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Faith and Progress: A Study of Father Colin MacInnes' Work in *Gleanntan Ecuador* (1995)

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Abstract: *This article examines the portrayal of Father Colin MacInnes in the Scottish Gaelic documentary Gleanntan Ecuador (Jan Pester, 1994). A Catholic priest from South Uist in the Scottish Outer Hebrides, MacInnes moved to Ecuador in 1984 and settled in Comité del Pueblo, a shantytown located in the outskirts of Quito, where he spent over twenty years contributing to local initiatives such as the provision of running water, hospitals, and churches. Central to the film is MacInnes' efforts to secure funding for a water supply project, achieved through transnational solidarity networks. This article constitutes the first academic approach to the film, bringing together studies in architecture and urban development, anthropology, ethnography, and religious and cultural studies. It argues that, by prioritising MacInnes as a spokesperson for the locals, the film inadvertently reproduces "civilisation and progress" tropes commonly associated with cinematic portrayals of religious missionaries in Ecuador and Latin America. This statement is supported by identifying onscreen binaries between the precariousness of the Ecuadorian township and the idyllic landscapes of the Scottish Isles, emphasising the charity of Scottish parishioners. The film also reiterates the hostility of local communist leaders, highlighting intimidation tactics and extortion, which speak of its positionality within a postcommunist world.*

An extensive depth-of-field shot reveals a landscape of shallow rocky formations stretching across the Inner Seas off the West Coast of Scotland. Almost imperceptible to the naked eye, a few bothies can be distinguished on the horizon, accompanied by the sound of running water and seagulls (Fig. 1). A couple of establishing shots bring the viewer closer to these bothies, as traditional Andean music gradually increases. This unexpected choice of soundtrack is briefly interrupted by a highway effectively cutting through the greenery of the isles, captured through a low-angle shot. A bandwagon vehicle continues through the path, interposed with imagery of tractors, farmers, and crofters. The sequence introduces the first piece of dialogue in *Gleanntan Ecuador* (Jan Pester, 1994) through a voiceover in Scottish Gaelic:

When he was helping out in my parish on Barra, I asked him once, "When did you get to bed last night, Colin?" His reply was, "I forgot all about it!" He had been working on a book and had stayed up all night. That's the kind of man Colin is. He'll go without any sleep if he's needed. THAT is a true missionary: to put the needs of others first at all times.¹

This dialogue refers to Fr Colin MacInnes, a Catholic priest born in Bornish, South Uist, in the Scottish Outer Hebrides. Introduced by Canon Angus MacQueen, a fellow priest who is later revealed in the sequence, MacInnes is the main subject matter in the documentary directed by Jan Pester. The film follows MacInnes' missionary work in Comité del Pueblo, a shantytown on the outskirts of Quito, Ecuador, characterised in the film as a "communist run" township. The film is primarily spoken in Scottish Gaelic (with English subtitles) and was initially intended for television broadcasting, premiering on Scottish television in two thirty-minute instalments. A

feature-length version of the film received a Spirit of the Festival award at the Celtic Film Festival in 1994 (“Winners”). This version constitutes the main case study for this article.



Figure 1: The landscape in the opening shot. *Gleanntan Ecuador* (Jan Pester). Media Nan Eilean Ltd, 1994. Screenshot. © MG ALBA

Gleanntan Ecuador explores MacInnes’ work in the mission field, tracing his journey from the initial livelihood struggles upon his arrival in Ecuador in 1984 to the construction of a local church and the establishment of a running water supply for the township in 1990. The film’s original broadcast distribution helps explain its treatment, which is comparable to a long-form reporting piece, with journalist Cathy MacDonald serving as both reporter and narrator. MacInnes’ story is primarily constructed through his own testimony, walks around the township, and interactions with local parishioners, positioning him as a central figure in championing development projects in the area while promoting the Catholic faith. This narrative, also anchored in references to Scottish solidarity, is set in direct opposition to local communist landlords and the poverty and precariousness of Comité del Pueblo.

The juxtaposition of these two seemingly distant locations—Ecuador and Scotland—serves as a key point of analysis, justifying the article’s transnational scope. In this context, this article examines MacInnes’ portrayal in *Gleanntan Ecuador* by highlighting some of the binaries constructed onscreen that tend to downplay the role of the local community in achieving shared goals. It is argued that by prioritising MacInnes as a spokesperson for locals, the film may inadvertently reproduce “civilisation and progress” tropes commonly associated with cinematic portrayals of religious missionaries in Ecuador and Latin America. While *Gleanntan Ecuador* does not explicitly promote problematic narratives of the foreign other, its depiction overlooks the sociopolitical complexities that led to the formation of Comité del Pueblo, for instance, as well as MacInnes’ own community-based experience prior to his work in Ecuador. These aspects reveal an emphasis on transnational solidarity over collective

mobilising, a noteworthy observation when considering the film's placement within a postcommunist period.

To support these assertions, this article first provides a historical account of Comité del Pueblo's troublesome beginnings and political inclinations, dovetailing with MacInnes' previous work in Scotland. Within this context, *Gleanntan Ecuador*'s film text and industry background are further explored, revealing key differences and similarities related to the film's limited Gaelic audience, its overall purpose and distribution, and characterisations within the diegesis of the film. Here, MacInnes' charisma, financial savviness, and mobilising skills seem to take precedence over the role of the collective, with Comité del Pueblo's communist leadership taking an oppositional stance. This analysis is then compared to cinematic representations of Christian missionaries in Ecuador, showcasing contrasting tendencies between portrayals that elevate the role of the missionary—primarily intended for foreign audiences—and antagonistic depictions that highlight legacies of colonialism and abuse. The article concludes with a brief reflection on the film's final commentary in relation to anticommunist sentiments during the 1990s.

Gleanntan Ecuador is part of MG Alba's film and media catalogue. Since the film includes third-party materials, its distribution is limited to nonbroadcast purposes. Consequently, this article constitutes the first academic analysis of the film, bringing together studies in architecture and urban development (Testori; Naranjo Serrano and Álvarez Villareal), anthropology (Trujillo), ethnography (High, "End" and "Little Bit Christian"), and religious and cultural studies (León; Long). By adopting a multilayered approach, I aim to complement the close textual analysis of specific scenes and sequences, further illustrating how *Gleanntan Ecuador* relates to the historical legacies of Comité del Pueblo and comparable Christian missionary work more broadly. The extradiegetic elements examined in this analysis reveal a wide range of power dynamics and transnational connotations, extending beyond Christian missions to film production and distribution. From this perspective, MacInnes' portrayal is useful in interrogating how these elements are ultimately translated into a particular representation of Ecuador, which appears to require a reliable mediator to transcend to international audiences.

The Birth of Comité del Pueblo

On this basis, this article begins with a historical examination of Comité del Pueblo, a township that emerged from complex sociopolitical conditions during the 1970s and 80s. *Gleanntan Ecuador* introduces the neighbourhood as a "place run by Communists", a characterisation that quickly establishes a binary between intimidating landlords and MacInnes' arrival in the area, overlooking some of the underlying circumstances that preceded the township's establishment. These circumstances include an influx of internal migrants during the 1970s—usually from rural provinces near Quito—a lack of affordable housing for working-class citizens, and the resulting Comité del Pueblo settlement, which was initially associated with Marxist–Leninist parties but soon saw its ideological foundations displaced by internal disagreements and allegations of authoritarianism. In addition to the absence of local and state support, the inadequate living conditions depicted in *Gleanntan Ecuador* can more appropriately be attributed to this convoluted political landscape.

Comité del Pueblo is a township of approximately 48,000 inhabitants, located in the northeast of Quito ("Estos cuatro problemas"). According to Gabriela Naranjo Serrano and

Jonathan Álvarez Villareal, the township was proposed by a citizen's organisation called "Comité Popular en favor del Hábitat" ("Popular Committee in Favour of Habitat"), in order to provide affordable housing to low-income households (103).² During the 1970s, living conditions for working-class citizens were defined by housing scarcity and limited access to basic utilities. Due to increased profits attributed to oil exploitation, Quito had experienced a massive influx of internal migrants from nearby rural provinces, primarily populating the historic city centre. Wealthy households had moved to the north, while popular housing extended to the south. In this context, the committee sought to acquire extensive plots of land for the purpose of settlement, averaging one sucre per square meter (Naranjo Serrano and Álvarez Villareal 103).

After a failed purchase attempt in 1971 and an unsuccessful property trespass in 1973, the committee successfully acquired a rural hacienda called La Eloísa, comprising 145 hectares and intended for 2,300 households (Naranjo Serrano and Álvarez Villareal 102). Urban design and housing prototypes soon followed, commissioned to the architecture programme at Universidad Central del Ecuador, specifically their Taller de Investigación Social, Diseño y Comunicación (Social Research, Design, and Communication Workshop) or TYSDIC (Testori 6). This coalition distinguishes Comité del Pueblo from informal settlements that developed in comparable locales, including the Guasmo neighbourhood in the city of Guayaquil.

By 1974, plots were eventually allocated to about 5,000 households, yet infrastructural issues were already evident, due to the financial limitations in households and lack of compliance with expected construction plans (Naranjo Serrano and Álvarez Villareal 103). In some cases, services like "sewage, water, light and telephone connections" were not considered by designers and instead "were totally delegated to the ingenuity of the inhabitants" (Naranjo Serrano and Álvarez Villareal 111). Naranjo Serrano and Álvarez Villareal describe it as "poor architecture for poor people", with Comité del Pueblo constituting a working-class neighbourhood intended to serve the labour needs of nearby factories (112).

How these shortcomings relate to the political influences of the committee is still debated today. Indeed, the committee was initially conceived as a grassroots branch of Partido Comunista Marxista Leninista del Ecuador (Marxist–Leninist Communist Party of Ecuador) or PCMLE. Led by Carlos Rodríguez Paredes—who at the time was regarded as an agitator by President Velasco Ibarra and by de facto leader Guillermo Rodríguez Lara—the PCMLE managed to mobilise a broad base of low-income households into a shared social project ("Comité"). Institutions like Universidad Central were also associated with the movement, with Rodríguez Paredes being a notable student. The populist rhetoric of PCMLE is highlighted by the city's chronicler, Alfonso Ortíz Crespo, who stresses the abysmal divide between a socialist left, represented by workers' unions and student organisations, and a land ownership largely consolidated by affluent citizens and the Catholic Church ("Comité").

Other commentators de-emphasise these early communist leanings, attributing Comité del Pueblo's infrastructural failings to an authoritative and vertical leadership style. Gonzalo Bravo Aráneda suggests that, rather than a Marxist and revolutionary ideology, it was the committee's authoritative practices that restricted further creativity and imagination (161). Naranjo Serrano and Álvarez Villareal consider haste as one factor that affected quality control in housing developments, with committee officials rushing to complete the project (112). Giulia Testori also adds that neighbourhood leaders were not sufficiently supported by the PCMLE board, as internal disagreements gradually weakened the party (14). More vocal critics like Stalin Vargas reject any responsibility by either PCMLE or committee officials, arguing that

the state, city council, and Catholic Church effectively dismantled any organisational process in the neighbourhood.

As this discussion reveals, several factors had contributed to Comité del Pueblo's marginal status. A socioeconomic backdrop that encouraged migration to urban centres like Quito, the scarcity of affordable housing solutions for working-class citizens, settlement proposals that relied on political discourses but failed to offer adequate conditions for their inhabitants, and a lack of attention from local authorities effectively discouraged any type of regulation or compliance. These factors transcend a specific ideological position and can be more precisely interpreted as a direct consequence of the political gridlock of the time. Therefore, by presenting Comité del Pueblo as a place controlled by communists, the inadequate and precarious living conditions introduced in *Gleanntan Ecuador* are implicitly attributed to this ideology without fully contextualising the multiple factors that led to these conditions. Consequently, Comité del Pueblo is visually constructed by highlighting unpaved roads, hard-to-access hut-like housing, and impoverished inhabitants with limited belongings. Paired with MacInnes' arrival in 1984, this onscreen binary successfully establishes a hostile mission field from the outset, later developed into openly antagonistic accounts.

Fr Colin MacInnes: A Priest Who Made Things Happen

In addition to the inadequate living conditions attributed to communist leaders, *Gleanntan Ecuador* also portrays Comité del Pueblo in relation to Scotland. The opening sequence already hints at this connection—later developed throughout the film—which helps to establish both geographical and cultural distance. However, this juxtaposition is not purely pedagogical; it can also be attributed to the film's intended Scottish Gaelic audience. Thus, MacInnes is positioned as a relatable mediator whose mission finds commonalities with the advancement of Scottish Gaelic language and cultures. These coincidences are not explicitly stated in the film text but can be inferred through extradiegetic sources such as press articles and feature pieces (Wilson). While *Gleanntan Ecuador* focuses primarily on MacInnes' work in Comité del Pueblo, its representation appears to be heavily shaped by the film's language, production backing, and target audience.

As stated, *Gleanntan Ecuador* (where “*gleanntan*” means deep, narrow valleys) is spoken in Scottish Gaelic and was originally broadcast as a two-part series for Scottish television. Unlike Spanish or English, Scottish Gaelic is spoken by approximately 57,600 users, or about one per cent of Scotland's population (Scotland's Census). The film's production company, Media Nan Eilean Ltd, was among the few businesses dedicated to Gaelic content, at the time considered “the most successful Independent Gaelic Language Production Company in Scotland” (“MnE Television”). The film received financial support from the Comataidh Telebhisein Gaidhlig (Gaelic Television Committee, CTG) and was awarded a Spirit of the Festival recognition at the Celtic Film Festival (now Celtic Media Festival) in 1994. Both organisations were concerned with recovering languages and cultures from Celtic nations, a purpose followed by CTG's successor, MG Alba, the current holder of the film rights and whose remit is “to ensure that Gaelic audiences are informed, educated, and entertained in Gaelic” (“About Us”). In this context, a high-profile Gaelic speaker like MacInnes represented an attractive subject matter, given his accrued notoriety, international reach, and previous efforts in promoting the Gaelic language.

Prior to his work in Ecuador, MacInnes led several community projects in the Outer Hebrides, a region deeply ingrained in Scottish Gaelic cultures. These projects are not significantly explored in *Gleanntan Ecuador*, but MacInnes' community-based organising and fundraising skills ultimately positioned him as a trustworthy spokesman on behalf of Comité del Pueblo, particularly for the average Gaelic viewer familiar with his track record. Brian Wilson, a journalist, former MP, and close friend, recalls some of these projects in a feature article on COVID vaccines and Ecuador's limited supply:

Colin carried the same leadership qualities into the priesthood. Wherever he went, he made things happen. In Iochdar, he threw himself into the co-chomunn movement and led the building of a hall. On Barra, alarmed by the fragility of Gaelic language and culture, he was central to the birth of Feis Bharraigh, and hence the whole Feisean movement. And so it went on.

By referring to these earlier projects, Wilson offers a favourable profile for MacInnes, anchoring transnational solidarity in identifiable references within the Scottish public imagination for the purpose of encouraging international aid. The co-chomunn movement, for instance, refers to a scheme that supported the establishment of community cooperatives, primarily in the Western Isles ("Communities"). Co-Chomunn An Iochdar's in South Uist—MacInnes' birthplace—was one of the first cooperatives to be created in 1979, supported by a £15,000 grant from the Highlands and Islands Development Board (Tasglann nan Eilean Siar). Similarly, Feis Bharraigh is an annual arts and culture festival held in Barra. Its first edition took place in 1981 in order to promote the Gaelic language for future generations (OSCR Charity Regulator). The festival inspired similar events throughout the Western Isles, currently consolidated under the umbrella association Fèisean nan Gàidheal or The Gaelic Festival. According to their website, the movement continues to accomplish its intended purpose, since "the current sense of revival in both the traditional music scene and Gaelic language development in Scotland is, in no small measure, due to the success of the Fèis movement" ("About Us").

With this background, the social causes explored in *Gleanntan Ecuador*, such as the Comité del Pueblo's water initiative, indirectly allude to seemingly unrelated projects like the development of the Gaelic language, with MacInnes serving as a unifying figure. As with Wilson's article on COVID vaccines, the film's intended audience is likely to draw connections between MacInnes' community projects in Scotland and his missionary work in Ecuador, even when such links are not directly stated in the film text. Since Comité del Pueblo is primarily depicted as a precarious township run by communists, MacInnes, by contrast, is established as a sympathetic mediator who also serves the remit of the film's production company and funding institutions.

Transnational Exchanges and Scottish Solidarity

By expanding on the early beginnings of Comité del Pueblo and MacInnes' previous work in Scotland, I have briefly identified some binaries established in *Gleantann Ecuador*, which are constructed onscreen by prioritising certain elements while overlooking others, considering its predominantly Gaelic audience. These binaries can be further illustrated by offering a close textual analysis of two key scenes, in addition to the opening scene previously mentioned, namely, an incident related to a water tanker retained by communist landlords and an extended montage that emphasises Scottish solidarity. These two scenes contrast thug-like behaviour and intimidation tactics attributed to the landlords with MacInnes' efforts to address infrastructural needs at Comité del Pueblo, made possible through transnational networks of

solidarity. As we will discuss in subsequent sections, this contrast resonates with earlier representations of Christian missionaries in the country, particularly in relation to an interpretation of civilisation and progress contingent upon these external, foreign agents.

In the first scene from the film, MacInnes explains how these leaders had kept a tanker intended for water distribution out of the reach of local citizens. As the previous historical review explained, the inhabitants of Comité del Pueblo often relied on tankers for their water supply due to irregular settlements and developmental shortcomings. In the film, MacInnes explains that releasing the tanker would have “diminished their power over the people”, which helps explain the leaders’ initial refusal. MacInnes concludes that, after hours of negotiation and even attempting to break into the property, the leaders eventually freed the tanker, only to reveal that several pieces were missing from the engine.

This anecdote is visually constructed by incorporating various static photographs, intertwined with MacInnes’ medium shot interview and voiceover. The photographs consist of several community members rallied around the tanker, trying to break into the property’s fence (Fig. 2). Some of these members are given prevalence by zooming into their faces or freezing the frame for greater impact (Fig. 3). The duration of each frame coincides with MacInnes’ cadence in voice, in doing so allowing for pauses and breaks.



Figure 2 (left): Comité del Pueblo inhabitants rallied around a water tanker.

Figure 3 (right): A woman protesting to release a water tanker.

Gleanntan Ecuador (Jan Pester). Media Nan Eilean Ltd, 1994. Screenshot © MG ALBA

In an interview for this article, MacInnes assumes that he was only permitted to settle in Comité del Pueblo because the so-called communist leadership did not expect him to influence the neighbourhood in a significant way (“About”). By then, Salesian partners had started the construction of a church building, and MacInnes was appointed by the local bishop “to create a parish that would care for the poor and the basic needs of the people.” This intention aligns with the tanker incident by distinguishing at least three parties within the diegesis of the film: MacInnes as its main subject matter, the collective who benefits from MacInnes’ intervention, and the antagonist landlords who are not directly named but are commonly referenced throughout the film. These latter groups appear largely mediated by MacInnes’ account and the accompanying voiceover by reporter Cathy MacDonald. In doing so, even when the collective is acknowledged, including their labour force, protection and engagement in evangelisation and discipleship, it is MacInnes’ financial savviness and strategic planning that seems to prevail over community efforts such as *mingas*.³

Indeed, during his time in Comité del Pueblo, MacInnes managed to acquire significant financial backing through solidarity networks in Scotland and Europe, which subsequently springboarded business negotiations with international banks. In the interview mentioned above, MacInnes explains that this process consisted of purchasing defaulted foreign-debt bonds at discounted prices and renegotiating them in the local market (“About”). Profits from these transactions helped fund the water project and other social initiatives later outlined in *Gleanntan Ecuador*. Consequently, MacInnes is portrayed in the film as a determined individual, capable of meeting with government officials and local authorities, thus reinforcing his reputation for “getting things done”. In contrast, as seen in the tanker incident, communist leaders are often portrayed as hindering the progress of social causes.

An extended montage midway through the film also highlights this contrast, drawing parallels between the celebration of Catholic mass by MacInnes in Comité de Pueblo and fellow priest Canon Angus MacQueen in Scotland. After some initial establishing shots that situate Comité del Pueblo as one of the poorest of the poor, narrator Cathy MacDonald states that “the dream of fresh water had replaced the nightmare of fear and extortion. What they needed now was money.” This voiceover is accompanied by travelling shots of congregants at the newly constructed San José Obrero Church, where MacInnes is preparing to celebrate Mass.

The image abruptly cuts to an establishing shot of the Western Isles, with MacInnes’ voice gradually fading into the distance. Next, a mobile bank unit by the Royal Bank of Scotland drives through the wet landscape of the isles into a small parking lot, as the shot opens to reveal a small road sign that reads “Bornais”. What follows is a series of mirroring images between Mass services in both locales, with MacInnes shaking the hands of congregants in Quito and MacQueen doing the same in Bornish, South Uist (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). Here, the combination between organic behaviour by participants and more elaborated reenactments to accentuate the visual storytelling of the sequence is evident. Handheld shots tend to capture spontaneous church actions, whereas close-up shots of offering containers and a bank cheque are intended to emphasise the charity of Scottish parishioners. The Catholic hymn “Pescador de hombres” (“Fisher of Men”) accompanies the montage, preluding a subsequent explanation of MacInnes’ financial strategies to fund the water project.



Figure 4 (left): Colin MacInnes greeting the congregation in Comité del Pueblo.

Figure 5 (right): Canon Angus MacQueen sharing baking goods with Scottish parishioners. *Gleanntan Ecuador* (Jan Pester). Media Nan Eilean Ltd, 1994. Screenshot © MG ALBA

Even though *Gleanntan Ecuador* was not necessarily planned for funding purposes, the above sequence exemplifies transnational flows of capital that have traditionally supported local missions, usually dependent on a trustworthy local mediator, such as MacInnes, to channel incoming support. This support is shown through a parallel treatment between congregants on opposite sides of the world, suggesting an apparent level playing field found in a shared Catholic faith. However, positioned within the totality of the documentary, given the stark infrastructural differences between Quito and the idyllic landscapes in the Scottish Hebrides, such a suggestion seems almost implausible. Instead, the visual commentary presented in *Gleanntan Ecuador* seems to inadvertently reiterate binaries of civilisation and progress found in earlier representations of Christian missionaries in the country, in many cases almost equating the faceless communist leaders with the unconverted “savage”. Figures like MacInnes are then elevated to a prevalent role, emphasising his savviness in getting the water project off the ground, much like the scientific and technological advances presented in previous missionary depictions.

Priests and Missionaries in Ecuadorian Film History

Certainly, the historical review of Comité del Pueblo alongside MacInnes’ prior initiatives related to the development of the Gaelic language provides a needed context to help explain some of the narratives established in *Gleanntan Ecuador*. Adding to this analysis, it is worth considering earlier uses of film in relation to missionary work, which, in the case of Ecuador, are directly associated with the development of cinema. These previous works tend to fluctuate between films intended for international support and normally elevate the role of the missionary, and oppositional films that stress the legacies of colonisation and abuse. Focusing on the former, we can identify an interpretation of progress and development that primarily derives from technological advancement, in contrast with the “primitive” and “savage” ways of unconverted locals.

Historically, Augusto San Miguel’s *El Tesoro de Atahualpa* (*The Treasure of Atahualpa*, 1924) is regarded as the first narrative film produced in Ecuador. Cinematic developments that preceded this milestone include the use of magic lanterns by German geologist Theodor Wolf in 1874 and the first cinematographic images captured by Italian entrepreneur Carlo Valenti in 1906 (Granda). The connection between scientific exploration, missionary work, and the modernity of the cinematographer would become apparent in *Los invencibles Shuaras del alto Amazonas* (*The Invincible Shuaras of the Upper Amazon*), the first ethnographic film produced in Ecuador, directed by Italian priest Carlo Crespi in 1926.

Crespi’s scholarly background in natural sciences, engineering, and music allowed him to migrate to Ecuador not only as a Catholic missionary but also as a scientist. According to Luis Álvarez Rodas, the Italian government provided Crespi with a variety of scientific instruments, including photographic cameras, compasses, theodolites, rain gauges, and a cinematographer (119–20). Crespi’s early uses of cinema demonstrate an awareness of the apparatus not only as a scientific device but also as a promotional one, with films produced for foreign audiences with the purpose of fundraising for local missions. Indeed, scholar Chiara Pagnotta identifies road construction in the Ecuadorian Amazon as the main reason for producing the film (126), implying an association between the cinematographer and economic development. Crespi’s fundraising tours in Italy between 1923 and 1925 confirm this intention, as well as a later exhibition of *Los invencibles Shuaras del alto Amazonas* at Columbia

University that showcased his research on Indigenous anthropology and culture (Álvarez Rodas 121). A promotional brochure of the film includes the following description by Crespi:

It sensibly leads the spectator to love the *Oriente*, to appreciate the prodigious strength of its nature and, above all, to deeply appreciate the Jíbaro race and the heroism of the missionaries, who strive to bring it to world civilisation. (León 105; my trans.)

This quote assumes a perception of underdevelopment by their intended foreign patrons, with missionaries taking a central role in ensuring their civilisation. Film researcher Christian León associates these tropes with a “coloniality of power”, in reference to Anibal Quijano’s theories on coloniality and modernity in Latin America. By “coloniality of power”, Quijano identifies modern structures of power centred around the axis of race and capital, which perpetuate hierarchical systems beyond former colonial establishments (216). Under this lens, León reads *Los invencibles Shuaras del alto Amazonas* as paradoxically showing a represented identity of the Shuar culture, while simultaneously denying them a representative consciousness (106). This process takes a second level of subalternity, considering the most recent version of the film in 1995, which incorporated reenactments and add-ons to give more prevalence to the figure of Crespi.⁴

Although films like *Los invencibles Shuaras del alto Amazonas* unquestionably perpetuated problematic stereotypes on Indigenous populations, Crespi’s footprint in Ecuadorian society is also undisputed, with a legacy that includes several schools, art institutes, and other social projects, particularly in the city of Cuenca (“Emotiva velada”; “Don”). How these initiatives are recalled and remembered by local communities, especially direct beneficiaries, is still ambiguous today. Nonetheless, the connection between religious observance and Western modernity appears deeply entangled with early cinema, a tendency that is not limited to Ecuador and Latin America. As Lee Grieveson suggests, the cinema apparatus also carries connotations of civilisation and progress (5), which can be distinguished in how *Los invencibles Shuaras del alto Amazonas* has been interpreted and adapted over the years (León 104). These trends will continue in later works of nonfiction that portray religious missions, even when large infrastructural endeavours are not necessarily mentioned onscreen.

For instance, the documentary *Through the Gates of Splendor* (Jim Harson, 1962) recounts the story of Elisabeth Elliot, an American missionary who gained international recognition after her then-husband, Jim Elliot, was tragically killed by the Waorani (also Huaorani) peoples in the Ecuadorian Amazon (“About Elisabeth Elliot”). Four other missionaries were also killed in the incident, including Nate Saint, brother of Elliot’s mission partner, Rachel Saint. After the event, Elliot remained in the Amazon, resuming evangelisation and Bible translation efforts through a parachurch organisation called the Summer Linguistic Institute-Wycliffe Bible Translators or SLI-WBT.⁵ The documentary premiered in 1967, only five years after the massacre and was based on the homonymous memoir by Elliot.

Like Crespi’s earlier film, *Through the Gates of Splendor* is primarily centred on the five martyred missionaries and Elliot’s subsequent evangelistic work. Elliot’s pedagogical voiceover is intended to humanise the so-called “savages”, as the film describes them, emphasising their noble character and willingness to accept the gospel. For example, the film opens with images of Elliot’s toddler daughter Valerie playing in a river with three Indigenous boys, accompanied by a voiceover narration that invites the intended American audience to inquire about how such an encounter is possible, considering the killing of her husband only three years before. This tone would prove crucial in raising media awareness, particularly in a

related tour in the United States by fellow missionary Rachel Saint in 1957 (Long 42–50). An anticipated “attraction” of the tour was Dayuma, a native Waorani woman who had converted to Christianity and who accompanied Saint. The closing images of *Through the Gates of Splendor* suggest a similar approach, featuring Elliot’s toddler daughter walking hand in hand with a Waorani man, next to lower third titles that read, “The savage my kinsman”, the title of her second book on the subject.

For Patricio Trujillo and collaborators, interventions like SLI-WBT suppose a “colonisation of the mind”, in addition to the physical domination brought about by oil exploitation and similar extractive practices in local territories (432). Trujillo and others define colonisation of the mind as a construction of the other as “inferior” and in need of civilisation, which is only attainable through cultural assimilation, including religious beliefs (434). These authors argue that at the time, it was the Ecuadorian government who “contracted [the SLI-WBT] to civilize, pacify, and evangelize the Waorani”, given that these groups “had been causing disturbances in the Pastaza and Napo province” (Trujillo et al. 434). When assessing this intervention in recent years, anthropologist Casey High noticed that certain missionaries had become “an important part of Huaorani history” (“End” 86), with conversion stories significantly contributing to their social transformation (“Little Bit Christian” 270). High attributes this impact to a shared sense of victimhood that connected martyred outsiders with colonised subjects, due to the latter sympathising with “the same history of losing close kin to violence” (“End” 86).

If we were to compare these historical and cinematic trajectories with those of MacInnes, Comité del Pueblo, and more importantly, their representation in *Gleanntan Ecuador*, it is important to establish some key differences to help guide its diegesis. To begin, as a rural township eventually absorbed by Quito’s expansive growth, Comité del Pueblo is hardly a remote or isolated community. Its geographic location places them in proximity to Quito’s development hubs, in contrast with earlier depictions of uncontacted peoples in the Amazon. On the other hand, as MacInnes explains in his interview, Comité’s inhabitants were not necessarily engaged with a given religion, despite many describing themselves as Catholic (MacInnes, “About”). MacInnes would be one of the first religious missionaries to arrive in the neighbourhood, with other authorities such as the police and local and state officials prevented from entering. As such, MacInnes’ arrival can also be interpreted as a first “encounter” with Comité residents, also considering the internal migration that preceded the creation of the neighbourhood.

A second aspect worth mentioning is *Gleanntan Ecuador*’s distribution and overall purpose. While films like *Los invencibles Shuaras del alto Amazonas* and *Through the Gates of Splendor* were primarily aimed at funding infrastructural work or promoting local missions, *Gleanntan Ecuador* occurs after the fact, recounting instead MacInnes’ feat in bringing running water to the neighbourhood. This strategy suggests that, more than just appealing to an evangelistic or civilising purpose, MacInnes’ involvement seems also to consider the capital interests of its patrons. Contrary to the alleged SLI-WBT’s association with the government for extractive purposes, MacInnes’ connection to authorities and officials is framed as a key mediation to champion social causes and attract funding, which occurs in parallel to the advancement of the Catholic mission.

These considerations provide an understandable distance between earlier portrayals of Christian missionaries and MacInnes in *Gleanntan Ecuador*, in terms of its urban setting, use of the film for funding purposes, and limited intended audience. Yet, as previously stated, the film text also presents some coincidences related to transnational exchanges with local

missions in Ecuador, specifically with the Western Isles in Scotland. A film like *Through the Gates of Splendor*, for instance, establishes a geographical distance between New York and the Waorani by tracing Elliot's arrival in Quito and their journey to the Amazonian territories. In *Los invencibles Shuaras del alto Amazonas*, this is presented by including maps and intertitles, before cutting to Indigenous peoples carrying heavy loads through the Amazonian jungle, with the aid of cattle. While *Gleanntan Ecuador* refrains from these stereotypical depictions, it concurs in emphasising the remoteness of Comité del Pueblo in relation to Scotland, both physically and culturally, implicitly suggesting a need for a Western understanding of civilisation that includes running water, among other infrastructural needs.

But the most noticeable coincidence is the prevalence of missionary figures, even in films that portray religious missions in a negative and more antagonistic way, a second tendency identified in films about missionaries in Ecuador. These films include *El Cielo para la cunshi, caraju!* (*Heaven for my Cunshi, Dammit!*, 1975) by Ecuadorian filmmaker Gustavo Guayasamín; *¡Fuera de aquí!* (*Get out of Here!* 1977) by Bolivian director Jorge Sanjinés; *Trinkets and Beads* (1996) by American filmmaker Chris Walker, and the two-part documentary diptych *Toroboro* (2024) by Ecuadorian director Manolo Sarmiento. This latter project, for instance, links an ethnobotanic study conducted in 1994 with a referendum initiative to prevent oil exploitation in 2023, which incidentally also highlights the significance of Christian missionaries, as explained by Sarmiento:

Back in Quito, I realised that what we had talked about the most was the contact that the Waorani had with Christian missionaries and oil companies. There were positive and negative views of that contact, but everyone talked about it. The documentary is about how traumatic and violent that contact was. (Flores Flores; my trans.)

What this quote tells us in relation to *Gleanntan Ecuador* and its comparison to films that emphasise the civilising role of missionaries is that even in works that provide a critical lens to these exchanges, their pervasive impact is unavoidable. Consequently, when thinking about possibilities to reverse and reclaim narratives and modes of representation, these should not necessarily offer a comparable binary treatment that hides the influence of missionaries. Rather, as in the case of Comité del Pueblo, these proposals can accommodate counter histories that are informed by alternative viewpoints, intended audiences, and production processes, effectively centred on local communities and filmmakers. In this sense, a final consideration for analysis is *Gleanntan Ecuador*'s relation to postcommunist geopolitics of the 1990s, particularly those associated with left-leaning movements within the Catholic Church in Latin America.

A Catholic Communist? An Ecuadorian Heart With a Scottish Mind

In addition to communist landlords being constantly referenced as the oppositional force, the film text in *Gleanntan Ecuador* also includes some subtle hints that seem to point to a more favourable, undisclosed theme of the film. In the last scene, Canon Angus MacQueen is seen enjoying a glass of tap water, following images of Scottish lochs and overflowing water containers near livestock, sequences that certainly illustrate an abundance now shared with parishioners in Ecuador. Here, MacQueen offers a surprising reflection: "The Christian doctrine is very similar to basic Communist ideals, justice and equal opportunity for all mankind. Some people would argue that Christ was the first Communist. And that seems quite fair to me."

Including this reflection as the final observation in a documentary that repeatedly emphasised the fear and extortion induced by communist leaders might seem like a contradiction, especially since MacQueen experienced some of these threats himself by being held at knifepoint twice while visiting MacInnes (“Parishioners”). Yet MacQueen’s final reflection can also be interpreted as attempting to find common ground across the aisle, irrespective of a political leaning or Catholic adherence. This intention is also present in some of MacInnes’ interventions, including a commentary shared shortly after the tanker’s anecdote. As the quote reveals, MacInnes does not seem to fully attribute this event to a given political ideology:

I have always maintained that there isn’t much difference between right and left in politics. The main aim of both sides is to gain the upper hand in different ways and do as they please irrespective of the well-being of the people. And the Church was true to the people.

This subtleness can be further understood if accounting for anticommunist sentiments in the West during the 1990s. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 represented a first step into dismantling communist regimes in central and eastern Europe, including the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Within Catholic circles, the spread of liberation theology across Latin America during the 1970s and 80s had gradually diminished, as many of the movement’s core principles relied on Marxist ideals (Hale 78). Community initiatives that promoted social justice or class consciousness, like Comité del Pueblo, required an acute awareness when navigating these political backdrops in order to secure funding, more so if recalling the neighbourhood’s communist origins.

In this sense, *Gleanntan Ecuador* appears to be mindful of these geopolitical dynamics, offering a more conservative approach that gives voice to social causes like Comité del Pueblo’s water initiative but not going as far as promoting an explicit association with ideologies that promote the collective over the individual, such as communism. MacInnes, on the other hand, seems to move in that direction in later writings. In an article for the Scottish Catholic Observer, for instance, MacInnes reports on the successful implementation of a microcredit programme in Comité del Pueblo, emphasising the corrupting capabilities of money (“Small”). Similarly, in an earlier piece for the same newspaper, MacInnes stresses how his parishioners tended to rely on the heart, a call that he commends when aiding the poor and describes as “[s]olidarity rather than charity” (“Learning”). A more vocal tone is found in an article for *The Guardian*, where MacInnes expands on the roots of Ecuador’s foreign debt and states that many politicians “have betrayed their vocation towards humanity” (“Pirate”).

These examples allude to MacInnes’ attention to social concerns but show that he did not go as far as liberation sympathisers, such as priests Camilo Torres Restrepo in Colombia and Ernesto Cardenal in Nicaragua. These counterparts also engaged with left-leaning filmmakers and movements, particularly those associated with the New Latin American Cinema during the 1970s (Alejos Grau).⁶ In contrast, MacInnes’ writings seem to offer a milder voice to unbalanced power structures, weaving these critiques with reports on particular initiatives and projects. Some of these articles also included contact information to receive donations, which suggests a viable medium for amassing international support.

In conclusion, this article has analysed the work of Fr Colin MacInnes in relation to the Scottish Gaelic film *Gleanntan Ecuador*. It has argued that, despite MacInnes’ acute awareness of social concerns in Comité del Pueblo, the film at times reinforces binary characterisations of civilisation and progress that elevate the role of the missionary and relegate the input of local

citizens. In particular, the film reiterates the hostility of communist leaders, highlighting intimidation tactics and extortion, in doing so, preventing the wellbeing of Comité del Pueblo's inhabitants. In contrast, MacInnes is portrayed as a skilled organiser and fundraiser who is able to bring about complex infrastructural initiatives, such as providing running water to the neighbourhood. Instances of progress and development associated with these projects, as depicted in *Gleanntan Ecuador*, resonate with earlier cinematic representations of religious missionaries in the country, but also establish key differences related to the film's production process and its limited Gaelic audience. Lastly, the film seems to carefully consider postcommunist geopolitics of the 1990s, yet not as bluntly as MacInnes' writings in later years. Here, MacInnes offers an appropriate closing statement that consolidates these conclusions: "Would the perfect combination be an Ecuadorean heart and a Scottish mind?" ("Learning").

Notes

¹ Here and elsewhere in the article, dialogues are transcribed from the film's English subtitles.

² For the purpose of clarity, this article uses "Comité del Pueblo" to refer to the local township and "the committee" to address the leadership organisation.

³ Giulia Testori defines *mingas* as "collaborative free work characteristic of the Andean populations" that derives from the word *mink'a* in the Quechua language and has no direct translation to English (1).

⁴ According to León, this new version is intended for a local audience and primarily emphasises the significance of Crespi's ethnographic recordings (105). As such, it omits any reference to Crespi's expedition and instead includes intertitles and explanations about the film's preservation process.

⁵ Boone Albridge, historian and SLI insider, explains that the SLI-WBT partnership combined Christian missions with "a linguistic and quasi-scientific enterprise" founded in the translation of the Bible (1). This agreement allowed the SLI-WBT to become one of the largest evangelical missions in the world, despite sharp criticism from both local and foreign organisations.

⁶ Two works of nonfiction can be mentioned here: *Camilo, el cura guerrillero* (*Camilo, the Guerrilla Priest*, Francisco Norden, 1974) and *El evangelio en Solentiname* (*The Gospel in Solentiname*, Marilú Mallet, 1978).

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