

# The Controversial Career of Sophie Muller (1910-1995): An Assessment of her Influence as a Protestant Evangelist on Colombia's Far Eastern Frontier

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## Abstract

In 1944 Sophie Muller, a young American woman, arrived in Vaupés as an independent missionary determined to bring Protestant Christianity to native Americans living along the rivers of Colombia's Amazon territory. Proselytizing during the turbulent Violencia era and overcoming numerous setbacks, by 1965 she had established two hundred native churches and translated the New Testament gospel into the languages of the Cubeo and Piapoco. Alternately branded as witch, heroic educator, divine missionary, and government opponent, her influence over thousands of natives in Vaupés, Guainía, and Vichada was undisputed for twenty years, but in the decades that followed her effectiveness declined despite the fact that she continued to work in the region until her death in 1995. This essay evaluates Muller's controversial impact on the indigenous people in Colombia's eastern territories and examines the factors that contributed to the decline of her influence after 1965.

**Keywords:** Sophie Muller, proselytization, indigenous peoples, Vaupés, Guainía, Vichada

## Resumen

En 1944 Sophie Muller, una joven mujer estadounidense, llegó al Vaupés como una misionera independiente empeñada en llevar el protestantismo a los grupos indígenas que habitaban en las riberas de los ríos del territorio amazónico colombiano. Haciendo proselitismo durante el turbulento período de la Violencia y superando muchos contratiempos, para 1965 ya había establecido unas doscientas iglesias nativas y había traducido el Nuevo Testamento a los idiomas cubeo y piapoco. Tildada alternativamente de bruja, educadora heroica, misionera divina y opositora del gobierno, ejerció una influencia indiscutida sobre indígenas en los departamentos del Vaupés, Guainía y Vichada durante unos veinte años. Sin embargo, en las décadas posteriores Muller se volvió menos eficaz, pero siguió trabajando en la región hasta su muerte en 1995. En este ensayo se evalúa su impacto controvertido en los pueblos indígenas de los territorios orientales de Colombia y se examinan los factores que contribuyeron al declive de su influencia después de 1965.

**Palabras clave:** Sophie Muller, proselitismo, indígenas, Vaupés, Guainía, Vichada

In 1944 Sophie Muller, a young American woman, arrived in Vaupés as an independent missionary determined to bring Protestant Christianity to native Americans living along the rivers of Colombia's Amazon territory. Proselytizing during the turbulent Violencia era and overcoming numerous setbacks, by 1965 she had established two hundred native churches and translated the New Testament gospel into the languages of the Cubeo and Piapoco. Alternately branded as witch, hero civilizer, divine missionary, and government opponent, her influence over thousands of natives in Vaupés, Guainía, and Vichada was undisputed for twenty years, but in the decades that followed her effectiveness declined despite the fact that she continued to work in the region until her death in 1995. This article evaluates Muller's controversial impact on the indigenous people in Colombia's eastern territories. Part one traces her rise to power between 1944 and 1965 by examining her personal background, the characteristics of the people she converted, and her religious philosophy and approach. Part two considers the gradual decline of her influence between 1965 and 1995 taking into account the National Front's Native American policies, opposition to her work by the Catholic Church, competition from other missionaries, and her often rancorous relations with the white colonizers and the natives themselves.

## Part I: Sophie Muller's Rise to Power

### *From Commercial Artist to Zealous Missionary*

Sophie Muller was born in New York City in 1910, the daughter of a German Catholic father and a Protestant mother. In the early 1940's she was studying to be a commercial artist at the National Academy of Design in New York City when she chanced upon a group of people singing and preaching on the sidewalk. Previously she had been religiously ambivalent, drifting from occasional attendance at a modernistic church to a study of theosophy and reincarnation, but the fervor of the street group piqued her curiosity. She decided to accept their invitation to join a Bible study and eventually went on to complete a three-year course at the National Bible Institute in New York City. Now convinced that the Old and New Testaments were the word of God, Muller was determined to spread the gospel to Native Americans who had had no previous contact with Christian missionaries, either Catholic or Protestant.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sophie Muller, *His Voice Shakes the Wilderness* (Sanford, FL: New Tribes Mission, 1988), 5.

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To accomplish this goal Muller joined the New Tribes Mission (NTM) in 1944 founded by Paul Fleming two years earlier. This fledgling organization espoused an evangelical approach to spreading Christianity among previously isolated tribes. It adopted a creed based on five fundamental principals: the virgin birth of Christ; the physical resurrection of the dead; literal belief in the Bible as the inspired word of God; the theory of redemption; and the second coming of Christ before the final judgment. In addition, members accepted the divine authority of the sacred scriptures; one God in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; salvation by grace as a gift of God, entirely independent of good works; and the responsibility of the believer in obeying the word of God and in witnessing Christ's salvation to all. Finally NTM rejected any religion that involved animism, humanism, mysticism, paganism, polytheism, and religious synchronism.<sup>2</sup>

After completing NTM courses in jungle life and linguistics, Muller decided to go to Colombia where some native tribes in the Amazon region had remained isolated from Christian proselytizing. In 1944 Colombia had ceased to grant visas to missionaries but not to other foreign professionals. Since Muller was a trained commercial artist, she was permitted to enter the country in that capacity. She landed at Buenaventura and continued on to Pasto where she contacted Katherine Morgan, a medical missionary and member of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, who had been living in Colombia since 1933. For six months Muller stayed with Morgan, using the time to study Spanish while sending back to the NTM illustrations for its posters and magazine, *Brown Gold*.

Considering herself now sufficiently prepared, Sophie traveled alone to Leticia in search of an Indian tribe previously untouched by Christianity. When she failed to locate a suitable tribe, she returned to Bogotá where she met Pat Symes, then director of the World Wide Evangelism Crusade. Symes was able to obtain for her a permanent visa, and he recommended that she visit a government Indian station on the Vaupés River. Taking a plane to this outpost, Muller met Wesley Driver, a missionary to the Cubeo people. Driver suggested that a native group known as the Curipacos located on the Isana River would meet her criteria. Accordingly Muller found a Venezuelan trader who took her by boat down the Isana to her first Curipaco village, Sejal, two days away from the government post of Maroa on the Venezuelan border.<sup>3</sup>

## *The Curipacos and Puinaves*

The Curipaco and their neighbors the Puinave, who were to become her first converts, were/are located in the present day department of Guainía, a transitional zone between the Amazon River and the sabanas of Orinoquia

located south of the department of Vichada and sharing borders with Venezuela and Brazil.<sup>4</sup> Living in villages along the Inírida River and its tributaries were five or six families organized in clans based on paternal lineages. The Curipaco practiced slash and burn agriculture, hunting, fishing and gathering. Disease kept the population at a stable level of around 2,000.<sup>5</sup>

The clans had four types of leaders: the *ijicot* who could cure or cause sickness and death was the most powerful; the *ipuigot*, who could purify collective food and water, and protect people from malignant spirits; the *cuaiotque*, depositaries of oral tradition, who could communicate with the dead and visit ancestors, and the *iguagot* who knew how to play musical instruments.



Above: Map drawn by Muller showing the area where she worked.

The Curipaco and Puinave did not feel the impact of European penetration until the late nineteenth century, when white collectors began to coerce them into gathering rubber in Venezuela, Brazil, and Colombia. The collectors enslaved the Indians forcing them to work under exceedingly harsh conditions. These cruel practices displaced many of the settlements and brought about a decline of the population, but it did not change native cultural patterns or their cosmology. Although in theory the Salesian missionaries had jurisdiction over the two groups, Christian evangelization did not begin, in earnest, until the arrival of Sophie Muller in 1944.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Cabrera Becerra, *Las Nuevas Tribus y los Indígenas de la Amazonia: Historia de una presencia protestante* (Bogotá: Litocamargo, 2007), 51-2.

<sup>3</sup> Muller, *His Voice Shakes*, 23.

<sup>4</sup> In the 1940's the 72,238 square kilometers of Guainía formed a part of the Comisaría of Vaupés. In 1963 Congress separated this section from Vaupés to create the Comisaría of Guainía and under the Constitution of 1991, it became a department.

<sup>5</sup> Gloria Triana, "Puinave," *Introducción a la Colombia Amerindia* (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiana de Antropología, 1987), 98.

<sup>6</sup> Triana, "Puinave," 103-4.

*The beginning of Muller's mission*

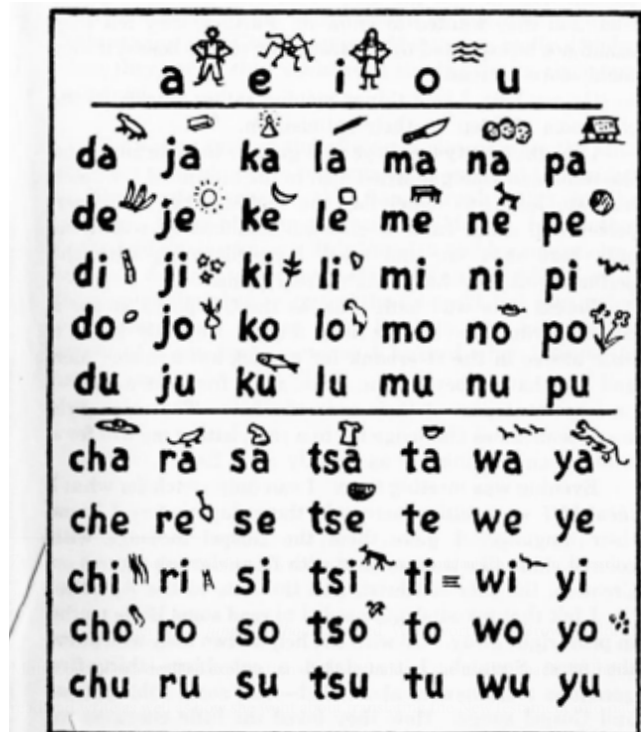
The appearance of a strange white woman speaking broken Spanish undoubtedly astonished the Curipacos of Sejal, but their chief, Pedro Lapa accepted her, and after two months the natives assigned her a house in their village. From the first day of her arrival Muller made it clear that she had come to teach the Curipacos to read and write and to convert them to the true religion. To accomplish these feats, she employed the method developed by Dr. Frank Charles Laubach while he was a missionary in the Philippines. Laubach taught illiterates to read by working through the alphabet one letter at a time, introducing letters in the order that adults might best absorb them. He created a chart to associate a certain letter with a picture of a familiar item whose name began with that letter. Words were repeatedly used so that the student became familiar with them and was even able to read a short story as part of the first lesson.<sup>7</sup> Muller began by working with a bilingual Curipaco—Pedro Lapa's son-on-law—to learn enough of their language through Spanish to make up a syllable chart. Thus while still learning Curipcao, she could teach the natives to read. When she started her classes, the natives responded with enthusiasm. In the evening she gave Bible lessons by translating a catechism—thirty-five questions and answers about God—Bible stories, and gospel songs.<sup>8</sup>

The system was surprisingly effective. After two months a greatly encouraged Muller returned to Bogotá via the Orinoco and Meta Rivers. There with the help of friends she produced the first booklet in Curipaco. The inside cover of the booklet had a full syllable chart that allowed it to serve as both a primer and a reader. The catechism, Bible stories and gospel songs followed the chart.

*Lower left: Muller's drawing of a syllable chart in Curipaco using the Laubach Method.*

*Below: Muller's drawing of how she used the chart to teach reading and writing to Curipacos.*

*(All drawings are from her book, His Voice Shakes the Wilderness.)*



When Muller returned to Sejal, she discovered that the motivation of the natives doubled when they found that they could read the booklet in their own language, and she believed that at least some of the young men were becoming believers in the Christian God.<sup>9</sup>

However, not all Curipacos were pleased with Muller's growing prestige. The *ijilicot* was especially concerned and decided to try to kill her. He arranged for her to receive some soup containing a powerful local poison. After she drank it, she experienced excruciating abdominal pains but was able to vomit up the contents of her stomach so that she did not die. The "miracle" of her survival convinced the people that she was a white goddess.

For her part, Muller regarded the Curipaco practice of drinking fermented beverages and holding celebrations that featured dancing and sexual copulation as evidence of witchcraft. She strongly condemned these and other traditional magical practices. According to anthropologist David Stoll, her authority had grown so great that under her direction "the first Curipaco converts threw their bundles of sacred objects into the river, axed the canoes where they

<sup>9</sup> Muller, *His Voice Shakes*, 27.

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made home brew, and because they feared the sorcery of their neighbors, took her to the next village to single out the guilty for a stern lecture."<sup>10</sup>

In 1948 Muller took a vacation, travelling to the US to be with her father and mother. After spending several months in their cottage on Long Island, she consulted with Dr. Eugene Nida of the American Bible Society before returning to Guainía with one of the first books ever written on Bible translating principles.<sup>11</sup> Satisfied that her conversion work was thriving, she decided to extend her activities to the Baniwa people in Brazil. She made two journeys into Brazil a year apart. The first was to the Cuiari and Icana; the second to the Icana and Airy. In 1949 she extended her evangelization to the Cubeo who lived along the Querary River. Unlike Catholic missionaries, she recruited Indian pastors and did not erect mission stations which exploited Indian labor. Her converts, ever increasing in number, took the new religion to neighboring people—the Puinave, Guayabero, and Piapoco. The Puinave and Piapoco in turn evangelized the Guahibo, Cuiva and Sáliva. Disciples spread her message in some cases in ways she completely unanticipated such as in 1950 when a Colombian Indian, apparently a Curipaco, led a mass movement of Baniwa down the Icana singing psalms and bearing banners.<sup>12</sup>

In 1951 Muller traveled to the U.S. for a three-month furlough. When she returned to Guainía she again attempted to cross over the border into Brazil. Warned that authorities had orders to arrest her for illegal entrance and for influencing Indians through her own brand of witchcraft, she reluctantly returned to Colombia only to discover that the Violencia had reached the Amazon.<sup>13</sup> In *His Voice Shakes the Wilderness*, she wrote:

Terrible tales of raids, torture, and massacres were told us by the refugees fleeing down the Colombian rivers into Venezuela. Then some Indians came downstream, alarming us with news that soldiers were committing outrages in the jungle areas and that the Indians were fleeing before them on every hand.<sup>14</sup>

Relief was in sight when General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla overthrew the government of Laureano Gómez on June 13, 1953. Rojas eventually managed to curb the greatest excesses of the Violencia in the eastern plains and Amazon, but he also ordered all Protestant missionaries to leave the Indian territories of Colombia. In 1953 he renewed the

Convención de Misiones (first signed in 1902) giving the Catholic Church exclusive control over the Indians in the National Territories. Muller avoided expulsion as long as she could, and when she was forced to leave Colombia, she made her base across the Venezuelan border in San Fernando de Atabapo. There supported by other NTM missionaries, she worked quickly to translate the gospels into Curipaco and had the text printed at the NTM Headquarters in Wisconsin. Once Rojas had been replaced by the Frente Nacional government in 1958, Muller was able to continue her work in Vichada and Vaupés.

By 1965 she was distributing printed copies of her translations of the New Testament in Curipaco, Punave, Piapoco, and Guahibo to the natives, and working on translations in Cubeo, Cuiva, Sáliva, Tucana, Siriano, Tatuya, and Carapana. In addition, she had written primers to teach reading and writing in these languages, so that all of the natives under her jurisdiction knew how to read. The 200 churches she had established included Curipacos, Puinaves, Piapocos, Guahibos, Cubeos, and a few Guayaberos. There were fifty native leaders in charge of these churches who themselves carried on the conversion work. Muller visited the churches on a regular basis, correcting any errors and distributing the latest books of the New Testament that she had translated. She also founded twenty-eight semiannual Indian Bible Conferences, each one attracting from 300 to 500 Indians. After these conferences male Indians would volunteer to visit unconverted tribes for two weeks or a month to spread the gospel. Finally there were more than 300 Congregations of Evangelical Indians governed by leaders and deacons, selected by the Indians themselves, who administered the sacraments.<sup>15</sup>

### *Factors in Muller's Success*

That Muller was able to teach several thousand Indians to read and write and to convert them to Evangelical Christianity owes much to the Laubach Teaching Method which she adopted and even more to her unshakable belief that she was God's messenger to the Indians. In his book, *Cosmos, Self, and History in Baniwa Religion for Those Unborn*, anthropologist Robin Wright offers a summary of her understanding of her mission based on a careful reading of her book *Beyond Civilization*. Wright suggests that Muller thought of herself in nine different ways: as a mediator between the natives and the Divine; as a pilgrim sentinel who had come to warn of the imminent end; as one moved by faith alone into the unknown; as one constantly reminded through the powers of nature of the imminence of the Second Coming; as one whose mission was to release the Indians from Satan's bond; as one sent to cleanse them in order to be "possessed" by God; as one sent to bring the "light"; as one sent to teach them detachment from worldly suffering and pain; and as one sent to prepare them for the Second Coming and the end of the world.<sup>16</sup>

15 Juan E. Vanegas, "Informe de la Iglesia Evangélica Colombia," *Memorias del Primer Congreso de Territorios Nacionales* (Hereafter cited as *Memorias*), Doc. #6,12-13.

16 Wright, *Cosmos*, 250-1.

10 David Stoll, *Fishers of Men or Founders of Empire?* (London: Zed Press, 1982), 170.

11 Muller, *His Voice Shakes*, 44-46.

12 Robin M. Wright, *Cosmos, Self, and History in Baniwa Religion for Those Unborn* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 237. Muller chronicled her experiences in Brazil in *Beyond Civilization* (Chico, CA: Brown Gold Publications, 1952).

13 The Violencia was an unprecedented civil war fuelled by the mutual hatred between Liberals and Conservatives. The first phase lasted from 1947 to 1965 and precipitated bloody fighting throughout most of Colombia. The conflict was especially harsh in the eastern Llanos where Liberal guerrillas fought pitched battles against the national army.

14 Muller, *His Voice Shakes*, 89.

According to Wright, however, the most striking aspect of Muller's motivation was her obsession with demons. "According to her, Satan was everywhere among the Indians; the Devil was manifest in their dances, in invisible forces of evil spirits, and in the stones of the shamans."<sup>17</sup> The shamans' stones, she told them, were handed down from the Devil. In village after village she ordered doubtful "witch doctors" to throw them in the river. She blamed the suffering of the Indians on sorcery and in trying to eliminate their traditional beliefs she felt no remorse at destroying at least part of their culture. In an interview in 1975 with David Stoll, she exclaimed: "Destroying the culture? I should hope so – drunkenness and wild dancing, you know dancing leads to immorality. The idiots had all this witchcraft, the men would drink and dance all night, then go off into the woods with girls and do their immorality." She added that she was forever having to set the Indians straight about who she was because they usually thought that she was from heaven."<sup>18</sup>

Muller was equally determined to protect the Indians from interaction with white settlers. Having reached Guainía when the Indians were reeling from abuses by the rubber collectors, she presented herself as a messenger of God, who came to bring them happiness and peace and to affirm that they should work no more for the white exploiter. She wanted to segregate them from global society in order to protect them.<sup>19</sup>

The rubber collectors had uprooted the natives from their traditional territory, but Muller encouraged them to return and reestablish stable *aldeas*. As they resumed their patterns of traditional subsistence, they faced renewed assaults from whites when the wave of Violencia in Colombia encroached into Vaupés. According to the Matallana Commission that investigated the NTM in 1974, Muller struggled to prevent her converts from acquiring the most common vices among the settlers. The fundamental point of her indoctrination was "to convince Indians that any contact with the whites led to the damnation of their souls."<sup>20</sup>

During the early years of the Frente Nacional (the agreement between Liberal and Conservative parties to alternate the presidency between 1958 and 1974) there is abundant evidence that leaders in Bogotá recognized Muller's success both in converting Indians and in teaching them to read and write. In 1959, for example, Catholic priests reported to the Ministerio de Gobierno:

Sofia Muller, a North American protestant missionary, who has been proselytizing for some years, practically dominates the north and northeastern zones of Vaupés: She exercises real authority over the Indians, who pay her true homage of submission and respect and in fact do

not recognize any authority besides hers, not only in religious questions but even in civil, economic, social and family matters. It is not an exaggeration to say that they pay her blind obedience and execute without question what she commands.<sup>21</sup>

The Comisario Especial of Vichada Daniel Monsegny Urdaneta agreed with this assessment. During the First Congress of National Territories held in Bogotá in May 1966, he reported that 30,000 of the 37,000 inhabitants in the *comisaria* were Indians who had become evangelical Christians under the influence of Sophie Muller. He added that despite founding school centers at Sunape and Santa Teresita, the Montfortian Catholic missionaries had been unsuccessful in winning over converts and that with the exception of the followers of Muller, the rest of the Indians were illiterate and complete savages lacking all habits of industry.<sup>22</sup>

## Part II: The National Front and the Decline of Muller's Ministry

Notwithstanding her acknowledged accomplishments, Muller's empire began to crumble after 1965 as a consequence of rapidly changing conditions sparked by reforms of the new regime. In particular, the policies it adopted concerning the role of the Catholic Church, Indian affairs, and colonization would each play a role in decreasing Muller's influence over the Indians.

Almost from the moment of her arrival the Catholic Church hierarchy regarded Muller's activities as an encroachment on its prerogatives. According to the Convenio sobre Misiones, first signed in 1902, renewed in 1928 and again in 1953 by Rojas Pinilla, Catholic religious communities had absolute authority to govern, police, educate and control the Indians as well as jurisdiction over primary education for all people—white or Indian in the national territories. In 1953 the Comisarias of Vichada and Vaupés fell under the jurisdiction of the Vicariato Apostólico de Villavicencio administered by the Montfort Fathers. The 1953 agreement specifically stated that members of other religions who resided in the national territories would enjoy constitutional guarantees of freedom of conscience, but that "they can only provide their religious and educational services to foreigners affiliated to their religion or sect in their own homes and in a strictly private matter."<sup>23</sup>

At the Primer Congreso de Territorios Nacionales in May 1966, the prelates affirmed that under the concordat, only Catholic missionaries were authorized to convert Indians in the territory and that anti-Catholic proselytism "is a true danger for Catholics and especially for the Indians." Anti-Catholic doctrines should not be introduced in the

17 Wright, *Cosmos*, 252-3.

18 Stoll, *Fishers of Men*, 170.

19 Trinana, "Puinave," 104.

20 José Bermudez Matallana, "Ministerio de defensa nacional comisión especial de reconocimiento y verificación," (University of Antioquia, 1976), cited by Stoll, *Fishers of Men*, 172.

21 Cited by Cabrera Becerra, *Las Nuevas Tribus*, 125-6.

22 Daniel Monsegny Urdaneta, Comisario Especial del Vichada, "Ponencia" in *Memorias*, Doc. 12.

23 For the full text of the Convenio, see *Conferencias Episcopales de Colombia, 1908-1953*, 2 vols. (Bogotá: Editorial El Catolicismo, 1956), I: 549-555.

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territories since they would necessarily cause uncontrollable reactions. While recognizing the personal sacrifice and zeal of some evangelical missionaries, the prelates noted that there had been frequent complaints that these individuals were not teaching patriotic history or civic duties in their schools, that the materials they used lacked charity, and that they were creating religious divisiveness. In short, they opposed the notion that evangelicals might have the right to proselytize in the National Territories.<sup>24</sup>

The spirit of ecumenicism fostered by Vatican II and the 1968 visit by Pope Paul VI to Colombia reinforced by demands from the territories and from the Indians themselves undermined the prelates' position and strengthened the call for reform of the Convenio de Misiones. Yielding to these pressures the Colombian government signed a new Concordat with the Vatican on July 12, 1973. Article XIII of this agreement restricted the monopoly that the Church held in the National Territories by requiring it to submit for state approval contracts for developing education programs that would be adjusted to the needs of the various regions.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, Indian peoples were organizing their own movements to defend their lands and culture. The Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca (CRCIC) was the most active, but other groups in the Llanos and Amazonas formed to resist encroachments by settlers, Evangelicals, and Catholic missionaries.<sup>26</sup>

Ten years earlier the government of Alberto Lleras Camargo created the Division of Asuntos Indígenas (DAI) located under the auspices of the Ministerio de Gobierno. In 1966 at the Congreso de Territorios Nacionales, the Director of the DAI, Gregorio Hernández de Alba, announced that his office had devised programs for the protection and integration of Indians in order to improve their living standard. Another report presented at the Congreso by Sergio Elías Ortiz, Jefe de la Sección de Lenguas Indígenas del Instituto Colombiano de Antropología, emphasized the need to preserve Indian languages which were quickly disappearing especially in the Amazonia region. Ortiz recommended that the government offer courses in Indian languages for primary school teachers to help them teach literacy in the national territory schools. In addition he supported the activities of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), an organization that had already signed a contract with the government to work with the DIA by providing linguists to study 50 or so native languages. Also known as the Wycliffe Bible Translators, the primary purpose of the U.S. based group was to translate the New Testament into native languages in order to convert natives to Evangelical Protestantism.<sup>27</sup>

A third National Front initiative that deeply affected the Amazon and Llanos regions was the controversial Agrarian Reform Law 135 passed by Congress in 1961. The law created an agrarian reform agency known as INCORA that was authorized to expropriate privately owned estates if necessary for redistribution to individuals who had insufficient or no land at all. Expropriation, however, was to be a last resort. INCORA's major role was to resettle peasants on land reclaimed for agriculture through irrigation or in the public domain. During the next two decades streams of colonists began making their way into the Llanos and Amazonas claiming land that had previously been the last refuge of Indians.<sup>28</sup>

The involvement of the Catholic Church, the government's renewed commitment to Indian affairs, the arrival of SIL translators, and the influx of new colonists all posed a threat to Sophie Muller's activities. Previously she had been able to work with a minimum of outside interference, but increasingly she faced competition from other missionaries, government workers, and colonists—the later displacing Indians from their traditional lands.

By the 1970s the Montfortians had enlarged their presence in Vichada. At Sunape, they organized a school where Indian children were brought to live and be educated separated from their parents. From this center missionaries moved out to create 25 satellite schools in Indian communities. Each school was directed by an Indian teacher. The live-in school had 160 students while the satellite schools combined for more than 500.<sup>29</sup> In addition some of the Catholic missionaries defected from the common cause of destroying traditional religions and tried to decolonize their work by restoring confidence in their ancient culture. Muller resisted the greater involvement of the Catholics whom she regarded as un-Christian. Charging that the priests were less interested in saying Mass than in reviving pagan rituals, she encouraged conflicts in villages between Protestant and Catholic families. The Protestant natives restricted access to the Catholic chapels, destroyed Catholic images and refused to share food with Catholics.<sup>30</sup> Salesian missionaries in Brazil reported that Sophie preached explicit anti-Catholic propaganda which led her to “rip off medals of Our Lady from children's necks while, in other villages, the same medals were found on the necks of dogs.”<sup>31</sup>

Even the new evangelical missionaries found it difficult to cooperate with Muller. In the words of David Stoll, the younger, more cautious NTM workers and members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics regarded her ascendancy over the natives with “perplexing despair.” “They could not fulfill the supernatural expectations she

24 “Ponencia del Comité Colombiano de Coordinación Misional” in *Memorias*, Doc. #34: 2.

25 Alfredo Vázquez Carrizosa, *El Concordato de Colombia con la Santa Sede, Julio 12 de 1973* (Bogotá: Itagraf, 1973), 15-21.

26 Stoll, *Fishers of Men*, 173.

27 Sergio Elías Ortiz, “Ponencia: Conservación y Trato de las Lenguas Indígenas en los Territorios Nacionales,” *Memorias*, Doc. #5, 1-4.

28 Alberto Lleras Camargo, “La Ley de Reforma Agraria,” *Realizaciones el Primer Gobierno del Frente Nacional* (Bogotá: ESAP, 1963), 95-98.

29 José Aurelio Roza G., S.M.M. *Cien Años en Colombia Construyendo Futuro 1904-2004* (Bogotá: Ediciones Monfortianas, 2007), 160.

30 Cabrera Becerra. *La Nuevas Tribus*, 119.

31 Wright, *Cosmos*, 239.

had aroused nor could they ignore the traditional beliefs, such as fear of the shamans, which she has consecrated into churches.”<sup>32</sup> Although the NTM missionaries regarded her New Testament translations as “something sacred and unchangeable,” at least one Indian, Esteban E. Mosonyi has charged that they were riddled with errors and that Muller had reduced the complexity of the languages, standardizing one dialect where many existed.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, some converts were rebelling against her authoritarian control. Her erratic and eccentric ways had alienated many “believers” from the beginning, and when Stoll interviewed Muller in 1975, she told him that the Indians were going back to their old ways.<sup>34</sup> “She was especially disgusted with the Guahibo and Cuiva who she said destroyed their minds with a hallucinogen, and that when she returned to a Guahibo village in 1974, only three families were still faithful. The others had painted themselves up and were dancing their traditional dances. They would not allow her to stay in the village, and a spokesman told her that she had deceived them.”<sup>35</sup>

Muller also opposed the efforts of the government to set up official primary schools. She wrote that the government wanted to work on behalf of progress for the Indians, but it did not recognize what made for real progress. While conceding that the effort to establish a regular school curriculum with mathematics, social studies and Spanish was not a bad idea, she claimed that the men who worked as teachers were “young atheists fresh out of college and full of Karl Marx,” who did not contribute to the moral standards she had imposed on the Indians. They were determined to stamp out the Protestant religion she had fostered and proceeded to do this by working through the children. In *His Voice Shakes the Wilderness*, she wrote:

They brought liquor, drank with the older teenagers and ruined many of the Indian girls. Usually the teachers were preceded by priests and others who came in with bags of government provisions: rice, lentils, soup cubes, sugar, lard, noodles, and chocolate. The Indians could not resist the free food and so received their teachers as well.<sup>36</sup>

Muller wanted to keep the Indians isolated from all contacts with white colonists. In 1967 a man claiming 8,000 hectares in Vichada Territory told a court that she had arrived on his property with 200 natives armed with bows and arrows and shotguns. Under her orders, the Indians

worked day and night to erect a 500-meter fence, which deprived the rancher of most of his claim.<sup>37</sup>

Three years later a more notorious example of whites encroaching on Indian land occurred in Planas, an oil-bearing region in the Department of Meta. In this district cattle ranchers had seized land from white colonists and confined thousands of Guahibo Indians to patches of the savannah. When Rafael Jaramillo Ulloa, a non-Indian government official, formed a Guahibo cooperative and encouraged the natives to resist, the ranchers (who included the governor of the Department of Meta and the mayor of Villavicencio), accused him of being a Communist guerrilla. This assertion prompted the arrival of the Vargas Army Battalion. After a number of sympathetic homesteaders and Indians were murdered or tortured, the Guahibo fought back with the primitive weapons at their disposal, but with little hope of defeating the stronger force. When priests and anthropologists brought the Guahibo side of the story of the conflict to national attention, the “Planas Affair” became a well-publicized scandal, but the official response supporting the ranchers’ activities confirmed that Indians could not expect justice from the authorities many of whom claimed large land holdings in the region.<sup>38</sup>

Muller did not support the Guahibos in this confrontation, because like the government, she considered Jaramillo Ulloa a communist. She told Stoll that by forming an Indian cooperative, the “communists” wanted to get the “gringos out first and then the evangelicals so that they can get control over everyone. She continued:

A cooperative is just the thing for them to get started. They tell everyone to buy and sell there, they get all that under their control, and then they have it. That’s what this Jaramillo did, he got the Indians into the cooperative and then told them to attack the white ranches. I told them not to join. I warned that there would be trouble because the *junta* is directed by this non-believer who has other purposes.

Join a cooperative with other believers, I told them. This is where the revolutions always start.<sup>39</sup>

By 1975 Muller had decided to resign from the NTM and work independently. She continued to remain active in the region, but by the early 1980’s, she was facing a new challenge. The Marxist guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) had arrived in Vichada, Vaupés, and Guainía. The FARC regarded the evangelical missionaries as agents of the U.S. government.<sup>40</sup> In 1988 Muller reported that many Indian believers had fallen victim to FARC enticements to join guerrilla bands or

32 Stoll, *Fishers of Men*, 171.

33 Cabrera Becerra, *Las Nuevas Tribus*, 123-124. In *Jungle Methods*, Muller admits that she simplified the language leaving out some syllables to make it easier for the Indians to learn. She notes that when new linguists arrived and tried to expand the syllable chart, it became so long, that “Only the most intelligent Indians could read it.” As a result they came to her and ask for her books since they could understand the ones she had written (p. 5).

34 Wright, *Cosmos*, 243.

35 Stoll, *Fishers of Men*, 171.

36 Muller, *His Voice Shakes the Wilderness*, 178-9.

37 Stoll, *Fishers of Men*, 172.

38 *Colombia Nunca Más* (Colombia: Proyecto Nunca Más, 2000), Vol. 7: 4-5.

39 Stoll, *Fishers of Men*, 172.

40 Garry Leech, “The Ongoing Pacification of Colombia’s Amazon Indians,” January 10, 2011, p.3. <http://colombiajournal.org/pacification-of-colombia-amazon-indians.htm>

## THE CONTROVERSIAL CAREER OF SOPHIE MULLER (1910-1995): AN ASSESSMENT OF HER INFLUENCE AS A PROTESTANT EVANGELIST ON COLOMBIA'S FAR EASTERN FRONTIER

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were attempting on their own to make fast money in the cocaine industry. By this time, she had moved her base to San Fernando de Atabapo on the Venezuelan side of the Orinoco River. Instead of making visits to various Indian conferences in Colombia, she confined her proselytizing to newly arrived Indians who fled Colombia to form new villages in Venezuela.<sup>41</sup> In the early 1990s she returned to the United States where she died of stomach cancer at the age of 83.<sup>42</sup>

### *Assessing the Impact of Sophie Muller*

Muller spent over 45 years in the Llanos and jungles of Colombia and Brazil in a determined effort to teach indigenous people how to read and write, and to convert them to Evangelical Christianity through the study of the New Testament, which she herself translated into their own languages. On the one hand, in demonstrating her faith in God, in her determination to overcome all obstacles, and in her single-minded campaign to win over native Americans to her beliefs, Muller was typical of hundreds of Catholic and Protestant missionaries who had been coming to South America since the sixteenth century. On the other, as a woman working largely on her own, she was unique, and her early successes during the era of Violencia in Colombia were truly remarkable.

Those who met her were impressed by her strong charismatic personality that was combined with a simplistic theology. On the one hand, her teaching the Indians to read and write empowered them to feel it was all right to be proud to be indigenous, and she organized the tribes and gave them a plan for living. On the other hand, she condemned their traditional social and religious practices, labeling them as evil forms of devil worship. She prohibited indigenous music, dances, fermented drinks, and traditional medicines because they were from the "devil." She especially targeted the shamans and chant owners and urged that they be ostracized from their kin groups. She likewise reviled non-indigenous traders and Catholic priests as "devils."

Muller's legacy is indeed controversial. Setting aside the issue of competing religious ideologies, scholars disagree on whether her efforts were a help or a disaster for the Indians. In 1976 the Matallana Comisión sponsored by

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41 Muller, *His Voice Shakes*, 196.

42 [www.thevoiceinthewilderness.org](http://www.thevoiceinthewilderness.org)

the Ministerio de Defensa Nacional investigated SIL and the NTM and observed that Muller's "teaching and demands on the Indians determined that they would remain in a state of prostration, misery, ignorance and illness, convinced that this was the situation that pleased God." "The work of señorita Sofia Muller," it continued, "has been absolutely negative and with grave consequences for the economic, social and cultural development of the numerous Indian communities that she has controlled for thirty years without the intervention of the Colombian State," and it concluded, "The state must put an end to her activities."<sup>43</sup>

Today the many Indian groups that agree with the view of the Comisión are working to revive the traditional cultural practices that Muller eradicated. There are others, however, that continue to celebrate her efforts.<sup>44</sup> As Robin Wright observes, the latter group cannot forget that Muller trained hundred of Indian pastors and, directly or indirectly, planted evangelical churches in scores of communities throughout the region. "Even in areas which she never again visited—such as the Icana, Cuiary, and Airy—the Indians still today guard a well-lit place in their memory of the early days of the millenarian enthusiasm which she had helped to revive."<sup>45</sup> María Fernanda Aristizabal, a government lawyer working on behalf of indigenous rights in Guainía, adds that Muller "helped instill pride in many indigenous people who had become downtrodden through the exploitation they experienced at the hands of outsiders." Moreover, she changed the balance between the indigenous and non-indigenous traders and was also responsible for replacing much of the violence waged between indigenous tribes with a peaceful process for addressing problems. Assessing this evidence it is difficult not to agree with Aristizabal's conclusion that at least in the Department of Guainía, whether for good or evil, Sophie Muller was the most influential person of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>46</sup>

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43 José Joaquín Matallana Bermúdez, "Ministerio de defensa nacional comisión especial de reconocimiento y verificación," *Boletín de Antropología*, (Universidad de Antioquia), IV:15 (1976): 73-4.

44 In an article, "The Amazing Sophie Muller: Tale of a Missionary in Colombia," the author, Felicity Dale, the granddaughter of a shaman who worked closely with Muller, was a child when Sophie lived in her village. Writing in 2008 she recalled that Sophie was "a woman totally given over to walking with God," and went on to relate several supernatural incidents in which Muller was involved. <http://adventure.wrecked.org/?filename=the-amazing-sophie-muller> accessed March 13, 2012.

45 Wright, *Cosmos*, 244.

46 Cited by Leech, "The Ongoing Pacification," 4.



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