

Michael L. Cepek. *Life in Oil: Cofán Survival in the Petroleum Fields of Amazonia*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. 2018. 302 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4773-1508-8. Paperback. USD 27.95.

***Life in Oil:
Cofán Survival in the Petroleum Fields of Amazonia***

Life in Oil makes for an unconventional academic read, making the task of reviewing it somewhat challenging. The book deals with the survival and co-existence of the Cofán people, an indigenous community that predominantly inhabits the Ecuadorian Amazonia, with oil extraction and production over a span of almost half a century in and around the village of Dureno. It tells the story of the Cofán as they have interacted, engaged, and negotiated with oil—the material itself, the institutions that are introduced with the establishment of the industry, the people that it brings, and the intermeshing of each of these not only with their lands and water, but also with their bodies.

The book adopts a narrative style that is easy to read and steers clear of abstractions, in an attempt to “share the largely unknown stories Cofán people create themselves” (p. 14). The primary contribution of this work lies in the realm of re-instating agency to the Cofán as a people, neither merely helpless victims of an extractive, polluting, and exploitative oil industry, nor simply as bearers of an ancient wisdom or an ‘authentic’ Cofán cultural repertoire. Instead, we come face to face with a people who, even as they are neither exotic ‘others’ nor tragic victims, continue to exist in their cultural differences and specificities, interpreting and understanding oil from within that situated worldview, and negotiate with the oil industry even as they suffer the exploitation and spoilage caused by oil. The Cofán are then a people, just like any other people, who encounter, assess, evaluate, and act, in the face of powerful capitalist lobbies.

Such a depiction goes a long way in de-fetishising otherwise common portrayals of indigenous people across the world. “The West”, Cepek notes, “demands too much of contemporary native peoples, the Cofán included. It hopes to make them into tragic symbols of its worst crimes while portraying them as wise beacons who offer a superior and authentic way of life, even today” (p. 12). In a bid to counter this double burden, Cepek takes us through the lives of the Cofán through different historical phases of their interaction with oil—now suspicious of it, another moment afraid, then resisting it, and again seeking to eke benefits from it. What we are met with then, is a depiction of the everyday struggles and negotiations of a people that remain engaged with oil—not always of their own volition—as active agents and not passive subjects.

The book begins with the author’s own encounter with an oil spill, taking us through the quotidian impact of oil on the

lives of the Cofán, laying out the framework and objective of the book as one meant for academic as well non-academic audiences. Chapter 2 lays out the social, geographical, and historical landscape within which this story is situated, focusing on the village of Dureno. The following chapter takes us through the place of *shamanism* in the lives of the Cofán, a significant element in their sense of community and organisation of social relations within the community. The “mundane-ness” with which this detailed explication is done contributes towards telling the story of the Cofán in terms that are deeply Cofán, taking their difference for what it is without making too big or too little of it.

Chapter 4 lends an insight into the relationship of the Cofán with non-Cofán outsiders, or *cocama* as they are referred to in Ain’gae, the language of the Cofán. The *cocama* make for an important figure in the complex relationship of the Cofán with oil, marking not only those who came with the oil companies themselves, but also those who began settling with the broader process of urbanisation and heightened activity that comes with roads, infrastructure, and markets. The book goes on to describe the very concrete and substantial impacts of oil on the people of Dureno, detailing the nature of health hazards amongst its people, narratives that surround them, and their place in much of the legal process that has gone on alongside. It is only in the sixth chapter, towards the end of the book, that we are introduced to the process of organised resistance to oil. Moving away from making resistance the central feature of the book, this chapter engages with important debates on how we understand communities in resistance and terms of solidarity. As the Cofán became well-known for their resistance to Texaco, which later merged with Chevron, they came to be primarily characterised, noted, and supported, for taking a radical anti-oil stance. However, the story of the Cofán extends beyond a simple ‘resistance to oil’ narrative.

The following chapter delineates a next phase in the lives of the people of Dureno vis-à-vis oil—one where they allowed oil companies access to their lands to explore for oil on their territory. They sought a share in the profits that were being reaped off their lands and resources, but they also sought returns for the damages they lived through, and they sought these with demands for control over the activities on their lands. While this was seen by many in solidarity as a moment of ‘betrayal’ to anti-oil politics, Cepek attempts to “hear Cofán people’s message in the terms they favour” (p. 12). The Cofán are then not subjects in a story of anti-oil resistance. Instead, Cofán resistance to oil is one part of the story of Cofán engagement with oil. By doing this, the book places the Cofán

at the centre, and attempts to situate and locate their choices, decisions, and actions. Their actions are not recounted to tell another story. They are the story. And it is here that the primary contribution of the book lies. Some of these ideas are discussed in the final chapter.

While the book maintains a non-academic narrative style, and there is much merit to experimenting with that, it does not engage with many of the debates within the academia on the politics of indigeneity, of representation, or questions of culture and environment, and issues of 'authenticity'. Engaging with the literature on these questions would have contributed in important ways to carrying forward these debates. The book raises issues specifically around the representation and the treatment of cultural difference in our writings. A missing element in the broader narrative was the role of the Ecuadorian state throughout this period. We see glimpses and comments in passing on the shifts in state policy, even as it appears to play an important role in shaping the Cofán and their abilities to cope with the oil industry.

In all, the book makes for a fascinating read and is refreshing in its writing style; though it does not articulate some of its central concerns in these words, it raises important questions of autonomy and self-determination of a people and speaks to critical debates raging at present within the academia. It will be of great interest to students and scholars engaging with

natural resource politics in contemporary times and is sure to broaden the frame within which questions are asked and problems posed. The book will also interest those who want to know more about how a central and primary commodity like oil is produced and acts on the people that live with it.

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