no journalistic or radio sources have been found that explicitly refer to the death of tens of thousands of Cofán during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Nonetheless, I wish to clarify that the data and analysis submitted do not refer to the current living conditions of the Cofán.

# EVOLUTION OF THE COFÁN POPULATION



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