

Historicizing Mobility: *Coyoterismo* in the Indigenous Ecuadorian Migration Industry

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Based on ethnographic research in the Ecuadorian Highlands, this article puts the mobility, migration, and smuggling practices of Ecuador's indigenous people in historical and contemporary context. The people of Ecuador's Southern Highlands have been on the move for generations, and migration is deeply embedded in the social and cultural landscape. In the rural communities of Cañar, indigenous coyotes are more than facilitators of migration: they are community members operating amid broader structural constraints, which have led to the emergence of specific trends in the facilitation of *irregularized* migration, yet they are expected to adhere to communal principles of reciprocity and trust. We place indigenous migrant narratives of mobility and identity at the center of our analysis of human smuggling, articulating a counternarrative to that of criminalization prevalent in transnational debates of irregularized migration, national security, and border control.

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*I*rregularized migration¹ from Latin America via smuggling networks, while hypervisible in the media, has received scant empirical research attention. The domination of the

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U.S.-Mexico migratory experience as the prototypical example of Latin America's migration has often hidden other flows that are occurring in the region. In fact, across Latin America, multiple countries have been key players in global migration flows. Ecuador is a case in point.

Ecuador is an important migrant-generating country. Most Ecuadorian migrants live in the United States, while several hundred thousand reside in Europe, primarily in Spain and Italy (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos [INEC] 2013; Instituto Nazionale di Statistica [ISTAT] 2012). Since 2000, local and global factors such as border securitization, regional conflicts, natural disasters, a dollarized economy, and Ecuador's open-border framework also turned this South American country into a destination for regional and extracontinental migrants. Refugees, asylum seekers, and economic migrants from countries as diverse as Cuba, Iraq, and Ghana, alongside Ecuadorian returned migrants, come together in Ecuador along their journeys to the North (Álvarez Velasco 2016; Jokisch 2014).

The facilitation of irregularized migration via smuggling, or *coyoterismo*, as the practice is referred to regionally in academic and policy circles, constitutes a prominent element of migrant journeys in Ecuador (Ruíz and Álvarez Velasco 2016). There is, however, scarce scholarship on the topic. The lack of empirical data and historical work on smuggling operations constitutes a concerning gap in migration studies globally. This article reduces that paucity of work by contributing to a deeper understanding of mobility strategies, by illuminating *coyoterismo* in Ecuador.

Within contemporary national and international discourses on migration, migrant brokers or facilitators (known across the Americas as coyotes) are continually cast as entrepreneurial criminals, discursively framed as coldhearted and profit driven, offsetting critical analyses of the role of nation-states in the global, targeted development of migration controls. However, as described by other authors in this volume, not all of those involved in the smuggling market fit the exploitative criminal image often circulated in the media and by organizations vested in countering irregularized migration flows.

Using two waves of ethnographic research in Ecuador's Southern Highlands conducted between June 2007 and August 2009, and November 2015 and November 2016, we contextualize migration and its facilitation via coyotes against the backdrop of the history of mobility and subsistence practices within indigenous communities in Ecuador. This article assesses the role of ethnic identity as a strategic variable in migration activity. By placing indigenous migrant narratives of mobility and identity at the center of the analysis of human

NOTE: This article draws from key findings of two independent, though interconnected, research projects. Victoria Stone-Cadena's dissertation research in anthropology at the CUNY Graduate Center analyzed the impact of migration patterns on indigenous migrant households in Southern Highland Ecuador, with the support of a Fulbright fellowship. Soledad Álvarez Velasco's doctoral dissertation in human geography at King's College London analyzes the production of Ecuador as a global zone of transit of irregularized transnational migration, on a full scholarship from the National Secretariat of Higher Education, Science and Technology (SENESCYT) of Ecuador (2014–2018).

smuggling, we articulate a counternarrative to that of criminalization prevalent in transnational debates on national security, border controls, and irregularized migration.

In the sections that follow, we provide an overview of the critique of migration studies vis-à-vis indigenous mobility, followed by a summary of the Ecuadorian migration context. We then provide a history of mobility practices predating the current indigenous migration patterns, primarily through the testimonies of indigenous and mestizo² people from the Ecuadorian Southern Highlands. Further, we outline contemporary and current trends in smuggling practices. We close with a series of conclusions and policy recommendations.

Indigenous Mobilities

Mobility within the context of globalization creates a “new order of instability in the production of modern subjects” (Torres and Carrasco 2008, 13). Indigenous Cañaris from Ecuador’s Southern Highlands, often wearing the wide-brimmed white hats associated with agrarian life, are now commonly seen in the driver’s seats of new pick-up trucks transporting goods and people through town. New consumption practices and entrepreneurial activities, such as investments in small businesses and vehicles, challenge long-standing forms of economic and social inequalities sustained by middle-class and professional mestizos. Another entrepreneurial activity is migration.

Migration is not new among indigenous communities. Cañaris have been on the move for generations. Regional trade precedes the arrival of the Spaniards (Murra, Wachtel, and Revel 1986). Cañari history has also included short-term migration to urban areas and the coast, as well as between haciendas in the highlands (Baraona 1965; Clark and Becker 2007). For most of the twentieth century, these patterns of circulation were interspersed with periods of stasis, as legislation often bound rural people to labor relationships with landed oligarchs (known in Spanish as *latifundistas*).

Migratory practices in Ecuador have been described as constituting a regional migration industry (Kyle and Goldstein 2011; Ruíz and Álvarez Velasco 2016). Yet scholars have paid less attention to the importance of indigeneity as a form of social capital that indigenous people have mobilized within their social networks and intermediary organizations in the context of irregularized migration (Stone-Cadena 2016). Migration industry scholars have analyzed the institutions involved in migration control, such as legalization (Hernández-León 2013), detention (Hernández-León 2013; Nyberg Sørensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2013), and deportation (Berg and Tamagno 2013), alongside the vast social and economic networks of migration facilitators and mobility management. Indeed, historical and regional social networks, economic practices, and informal networks within the region are extremely important in the growth of international migration from the region. Yet our goal here is to demonstrate how identity, as discussed by indigenous migrants and migration merchants, shapes opportunities and strategies in the practice of *coyoterismo*.

A growing body of literature on indigenous migration looks at different aspects of the migration experience: from its significance in the destination countries (Andolina, Laurie, and Radcliffe 2009b), to the migratory networks (Torres and Carrasco 2008), and within the nations and communities of origin (Cadena and Starn 2010), while other authors have examined indigeneity as (re)defined within a transnational context through a broadly comparative approach (Castellanos, Gutiérrez Nájera, and Aldama 2012).

We understand identity, territory, and community as mutually constructed categories and recognize mobility as a fundamental aspect of indigenous livelihoods (Torres and Carrasco 2008). While the nation-state has shaped a discourse about indigeneity, which is both temporally and territorially limited (Bretón, Jove, and Vilalta 2007), some have criticized such state-centric notions of indigeneity and instead sought to deconstruct reified and monolithic conceptualizations of indigenous identity (Andolina, Laurie, and Radcliffe 2009a). Following the path of these scholars, our work seeks to point to *identity* as a conceptual category, and to the moments in which indigenous identity is mobilized in the context of migration facilitation by coyotes.

Through transnational social networks, indigenous people have “encounter[ed] new anchors for identity that aren’t fixed in territory or community, but rather formed through new spaces of social cohesion and socioeconomic and political relationships” (Torres and Carrasco 2008, 14). In Ecuador’s Southern Highlands, these new concepts of indigenous identity circulate largely through social media and surface in the work of pan-indigenous organizations and local-level community projects to preserve agrarian practices and community life. In constructing counternarratives to migration, the state has emphasized the negative repercussions of migration on families, traditions, and community obligations, all of which are seen as tied or inherent to indigenous rural life. The state has claimed that migration leads to the decline of traditional practices, festivals, and other community activities; yet indigenous leadership and organizations have been at the forefront of mitigating these changes. The transnationalization of festival participation and sponsorship from community members abroad demonstrates that indigenous rural life is changing but not as state-centric narratives may portray. This article shows that the experiences of indigenous coyotes and migration entrepreneurs do not seem to conform to those narratives, either.

Regional Background

Ecuador is the fourth smallest country in Latin America. It has four distinctive geographic regions: the Pacific coastal lowlands, the highlands (Andean cordillera), the Amazonian jungle, and the Galápagos Islands. It is also one of the most bio-diverse countries in the world and encompasses numerous distinct ecological environments. Each region has played a role in the political and economic development of the nation. Crude oil exports compose close to 50 percent of the nation’s export earnings, estimated at US\$11.4 billion in 2014 (Organization of

the Petroleum Exporting Countries [OPEC] 2015). Earnings from oil are followed by remittances from immigrants abroad, estimated at US\$2.3 billion in 2015 (Banco Central del Ecuador 2015).

International migration from Ecuador is not new, but the dynamics have changed significantly since its early inception in the late 1960s. Prior to the 1960s, overseas migration was minimal. Scholars identify the demise of the regionally based Panama hat export industry in the mid-1960s in the highland southern provinces of Azuay and Cañar as leading to the pioneering migratory movements to the United States (Kyle 2000; Gallegos and Ramírez 2005). These flows predominantly involved young male merchants who migrated to the United States by relying on the connections they had made through their participation in the hat trade. Most of them migrated without authorization and found employment in restaurants as busboys or dishwashers, while a smaller number worked in factories or construction sites in cities such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, and Minneapolis (Jokisch 2014). By the 1970s, the provinces of Azuay and Cañar, and Ecuador's third-largest city, Cuenca, constituted the core migrant-sending zone in Ecuador. The main sending communities relied on subsistence agriculture and maintained the tradition of women weaving Panama hats for export to New York, and male seasonal migration to the coast.

The global petroleum crisis during the 1980s prompted another spike of Ecuadorian migration as rural laborers struggling to subsist in a weakened economy traveled to the United States. Yet a more dramatic crisis occurred in late 1999 and early 2000s as a result of low oil prices and natural disasters. Migration to Spain, Italy, and, to a lesser extent, Germany and Russia, surpassed migration to the United States during this time. Increased border controls in the United States following the passage of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRAIRA), which criminalized illegal entries, increased migration risks and costs to the United States. And so, from 1998 to 2006, between 0.5 and 1 million Ecuadorians migrated overseas, primarily to Spain, where low-skilled work was available and migrants did not have to worry about learning a new language (Jokisch 2014). Spain did not restrict visas for Ecuadorians, which allowed many migrants to obtain work permits.³

This second wave of migration was much more geographically and socioeconomically diverse. Migrants came from every province and were more urban and better educated; they also represented various ethnicities. By 2013, it was estimated that between 2 and 3 million out of a total of almost 16 million Ecuadorians lived abroad (INEC 2013). The global recession in 2008 and changes to immigration law in Spain, which imposed visa restrictions on Ecuadorians in 2003, impacted migration flows to Europe.

Currently, border securitization and the extension of immigration controls into Mexico have further shaped the dynamics of irregularized migration from Ecuador. The country has emerged as a "revolving door" (De Genova 2005) for Ecuadorians who seek to return to the United States following their deportation. Increased immigration controls in Mexico have also led to the deportation of Ecuadorians from that country. An estimated fifty Ecuadorians on average have been deported by Mexico every month since 2009. It is also estimated that more

than 7,500 Ecuadorians have been deported from the United States between January 2012 and June 2016 (Directorate of Attention and Protection of Ecuadoreans Abroad [DAPE] 2016). Furthermore, while the last decade has seen some improvements in Ecuador's economy and living conditions, most advances are concentrated in urban areas (INEC 2013). Poverty remains high in regions with high concentrations of rural and indigenous populations (Chiriboga 2013). National unemployment is also high, and approximately half of the economically active population works in the informal economy (INEC 2013). Furthermore, the open-border migration policies put into place by former president Correa allowed migrants from countries from regions as distant as West Africa and as close as the Caribbean to enter Ecuador without a visa. This led Ecuador to become an important springboard from which transcontinental migrants could embark on the journeys that would eventually take them north. In the aftermath of several events involving confrontations between migrants in transit and the state forces,⁴ the Ecuadorian parliament signed the Law of Human Mobility on January 2017, which sought to regulate the entry of foreigners into the country. The law implements, among practices such as visa restrictions, the detention and removal through deportation of those who fail to enter the country legally (Ruíz and Álvarez Velasco 2016).

The leading destination among migrants leaving Ecuador is the United States. The route, which includes crossing at least seven national borders, is traversed by land or a combination of air and land routes. Most travel from Ecuador to Honduras; from there, they travel by land to the Mexico-U.S. corridor. Another route from Ecuador is to Colombia or Peru to Panama, from which migrants travel into Mexico and on to the United States. Historically, the majority of these migratory flows have involved migration facilitators in the formal and informal markets, ranging from travel agencies to coyotes (Kyle and Siracusa 2005). While Ecuadorian investigative journalism has remained the primary source of information on the facilitation of irregularized migration from or through the country, there is a vacuum of empirically informed scholarly work on the operation of smuggling groups, as knowledge of their contexts and processes remains scant.

Historicizing *Coyoterismo*

To explore the dynamics of irregularized migration and *coyoterismo* in Ecuador, we turned to ethnography as our main data collection strategy. Following Marcus's example of multisited ethnography and "following" people, things, metaphors, stories, relational conflicts (Marcus 1995), our field methods focused on the spatial contexts of social relations to understand the dynamics of *coyoterismo*.

There are several considerations for "following" migrants "en route" or "capturing" the clandestine dynamics of circumventing border control. The waiting times and pauses during migration allowed us to capture the complexity of movement (Urry 2007; Auyero 2012). Apart from finding key ethnographic sites, we

identified places and moments of pause along the migration process to build trust, develop deep conversations, and carry out *in situ* observations. The first stage of this study took place between June 2007 and August 2009, and was carried out in the *cantón* (province) of Tambo and the nearby province of Cañar. A total of twenty-seven structured interviews with indigenous families who had at least one migrant family member were conducted, along with participant observations at community meetings and *mingas* (community projects). During the second stage, which took place between November 2015 and November 2016, we conducted multisited ethnography in urban Ecuador, including sites such as Quito (Ecuador's capital city and one of the main receptors of deported migrants) and the southern cities of Gualaceo, Chordeleg, El Descanso, Azogues, and Cuenca in the provinces of Azuay and Cañar, the historical centers of Ecuadorian irregularized migration facilitation. In Azuay and Cañar, we identified entry contacts and then relied on a snowball technique to reach additional respondents. In Quito, we supplemented those initial interviews with additional interviews and observations at the Human Mobility Management Unit of the Provincial Government of Pichincha.⁵

In total, eighty local respondents—including civil servants; border agents; members of local NGOs, social organizations, and international organizations working in migration affairs; local inhabitants; Ecuadorian deported migrants; their family members; and members of smuggling networks (brokers, middlemen, lawyers, transporters, and money lenders or *chulqueros*)—were asked questions regarding the history of *coyoterismo* in the region, its current trends, the identities and community perceptions of coyotes, and the challenges indigenous migrants and families working alongside coyotes face.

Coyotes: "They are part of us"

Here, everybody knows about *coyoterismo*. Everyone has a direct experience, or knows someone who knows something about someone else. Coyotes are part of us. Anybody will tell you a bit. Everybody knows.

In the Ecuadorian southern provinces of Azuay and Cañar, "everybody knows" something about *coyoterismo*, as this statement from Azuay's attorney general indicates. Local authorities, taxi drivers, market vendors, waiters, shopkeepers, priests, teachers, street vendors, lawyers, NGO representatives, and of course, migrants and their families all appear to have had interactions with Ecuadorian irregularized migration.

Most of those who migrated during the first wave of migration following the decline in Panama hat production in the 1960s were male. These men knew or were aware of the migration route, having learned it through their own journeys, and likely perfected it through their contact with Mexican coyotes, later providing the service themselves on behalf of other people, likely as a favor ("The one who knew the route took someone else," stated the former priest of Gualaceo), thus beginning a social process of translocal and transnational clandestine movement.

However, not just anyone could become a coyote. In the early period of migration, only a few mestizo families occupied the lucrative positions of informal moneylenders and coyotes, relying on their connections in the United States through close friends and family members. The middle-class merchant families, who had profited during the straw-hat economy prior to its decline in the mid-1960s, composed the first wave of migrants to the United States and established and developed the initial migration facilitation networks.

The entrepreneurial middlemen in irregularized migration have deep historical roots in Ecuador's southern region. In the early half of the twentieth century, middle-class mestizo men would act as liaisons between indigenous households and landed oligarchs, religious officials, and coastal landowners seeking seasonal laborers, and were often called *enganchadores* (recruiters). In the early 2000s, a similar term was used for young men, riding in luxury pick-up trucks, who would drive through rural towns and villages telling people about the services of coyotes that they represented. Prior to 2008, most migrant brokers in the region were connected to merchant mestizo families who had dominated human smuggling activities for the previous 20 years. In the Southern Highlands of Ecuador, this identity-based, exclusionary economic practice perpetuated social and economic inequalities of the local agro-artisan economies, which were themselves shaped by a long history of indentured agrarian labor on the haciendas.

Migrants from rural locations described how peasants began migrating to the United States in the mid-1980s. They would get dressed in their best clothes before they visited the coyote in Cuenca—in indigenous narratives, this coyote was described as a mestiza woman—who would facilitate their journeys. The presence of a woman in a male-dominated business may be an indicator of the absence of male counterparts, as migrants in the region were primarily men. However, it might also point to the often invisible roles of women in smuggling, which often involve coordinating or putting facilitators and clients in contact (Sánchez 2016).⁶ Regardless of their gender, mestizo coyotes controlled the process, exerting an exclusive and privileged financial and social role in the community.

By the 2000s, a critical shift occurred as a result of indigenous migrants' journeys. Indigenous people were able to forge their own social networks and connections and began to exercise the role of coyote themselves. The more established mestizo families had begun to lose the once exclusive connections to the United States because of U.S. migration reform, which criminalized illegal entries. There were also changes in the social dynamics of migrant communities, connected to the impact of globalization on rural areas. The crisis had indeed led to a significant shift in migration trends, which this time impacted all social classes and ethnicities, as the fluctuation of oil prices created significant job instability among the entire Ecuadorian society.

Overall, indigenous people welcomed the shift in the coyote-migrant dynamic. There was an expectation that the relationship between coyotes and migrants by virtue of sharing a common indigenous identity would be fairer, and more likely to take place in Kichwa, the indigenous language. The language barrier for

monolingual Kichwa speakers who wanted to migrate was reduced, and would-be migrants were able to understand what the contracts entailed or what to expect from the journey. Indigenous people also believed that the community itself would have greater leverage over the actions of coyotes because of their membership in the community, therefore ensuring the safety and protection of migrants traveling under their watch. A male respondent from a smaller province in Cañar pointed out that there was also an expectation that indigenous coyotes would be more accountable to their communities, as the ties were stronger than with mestizos, especially if the coyote resided in the same village or province in which he recruited clients. Furthermore, the existence of extended family and kinship networks identifiable through indigenous surnames were thought to further reduce the possibility for abuse, threats, or intimidation from coyotes or moneylenders. The testimony of the same respondent attests to the transition:

[Indigenous] men have been the ones showing up, more or less, they take the jobs from the mestizos. They work with more tranquility, seriousness, and honesty because they are part of the Kichwa community. The mestizos would take advantage of the lack of knowledge in these communities, while [the indigenous coyotes] are bilingual, explain everything in both languages and explain it well to the travelers. They are Cañari. Since 2002, there are Cañari coyotes. There's more trust. Perhaps because of the security. Also people can hold them accountable. Before there wasn't that opportunity.⁷

The changes, however, did not occur smoothly. While ethnic solidarity was expected, the broader transnational and global economic pressures also played a role in shaping the market. The economy of irregularized migration in Ecuador had developed within deeply entrenched social and economic inequalities, and eventually an even larger number of indigenous people joined the migration markets as transnational peasants (Kyle 2000) because of the persistent economic turmoil.

By the mid-2000s, indigenous coyotes had a significant role in the lucrative informal economy of the migration industry, which mestizo elites had long dominated. These changes signaled an important shift in the socioeconomic and ethnic stratification between mestizo elites and indigenous and rural workers. Raul, a 34-year-old indigenous leader from Cañar, states:

There are no Cañari *chulqueros* (moneylenders), they are all mestizos, because the mestizos wouldn't let them in on the game and they got angry. Possibly that will change in the future. When they—the *chulqueros*—come for their payment, they are abusive. Back in 2001–2002, there were no coyotes here, only in the cities, there was one in Cuenca, a mestizo, and there was a big fight.⁸

Within the indigenous communities, social stratification has also increased between households with migrant members abroad and those without. The monetization of goods and services due to the influx of remittances, among other factors, has also exposed the deep differences and enduring inequalities that persist between indigenous and mestizo Ecuadorians.

Coyotes' perceptions in the community

Indigenous people are cognizant of the broader economic forces at play and the individual decision-making processes of coyotes. A Cañari man expressed jokingly: “We may not like what [coyotes] do but we may need their services one day.”

Migration entrepreneurs, coyotes, and moneylenders are tolerated in their communities because they are a part of the social fabric. In interviews conducted during the first wave of this study (2008–2010), coyotes were described as performing a necessary role, and there was broad recognition that in communities like those in southern Ecuador somebody would eventually need their services. By the second wave of our study (2015–2016), local community actors and migrants were already describing coyotes based on their direct or indirect experiences. If the migrant had successfully arrived at their location, coyotes were praised and cast in a favorable light. Conversely, if there had been any failures (such as scams, accidents, disappearances, shipwrecks in the Pacific Ocean, or deaths), coyotes were defined as reckless, violent, or abusive. As Gonzalo, a 24-year-old deported migrant stated, a coyote was “someone to fear, and someone who gave me very bad memories.”

Despite failed experiences, local residents and migrants in general asserted that coyotes were trusted facilitators or enablers of migration. Paul, a 21-year-old deported male, said, “Coyotes aid people to move, not only from Ecuador but from poverty. Why should we judge them? Those who should be judged are the ones who impede our free movement.” In local urban towns, such as Gualaceo, Chordeleg, or El Descanso, coyotes are perceived as benefactors or *padrinos* (godfathers), as Zoila, a 54-year-old resident of Gualaceo, reflects:

If you don't have a *padrino*, you cannot baptize the child. Right? It is the same: without a coyote, you won't make it, you cannot risk it, much less if it is your first time, you need him. In some rural communities, [coyotes] even become local *priotes*.⁹

On the other hand, coyotes were also depicted as disconnected from their communities and as likely to exploit migrants and their families. It is important to underline that the perceptions tied to smuggling facilitators or coyotes depended on the respondent's direct or indirect experiences with them, and these experiences were hardly ever easy to conceptualize as solely exploitative or supportive. For example, a law enforcement official we interviewed initially described coyotes as “men who take advantage of migrants” and “men who subject migrants to violent experiences.” However, he also described them as “[being] part of us,” recognizing the coyotes as members of the community.

So who are the coyotes? Kyle (2000) suggested that an understanding of Ecuadorian *coyoterismo* requires recognizing that a “migrant export model” has operated in the country—one in which migration merchants were central in the configuration of social networks, based on trust but often predatory financing to enable clandestine transits. Alongside coyotes, Kyle (2000, 66–67) identified the moneylender or *chulquero*, who often charges high interests on loans used by migrants to embark on clandestine journeys. Oftentimes the coyote plays the role of a *chulquero*, ensuring a higher return in profits. In other cases, the coyote

refers the migrant to a reputable *chulquero*, usually local lawyers or business owners. By doing so, the social network of irregularized migration facilitation is extended to include the mainstream economy through document forgers, travel agents, airline staff, consular officials, and law enforcement to name a few.

In this social network, *chulqueros* are most often seen as a burden for migrants, and not necessarily as a trustworthy figure. To lend families or individuals money for migration journeys, *chulqueros* demand that they sign apocryphal contracts or surrender property titles. These documents, while in many cases illegal, constitute effective intimidation tools. In fact, references to *chulquero's* frauds and abuse of power were more common than those pertaining to coyotes in our sample. As Andrés, a 29-year-old migrant deported from the United States stated:

The problem is not the coyotes. With certain exceptions, they usually keep their word and they guide people to reach the U.S. Otherwise, *coyoterismo* would have ended. Do you think we will still be trusting an activity that is destined to fail? Of course not. As migrants, we are not dumb. Accidents do happen on the route, but people arrive. Coyotes give us three attempts. *Chulqueros* are the problem: they abuse us and steal our properties, while threatening us.

However, while en route, coyotes in our study did engage in abusive behavior, which often went unpunished. This happens not only because migrants fear reprisal, but because of other social mechanisms put into place to reduce the likelihood of conflict through mediation. As one government prosecutor stated:

People rarely report coyotes. When they do, usually the *chulquero* or someone else who works with the coyote negotiates with migrants' families and charges are not filed. It is very difficult for us to seek justice in this matter because people protect coyotes and cases come to a standstill. Scams linked to *chulqueros* are much more likely to be reported, though *chulqueros* also negotiate [solutions] in the shadow.

Coyotes may also not be criticized because of their historical role in the local economy. As an official at the Cañar's State Attorney General stated:

It is very difficult to catch a coyote. Before him there is a lot of other people who won't dare to report him because the business would end. He hides behind them. The *chulqueros* or *enganchadores* (brokers) are caught before a coyote. But once caught, new people are immediately recruited. It has been and still is a super business.

Across communities in the Southern Highlands, the existence of *coyoterismo* ensures the emergence of often lucrative business opportunities, with legal and illegal business transactions becoming blurred, creating an income source that few want to jeopardize.

Contemporary Trends in Ecuadorian *Coyoterismo*

The testimonies of indigenous Ecuadorians are effective in identifying new transitions in and elements of the irregularized migration facilitation experience.

Despite the absence of official data on the number of people who rely on coyotes to embark on their routes or of empirical work on the dynamics of smuggling facilitation, our research identified a series of trends in the testimonies of migrants and their families.

Perhaps the most important of them is that despite the historical processes of migration and immigration enforcement in that country, the community-based, trust-dependent form of facilitation exists to this day. The irregularized migration facilitation processes that are primarily based on trust among coyotes, *chulqueros*, migrants, and their families are still commonplace in Ecuador, alongside other more recent forms of facilitation.

For example, in our research we identified a “relay-race” modality of *coyoterismo*, which has emerged to circumvent at least in part the border controls along the route. It relies on the contacts that coyotes have built over decades of journeys with their counterparts across the continent. While this form of *coyoterismo* only involves local, regional operations, it requires skill and knowledge in building relationship with coyotes from other countries who by virtue of possessing the same social capital, can “push” migrants forward. Hernan, a taxi driver describes how this works:

Starting in the late 1980s, Ecuadorian coyotes developed direct links with Mexican coyotes. A coyote from Gualaceo would guide a group of migrants all the way into Mexico, or even further north. Now it is different. With so many controls, [coyotes] work as in a relay race: one coyote takes the people from here to Colombia, then another [takes them into another country] and it goes on [until their destination].

Hernan’s testimony illustrates how *coyoterismo* has transformed because of the externalization of the U.S.-Mexico border—the implementation of stronger migration controls beyond the U.S.-Mexico border into the south has led others to adopt the tactics of Ecuadorian coyotes. The tightening of visa requirements, not only in the United States but also in Mexico, Guatemala, and Costa Rica, has also complicated transits that in the past could be easily carried out. Mexico has also implemented, in collaboration with and in response to demands from the United States, stricter migration controls in the last two years. Mexico has detained more migrants than the United States in the context of the program “Frontera Sur” or “Southern Border” (Badillo 2017).

As a result, since the end of the 1990s Ecuadorian coyotes have increasingly become part of a broader system of coyotes that operates along the continent. Unlike the 1970s or 1980s when coyotes were capable of transporting their clients from their place of origin to their destination, some Ecuadorian facilitators have opted to execute only a single segment of the journey, for instance from Ecuador to Bolivia or from Ecuador to Colombia (in some isolated cases, they do cover the entire segment, Ecuador-Mexico), in conjunction with other coyotes in the region.

Our field work has not produced evidence of any involvement of transnational organized crime. However, we did find strong connections between Ecuadorian and foreign coyotes along the migration route. Most of the communication

among coyotes across borders takes place via cell phones. Coyotes exchange information and coordinate smuggling activities through their phones, and rely on wire transfer services such as Western Union or Money Gram to collect their funds undetected. The Internet and other mobile technologies has further strengthened coyotes' ability to conduct business virtually and remotely, often without even having to meet other smugglers, or even their clients.

Our respondents reported that access to phones has altered the interactions that once characterized the coyote-migrant relationship: services have become impersonal, distant, and the once taken-for-granted level of care has eroded. Andres, a deported migrant explains: "People meet with coyotes less now because we exchange phone numbers and stay in touch via text messages or Whatsapp. We then sort out things such as payment arrangements or departing points solely by phone." A government official supported this claim, alleging: "the upsurge of border control has led to a complex situation: migrants do not know their coyotes. Today, it is *coyoterismo* without a face." Coyotes are, therefore, increasingly becoming anonymous, and their traditional and expected roles as caregivers¹⁰ are diminishing. When migrants or their families ran into trouble during their journey, they often found themselves alone, and they lacked the ability to get help or to report or confront those who they had hired. Respondents stated that the change in the facilitation of irregular migration has played a role in the increased vulnerability of migrants, namely, disappearances, and in the incidence of violence and death along the migration corridor.

Reports of robberies, extortion, discrimination, collective or individual kidnapping, torture, sexual assault, traffic accidents, disappearances, and murders are not uncommon along smuggling routes. Smugglers are not the only perpetrators of these crimes. Border control authorities, police, thieves, members of drug trafficking organizations, gangs, other migrants in transit, and ordinary citizens are all among those behind acts of violence against migrants in transit. These crimes remain largely unreported and are therefore never punished. The depersonalization of smuggling facilitation, as reported by respondents, creates the conditions for these abusive practices to continue.¹¹

Another serious consequence of the depersonalization of *coyoterismo* and its increased reliance on mobile technology is the growing number of migrants who engage in self-smuggling, as well as in the provision of amateur services to others. This change appears to stem from the increased number of deportees returned from Mexico and the United States. As border securitization increases risks in crossing and thus smuggling costs, Ecuadorians often lack the funds to hire coyotes. As a result, when these deported migrants embark on their return north, they act as their own coyotes and often assist others in similar situation as a cost-saving measure. These practices are perceived by locals as chaotic, and as placing the migrant and those who decide to travel along at risk. A government official states:

Deported migrants do not necessarily know the route. Even though some of them have recently been on transit along the route, others left [Ecuador] one or two decades ago. Today there are new rules in this game and [migrants] do not know them. Deportation

has caused more disappearances because [deportees] think they can guide but they cannot.

Deported migrants often do not know the route nor do they have experience negotiating or dealing with more seasoned coyotes. This lack of experience and connections can lead to violent confrontations with more established smugglers. Still, though, there is no shortage of deported migrants who begin a new journey north on their own. Wi-Fi hotspots and GPS-enabled phones give these less-experienced migrants the confidence to begin their journeys once again. And because of cell phones, migrants can remain in constant contact with friends and family members, tapping into the collective knowledge created, shared, and updated by migrants in transit. Facebook, Skype, Google Maps, and Whatsapp give many the confidence to launch their personal smuggling operation without having to pay a coyote or deal with a *chulquero*. Manuel, a deported migrant in the process of planning his journey, stated:

Why do we need to pay? I know the route, I already went through once, and I have this [showing his Smartphone]: I need a Wi-Fi connection and that's it. I have maps, routes and my contacts that will guide me. You know what? I'm not leaving alone, I'll go with my friends. I'll take them and they pay [me].

The access to such shared migratory knowledge means coyotes' traditional monopoly of smuggling knowledge is being challenged and perhaps may even be rendered unnecessary in the future. The arrival of "amateur" coyotes is changing the dynamics of *coyoterismo* in ways that warrant further research.

Conclusion

Historicizing mobility and placing identity at the center of the analysis of human smuggling provides a nuanced narrative of human smuggling that in most ways contradicts the dominant characterization of smuggling as a criminal activity amid rising securitization of national borders. Within the small villages of Southern Highland Ecuador, mobility for labor and trade is deeply rooted in the cultural norms of indigenous communities. However, globalization and migration regimes have led to the transformation of mobility practices and to the reconfiguration of the players in the informal economy of smuggling. In the testimonials here, indigenous coyotes were considered to be more than facilitators: they were community members who were expected to adhere to communal practices of reciprocity and trust, in contrast to the relationships with mestizo coyotes. However, ethnic solidarity did not necessarily mitigate exploitation within the informal economy.

Migration provides "new anchors" for identity beyond those centered on the nation-state, region, or locality. As indigenous leaders mobilize and organize based on indigenous identity, territory, and community, there is a growing cosmopolitan vision of indigeneity that emerges out of transnational migration and

globalization (Cadena 2010; Delugan 2010). In Ecuador, national discourse about rural migration is largely negative despite the dependence on remittances throughout the country. This discourse casts the migrant as reckless and irresponsible, and makes a false correlation between their “abandonment” and the overwhelming burden that it places on state institutions, such as schools and other social service centers. On an international level, scorn is largely reserved for migrant facilitators. However, as we see here, there is much to take into consideration about who coyotes are, what roles they play, and the historical and socio-cultural depth around which people organize their personal migration projects.

The reinforcement of border controls in the Americas since the 1990s has had direct repercussions on the social and behavioral processes of *coyoterismo* and irregularized migration. Increases in deportations have turned Ecuador into a revolving door, a temporary place of respite to recommence another journey toward the north, further promoting the demand for *coyoterismo*.

Rather than defining it solely as a criminal or a benign practice, *coyoterismo* in Ecuador is best understood as a practice and an element within the continuum of migrants’ decision-making, and in which migrants play clear and active roles. In response to ever-changing migratory policies, *coyoterismo* must, therefore, be understood as a contingent sociohistorical process. Technological advances in communication have brought about profound changes to the modus operandi of smuggling operations. Nowadays smuggling is carried out in tranches controlled by local coyotes, who also operate as brokers for other coyotes on the continent. Migrants, however, are not passive by any means. They share tips, strategies, and routes, and sometimes travel without using coyotes’ services.

Restrictive state responses to migration fuel mobility and are consequently responsible for the further proliferation of *coyoterismo*, as is in the case of Ecuador. The inability of the United States’ government to develop comprehensive immigration policies—including mechanisms for expedited family reunification—has also encouraged the growth of *coyoterismo* (Álvarez Velasco and Guillot Cuéllar 2012). In the Ecuadorian case, coyotes represent a much more agile and effective way to bring together children and their immigrant parents and to reunite families.

Despite the complexity and long history of smuggling in Ecuador, the media and political discourse continues to treat the phenomenon as a criminal activity deserving tough punishment. This push toward criminalization suggests that the Ecuadorian government has failed to understand the complexity of migrant smuggling. While constructing smuggling as a problem makes it easy to promote and legitimize state interests, the social and cultural processes of *coyoterismo* involve complex and often hidden factors such as the reliance on the informal economy as a way of subsistence, and the poverty and inequity that for decades have encouraged irregularized migration among indigenous people. The Ecuadorian state’s views on irregularized migration differ fundamentally from local, indigenous understandings in which coyotes, far from being a “threat,” are part of local everyday life—they are “part of us.”

Notes

1. The term *irregularized migration* instead of *irregular migration* is used in this article to bring attention to the social, political, and juridical processes that consign some migrants to an “illegal” or “irregular” status. The more commonly used term “irregular” migration suggests the existence of an antagonist and supports a binary discriminatory regime between “desired” and “undesired” migrants, where regular—and all possible synonyms, such as documented, authorized, legal—is directly linked to the former and irregular to the latter. In an attempt to surpass the binary trap, critical migration scholars argue for denaturalizing the term and focusing on the processes that produce it, appealing for an understanding of the social and political processes that render some people “illegal” or “irregular” (De Genova 2002; Bauder 2014; Dauvergne 2008).

2. The Ecuadorian population is ethnically diverse and can be roughly categorized into four ethno-racial groups: white (of Spanish/European descent), mestizo (of Spanish/European and indigenous descent), Afro-Ecuadorian (of African and European or indigenous descent), and indigenous.

3. Jokisch (2014) indicates that most of the first migrants to Spain were women who posed as tourists and traveled with the help of Ecuadorian travel agencies. These women typically obtained work as domestic workers.

4. The forceful removal of 147 Cuban nationals from El Arbolito Park the night of July 6, 2016, comes to mind.

5. The Human Mobility Management Unit of the Provincial Government of Pichincha is a local public office located in Quito, Ecuador’s capital, which provides social, psychological, and legal support, and economic advice to Ecuadorean returned and deported migrants, to worldwide immigrants including migrants in transit, and to asylum seekers and refugees.

6. Smuggling is a highly gendered occupation. Tasks are feminized, with women performing caregiving and cleaning roles, while men guide groups and drive vehicles; they execute tasks that are often deemed as carrying more importance than those performed by women. See Zhang, Chin, and Miller (2007) and Sánchez (2016).

7. Interview with Victoria Stone-Cadena, Cañar, Ecuador, 2008.

8. *Ibid.*

9. A *prioste* is a person chosen or self-appointed to finance community celebrations, often as a mark of status.

10. See Vogt (2013) on care and intimacy in the smuggler-migrant relationship.

11. Majidi, in this volume, found that the protection smugglers are able to provide to migrants in transit diminishes the farther they get from home, as smugglers’ contacts are more likely to be unknown or unrelated to the ones the migrant originally hired.

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