

NINA PACARI
(October 9, 1961-)

Ecuador: Politician

Nina Pacari rose from a marginalized childhood in a small Andean village in northern Ecuador to become a renowned leader of the country's indigenous movement. With a strong connection to her native roots, Pacari developed a deep commitment to the well-being of the indigenous peoples of Ecuador. She has given a voice to the oppressed and has realized gains in the struggle to improve her community's socioeconomic conditions. Pacari's solid indigenous ethnic identity and a strong bonding with her cultural roots have given her the strength and hope necessary to overcome the obstacles she has encountered.

Pacari grew up as María Estela Vega Cornejo in an acculturated family living among mestizos (those of mixed European and indigenous heritage) in Cotacachi, a small town in the northern highland province of Imbabura. She was the oldest in a family of eleven children, and her hardworking, humble parents taught her the importance of striving for a better future. Her father was a tradesman who, although of a quiet nature, showed enthusiasm for financial and political affairs. He improved the family's economic situation through perseverance and hard work. Pacari's mother, a kind, loving, and understanding woman who was always committed to her children, demonstrated the significance of honoring and preserving one's cultural values, customs, and traditions. Through the influence of people such as her mother and grandmother, Pacari discovered the strength and endurance that her Indian roots could provide.

Pacari's childhood was filled with hard work and a daily struggle to attain a better future. As an Indian girl living among mestizos, she experienced racism along with the temptation to shed her ethnic identity. Others cut their hair, put on Western clothes, spoke Spanish, and entered the mestizo world. Early in her life, Pacari underwent changes that led her away from her indigenous traditions and toward the mainstream culture. From the age of fourteen, however, Pacari began to depart on a course independent from her home and community. Instead of marrying, settling down, and raising a family, she violated social expectations and left home to pursue an education. Her aspirations led her to become one of the first Indians in Cotacachi to gain a higher education. She attended



Nina Pacari. Courtesy of Judy Hinojosa.

a Catholic secondary school where she became the best student. Racial discrimination, however, prevented her from participating in scholastic events. Nevertheless, she excelled in her studies and became the first Indian woman in Ecuador to earn a university degree in jurisprudence.

Pacari's political consciousness was awakened while she was studying for her law degree at the Central University in Quito. She became involved in student organizations and a cultural workshop that embraced indigenous values and heritage. As part of this trend, the students attempted to preserve the Quichua language that was starting to disappear, especially among young people. Meanwhile, these students were becoming aware that while they were regaining an ethnic consciousness, they still bore Spanish names. For this reason, at the age of twenty-four, María Estela Vega legally changed her name to Nina Pacari. Nina is a Quichua word that means fire, light, or heat; Pacari is the dawn. Her name indicates the dawning of a new consciousness.

With an education, many people in her position would have left the Indian world to advance their own economic and cultural interests; instead, she returned to her community to defend the rights of other Indians. Pacari underwent her early political formation through her work with the Federation of Indigenous and Country Peoples of Imbabura (FICI). Pacari is very critical of the long history of Western, neocolonial, and imperialist abuses of indigenous cultures: "For almost five centuries we have been the most exploited sector of society" (Pacari 1984, 116). Indian communities have suffered attacks on their land, culture, lan-

guage, religion, and political structures. "They weren't able to destroy us," Pacari concluded, "because we are the fruit of a millenarian culture" (1984, 114).

After working with FICI, Pacari used her legal training to work with indigenous communities in the central highland province of Chimborazo. She helped them with a variety of problems involving land and labor rights, as well as other social problems. This work was fulfilling for her, and it also led to greater empowerment for the Indian masses in Ecuador. In the process, Pacari developed a more profound critique of indigenous society. Indians were not "ethnic minorities" but nationalities with their own language, history, territory, socioeconomic structure, and culture. Their struggle was to claim the rights associated with that status. Pacari began to press for legal reforms that would recognize indigenous nationalities, officially recognize the Quichua language, democratize access to political power, and provide Indians with land.

Pacari assumed a national presence in Ecuador in 1989 through her work as a legal advisor with the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). CONAIE had emerged in November 1986 in an attempt to organize all indigenous groups in Ecuador into one pan-Indian movement dedicated to working for social, political, and educational reforms that would benefit the indigenous nations. CONAIE erupted into the national consciousness in June 1990 when it led the largest, most powerful uprising for indigenous rights in Ecuador's history—an uprising that paralyzed the country for a week.

During the 1990 uprising, Pacari returned to Chimborazo to visit indigenous communities and encourage them to participate in the coordinated activities. Largely through the leadership of women, the Indians blocked roads with boulders and tree trunks. Through such mass actions, the Indians forced the government and the military to back down and enter into discussions with CONAIE. In Quito Pacari formed part of a legal commission that initiated a dialogue with the government. From that point forward, she has remained deeply involved in indigenous politics on a national level. Reflecting later on the 1990 uprising, Pacari saw it as a turning point in organizing indigenous efforts in Ecuador. It led to a reaffirmation of indigenous identity and a consolidation of organizational structures. More important, the uprising led Indians to articulate judicial claims aimed at constitutional revisions that would result in true equality for all peoples in Ecuador.

Land has historically been a principal demand of Ecuador's indigenous movement, and Pacari has long pressed for land rights for Indian communities. As in the rest of Latin America, over the last five centuries, a small group of wealthy landowners had taken almost all the land away from the Indians. The result was an extreme imbalance in land holdings

that the Indians have long sought to correct. Whereas the white elite saw land as a commodity, indigenous peoples, Pacari states, "see land as an essential foundation for our culture, political organization and economic development, and of life itself" (Pacari 1.996, 25). Without land, Indian communities and culture cannot survive.

The 1937 *Ley de Comunas* (Law of Communes) defended the Indians' right to hold land communally, but much of their land has been on steep mountain slopes. The elite controlled the fertile valley lands. In 1964 the Ecuadorian government expanded these rights with an agrarian reform law that granted some Indians titles to small plots of land on the haciendas where they worked. In 1994 conservative president Sixto Durán Bailén implemented a new agrarian development law drafted by large landowners. This law, part of the government's neoliberal structural adjustment program, would have eliminated the minor gains achieved by the Indian movement over the course of the twentieth century.

Pacari played a leading role in consulting with indigenous peoples and small farmers on this law, and she drafted a detailed alternative proposal to the government's law and defended the interests of indigenous peoples. In June 1994, indigenous organizations responded to the government's free-market reform and the undemocratic nature of its adaptation with an uprising that shut down the country for two weeks. The uprising forced the government to negotiate with the indigenous peoples. Pacari became the key leader in these negotiations. Although it was an uphill struggle against a colonialist mentality, racist assumptions about the Indians, and an already promulgated law, she helped force the government to concede to some of the indigenous movement's demands for a continuing process of agrarian reform and defense of communal lands.

Pacari's political career continued to flourish in the following years. In 1997 the National Assembly selected her as the national executive secretary for the planning and development of Indian and African groups. She actively participated in working for the well-being of both peoples. In the same year she served a one-year term as a representative from the province of Chimborazo in the National Constituent Assembly which wrote a new constitution that recognizes the pluricultural and multiethnic nature of the Ecuadorian state. In August 1998, she became the first Indian woman to win election to Ecuador's National Assembly. She was elected vice president of the assembly, and through this position she has gained a greater presence for all indigenous groups in Ecuador.

Pacari faces what she terms a triple discrimination: discrimination for being a woman, an Indian, and a female lawyer, a profession that traditionally belongs to men. Pacari notes that machismo is a European import; gender discrimination is largely missing within Indian communities. She believes that embracing traditional Indian values is a

path toward human liberation. Today, Pacari continues to dress in the traditional indigenous costume of her community, and she speaks her native Quichua language.

Pacari continues today to work actively with Ecuador's Indian movement to defend Indian communities from the devastating consequences of neoliberal economic reforms and elite assimilationist attempts to suppress ethnic identities. She has consistently defended Indian rights for self-determination and the preservation of cultural identity, values, and language. Pacari has expressed that the key demand of Ecuador's indigenous movement is "the construction of a plurinational state that tolerates and encourages diversity among different groups in society" (Pacari 1996, 25). In struggling to achieve this goal, Nina Pacari has become a key player in Ecuador's Indian movement.

Further Reading

- Pacari, Nina. "Las culturas nacionales en el estado multinacional ecuatoriano." *Antropología, cuadernos de investigación* 3 (November 1984): 113-22.
- . "Los indios y su lucha jurídico-política." *Revista ecuatoriana de pensamiento marxista* 12 (1989): 41-47.
- . "Levantamiento indígena." In *Sismo étnico en el Ecuador: Varias perspectivas*, edited by José Almeida et al., 169-86. Quito, Ecuador: CEDIME--Ediciones Abya-Yala, 1993.
- . "Taking on the Neoliberal Agenda." *NACLA Report on the Americas* 29, no. 5 (March-April 1996): 23-32.