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ON THE COVER

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LUKANKA

Lukanka is a Miskito word for “thoughts”

Leslie Korn, Ph.D., MPH
Editor in Chief

Curating a journal of global Indigenous voices is a journey filled with surprises and unexpected gifts from unseen places. The contributions for the 2025 Winter Issue form a cohesive journal issue, weaving together common themes of Traditional Ecological Knowledge and activist scholars participating in and reflecting on efforts to maintain sovereignty over land and natural resources.

In this issue, contributors responded to our general call for papers, exploring topics within the broader field of Indigenous human ecology. These topics include access to natural resources, international legal mechanisms, the connection to land, and the roles of resilience, activism, and the arts in preserving Indigenous territories and sustaining traditional ways of life.

The first paper is a seminal chapter by **Rudolph Rýser, Ph.D.**, which lays the groundwork for understanding the dynamic relationships between nations and states in the context of Indigenous environmental rights and practical considerations. Rýser emphasizes the critical need for Indigenous peoples to maintain control over their lands, which harbor the world’s last remaining natural resources. These resources are essential for Indigenous communities’ survival and global ecological balance.

The chapter explores the role of negotiations and strategies to prevent further invasions and resource extraction, framing these actions as vital to preserving Indigenous sovereignty and environmental sustainability. Ryser’s thesis calls for a profound reimagination of the relationships between state actors and Indigenous nations. It urges Indigenous leaders to assert their rights and sovereignty in the international arena. He envisions a future where collaboration replaces exploitation and the rights of Indigenous nations are fully recognized and respected in global governance frameworks.

Mohammed Enaikele, Ph.D., and Suleiman Momoh explore a fundamental Indigenous value: naming peoples and places is integral to preserving identity. In their paper, they investigate the influence of Islam on Indigenous naming practices among the Etsako people in present-day Nigeria, examining how these changes have been reshaping Indigenous identity across generations. This raises essential perspectives on how religions, often used as tools of colonization, influence Indigenous peoples.

Longtime *Fourth World Journal* contributor and Soviet Union scholar **Joseph Fallon, MIA**, delves into the Soviet Union’s systematic efforts, beginning with the Bolsheviks, to

homogenize and erase Indigenous peoples and their identities. Fallon's analysis reinforces the enduring resilience of Indigenous peoples, who, as Dr. Rudolph Ryser often asserted, form the bedrock of humanity. Despite the actions of state systems and ideological frameworks, Indigenous identities, though submerged under political rule, endure and persist, deeply rooted in cultural memory and tradition.

Land and its resources are at the heart of the struggle for Indigenous rights. Without land, Indigenous peoples lose their homes, their rights, and their access to vital resources. Yet it is this very land that state governments and corporations covet. **Mrinal Debnath, EdD**, provides a deeply human perspective on the destabilizing effects of land grabbing on the people of Palashpur, a remote village in Bangladesh. This story is just one of thousands of similar struggles unfolding worldwide. Debnath takes us through the historical collusion of colonizing forces that have set the stage for the current crisis in the region, highlighting the failure of existing laws to protect communities and prevent further exploitation.

Debnath eloquently describes land grabbing as a fundamental disruption of the "rhythm of life," a balance of body, mind, and spirit essential for well-being. When this rhythm is broken, it leads to profound trauma—both personal and communal. Through his analysis, Debnath illuminates the critical link between land, identity, and resilience, urging readers to confront the global implications of these ongoing violations.

With a shared history of British colonial rule, like the people of Palashpur in Bangladesh, **Zafar Khan, Ph.D.**, examines the story of the Pashtun people in northern Pakistan and their resilience in employing cultural practices to combat the effects of climate change. The history of colonial exploitation is the legacy of foreign domination, and distrust of external systems continues to shape their responses to modern challenges. The Pashtun are asserting their traditional knowledge to address environmental changes, drawing strength from their cultural heritage. The author briefly touches on the critically important issue of women's marginalized role in Pashtun society. This raises the need for a critical analysis of Indigenous values and practices that contribute to women's oppression, highlighting the tension between cultural preservation and gender equity. Addressing these dynamics is essential for prioritizing women's sovereignty and cultural sovereignty, fostering a more inclusive and sustainable path forward for Pashtun society.

If the themes of this journal issue have thus far underscored the pervasive disregard for institutional governance and legal frameworks, **Marine Gauthier, MS**, brings back our focus to Africa. In this context, even well-intentioned efforts like the REDD+ initiative (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), which aims to combat climate change, fail to consider the needs of Indigenous peoples adequately. What might seem like a noble effort at climate healing often overlooks the voices and priorities of those most closely connected to the land.

Gauthier argues that Indigenous decision-making must precede any initiative involving their lands and practices. She emphasizes that women's contributions, far from being relegated to the margins as "women's issues," are central to addressing the community's needs. True sustainability, she asserts, cannot be achieved without integrating the perspectives and leadership of Indigenous women into the broader framework of environmental and social solutions.

Moving west, **Laura Corradi, MA**, reflects on her involvement in the Siekopai Nation's landmark victory over their territories in the Ecuadorian Amazon region. This article is presented in English, Spanish, and Corradi's native Italian, emphasizing the global relevance of this achievement. Corradi situates this intergovernmental agreement within the broader context of international resolutions and agreements, highlighting its significance as a potential model for negotiated relationships between Indigenous peoples' rights, land stewardship, and state governments. While the victory marks a critical step forward, it raises questions about how these legal agreements will manifest in practice, warranting close monitoring to ensure they result in meaningful outcomes for the Siekopai Nation and their land.

CWIS intern **Robert Hansell** undertook a literature review complemented by selected case studies, a glossary, and web resources as part of his graduate studies. *Fourth World Journal* is proud to present this student research as part of our commitment to mentoring rising activist scholars.

This comprehensive review notes the essential inclusion of gender in knowledge production related to Indigenous food sovereignty. Hansell highlights the vital role that traditional food systems play in maintaining cultural coherence and serving as a defense against what I previously referred to in my FWJ article, "Burying the Umbilicus" (Summer 2014), as *nutrition trauma*. This term describes the disruption of access to endemic, natural food resources caused by external forces, leading to the introduction of foreign foods that are often ill-suited to the local population's biochemistry. Such disruptions can result in chronic illnesses previously rare or unknown, underscoring the critical importance of preserving Indigenous food systems in the face of ecological and cultural challenges.

In the final paper of this *Fourth World Journal* issue, **Peter Petkovsek, MFA**, explores the expression of Mapuche cosmovision and (new) animism through stage performance. The work tells a powerful story of resilience and environmental significance, using diverse arts and cross-cultural collaboration to bring the narrative to life.

Petkovsek shares the story of the performance, the creative process, and the artful outcomes, all grounded in the values of respect and reciprocity with nature, highlighting the enduring relevance of ancient traditional stories. These narratives serve as a persistent cultural stream that nourishes the community's vision and reinforces its connection to heritage and the environment. The paper also exemplifies the fruitful outcomes of communication and collaboration across

cultures, illustrating how shared creative efforts can transcend boundaries and inspire meaningful connections.

Martha Schmidt, LL.M., a human rights attorney and CWIS board member, confronts the complexities of international law, which is frequently crafted without the input of Indigenous peoples. Even when such laws are developed with Indigenous peoples' contributions, they often remain constrained by structural frameworks that marginalize Indigenous communities. In her book review, Schmidt examines Shea Elizabeth Esterling's recent book, *Indigenous Cultural Property and International Law: Restitution,*

Rights and Wrongs, a significant addition to the literature.

Schmidt asks critical questions such as how international law serves—or fails to serve—Indigenous peoples. Through this lens, she explores the challenges and shortcomings of current legal frameworks while highlighting the need for more inclusive and equitable approaches to Indigenous cultural property and rights.



Leslie Korn, Ph.D., MPH
Editor in Chief

CHANGE DESTINIES



The more one gives,
the wealthier one becomes

Traditional Salish Wisdom

Biodiversity Wars

International Relations and the Fourth World

By Rudolph C. Rýser, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

This is the first part of Chapter 2 of Rudolph Rýser's book, *Biodiversity Wars: Coexistence or Biocultural Collapse in the 21st Century*, which he was writing at the time of his passing. This chapter examines the dynamics of international relations and biodiversity, focusing on how the relationships between indigenous nations and modern states have shaped the sustainability of ecosystems and cultures around the world. Rýser explores the definitions and distinctions between the cultural heritage of nations and the ethos of states, emphasizing how these differing frameworks impact their interactions and the ongoing struggle for biodiversity and cultural preservation. Drawing a contrast between "corporate states" and "Fourth World Nations," Rýser argues that the former can act in overconsumptive and aggressive ways despite the existence of alternative *kálhaculture* practices, or methods of sustenance that balance the demands of the human and natural worlds. This chapter also introduces the "temporal pause" prompted by the creation of the Westphalian system and the global breakdowns it has incurred as a result of resource exploitation. As a result, it is imperative that states and nations re-evaluate the international system, opening mutual political opportunity among actors.

Keywords: Biodiversity Wars, international relations, biodiversity, indigenous nations, modern states, cultural heritage, *kálhaculture* practices, corporate states, Fourth World Nations, Westphalian system, resource exploitation, sustainability, ecosystems, cultural preservation, overconsumption, alternative methods of sustenance

A General Theory of International Relations

Human dependence on the Earth's life-supporting ecosystems requires sustained accessibility to plant-based and animal-based sources of food, medicines and materials for

shelter as well as daily comforts. All human survival depends on the sustained availability of biological and botanical diversity. The actions and choices taken by human beings, therefore, directly influence the enduring availability of the Earth's life support systems. While individual and community choices and activities most surely can

Figure 1*Two men catch fish in a river.*

alter the character and makeup of ecosystems, the extent to which nations constructively engage each other and whether states and nations carry on constructive relations has determined the sustainability of Earth's life support systems. The pursuit of sustenance, control over lands, wealth, and power by nations and states in just the last 300 years has profoundly diminished biodiversity throughout the world and, importantly, the diversity of peoples. International relations have become increasingly unbalanced to the degree that states have come to dominate the international landscape, reducing the world's nations to subordinate peoples, though their role is essential to ensuring the sustainability of ecosystems in the face of unrestrained development and consumption practiced by the world's states.

Inspecting the nature of relations between nations and states in pursuit of mutual coexistence and comity is needed. One will see that without constructive and respectful political and diplomatic relations between the more than 5000 nations and the 206 states, the risk of biological diversity collapse accelerates, hazarding the collapse of all human societies. Relations between nations, as with relations between states, are defined by normally accepted practices and by mutually agreed rules. It is by virtue of this simple formulation that human societies have long engaged with each other. But if there are two broadly defined systems of norms and rules of conduct that separate nations and states, the conditions are then created for perpetual conflict—and, yes—wars.

Biodiversity Wars between nations and states are being carried out in the 21st century worldwide at the expense of diverse ecosystems and diverse cultures. Biodiversity and biocultural diversity are being destroyed. These wars can only be brought to an end if indigenous nations and the states formed on top of them can bridge the gap between their systems of legal and political norms. From the elimination of the wide gap, nations and states must find mutual coexistence within a framework of comity—a mutually respected law.

Recognizing this gap between nation-based and state-based legal systems calls on us to inspect the two systems in an effort to find a basis for coexistence. Establishing a balance between the two systems is essential to comity between nations and states and reversing the adverse effects of unrestrained development on biodiversity. The success of respectful relations between the world's nations and states has and shall determine whether diverse life on the planet will continue. We will go through the process in this chapter, examining how these systems have developed and where they may function in common.

Relations between nations have been defined by customary laws since long before the early formation of modern states in the 17th century. What we now refer to as “international law” and “international relations” reflects many of the evolved and accepted customary laws developed in pre-state nations and later adapted to the newly formed states—in the world mainly understood to exist before the middle 17th century. States introduced as strict hierarchical polities were formed out of “dukedom” to end the Thirty Years’ War¹ in Europe. They borrowed from the experiences of nations to structure their internal laws and, ultimately, the rules for conducting relations between the emerging states. States were thus formed as artificial constructs setting up fixed boundaries, internally defined universal laws, exercising a monopoly on the use of violence, designating a single person as the “sovereign,” and formalizing the requirement that “neighboring states” must recognize each state to legitimize their existence. Nation-based law—the rules by which nations operate—and state-based law—the rules by which states operate—came into existence, with states slowly presuming dominance and subordinating nations, usually applying their monopoly on force and asserting

¹ Europe's war between the Roman Catholic Austro-Spanish Habsburgs and the Protestant French Bourbons between 1618 and 1648 involving numerous nations engaged in combat over religion, dynastic control, territorial rights, and commercial rivalries resulted in an estimated military and civilian deaths in the range of 4.5 million to 8 million. The deceased were killed less by military engagement than by disease and starvation. Numerous other conflicts in Europe were conducted coincidentally, before and after the Thirty Years' War. Battles between various competing forces struck at towns and principalities located throughout the Holy Roman Empire, embracing territories and peoples from France to the west, the Swiss Confederation and the Republic of Venice to the South, the Ottoman Empire to the southeast, and Poland to the north-east—virtually all of what we would now recognize as central Europe. The Holy Roman Empire consisted of about 1,800 tiny estates owned by families of Imperial Knights, to whom the Roman Church granted various attributes of sovereignty. Territories won and lost, for example, between the combatting forces included Alsace and Metz, transferred to French control, Upper Palatinate to Bavaria, and the territories of Eastern Pomerania, Magdeburg Halberstadt, Cleves, and Mark to Brandenburg. Meanwhile, claims by combatant parties also engaged over religious adherents to extend the influence of the Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Hussite minorities, and Calvinists. The centrality of religions would determine the future existence of the Holy Roman Empire led by Ferdinand II, who served as the king of Bohemia, seeking to impose Roman Catholic absolutism through his. The Protestants objected to Ferdinand's overbearing insistence. Scholars credit the Treaty of Westphalia that brought the Thirty Years' War to a close for establishing the concept of state territorial sovereignty. In addition to territorial transfers to France, Sweden, and Bavaria sovereignty, the United Provinces of the Netherlands and the Swiss Confederation rose to become independent republics.

claims to land. This division has evolved into a long-term contest between nations and states directly bearing on the sustainability of natural environments and the sustainability of nations. It is in this context that one begins to recognize one aspect of Biodiversity Wars—the gap between nation-based law pursuing “balance” between human beings and the natural environment and state-based law pursuing dominance of human beings over the natural world.

To be clear, basing the conduct of international relations on the internal customary laws of nations may also be understood as nation-based international law. Where states conduct international relations, they, too, base their actions and rules on internal laws that can be understood as state-based international law. One would think that since the “internal/external” legal processes appear to be the same, indigenous nations and internationally recognized states would conduct international relations in the same way. They do not. The differences in the conduct of international relations directly bear upon the sustainability of biodiversity and the continuity of indigenous nations. When either nations or states fail to respect natural life, all life is at risk. To better understand the nature of contentions between nations and states affecting biodiversity it is important to examine the two systems, where they converge, and where they depart. It is where these systems depart that contention defines biodiversity wars.

In the [opening Chapter](#), I established that the first subject of this volume is that indigenous nations must be understood to be “peoples,” or

different peoples around the world. “Peoples” is merely a different term of reference for “nations.” They are not States and they are not minorities or ethnic minorities in states.

There are “nation-states” ruled by nations (i.e., Vanuatu, Timor-Leste, Croatia, Iceland) and nations engaged in self-rule within but not in control of a state. The state and the nation and the nation-state all play a dramatic political role in determining the use and abuse of Earth’s life support systems. The subject of this volume is that the life support system on which all of humanity depends is sustained in part by international comity between nations and states and human respect for life that is comprised of all of the life-giving flora, fauna (including human beings), waters, rocks, and soils of the planet. These two subjects are joined out of necessity: Each is dependent on the other for the continuing existence of distinct peoples and diverse ecosystems. While it is true that the Earth can do without human beings, the reverse of that view must be well understood: human beings cannot survive without the natural life of the planet. The peoples responsible and able to ensure the continuity of diverse ecological systems through the practice of cultures and rules are the peoples—indigenous peoples—whose cultures have adapted over thousands of years to the changes common throughout the natural world. Nations generally have rules embedded in their cultures that impose controls on human behavior toward the natural world, and these concepts are expressed domestically and internationally. The ethos of states concerning biodiversity is

expressed in international law as sustainability and development, but the rules so enshrined tend to be aspirational but without controls or enforcement. The divide between nations and states directly contributes to confrontations, risking the lives of the peoples of each nation and humanity generally and the ecosystems on which they depend.

While 76% of the world's human population has become mainly dependent on consumerism and cultivated—commercially produced—foods and medicines applying the ethos of development, the other 24% (Fourth World [indigenous] peoples) has largely practiced cultures that draw foods and medicines from the natural fecundity of flora and fauna across the lands and in the rivers and seas through the application of the laws of their cultures. The ethos of development seeks, by its own definition, to dominate and extract short-term wealth from the natural world, whereas the laws of indigenous cultures work to balance human needs against the capacity of the natural world to restore itself over the long term. As the adverse effects of human-induced climate change envelop human societies throughout the world, it is evident that the ethos of development has reached its limits and can no longer benefit growing human populations without causing their collective destruction. Economic and military encroachments into Fourth World territories

launched by states and their sub-agents pressure increases daily on Fourth World peoples to “step aside or die” to make rich, undeveloped regions of the world available to the corporate states that persist in their demands for unrestrained development and conversion of natural life into commercial products.

Between Ethos and Culture

A dramatic confrontation between the ethos of development and the culture of balance has been playing out over the last twenty-five generations as a political and violent contest for access to and use of lands and resources in Fourth World territories between the two contenders: corporate states and Fourth World nations. Nations collapse when they set aside their cultural laws and pursue aggressive dominance of other nations and the natural world. In the experience of indigenous nations, states must come to recognize that they, too, risk collapsing and disappearing from the planet from the same conduct.

Now, we must discuss the political and legal framework within which Fourth World nations and their culture-based² natural law and political practices exist. I place nation-based law alongside the corporate states and the state ethos of “positivist”³ legal and political practices. The differences are stark between the nations and the states, accounting for the struggle between

² Culture—the dynamic and evolving relationship between a people and their relationship to the land and their cosmos. Relationships between people, the land and what is on the land and the cosmos essentially define and determine human interactions and have so influenced those interactions for tens of thousands of years.

³ The notion that one can “posit” or simply assert or set out a concept or idea that forms the basis of a legal or political argument. One invents such concepts or ideas in one’s mind, and when accepted by other reasoning individuals, they become the “rules of the road” on which others are expected to base their moral actions. Such rules, the guiding ideals, are the basis for ethos, which members of a community are expected to follow as if in a “consensus trance.”

them over sustaining biodiversity or breaking down the diversity of the natural world. Within the political context, nations and states engage in warm wars (political confrontations) and hot wars (violent confrontations resulting in deaths and displacement of populations). The states take actions in the form of colonization and the use of force to dominate, incorporate, or eliminate Fourth World nations to gain unfettered access to land and raw materials. Nations and states occupy much of the same territorial space and the same political space where decisions are made. This is mainly due to the incomplete decolonization process where “nonself-governing peoples” were recognized by states’ governments in the 1940s to have the right of self-government—to form and govern their own state, become associated with existing states as self-governing or to simply absorb into an existing state. Seven hundred and fifty million people in what became 80 new states chose independence after 1945. Left unresolved was the status of 1.3 billion people in nations located inside the boundaries of 206 existing states not included in the decolonization process. It is in this context where the nation and state conflict over biodiversity and sustainability is being waged today. The international political and legal framework is the possible mechanism for mediating these confrontations.

State-based international law is the mechanism we are all used to dealing with since it dominates international discourse and sets

the rules for conduct between states. Nation-based international law—not so well known in the public discourse—is also a mechanism that serves to mediate relations between indigenous nations, and to a limited degree the conduct of relations between nations and states. It is to the political framework and the legal framework we now turn to as we inspect the nature of state and nation conflicts that directly bear upon the biodiversity war.

Are Fourth World peoples (“indigenous peoples” is used interchangeably) “stewards” of the natural world? One could make that argument and thus romanticize the actual pragmatic relationship between Fourth World peoples and the natural world. Dependence on the natural world requires a practical commitment to sustain that world for personal nourishment and renewal. But the truth is that long-evolved cultural practices aimed at balancing human needs against the capacity of the Earth to reproduce life stand as a natural law that nations must realistically respect to ensure their sustained survival—sustain the diversity of the biological world and indigenous peoples themselves are sustained. Some nations do not follow this maxim, but rather aggressively act as predators of the land and other nations. It is thus that we come to understand that nations and states can act in ways contrary to the idea that they must limit their demands for resources or consume natural life so as to ensure Earth’s sustained and diverse natural life.

Figure 2

An indigenous woman from a local cooperative cultivates Moringa in the Tristao Islands, Guinea.



Note. From *Guinea - Rural Women's Cooperative Generates Income and Improves Community Life* [Photography collection], by Joe Saade, UN Women, 2016, Flickr. (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/unwomen/31122748904/in/album-72157687904332271>). CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Many Nations as a Complex of Diversity

The diversity of indigenous cultures is nearly unfathomable. More than 5000 distinct nations are spread across the planet, reflecting the ingenious and successful adaptations human beings have made to the infinitely varied ecosystems that support life—a process that began millions of years ago but accelerated over the last 50,000 years or so. The cultural adjustments made to differing ecosystems by each successful community and its descendants, as well as to varied climate conditions and the changing flora and fauna, stand as testimony to the power of culture and the enduring flexibility

of peoples. Cultural adaptation to natural change to achieve and regain balance accounts for the success of biodiversity and human beings as part of that diversity. Where nations fail to adapt to the natural environment, life becomes impossible.

The complexity of human cultures and the ecological systems in which they thrive is clearer when one considers that indigenous peoples inhabit deserts, rain forests, savannas, frozen tundra, tropical islands, icy valleys, mountains, and deep gorges, among many different ecosystems. Indigenous nations inhabit some of the richest and most fertile lands in the world such as the region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in eastern Syria and Northern Iraq and the most arid regions including the Sahara Desert.

The very richness and diversity of life in the natural world is reflected in human diversity—cultural responses to the environment as demonstrated in the practice of *kálhaculture*⁴. It is such a wonder that human beings are like so many other animals and plants. That they are so different is even more remarkable when one considers how much indigenous peoples are the same—they tend most of the time to respect the natural environment and exploit it only to the extent that the earth can replenish. They all practice *kálhaculture* to some degree. They depend on plant and animal-based foods and medicines obtained from the natural environment

⁴ The word *Kálhaculture* is derived from two words. The first is an Oneida word for “forest or woods,” and the second word is from the Latin meaning “worshiping Earth” or tending to the earth. I have introduced this word to help readers understand the concept of balanced use of nature that indigenous peoples carry out every day.

and they may also practice various forms of agriculture while balancing the relationship between human need and the earth's capacity to restore natural life. Despite the exploitive and encroachment practices of concentrated metropolitan societies, indigenous peoples rely on *kálhaculture* for 80%-90% of their nutrition to as little as 20%. The practice of *kálhaculture* is essential to sustaining biodiversity around the world. The failure to practice this method of harvesting from nature forces the collapse of human and other animal and plant species. *Kálhaculture* is a method of food and medicine harvesting and restoring that ensures biodiversity and bio-cultural diversity—a balance between the natural world and human demands—the root of which is “natural law.”

International Relations—the Ancient Art

The common understanding for mediating the differences between the unrestrained development by states and their subentities (corporations, transnational religions, etc.) and Fourth World nations seeking to ensure the balance between human beings and the natural world falls to the ancient art of international relations. Understanding how nations relate to each other and how they relate to the various states is an important part of the story of Biodiversity Wars. In Chapter 3 that follows, you will see added features of Biodiversity Wars in the conflict over self-determination and territorial control. Both of these factors figure prominently in international relations and the conduct of Biodiversity Wars. For it is when international relations—mutually accepted rules of conduct—

break down that economic, political, and military violence step to the fore. Here we will examine international relations in its various forms and the foundation for international relations: nation-based international law and state-based international law. The challenge is to find a bridge between international relations and the two legal systems to establish a meeting at the “forest’s edge.” This is the point where Fourth World nations and corporate states must meet to end the war.

International Relations in the Temporal Pause

Since the 17th century, the engagement of newly formed states and nations of long-standing have remained in a “temporal pause.” The temporal pause has been a time when the rules for conduct in the international environment and in relation to the conduct of peoples and the earth's natural life have been out of balance—the radical shift from nation rules of conduct to state rules of conduct. At the beginning of the 21st century, a shift toward a new balance may be underway where nation-based international law and state-based international law together move toward a balance that will ultimately equalize relations between nations and states. Such a balance may then permit effective dialogue and joint action by nations and states to roll back the adverse effects of climate change and, importantly, reestablish the balance between peoples and the natural environment to sustain biodiversity and biocultural diversity (human diversity).

While it had been true that nations long dominated international relations until the 17th century, longstanding national practices

for relations between peoples were interrupted with the advent of the formation of states. The Treaty of Westphalia (1648), mediated by the Roman Catholic Church in Europe, established rigid definitions for states that would be applied throughout the world. From the time these few states were formed, they were defined as having hierarchical political structures, fixed boundaries, the monopoly over the means and exercise of force (police or military violence internally or externally), and the requirement to join the “club of states” through mutual recognition. In other words, it would be necessary for other states to recognize the new entity and the sovereignty of its leader for the state to have legitimacy. However, this new regime had profound consequences for nations around the world as the state model ruled by central authority became the standard for human organization and the means for establishing domination over nations and their territories. States proved to be ravenous consumers of raw materials in the spirit of the Roman Empire and other empires following. Colonization and unrestrained exploitation of people and nations’ territories that the laws of nations had long observed were swept away, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries—and with profound consequences for all of humanity in the 20th century.

National laws were being replaced by state-based laws through imperial and state colonization. What had been a global environment dominated by nation-based law was, for a very short time, equally balanced with emerging state-based law. As state-based laws became the dominant set of rules for the

conduct of relations between states, nations were subordinated to the states—to the point of peoples becoming subordinate populations inside settler states.

I refer to the “temporal pause” as a 372-year period of struggle between nations and states that has produced severe damage to both nations and states and, certainly, to the natural environment. What began as local and extended religious wars between kingdoms and “dukedom” in the 1618 “Holy Roman Empire” (made up mostly of what is now Germany) where the Roman Catholic Church was challenged by the Protestantism of Luther came to an end in 1648 with two treaties that would be known as the Treaty of Westphalia. The treaty that was arduously negotiated produced the structure of what we now know as the modern state system and a new framework for international relations.

The “Westphalian World” served reasonably well to stabilize relations between peoples around the world though the system began to break down in startling ways as new states were formed to exploit limited resources in the 20th century at the beginning of the 21st century. With the collapse of many states⁵, the conduct of world wars, and the advent of global breakdowns from climate change, excessive and unrestricted human development. What was once clearly

⁵ Ottoman Turkey, Japan, Pomerania, Silesia, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and now the DR of the Congo, Libya, Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia, Syria, Chad, Central African Republic, Lebanon, Venezuela, Afghanistan. While the names of these states in some cases have been recovered and the state reformed, others have been absorbed and disappeared completely. Perhaps 30 of the world’s states in Central Africa, West Asia, and South America qualify as collapsed or dysfunctional.

understood and described as normal in everyday life is no longer certain or even real. The sense of permanence and stability engendered by such a condition is lost and replaced by a sense of anxiety and fear. It is just these conditions that indicate that the relations between nations and states are in a temporal pause. It is just in such times that great shifts take place in human history. Assumptions on which people, nations, and states have acted in the past are no longer adequate, suitable, or valid. The sense of “knowing what to do” escapes public officials, and the leaderless mobs’ fear begins to rise. In international relations and practice, one readily sees a growing tension locally, regionally, and globally.

In much the same way individuals and families relate to each other, nations and states conduct themselves according to customary practices called norms and various rules called laws. There is nothing really mysterious about the process of human interaction—it evolves as custom as a way of ordering society. Customary practices between nations and between states evolved from internal customs and are intended to bring order to the conduct of relations between polities.

As we examine the conduct of nations and states in their international relations, we are confronted with manifest crises of biodiversity collapse, out-of-control human-caused climate

change, the unrestrained destruction of indigenous peoples, and growing incidents of zoonotic disease resulting from unrestrained human exploitation of natural life reaching deeper and deeper into rainforests and other forests formerly left undisturbed by massive human interference. The human-created crises threaten human life the world over—all of human life.

We need to pause to consider relations between nations and states and to consider new pathways for the conduct of nation and state relations to allow for dialogue and the establishment of new mechanisms to halt the destruction of diverse ecosystems and cultures. However, the conduct of constructive relations between nations and states based in comity is now virtually non-existent— though the United Nations has opened a crack in the door to constructive relations with tentative invitations to nations to sit in meetings where human rights policies are being discussed. This circumstance requires us to inspect nation-based legal systems and state-based legal systems to identify the most likely alternatives for mutual dialogue and constructive action by nations and states. We need to consider the urgency of opening direct and respectful dialogue where nations and states share authority on an equal political plain. Such a condition is essential for mutual coexistence.

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Dr. Rudolph C. Ryser (1946-2023) grew to maturity in the Cowlitz Indian culture on the US Pacific Northwest coast, though he is of Cree/Oneida descent on his mother's side and Swiss descent on his father's. He earned his doctorate in international relations at the Union Institute and University, where he was honored with the Distinguished Alumni Award in 2020. He founded the Center for World Indigenous Studies in 1979 and served as Board Chair and Executive Director until his death. He is the author of the seminal book *Indigenous Nations and Modern States: The Political Emergence of Nations Challenging State Power* (2012), the Fourth World Geopolitical Reader, and numerous journal articles and policy white papers, and was at work on a new book, *Biodiversity Wars, Coexistence or Biocultural Collapse in the 21st Century*. For more than fifty years, he worked in the field of Indian Affairs as a writer/researcher/advisor to political leaders of Fourth World nations throughout the world.

Guerras por la biodiversidad

Relaciones internacionales y el Cuarto Mundo

By Rudolph C. Rýser, Ph.D.

Traducción al español por Yesenia Cortés

ABSTRACT

Ésta es la primera parte del Capítulo 2 del libro de Rudolph Rýser, *Guerras por la biodiversidad: coexistencia o colapso biocultural en el siglo XXI*, que el autor estaba escribiendo antes de su fallecimiento. Este capítulo examina la dinámica de las relaciones internacionales y la biodiversidad, centrándose en cómo las relaciones entre las naciones indígenas y los estados modernos han definido la sostenibilidad de los ecosistemas y las culturas de todo el mundo. Rýser explora las definiciones y distinciones entre el patrimonio cultural de las naciones y el ethos de los estados, destacando cómo estos dos marcos diferentes afectan las interacciones entre ellos y la lucha actual por la biodiversidad y la conservación cultural. Trazando un contraste entre los «estados corporativos» y las «Naciones del Cuarto Mundo», Rýser argumenta que los primeros pueden actuar de forma excesivamente consumista y agresiva a pesar de la existencia de prácticas alternativas de *kálhacultura*, o métodos de sustento que equilibran las demandas de los mundos humano y natural. Este capítulo también introduce la «pausa temporal» provocada por la creación del sistema westfaliano y las rupturas globales en las que ha incurrido como resultado de la explotación de los recursos. Como resultado, es imperativo que los estados y las naciones reevalúen el sistema internacional, para abrir oportunidades políticas entre los diferentes actores.

Palabras clave: Guerras por la biodiversidad, relaciones internacionales, biodiversidad, naciones indígenas, estados modernos, patrimonio cultural, prácticas de *kálhacultura*, estados corporativos, Naciones del Cuarto Mundo, sistema westfaliano, explotación de recursos, sostenibilidad, ecosistemas, preservación cultural, consumo excesivo, métodos alternativos de sustento

Una teoría general de las relaciones internacionales

La dependencia humana hacia los ecosistemas de la Tierra que sustentan la vida requiere una accesibilidad prolongada a fuentes de alimentos,

medicinas y materiales de origen vegetal y animal para refugio, así como para las comodidades diarias. Toda la supervivencia humana depende de la disponibilidad prolongada de diversidad biológica y botánica. Por lo tanto, las acciones y elecciones adoptadas por los seres humanos

Figura 1*Dos hombres pescan en un río.*

influyen directamente en la disponibilidad duradera de los sistemas que sustentan la vida en la Tierra. Si bien las elecciones y actividades individuales y comunitarias seguramente pueden alterar el carácter y la composición de los ecosistemas, la medida en que las Naciones se involucran constructivamente entre sí; y el hecho de que los Estados y las Naciones mantengan relaciones constructivas es lo que ha determinado la sostenibilidad de los sistemas de soporte vital de la Tierra. La búsqueda de sustento, control sobre las tierras, riqueza y poder por parte de las Naciones y los Estados tan solo en los últimos 300 años ha disminuido profundamente la biodiversidad en todo el mundo; y, lo que es más importante, la diversidad de los pueblos. Las relaciones internacionales se han vuelto cada vez más desequilibradas hasta el punto de que los Estados han llegado a dominar el panorama internacional, reduciendo a las

Naciones del mundo a pueblos subordinados, aunque su papel es esencial para garantizar la sostenibilidad de los ecosistemas frente al desarrollo y el consumo desenfrenados practicados por los Estados del mundo.

Es necesario inspeccionar la naturaleza de las relaciones entre Naciones y Estados en pos de la coexistencia y la cortesía mutuas. Porque se verá que sin relaciones políticas y diplomáticas constructivas y respetuosas entre las más de 5.000 Naciones y los 206 Estados, el riesgo de colapso de la diversidad biológica se acelera, amenazando el colapso de todas las sociedades humanas. Las relaciones entre Naciones, al igual que las relaciones entre Estados, están definidas por prácticas normalmente aceptadas y por reglas mutuamente acordadas. Es en virtud de esta sencilla formulación que las sociedades

humanas llevan mucho tiempo comprometidas entre sí. Pero si hay dos sistemas de normas y reglas de conducta ampliamente definidos que separan a Naciones y Estados, entonces se crean las condiciones para conflictos perpetuos -y sí, guerras.

En el siglo XXI, se están llevando a cabo guerras por la biodiversidad entre Naciones y Estados en todo el mundo a expensas de diversos ecosistemas y diversas culturas. La biodiversidad y la diversidad biocultural están siendo destruidas. Estas guerras solo podrán ser terminadas si las Naciones indígenas y los Estados creados sobre ellas pueden cerrar la brecha entre sus sistemas de normas legales y políticas. A partir de la eliminación de la amplia brecha, las Naciones y los Estados deben encontrar la coexistencia mutua dentro de un marco de cortesía: una ley mutuamente respetada.

Reconocer esta brecha entre los sistemas legales nacionales y estatales nos exige inspeccionar los dos sistemas en un esfuerzo por encontrar una base para la coexistencia.

Establecer un equilibrio entre los dos sistemas es esencial para la cortesía entre Naciones y Estados y para revertir los efectos adversos del desarrollo desenfrenado sobre la biodiversidad. El éxito de las relaciones respetuosas entre las Naciones y los Estados del mundo ha determinado y determinará si continuará la vida diversa en el planeta. En este capítulo, repasaremos el proceso examinando cómo se han desarrollado estos sistemas y qué áreas podrían funcionar en común.

Las relaciones entre las Naciones han estado definidas por leyes consuetudinarias desde mucho antes de la formación temprana de los Estados modernos en el siglo XVII. Lo que ahora llamamos “derecho internacional” y “relaciones internacionales” refleja muchas de las leyes consuetudinarias evolucionadas y aceptadas desarrolladas en Naciones preestatales, y luego adaptadas a los Estados recién formados -en el mundo generalmente entendido como el existente antes de mediados del siglo XVII. Los Estados introducidos como entidades políticas jerárquicas estrictas se formaron a partir de “ducados” para poner fin a la Guerra de los Treinta Años¹ en Europa. Tomaron prestado de las experiencias de

¹ La guerra europea entre los Habsburgos católicos austro-españoles y los Borbones franceses protestantes entre 1618 y 1648, en la que participaron numerosas Naciones en combate por religión, control dinástico, derechos territoriales y rivalidades comerciales, provocó una estimación de muertes militares y civiles en el rango de 4.5 millones a 8 millones. Los fallecidos murieron menos por enfrentamientos militares y más por enfermedades y hambre. Muchos otros conflictos en Europa tuvieron lugar simultáneamente, antes y después de la Guerra de los Treinta Años. Las batallas entre varias fuerzas en competencia se produjeron en ciudades y principados ubicados en todo el Sacro Imperio Romano Germánico, abarcando territorios y pueblos desde Francia al oeste, la Confederación Suiza y la República de Venecia al sur, el Imperio Otomano al sureste y Polonia al noreste: prácticamente todo lo que hoy reconoceríamos como Europa central. El Sacro Imperio Romano estaba formado por unas 1,800 pequeñas propiedades pertenecientes a familias de caballeros imperiales a los que la Iglesia Romana concedía diversos atributos de soberanía. Los territorios ganados y perdidos, por ejemplo, entre las fuerzas combatientes, incluyeron Alsacia y Metz transferidos al control francés, el Alto Palatinado a Baviera y los territorios de Pomerania Oriental, Magdeburgo, Halberstadt, Cleves y Mark a Brandeburgo. Mientras tanto, los partidos combatientes también reclamaban a los seguidores religiosos extender la influencia de los católicos romanos, los luteranos, las minorías husitas y los calvinistas. La centralidad de las religiones determinaría la existencia futura del Sacro Imperio Romano Germánico, liderado por Fernando II, quien sirvió como rey de Bohemia buscando imponer el absolutismo católico romano a través del suyo. Los protestantes se opusieron a la autoritaria insistencia de Fernando. Los académicos atribuyen el mérito al Tratado de Westfalia que puso fin a la Guerra de los Treinta Años por establecer el concepto de soberanía territorial estatal. Además de las transferencias territoriales a Francia, Suecia y Baviera, las Provincias Unidas de los Países Bajos y la Confederación Suiza se convirtieron en repúblicas independientes.

las Naciones para estructurar sus leyes internas y, en última instancia, las reglas para conducir las relaciones entre los Estados emergentes. Los Estados se formaron así como construcciones artificiales que establecían fronteras fijas, leyes universales definidas internamente, que ejercían un monopolio sobre el uso de la violencia, designaban a una sola persona como “soberano” y formalizaban el requisito de que los “Estados vecinos” debían reconocer a cada Estado para legitimar su existencia. El derecho nacional (las reglas mediante las cuales operan las Naciones) y el derecho estatal (las reglas mediante las cuales operan los Estados) surgieron cuando los Estados comenzaron poco a poco a ejercer dominio y a someter a las Naciones, imponiendo su monopolio por la fuerza y reclamando la tierra. Esta división ha evolucionado hasta convertirse en una competencia a largo plazo entre Naciones y Estados que tiene relación directa con la sostenibilidad de los entornos naturales y la sostenibilidad de las Naciones. Es en este contexto que uno comienza a reconocer un aspecto de las Guerras por la Biodiversidad: la brecha entre las leyes nacionales que buscan el “equilibrio” entre los seres humanos y el medio ambiente natural y las leyes estatales que buscan el dominio de los seres humanos sobre el mundo natural.

Para ser claros, basar la conducta de las relaciones internacionales en las leyes consuetudinarias internas de las Naciones también puede entenderse como derecho internacional basado en Naciones. Cuando los

Estados llevan a cabo relaciones internacionales, también basan sus acciones y reglas en leyes internas que pueden entenderse como derecho internacional basado en los Estados. Se podría pensar que, dado que los procesos legales “internos/externos” parecen ser los mismos, las Naciones indígenas y los Estados internacionalmente reconocidos conducirían las relaciones internacionales de la misma manera. No es así. Las diferencias en la conducción de las relaciones internacionales influyen directamente en la sostenibilidad de la biodiversidad y la continuidad de las Naciones indígenas. Cuando las Naciones o los Estados no respetan la vida natural, toda la vida está en riesgo. Para comprender mejor la naturaleza de las disputas entre Naciones y Estados que afectan la biodiversidad, es importante examinar los dos sistemas, dónde convergen y dónde se separan. Es allí donde parten estos sistemas donde la contienda define las guerras por la biodiversidad.

En el capítulo inicial establecí que el primer tema de este volumen es que las Naciones indígenas deben entenderse como “pueblos” o pueblos diferentes alrededor del mundo. “Pueblos” es simplemente un término de referencia diferente para “Naciones”. No son Estados y no son minorías ni minorías étnicas en los Estados.

Hay “Estados-nación” gobernados por Naciones (es decir, Vanuatu, Timor-Leste, Croacia, Islandia) y Naciones comprometidas con el autogobierno dentro de un Estado, pero sin

control de él. El Estado, la Nación y el Estado-Nación desempeñan un papel político dramático que determina el uso y abuso de los sistemas de soporte vital de la Tierra. El tema de este volumen es que el sistema de soporte vital del que depende toda la humanidad se sostiene en parte por la cortesía internacional entre Naciones y Estados y el respeto humano por la vida, que se compone de toda la flora y la fauna que dan vida (incluidos los seres humanos).), aguas, rocas y suelos del planeta. Estos dos temas están unidos por necesidad: cada uno depende del otro para la existencia continua de pueblos distintos y ecosistemas diversos. Si bien es cierto que la Tierra puede prescindir de los seres humanos, debe entenderse bien lo contrario de esa visión: los seres humanos no pueden sobrevivir sin la vida natural del planeta. Los pueblos responsables y capaces de asegurar la continuidad de diversos sistemas ecológicos mediante la práctica de culturas y reglas son los pueblos -pueblos indígenas- cuyas culturas se han adaptado durante miles de años a los cambios comunes en todo el mundo natural. Las Naciones generalmente tienen reglas incorporadas en sus culturas que imponen controles sobre el comportamiento humano hacia el mundo natural y estos conceptos se expresan a nivel nacional e internacional. El espíritu de los Estados respecto de la biodiversidad se expresa en el derecho internacional como sostenibilidad y desarrollo, pero las reglas así consagradas tienden a ser aspiracionales, pero sin controles ni aplicación. La división entre Naciones y Estados contribuye directamente a confrontaciones que ponen en riesgo las vidas de los pueblos de cada Nación y

de la humanidad en general y los ecosistemas de los que dependen.

Mientras que el 76% de la población humana mundial se ha vuelto principalmente dependiente del consumismo y los alimentos y medicamentos (producidos comercialmente) cultivados aplicando el ethos del desarrollo, el otro 24% (pueblos [indígenas] del Cuarto Mundo) ha practicado en gran medida culturas que extraen alimentos y medicinas de la fecundidad natural de la flora y la fauna en las tierras, en los ríos y los mares mediante la aplicación de las leyes de sus culturas. El ethos del desarrollo busca, por su propia definición, dominar y extraer riqueza a corto plazo del mundo natural, mientras que las leyes de las culturas indígenas trabajan para equilibrar las necesidades humanas con la capacidad del mundo natural de restaurarse a sí mismo a largo plazo. A medida que los efectos adversos del cambio climático inducido por el hombre envuelven a las sociedades humanas en todo el mundo, es evidente que el ethos del desarrollo ha llegado a sus límites y ya no puede beneficiar a poblaciones humanas en crecimiento sin causar su destrucción colectiva. Las invasiones económicas y militares de los territorios del Cuarto Mundo lanzadas por los Estados y sus subagentes aumentan diariamente la presión sobre los pueblos del Cuarto Mundo para que “se hagan a un lado o mueran”, para poner regiones ricas y subdesarrolladas del mundo a disposición de los Estados corporativos que persisten en sus demandas de desarrollo desenfrenado y conversión de la vida natural en productos comerciales.

Entre el ethos y la cultura

Una dramática confrontación entre el ethos del desarrollo y la cultura del equilibrio se ha estado desenvolviendo durante las últimas veinticinco generaciones, como una competencia política y violenta por el acceso y el uso de tierras y recursos en los territorios del Cuarto Mundo entre los dos contendientes: los Estados corporativos y las Naciones del Cuarto Mundo. Las Naciones colapsan cuando dejan de lado sus leyes culturales y persiguen un dominio agresivo de otras Naciones y del mundo natural. En la experiencia de las Naciones indígenas, los Estados deben llegar a reconocer que ellos también corren el riesgo de colapsar y desaparecer del planeta por la misma conducta.

Ahora debemos discutir el marco político y legal dentro del cual las Naciones del Cuarto Mundo, junto con su derecho natural basado en la cultura² y sus prácticas políticas, existen. Coloco el derecho basado en Naciones junto a los Estados corporativos y el ethos estatal de las prácticas jurídicas y políticas “positivistas”³. Las diferencias son marcadas entre las Naciones y los Estados, lo que explica la lucha entre ellos por mantener la biodiversidad o romper con la diversidad del mundo natural. Dentro del contexto político, las Naciones y los Estados participan en guerras

tibias (enfrentamientos políticos) y guerras calientes (enfrentamientos violentos que resultan en muertes y desplazamientos de poblaciones). Los Estados toman acciones en forma de colonización y del uso de la fuerza para dominar, incorporar o eliminar Naciones del Cuarto Mundo para obtener acceso ilimitado a la tierra y las materias primas. Las Naciones y los Estados ocupan gran parte del mismo espacio territorial y el mismo espacio político donde se toman las decisiones. Esto se debe principalmente al proceso de descolonización incompleto en el que los gobiernos de los Estados le reconocieron a los “pueblos no autónomos” en la década de 1940 el derecho de autogobierno: formar y gobernar su propio Estado, asociarse con Estados existentes como autónomos o simplemente absorber en un Estado existente. Setecientos cincuenta millones de personas, en lo que se convirtieron en 80 nuevos Estados eligieron la independencia después de 1945. Quedó sin resolver el estatus de 1,300 millones de personas en Naciones ubicadas dentro de las fronteras de 206 Estados existentes no incluidos en el proceso de descolonización. Es en este contexto donde hoy se libra el conflicto Nación y Estado sobre la biodiversidad y la sostenibilidad. El marco político y jurídico internacional es el posible mecanismo para mediar en estos enfrentamientos.

² Cultura: la relación dinámica y evolutiva entre un pueblo y su relación con la tierra y su cosmos. Las relaciones entre las personas, la tierra y lo que hay en ella y el cosmos definen y determinan esencialmente las interacciones humanas y han influido en esas interacciones durante decenas de miles de años.

³ La noción de que uno puede “postular” o simplemente afirmar o exponer un concepto o idea que forma la base de un argumento legal o político. Uno inventa en su mente tales conceptos o ideas y, cuando otros individuos racionales los aceptan, se convierten en las “reglas del camino” en las que se espera que otros basen sus acciones morales. Tales reglas, los ideales rectores, son la base del espíritu que se espera que los miembros de una comunidad sigan como si estuvieran en un “trance de consenso”.

El derecho internacional basado en los Estados es el mecanismo al que todos estamos acostumbrados, ya que domina el discurso internacional y establece las reglas de conducta entre los Estados. El derecho internacional basado en Naciones –no tan conocido en el discurso público– es también un mecanismo que sirve para mediar en las relaciones entre Naciones indígenas y, hasta cierto punto, en la conducción de las relaciones entre Naciones y Estados. Es al marco político y al marco legal al que ahora recurrimos cuando inspeccionamos la naturaleza de los conflictos estatales y nacionales que influyen directamente en la guerra por la biodiversidad.

¿Son los pueblos del Cuarto Mundo (“pueblos indígenas” es un término sinónimo) los “guardianes” del mundo natural? Se podría plantear ese argumento y así romantizar la relación pragmática real entre los pueblos del Cuarto Mundo y el mundo natural. La dependencia del mundo natural requiere un compromiso práctico para sostener ese mundo para el sustento y la renovación personal. Pero la verdad es que las prácticas culturales evolucionadas desde hace mucho tiempo destinadas a equilibrar las necesidades humanas con la capacidad de la Tierra para reproducir vida se erigen como una ley natural que las Naciones deben respetar de manera realista para asegurar su supervivencia prolongada: si se sostiene la diversidad del mundo biológico, los propios pueblos indígenas estarán sustentados. Algunas Naciones no siguen esta máxima, sino que actúan agresivamente como depredadores de la tierra y de otras Naciones. Es así como llegamos

a comprender que las Naciones y los Estados pueden actuar de manera contraria a la idea de que deben limitar sus demandas de recursos o del consumo de la naturaleza para asegurar la vida natural sostenida y diversa de la Tierra.

Figura 2

Una mujer indígena de una cooperativa local cultivando Moringa en las Islas Tristan, Guinea.



Nota. De Guinea - Rural Women's Cooperative Generates Income and Improves Community Life [Colección fotográfica], por Joe Saade, ONU Mujeres, 2016, Flickr. (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/unwomen/31122748904/in/album-72157687904332271>). CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Múltiples Naciones como un complejo de diversidad

La diversidad de culturas indígenas es casi insondable. Las más de 5,000 Naciones distintas están repartidas por todo el planeta y reflejan las ingeniosas y exitosas adaptaciones que los seres humanos han realizado a los infinitamente

variados ecosistemas que sustentan la vida, un proceso que comenzó hace millones de años, pero se aceleró durante los últimos 50,000 años aproximadamente. Los ajustes culturales realizados a los diferentes ecosistemas por cada comunidad exitosa y sus descendientes, así como a las diversas condiciones climáticas, y los cambios en la flora y la fauna, son testimonio del poder de la cultura y la flexibilidad duradera de los pueblos. La adaptación cultural al cambio natural para lograr y recuperar el equilibrio explica el éxito de la biodiversidad y de los seres humanos como parte de esa diversidad. Cuando las Naciones no logran adaptarse al entorno natural, la vida se vuelve imposible.

La complejidad de las culturas humanas y los sistemas ecológicos en los que prosperan es más clara si se considera que los pueblos indígenas habitan desiertos, selvas tropicales, sabanas, tundras congeladas, islas tropicales, valles helados, montañas y cañones profundos, entre muchos ecosistemas diferentes. La Nación indígena habita algunas de las tierras más ricas y fértiles del mundo, como la región entre los ríos Tigris y Éufrates en el este de Siria y el norte de Irak, y las regiones más áridas, incluido el desierto del Sahara.

La propia riqueza y diversidad de la vida del mundo natural se refleja en la diversidad humana: respuestas culturales al medio ambiente, como se demuestra en la práctica de la *kálhacultura*⁴. Es sorprendente que los seres humanos sean como tantos otros animales y plantas. Que sean tan diferentes es aún más notable si se considera hasta qué punto los pueblos indígenas son iguales: tienden la mayor

parte del tiempo a respetar el medio ambiente natural y a explotarlo solo en la medida en que la tierra puede reponerse. Todos ellos practican la *kálhacultura* hasta cierto punto. Dependen de alimentos y medicinas de origen vegetal y animal obtenidos del entorno natural y también pueden practicar diversas formas de agricultura mientras equilibran la relación entre las necesidades humanas y la capacidad de la tierra para restaurar la vida natural. A pesar de las prácticas de explotación e invasión de las sociedades metropolitanas concentradas, los pueblos indígenas dependen de la *kálhacultura* para obtener desde el 80% y el 90% de sus recursos para nutrición, hasta tan solo el 20%. La práctica de la *kálhacultura* es esencial para mantener la biodiversidad en todo el mundo. El no practicar este método de recolección de la naturaleza fuerza al colapso de las especies humanas y de otras especies animales y vegetales. La *kálhacultura* es un método de recolección y restauración de alimentos y medicinas que garantiza la biodiversidad y la diversidad biocultural, un equilibrio entre el mundo natural y las demandas humanas, cuya raíz es la “ley natural”.

Relaciones internacionales: el arte antiguo

El entendimiento común para mediar en las diferencias entre el desarrollo desenfrenado de los Estados y sus subentidades (corporaciones, religiones transnacionales, etc.) y las Naciones

⁴ La palabra *Kálhacultura* se deriva de dos palabras. La primera es una palabra Oneida que significa “bosque o bosques” y la segunda palabra proviene del latín y significa “adorar a la Tierra” o “cuidar la tierra”. He introducido esta palabra para ayudar a los lectores a comprender el concepto de uso equilibrado de la naturaleza que los pueblos indígenas realizan todos los días.

del Cuarto Mundo que buscan asegurar el equilibrio entre los seres humanos y el mundo natural, cae en el antiguo arte de las relaciones internacionales. Comprender cómo se relacionan las Naciones entre sí y cómo se relacionan con los distintos Estados es una parte importante de la historia de las guerras por la biodiversidad. En este siguiente Capítulo 3 se verán las características adicionales de las guerras por la biodiversidad en el conflicto por la autodeterminación y el control territorial. Ambos factores ocupan un lugar destacado en las relaciones internacionales y en la conducción de las guerras por la biodiversidad. Porque es cuando las relaciones internacionales (normas de conducta mutuamente aceptadas) se rompen, que la violencia económica, política y militar pasan a primer plano. Aquí examinaremos las relaciones internacionales en sus diversas formas y los fundamentos de las relaciones internacionales: el derecho internacional basado en Naciones y el derecho internacional basado en los Estados. El desafío es encontrar un puente a través de las relaciones internacionales y los dos sistemas legales para establecer un encuentro al “borde del bosque”. Este es el punto donde las Naciones del Cuarto Mundo y los Estados corporativos deben reunirse para poner fin a la guerra.

Las relaciones internacionales en la pausa temporal

Desde el siglo XVII, el compromiso de los Estados recién formados y de las Naciones de larga data ha permanecido en una “pausa temporal”. La pausa temporal ha sido un momento en el que las reglas de conducta en

el entorno internacional y en relación con la conducta de los pueblos y la vida natural de la Tierra han estado desequilibradas: el cambio radical de reglas de conducta nacionales a reglas de conducta estatales. A principios del siglo XXI puede estar en marcha un cambio hacia un nuevo equilibrio en el que el derecho internacional basado en Naciones y el derecho internacional basado en los Estados avancen juntos hacia un equilibrio que en última instancia igualará las relaciones entre Naciones y Estados. Ese equilibrio podría entonces permitir un diálogo eficaz y una acción conjunta por parte de Naciones y Estados para hacer retroceder los efectos adversos del cambio climático y, lo que es más importante, restablecer el equilibrio entre los pueblos y el medio ambiente natural para sostener la biodiversidad y la diversidad biocultural (diversidad humana).

Si bien era cierto que las Naciones dominaban durante mucho tiempo las relaciones internacionales, hasta el siglo XVII las prácticas nacionales de larga data para las relaciones entre pueblos se interrumpieron con el advenimiento de la formación de Estados. El Tratado de Westfalia (1648), mediado por la Iglesia Católica Romana en Europa, estableció definiciones rígidas para los Estados que se aplicarían en todo el mundo. Desde el momento en que se formaron estos pocos Estados, se los definió por tener estructuras políticas jerárquicas, fronteras fijas, el monopolio sobre los medios y el ejercicio de la fuerza (violencia policial o militar, interna o externa) y el requisito de unirse al “club de Estados”. “mediante el reconocimiento mutuo. En otras palabras, sería necesario que otros Estados

reconocieran la nueva entidad y la soberanía de su líder para que el Estado tuviera legitimidad. Pero este nuevo régimen tuvo profundas consecuencias para las Naciones de todo el mundo, ya que el modelo de Estado regido por la autoridad central se convirtió en el estándar para la organización humana y el medio para establecer la dominación sobre las Naciones y sus territorios. Los Estados demostraron ser consumidores voraces de materias primas en el espíritu del Imperio Romano y otros imperios posteriores. La colonización y la explotación desenfrenada de los territorios de personas y Naciones que las leyes de las Naciones habían observado durante mucho tiempo fueron eliminadas, especialmente en los siglos XVIII y XIX, y con profundas consecuencias para toda la humanidad en el siglo XX.

Las leyes nacionales estaban siendo reemplazadas por leyes estatales a través de la colonización imperial y estatal. Lo que había sido un entorno global dominado por el derecho nacional, estuvo durante muy poco tiempo igualmente equilibrado con el derecho estatal emergente. A medida que las leyes estatales se convirtieron en el conjunto dominante de reglas para la conducta de las relaciones entre Estados, las Naciones quedaron subordinadas a los Estados, hasta el punto de que los pueblos se convirtieron en poblaciones subordinadas dentro de los Estados colonizadores.

Me refiero a la “pausa temporal” como un período de 372 años de lucha entre Naciones y Estados que ha producido graves daños tanto

a Naciones como a Estados; y ciertamente, por el entorno natural. Lo que comenzó como guerras religiosas locales y extendidas entre reinos y “ducados” en el “Sacro Imperio Romano” de 1618 (compuesto principalmente por lo que hoy es Alemania), donde la Iglesia Católica Romana fue desafiada por el protestantismo de Lutero, llegó a su fin en 1648, con dos tratados que se conocerían como el Tratado de Westfalia. El tratado, que fue arduamente negociado, produjo la estructura de lo que hoy conocemos como el sistema estatal moderno y un nuevo marco para las relaciones internacionales.

El “Mundo de Westfalia” sirvió razonablemente bien para estabilizar las relaciones entre los pueblos de todo el mundo, aunque el sistema comenzó a desmoronarse de manera sorprendente a medida que se formaron nuevos Estados para explotar recursos limitados en el siglo XX a principios del siglo XXI, y con el colapso de muchos Estados⁵, la conducción de guerras mundiales y el advenimiento de crisis globales derivadas del cambio climático y del desarrollo humano excesivo e irrestricto. Lo que antes se entendía y describía claramente como normal en la vida cotidiana ya no es seguro ni real. La sensación de permanencia y estabilidad

⁵ Turquía otomana, Japón, Pomerania, Silesia, Unión de Repúblicas Socialistas Soviéticas, Yugoslavia, Checoslovaquia y ahora la República Democrática del Congo, Libia, Yemen, Sudán del Sur, Somalia, Siria, Chad, República Centroafricana, Líbano, Venezuela, Afganistán. Si bien en algunos casos se han recuperado los nombres de estos Estados y se ha reformado el Estado, otros han sido absorbidos y desaparecidos por completo. Quizás 30 de los Estados del mundo en África Central, Asia Occidental y América del Sur calificarían como colapsados o disfuncionales.

engendrada por tal condición se pierde y es reemplazada por una sensación de ansiedad y miedo. Son precisamente estas condiciones las que indican que las relaciones entre Naciones y Estados están en una pausa temporal. Precisamente en esos tiempos se producen grandes cambios en la historia de la humanidad. Los supuestos sobre los cuales las personas, las Naciones y los Estados han actuado en el pasado ya no son adecuados, convenientes o válidos. La sensación de “saber qué hacer” se les escapa a los funcionarios públicos, y el miedo de las turbas sin líderes comienza a aumentar. En las relaciones y la práctica internacionales, uno ve fácilmente una tensión creciente a nivel local, regional y global.

De la misma manera que los individuos y las familias se relacionan entre sí, las Naciones y los Estados se comportan de acuerdo con prácticas consuetudinarias llamadas normas y diversas reglas llamadas leyes. No hay nada realmente misterioso en el proceso de interacción humana: evoluciona como una costumbre, como una forma de ordenar la sociedad. Las prácticas consuetudinarias entre Naciones y entre Estados que evolucionaron a partir de costumbres internas tienen como objetivo poner orden en la conducción de las relaciones entre entidades políticas.

Al examinar la conducta de las Naciones y los Estados en sus relaciones internacionales, nos enfrentamos a crisis manifiestas de colapso de la biodiversidad, cambios climáticos fuera de control causados por el hombre, destrucción

desenfrenada de pueblos indígenas y crecientes incidentes de enfermedades zoonóticas resultantes de la acción humana desenfrenada. La explotación de la vida natural se adentra cada vez más en las selvas tropicales y otros bosques que antes no habían sido perturbados por la interferencia humana masiva. Las crisis creadas por el hombre amenazan la vida humana en todo el mundo: toda la vida humana.

Necesitamos hacer una pausa para considerar las relaciones entre Naciones y Estados y considerar nuevos caminos para la conducción de las relaciones entre Naciones y Estados para permitir el diálogo y el establecimiento de nuevos mecanismos para detener la destrucción de diversos ecosistemas y culturas. Pero la conducción de relaciones constructivas entre Naciones y Estados basadas en la cortesía es hoy prácticamente inexistente, aunque las Naciones Unidas han abierto una rendija en la puerta a las relaciones constructivas con invitaciones tentativas a las Naciones a participar en reuniones donde se discuten políticas de derechos humanos. Esta circunstancia requiere que inspeccionemos los sistemas legales nacionales y los sistemas legales estatales para identificar las alternativas más probables para el diálogo mutuo y la acción constructiva por parte de Naciones y Estados. Necesitamos considerar la urgencia de abrir un diálogo directo y respetuoso donde las Naciones y los Estados compartan la autoridad en un plano político igualitario. Esta condición es esencial para la coexistencia mutua.

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SOBRE EL AUTOR

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El Dr. Rudolph C. Ryser (1946-2023) creció en la cultura de los indios Cowlitz, en la costa noroeste del Pacífico de Estados Unidos. Obtuvo su doctorado en relaciones internacionales en el Union Institute and University. Fundó el Centro de Estudios Indígenas del Mundo en 1979, en el que se desempeñó como Presidente del Consejo y Director Ejecutivo hasta su fallecimiento. Es autor del libro *Indigenous Nations and Modern States: The Political Emergence of Nations Challenging State Power* (2012), del *Fourth World Geopolitical Reader* y de numerosos artículos en revistas y documentos de políticas públicas. Al momento de su fallecimiento, estaba trabajando en un nuevo libro, *Guerras por la biodiversidad: coexistencia o colapso biocultural en el siglo XXI*. Durante más de cincuenta años, trabajó en el ámbito de los asuntos indígenas como escritor, investigador y asesor de líderes políticos de Naciones del Cuarto Mundo.

Indigenous Etsako Names Among Auchi People

The Influence of Islam on Their Current Naming Practices

By Mohammed Enaikele, Ph.D. and Suleiman Momoh

ABSTRACT

The name or names that an individual bears is an important aspect of his or her social identity. Among the Etsako people of Auchi, Edo state, Nigeria, their indigenous names are not just couched in abstract or without justification. The article explores the influence of Islam on various Etsako names among Auchi people. This study uses an in-depth unstructured interview (IDI) to collect indigenous Etsako names, employing an accidental sampling method with a cross-section of twenty (20) key informants in each of the five indigenous communities of Auchi. The key informants are heads of households/families. The study provided several indigenous Etsako names and their literal meanings. It also revealed that before the introduction of Islam to the Etsako people of Auchi, parents gave their children indigenous Etsako names at birth. Later, however, parents started giving their children Muslim names together with indigenous Etsako names. But lately, indigenous Etsako names are increasingly endangered because the names are no longer being given to children at birth but have significantly shifted to Muslim names. The study thus concludes that the challenges of redeeming, resuscitating, and stabilizing the culture of indigenous Etsako names should be the collective responsibility of the Etsako people of Auchi.

Keywords: Auchi, Etsako names, influence of Islam, current naming practices, cultural preservation

Introduction

The Chamber Dictionary (2005) defines a name as a noun and further expatiates that a noun is the name of a person, a thing, or a place, or what a person, a thing, or a place is called or identified as. It is the nomenclature used in making reference to all things: living or

non-living, tangible or intangible, concrete or abstract, liquid or solid. Human beings are instinctive and rational thinking beings. Of all terrestrial creatures, only human beings are endowed with the initiative and self-consciousness to give things individual names (Eboh, 2011). Naming is a universal practice—there is virtually no known society in which

newborn babies are not given names. Across all cultures, the individual name is a unique aspect of life common to all human societies. Another important fact about names is that only human beings have the gift of naming a child with a specific name (Yusuf et al., 2014). A name is an essential part of human identity, deeply tied to the perception of intrinsic value and the essence of humanity.

The name or names that an individual bears is an important aspect of his or her social identity. Anthropologically, in Africa, the belief is that a name does not only serve as a social or cultural identity, but it is also an essential part of an individual spiritual being because it influences several aspects of human life, the general lifestyle and life prospects of an individual (Liseli, 2012). A name can influence an individual lifestyle and mold and shape the character, personality, and prospects of success in the life of the bearer. This is why Africans generally attach importance to giving a child a good name—the name assigned to a child could determine a lot about the child's present and future (Yusuf et al., 2014).

African names are an important component of the African culture because they are indigenous. Indigenous African names are given with deep reflection before settling for what is considered appropriate, relevant, and meaningful. The etymological meaning and relevance of Indigenous African names lie in the embedded wisdom and philosophical character they carry. Some of these indigenous African names are aesthetically wrapped in native proverbs, poetic dignity, and cultural nuances and are artistically cultivated to reflect an event so that a mere

mention of the name evokes memories of it. In the typical traditional Yoruba society, the name that an individual bears could obviously reveal his or her place of origin or root, family background, family occupation, and political and economic class. Some names could also reflect the kind of deity worshipped in the household of the bearer (Yusuf et al., 2014). Names are also used to immortalize late grandparents. Thus, when a child is named after his or her grandparents who have passed on, it serves as a form of remembrance and appreciation for a life well spent by the deceased (Akintoye, 2021). Some other names are panegyric names, otherwise known as praise names (Oriki). Such names are used to spur the bearer on occasions, at moments of great expectations, or in times of challenges (Olatunji et al., 2015).

Among the Etsako people of Edo state in Nigeria, their indigenous names are not just couched in abstract or merely given; they are reflections of the people's worldview, cultural heritage, social interactions, and social constructions of experiences of everyday social life. Parents, grandparents, or family members who give names to a newborn baby do so after careful reflection before settling for what is considered apt. In most cases, the philosophical meaning and relevance of these names are so complex that the essential need for such names cannot be understood except when their etymological meaning is appreciated within the context of the culture of the people. This naming pattern is evident in African socio-cultural interpretation of names, the people's worldview, and the social constructions of the experiences of

the people's everyday social life and memories of events that some names try to invoke (Muguti & Mutani, 2014).

Though studies on indigenous African names are not a new academic interest, limited anthropological and sociological research has been done in this field compared to other allied disciplines like history, theology, philosophy, and socio-linguistic studies. It is perhaps not out of place to say that philosophy and other academic disciplines like history, theology, and socio-linguistic studies only took an academic interest in this field of study for their aims and presuppositions. Over and above this, the present study pedagogically unveils and explores various indigenous Etsako names and the influence of Islam on the people of Auchi's current naming practices. The study also provides the literal interpretations or meanings of these indigenous Etsako names and the social significance of assigning such names to a newborn baby. It is important to appreciate the people's naming practices as a reflection of their worldview, cultural heritage, and the social constructions of their everyday social life. Above all, this study places a premium on Etsako names, primarily because most academic studies on Etsako culture have paid little or no attention to it.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural theory is a prominent framework in cultural anthropology. It generated significant academic interest, particularly in the 20th century, among social scientists who studied the Black Africans' indigenous worldview and the social constructions of their everyday social lives

(Oke, 2004). However, most of the analyses and discussions on the theory have primarily been associated with the concept of culture. Hence, the importance of adopting cultural theory for this study lies in the fact that in Africa, names given to newborn babies are not just couched in the abstract; they are guided by culture. In anthropological usage, culture is the complete way of life for a group of people. It encompasses people's beliefs, institutions, and other life patterns, including their social worldviews. The social worldview of any human group is a reflection of their culture; it defines and shapes their thought, mindset, understanding, and explanation, which inform the social constructions of experiences of their everyday social life (Ademowo, 2017).

In most cases, names conceived with indigenous worldviews or experiences of the everyday social life of a people are deeply embedded in their culture, so the etymological meaning and relevance of such names can only be understood and appreciated within the culture of the people, mainly because indigenous names are very meaningful, so much so that the literal or metaphorical beauty of many of such names is often lost in an attempt to translate their meaning and relevance into another language.

Anthropologists are essentially sensitive to the relativity of cultural patterns of names across cultures to avoid being ethnocentric. This is because names given to newborn babies are primarily informed by people's indigenous worldview and social constructions of experiences of their everyday social life. These names have deep philosophical meanings. An ethnocentric

individual from another culture may not be able to appreciate the philosophical reasons or, better still, the literal or metaphorical meaning, relevance, and etymological beauty of the indigenous names of another culture.

Materials and Methods

Ethno-Historical Profile of Etsako People of Auchi

Figure 1
Map of Auchi



Note. Etsako West. Google Maps, 2024. (<https://maps.app.goo.gl/EpsStj94wzDutJgV8>). [Accessed May 2024].

The study was conducted among the indigenous Etsako people of Auchi, which consists of five major communities: Usogun, Aibotse, Akpekpe, Igbhe, and Iyekhe. Auchi is one of the thirteen clans in Etsako. Located to the north of Auchi is Aviele, to the south is Uzairue, to the west is South-Ibie, and to the east is Ivbiadoabi.

Auchi is the most prominent and popular town in Etsako. After the 1978 Local Government Reforms, Auchi became the Local Government Headquarters of Etsako West. Historically, Auchi people, like other Etsako people, migrated from Benin Kingdom in the 16th century during the reign of Oba Ewuare of Benin (Yakubu, 2021). The people of Auchi are traditionally understood to have been led by a man named Uchi. Uchi had the present Auchi Villages—Usogun, Aibotse, Akpekpe, Igbhe, and Iyekhe—named after his children. These villages, which are separated, are located at the foot of Uchi Hill, while at the top of the hill is the Uchi market. The indigenous administration of Auchi town was initially a gerontocracy, where the most senior man (Odion) presides over the affairs of Auchi. However, this system was replaced by a monarchical traditional administration after the Nupes invaded and introduced Islam to Auchi (Yakubu, 2021). Presently, Auchi is organized under a Paramount Chief called Otaru, who traditionally presides over its five major communities. The Etsako people have unique peculiarities in history, language, names, indigenous worldview, social experiences of everyday life, traditional belief systems, culture, norms, values, taboos, and superstitions.

Research Instrument and Sampling Method

A primary source of data—an in-depth unstructured interview (IDI)—was employed for the study to collect indigenous Etsako names. An accidental sampling method was used to conduct the IDI with a cross-section of twenty (20) key informants in each of the five indigenous

communities. The key informants are heads of households/families that live in the five Auchi communities and are very familiar with Etsako names and culture. Informed consent was obtained from the key informants, and they were duly informed of the objectives of the study and their right to quit or withdraw their participation at any time. Also, they were assured of their privacy of identity and confidentiality of the information shared with the researcher. The IDI questions were not arranged as a fixed questionnaire. Answers to the questions were also gently probed, only where necessary, to give respondents a moment to reflect and gather their thoughts for clearer responses and information. All the data gathered were qualitatively analyzed. This is a fact-finding qualitative study, as Indigenous names may seem unfamiliar due to the philosophical meanings embedded in many of them. This study aimed to focus on the literal interpretative understanding of the names, as they vividly reflect the worldview and culture of the Etsako people, to avoid any distortion of their meaning—whether etymological or philosophical.

Results and Discussion

One hundred (100) indigenous Etsako names with their literal meanings were collected. The names were sorted to avoid duplication, and seventy (70) were selected for analysis.

Most of our respondents confirmed that indigenous Etsako names are no longer commonly given to children at birth as before.

This is why the younger generations are more popularly known and addressed with Muslim names, which they were given at birth. Before the introduction of Islam to the Etsako people of Auchi, parents were giving their children indigenous Etsako names at birth. Over time, however, Muslim names began to be given alongside these indigenous names. While older generations continue to carry both indigenous Etsako and Muslim names, a key informant noted a recent shift towards exclusively Muslim names, as parents no longer place as much importance on giving their children indigenous Etsako names. The people's strong adherence to Islam as a way of life may have largely accounted for this.

Common Indigenous Etsako Names of the People of Auchi

Although names are a symbol of indigenous identity and family roots, among the Etsako people of Auchi, names do not just serve as indigenous identity; they constitute an integral part of the people's culture. The preservation of a people's identity is inherently determined by their ability to maintain their cultural heritage through indigenous names, amongst other aspects. No Etsako name is given without justification, as each name is a product of thoughtful consideration. The philosophical, religious, and indigenous worldviews of most Etsako names are so complex that the essential need for such names may not be fully understood except when the etymological meaning or philosophical value of such names is appreciated within the context of the culture of the people. These indigenous names could be categorized as shown below:

1. Names Bestowed by the Circumstances of Birth

An example of such names is those given to twins. These names include:

Odion: The first-born twin

Omoh: The second-born twin

Other names derived from the circumstances of birth are those given to children born into families where previous infants have died shortly after birth. Etsako people of Auchi believe these types of children are mischievous-spirit-incarnate infants who burden their parents by dying soon after birth. These children are sometimes given names such as Ugwuri, Oghumah, Ikhazeoboh, Ighera, Ananagbo, Ananomo, Oghiato, and Aziku to deter them from dying young.

The literal meanings of these names are:

Ughwuri: Vulture

Oghumah: Slave

Ikhazeoboh: I won't let you go again.

Ighera: I won't go again.

Ananagbo: Don't run away from the world.

Ananomo: I can't run away from a child.

Oghiato: Thief

Aziku: Refuse dump-pit

Apart from giving them these names, frequently, parents of these infants also perform other forms of ritual sacrifices such as burying the child's umbilical cord and placenta with other native substances in a pot near a stream, refuse dump-pit, or beside plantain trees to

deter the infants from dying young. Yakubu (2021) reports that the Etsako people of Auchi believe in reincarnation and the visible and invisible worlds of spirits. These two worlds are not separate; they are interconnected, commune, and interact spiritually, allowing spirit-incarnate infants—who burden their parents—to reincarnate repeatedly, only to die shortly after birth. The native doctors, diviners, priests, and priestesses, endowed with spiritual awareness or understanding, often recommend these ritual sacrifices to appease the visible and invisible world of spirits. At times, the sacrifice is complimented with a deep facial cut/mark (indigenously known as *Azokpa*) on the infant to prevent him/her from dying young again. *Azokpa* is a deep facial cut/mark that runs from the ridge of the nose to the cheekbone.

For anthropologists, the efficacy of non-empirical beliefs in ritual sacrifice, the visible and invisible worlds of spirits, and the facial cut/mark used to deter spirit-incarnate infants from dying young serve as clear evidence of the people's belief system. This belief should be recognized and appreciated within its cultural context as a way of life. Therefore, it is not the role of anthropologists to condemn or debunk the efficacy of these rituals, as doing so would risk bias or ethnocentrism. The belief in these rituals helps the people adjust to and cope with their social and physical environments while also providing an explanation for the frustrations associated with the repeated deaths of infants shortly after birth.

2. Names Couched on Bravery/Strength

Names like Ekpe, Oduma, Inih, and Imoudu philosophically represent bravery. People who are strong and very brave often bear these names. Sometimes, these names could also be acquired as titular names to honor an individual as a fearless warrior.

The literal meanings of these names are:

Ekpe: Tiger

Oduma: Lion

Inih: Elephant

Imoudu: I am brave, or I am not afraid.

3. Names That Represent Nobility or Royalty

Names like Ogie, Egiegba, Egietsemeh, Egieiya, and Aidonogie are names associated with nobility or royalty in the child's lineage. For example:

Ogie: King

Egiegba: Assembly of royalty

Egietsemeh: It is my turn to the throne.

Egieiya: I am on the throne.

Aidonogie: You don't change throne.

4. Names Rooted in a General Worldview

Names like Agboeyegbeni, Agbomehe, Anakhuagboh, Anavherokha, Ikhade, and Ariakhue are borne out of interpretations of human experiences that significantly shape their worldview. For example:

Agboeyegbeni: People don't wish other people well.

Agbomehe: I will wait for my time.

Anakhuagboh: Don't be in a hurry about life.

Anavherokha: You can take refuge in the home of a hero.

Ikhade: I won't fall.

Ariakhue: Nobody knows tomorrow.

5. Names Derived from Social Experiences in People's Daily Lives

Names like Akhagiemeh, Oghosomi, Monofi, Izuagie, Igenegba, Imohagene, Imoitsemeh, Enaikele, and Agbonosimen are borne out of social experiences in people's daily lives and patterns of social interactions.

Akhagiemeh: I won't be laughed at.

Oghosomi: It is going well in my life.

Monofi: I have someone who can fight back.

Izuagie: You can't laugh at me.

Igenegba: Assembly of men

Imohagene: I have a man.

Imoitsemeh: I have my own.

Enaikele: This is my choice, or this is what I want.

Agbonosimen: You don't fight the person rescuing you.

6. Names That Symbolically Represent Wealth

Omokhefue: A child is wealth.

Efuetsemeh: It is my turn to be wealthy.

7. Names Derived from Proverbs

When names are couched in proverbs, they reflect the complex nature of particular issues or events, often explaining them formally

or informally through the use of proverbs. Sometimes, information that one is not willing to share directly with other people is indirectly expressed through names embedded in proverbs. Such names can only be understood when the philosophical meaning of such proverbs is appreciated within the context of the people's culture.

Some examples of these names are:

Akhanene: When we talk.

Akhamemeh: People will not say any evil about me.

Ogboanoh: You ask a question.

Akhamotse: I am counted among the beautiful ones.

8. Circumstantial Names

Etsako people take great interest in events and circumstances surrounding the birth of a child. Circumstantial names are given based on what the parents experienced before or during the birth of the child. Such experiences may occur simultaneously or immediately after the birth of the child.

Ikhazuagbe: No one can kill me.

Ikhago: I won't cry.

Ogheghe: Joy

Avbuenegbe: Let's keep each other's secret.

9. Names That Reflect Reverence for God

These names serve as a way of reverencing God, particularly as a means of expressing gratitude for what God has done for the parents

of the newborn child. In general, names with the prefix Osi, Esi and Osho are names that reverence God.

Some examples of these names are:

Danesi: I submit to God.

Esikpemi: I thank God.

Emosohke: God's gift

Esihogie: God is king.

Esiomohmo: Is God that gives the child

Oshone: God is the highest.

Oshomah: God decides.

Oshore: God knows.

Osirama: I beg God.

Agionomoesi: You don't laugh at one who has God.

Osiano: Is God you should ask.

Oshoremeh: God gives me.

Anoghena: Nobody is greater than God.

Amanosi: You don't decide for God.

Osighuwe: I am focusing on God.

10. Names Based on the Value of the Family

These names are often given to a child whose parents have been avoiding their hometown or family. Grandparents or family members who give these names to a newborn baby do so after careful reflection on the neglecting attitude of the child's parents to their family roots or hometown. They are names that encourage bonding and mutual interpersonal relationships among members of the same family. In most African societies, the value placed on family is fairly similar. Family provides emotional support and true companionship to its members. In times of grief

and celebration, family members give support. Family provides security and protection to its members against injury, assault, frivolous intimidation, subjugation, and deprivation. Any injustice suffered by any family member may be seen as an injustice against the entire family.

Some examples of these names are:

Ananafe: Don't run away from your family roots/home.

Afegbua: We have expanded our family.

Igbafe: I don't fight with my family.

11. Names Reflecting Fairness Toward Humanity

These names are a clear reflection of the indigenous worldview that there are retributions attached to evil doing. These names also reflect on social experiences of everyday life and social interactions of the people.

Examples of such names are:

Iruobe: I will not harm or do anything evil to anybody.

Ikhelebe: I don't want enemies.

12. Names Based on the Value of a Child

These names are given as a reflection of the value attached to having a child. Having a child is a continuity of oneself and the family. Etsako people place great importance on childbearing, believing that for an individual to find true fulfillment, having a child is essential; without it, they feel their life would be in vain.

Some examples of these names are:

Omokhupo: A child is the cloth that covers me.

Omokhefue: My child is my wealth.

Omohukwu: My child is my possession.

Omokhua: A child is important, or a child is great.

13. Names Couched on the Need to Trust or Look Up to God and the Efficacy of Prayers

This category of names is a clear reflection of Etsako indigenous worldview of the supremacy of God and why we should trust, pray and look up to him for everything.

Examples of these names are:

Okhuliaghwe: Trust or look up to God.

Itseowa: Prayers don't get lost.

14. Names Based on Conflict-Free Relationships With In-Laws

The whole idea of tolerance and a culture of peaceful coexistence manifests in these names, where man's conduct is regulated within the virtue of tolerance and respect for in-laws. The name projects a philosophical and ideological culture of mutual co-existence, which is expected to translate and infuse people's ways of life and their social relationships with their in-laws.

Examples of such names are:

Agberua: You don't beat or fight your in-laws.

Eruaagha: In-laws are meant to be adored.

15. Names Used as Appellations

These names are not usually given to a child

during a naming ceremony. They are nicknames or praise names given by family or friends after observing one or more unique physical characteristics, features, or other behavioral traits. Such nicknames reveal a lot about the bearer. In most cases, their indigenous or Muslim/Christian names become unused, as they are replaced by the nicknames by which people now address them.

Some of these nicknames are listed below:

Ukpomoh: Big boy

Okpomosi: Big girl

Emoh: My friend

Udo: Stone

Omosiotse: Beautiful girl

The Influence of Islam on Current Naming Practices Among Etsako People of Auchi

The axiom that culture is dynamic and adaptive is clearly exemplified in the naming practices of Etsako people of Auchi, Nigeria. Their indigenous naming practices are now largely interwoven with Islam. Islam has a great impact on the people of Auchi in general. Islam is a complete way of life for the people because it covers all aspects of their cultural life, including the adoption of Muslim names. The study observes that Auchi people are prominently Muslims—though most of our respondents have indigenous Etsako names, they are more popularly known and addressed by their Muslim names. Islam, as the dominant religion among the Etsako people of Auchi, has a long history associated with the Nupe Jihadists who brought

Islam to the present Edo State through the Edo North corridor where the Etsako people are geographically located (Yakubu, 2021). Before the Etsako people of Auchi were converted to Islam, everyone was known and addressed by their indigenous names within and outside the community. These names were given at birth and were couched to reflect the people's worldview, cultural heritage, social interactions, and social constructions of experiences of everyday social life of the people (Yakubu, 2021). But lately, this culture of indigenous Etsako names seems increasingly endangered as Etsako people of Auchi now bear Muslim names given to them at birth. Some of these Muslim names and meanings include:

1. **Abdullah:** The servant of Allah
2. **Farooq:** One who can tell right from wrong
3. **Basiru:** Bringer of good news
4. **Jaffar:** Most forgiving and merciful Allah

The study observes that the strong adherence to Islam as a way of life by the Etsako people is the major cause of this shift to Muslim names, which are more popularly known and addressed. More so, they see Muslim names as a symbol of brotherhood. The epistemological processes underlying the threat to Etsako minority language (Enaikele, 2014) could also be major reason why the culture of indigenous Etsako name is now being endangered.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The individual name is a unique aspect of life common to all human societies. The name that an individual bears is not just an important

aspect or means of their social identity; it is also an essential part of an individual's spiritual being because it influences several aspects of human life, such as the general lifestyle and life prospects. In African societies, names are an important component of culture because they are indigenous. Indigenous African names have deep meanings and are a product of insightful thoughts. The etymological meaning and relevance of indigenous African names are the embedded wisdom and philosophical character of these names.

The philosophical, religious, and indigenous worldviews of most indigenous Etsako names are so complex that the essential need for such names may not be easily understood except when the etymological meaning or philosophical value of such names is appreciated within the context of the culture of the people. Islam has a great impact on the people of Auchi. Islam is a complete way of life for Muslims—it covers all aspects of their cultural life, including the adoption of Muslim names, which are generally known and addressed. Today, the culture of indigenous Etsako name seems endangered because these indigenous Etsako names are no longer being commonly given to children at birth as before. Rather, most Etsako people of Auchi now bear Muslim names given to them at birth. They take notable pride in bearing and being addressed by their Muslim names as a symbol of brotherhood. This may strongly imply that the Etsako peoples' cultural heritage and identity could be lost if nothing meaningful is done collectively by the people to resuscitate the culture of Etsako indigenous

names in particular because the preservation of peoples' cultural heritage and identity is inherently determined by their ability to maintain their cultural heritage and roots through indigenous names, amongst others.

The epistemological processes underlying the threat to Etsako minority language (Enaikele, 2014) may also be a notable factor or reason why the culture of indigenous Etsako names seems increasingly endangered. The potential loss of the indigenous cultural heritage and identity of Etsako people of Auchi is imminent if nothing is done collectively by the people to begin to resuscitate and promote the culture of indigenous Etsako names. This study, therefore, recommends that the challenges of redeeming, resuscitating, and stabilizing the culture of indigenous Etsako names should be the collective responsibility of Etsako people of Auchi. Since the preservation of a peoples' identity is inherently determined by their ability to maintain their cultural heritage through indigenous names, for example, Etsako indigenous names could be redeemed or resuscitated by promoting the intergenerational transmission of the indigenous names through naming and addressing a child by his or her indigenous names. This is an important solution to saving Etsako indigenous names.

As the home remains the major and important agent of socialization, it is the contention of this paper that parents, guardians, and members of the child's family have an important role to play in the intergenerational transmission of indigenous names. One of the ways they can

achieve this is by naming and addressing their children by indigenous names. Thus, there is a need for a general re-orientation on the psyche of parents and the community at large against ethnocentric attitudes against African culture by Africans themselves that indigenous African names are inferior to Muslim names! Parents, guardians, family members, neighbors, and Islamic clerics and scholars, in particular, should prevent their children from perceiving their indigenous names as inferior to Muslim names by encouraging them to take pride in bearing and being addressed by their indigenous names because Etsako indigenous names have their

unique cultural and philosophical meanings, which should be made to stimulate the interest of the younger generation towards reviving or resuscitating indigenous Etsako names. So, more attention and time should be given to children to learn and appreciate the etymological beauty, proverbs, culture, and philosophical meanings embedded in their indigenous names. This is because when a child can appreciate the unique beauty of his or her indigenous name, the child will take pride in the indigenous name. It is only by this that intergenerational transmission of Etsako indigenous names can stand a meaningful chance of survival.

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Full Circle

Identity, Soviet Nationalities Policy, and Central Asia

By Joseph Fallon, MIA

ABSTRACT

How did Soviet nationalism impact the diverse ethnic groups of Central Asia? This paper interrogates Soviet “modernization” policy toward different identity groups in modern Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Using an International Relations approach, the author problematizes the Leninist ethnoterritorial nationalist framework, arguing the complexities of ethnic identity in the region. As such, the creation of discrete bordered “socialist nations” is an artificial endeavor based on incorrect assumptions about the homogeneity of regional ethnic groups. The repeated divisions of Central Asia during the Bolshevik era attempted to catalyze the development of socialism within governable economic units of the Soviet empire. This phenomenon is clearly articulated in the Ferghana Valley region, which houses Uzbek, Tajik, and Kyrgyz populations, among others. The geography of this area is analyzed to highlight the pitfalls of Soviet border delineation. Last, the article further explores the influence of the clan system during the nation-building period and the process of “korenizatsiia” or “indigenization,” which was used strategically by both clan leaders and soviet officials to harness political power.

Keywords: Soviet nationalism, Central Asia, ethnic groups, modernization policy, Lenin, ethnic identity, Soviet borders, clan system, korenizatsiia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Ferghana Valley, Bolshevik era, nationalism, nation state

Before there were nations, there were clans. The Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are products of Soviet nationalities policy. This policy, undertaken in the 1920s and 1930s, sought to modernize clans out of existence by partitioning Central Asia into five officially sanctioned nations, each with fixed borders.

“The Soviet system, while brutal and callously profligate with human life, was not simply a continuation of Russian colonialism in another form. In Central Asia, it was a radically modernizing regime that transformed what had been a culturally and politically unassimilated colony of the Tsarist Empire into the nation states we know today.”¹

¹ Alexander Morrison, “Central Asia and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Look at the Balance Sheet at the Centennial,” EurasiaNet, October 26, 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/central-asia-and-the-bolshevik-revolution-a-look-at-the-balance-sheet-at-the-centennial#:~:text=The%20Soviet%20system,%20while%20brutal%20and%20callously%20profligate>

However, are they nation-states? Should they be nation-states? The nation-state is a Western concept of the 19th Century. In applying it to non-Western peoples, does it not become a procrustean bed, defined as “a plan or scheme to produce uniformity or conformity by arbitrary or violent methods?” In the results so achieved, do not the bad outweigh the good?

“Nationalities were not only promoted but institutionalized; individuals had to perceive themselves as belonging to the nationality of the titular nation they found themselves in, regardless if they actually corresponded to their own...Where nationalities did not exist, or were not clearly identifiable, they were invented and local elites were created to govern over the area...A significant Uzbek minority found itself in Tajikistan and as well as a big Tajik minority in Uzbekistan, hampering nation building...There are many other examples of titular nationalities being excluded from their titular territories. Many of these have led to irredentist claims throughout Central Asia, with the Ferghana Valley being the most prominent example.”²

The entire process of national delineation was alien to the history of Central Asia. A fluid frontier between nomadic and sedentary societies, Central Asia was a rich tapestry of peoples, customs, languages, and beliefs that intermingled into an overarching cultural unity.

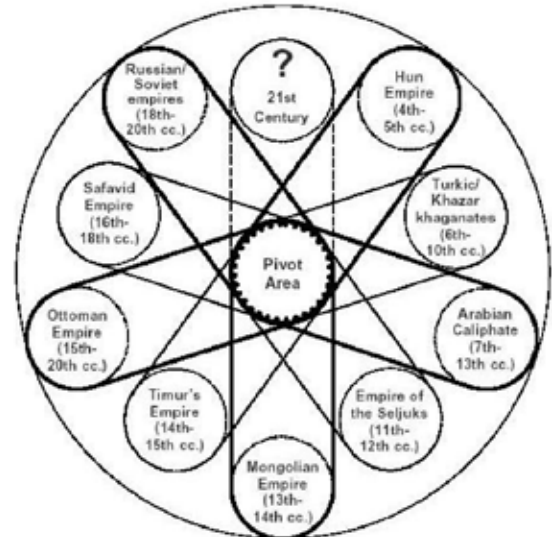
For two thousand years, Central Asia was a hub of the Silk Road, overland trade routes linking China, Europe, India, and the Middle East. Strategically important and economically wealthy, control of this land was contested by a

multitude of local and foreign powers, from tribal confederations to empires, from kingdoms to city-states.

The history of Central Asia was a cycle of imperium, interregnum, and new imperium, of political borders expanding and contracting. It was a cycle, which not only defined, but transcended the region. It was a cycle with such a profound impact on the rest of Eurasia that Central Asia became known as the “geographical pivot of history.”

In their 2010 article, “The Heartland Theory and the Present-Day Geopolitical Structure of Central Eurasia,” Eldar Ismailov and Vladimir Papava illustrated the cycle in a diagram. (Figure 1)

Figure 1
Evolution of the Pivot Area



Note. From The Heartland Theory and the Present-Day Geopolitical Structure of Central Eurasia, by E. Ismailov and V. Papava, p. 91. (<https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/Monographs/1006Rethinking-4.pdf>)

² Salvatore J. Freni, “The Soviet Nationality Policy in Central Asia,” *Inquiries Journal/Student Pulse* 5.03 (2013). <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/731/3/the-soviet-nationality-policy-in-central-asia>

At the start of Russia's conquest of Central Asia in the 19th century, the region consisted of two distinct areas: the north, known as the Steppes, which was home to Kazakh and Kyrgyz nomads, and the south, where the most fertile lands were controlled by three rival city-states—Khiva, Bukhara, and Kokand.

In southern Central Asia, "...the fragmented city-states that emerged from Nadir Shah Afshar's empire (1736–1747) such as Bukhara, Khiva, and Khoqand...that characterized Central Asia on the eve of colonial conquest were thus quite novel in terms of structural power dynamics, yet thoroughly Turko-Perso-Islamic in terms of symbolism, law, and patrimonialism. This period also witnessed what was in many ways the apex of Persianate high culture, building on traditions with roots stretching back to the Timurid period and earlier. Sufism in all of its forms became mainstream. Intellectual elites were polymathic, simultaneously mastering jurisprudence, poetry, medicine, occult sciences, and more. Vernacularization, particularly in literary Central Asian Turki, deepened these currents and carried them to new audiences. The new city-state dynasties competed with one another to build up educational centers to support all of these cultural forms...Many of these cultural, social, and even political forms persisted under [Russian] colonialism, even as the pace of change sped up. Some of the precolonial dynasties persevered under indirect colonial rule."³

The October 1917 Bolshevik coup, which overthrew the elected legislature established by the February Revolution, plunged Russia into

civil war (1918–1921). From the Steppes to the Pamirs, from the Caspian Sea to the border of China, Central Asia was engulfed in chaos. With the collapse of Moscow's authority, the region was violently politically fragmented among competing groups. There was the Tashkent Soviet [controlled by Russians], the reformist Jadids [Uzbek intellectuals who looked to the Ottoman Empire for inspiration and envisioned one Turkic state for Central Asia], the traditionalist Basmachis, who could be either localists supporting the independence of Bukhara and Khiva or regionalist supporting an independent Turkestan, the locals emirs, themselves, and the Kazakh and Kyrgyz nomads.

The anarchy was fueled by the outbreak of widespread famine from 1917 to 1920; "the full scale of the catastrophe,[was] exacerbated...by accompanying epidemics of cholera, typhus, and typhoid. Between 1915 and 1920, the amount of cultivated land declined by half and livestock decreased by 75 percent. Cotton production practically ceased. The losses were not uniform across social groups, of course. Russian peasants saw a decline of 28 percent in their cultivated land and lost 6.5 percent of their livestock; the figures were 39 percent and 48 percent, respectively, for the sedentary indigenous population, and 46 percent and 63.4 percent for the nomads. The civilian population of Turkestan fell by one-quarter

³ James Pickett, "Central Asia between Empires: New Research on the 18th and 19th Centuries," *Asian History*, Oxford University Press, June 21, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.713>

over the same five years, from 7,148,800 in 1915 to 5,336,500 in 1920. The indigenous rural population declined by 30.5 percent.”⁴

For the Bolsheviks, Central Asia had been peripheral to their Marxist revolution. The land lacked an industrial base and a proletariat. It was devoid of nations and a bourgeoisie. It was a Russian colony without political, economic, or cultural integration into Russia. Yet, Central Asia soon became a military priority for the Bolsheviks.

The Bolsheviks quickly realized they needed to conquer Central Asia to secure their revolution. Economically, the region was a vital source of oil, cotton, and food. Strategically, Central Asia was a buffer against British intervention from India.

In August 1918, the British established a military presence in the Transcaspian oblast, present-day Turkmenistan, in support of the local anti-Bolshevik government. This British expeditionary force, composed of British Indian troops and commanded by Major General Sir Wilfrid Malleon, a former head of Indian Army intelligence, entered through Persia and remained until April 1919.

However, the Bolsheviks were in sufficient control of Central Asia to politically reorganize much of the region. On April 30, 1918, the Bolsheviks combined the southern Central Asian oblasts of Turkestan, Samarkand, Ferghana, Semirechie, and the Transcaspian to form the Turkestan Soviet Federative Republic. Two years later, on September 24, 1920, it was renamed the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.

That same year, the Bolsheviks overthrew the Khan of Khiva and the Emir of Bukhara, ideological obstacles to Soviet power in southern Central Asia. On February 2, 1920, the Khanate of Khiva was abolished and replaced with the Khorezm People's Soviet Republic. Eight months later, on October 8, 1920, the Emirate of Bukhara was abolished and replaced with the Bukharan People's Soviet Republic. (Figure 2)

Northern Central Asia had been the General-Governorship of the Steppes. On August 26, 1920,

Figure 2

First Communist borders for Central Asia, 1918-1920



Note. Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. By Seb az86556, Wikipedia, August 7, 2024. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkestan_Autonomous_Soviet_Socialist_Republic#/media/File:SovietCentralAsia1922.svg). CC BY-SA 3.0

⁴ Adeeb Khalid, "Between Empire and Revolution: New Work on Soviet Central Asia," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, Volume 7, Number 4, Fall 2006 (New Series), pp. 865-884 (Review), (6) Between Empire and Revolution: New Work on Soviet Central Asia | Adeeb Khalid - Academia.edu

the Bolsheviks renamed it the Kirgiz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, an ethno-administrative unit of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. Its borders corresponded to those of present day Kazakhstan, not Kyrgyzstan.

Until the 1920s, Russian sources identified Kazakhs as “Kirgiz” or “Kirgiz-Kaysaks” and Kyrgyz as “Kara-Kirghiz.”

Kazakhs were called “Kirghiz” to distinguish them from Russian “Cossacks.” The Kyrgyz called “Kara-Kirghiz” [meaning Black Kyrgyz for their black tents] were considered a sub-group of “mountain-dwelling Kazakhs.”

Kazakhs and Kyrgyz are closely related linguistically and culturally. In the words of Jambyl Jabaev, a famous Kazakh traditional folksinger, “*My bones are Kazakh, my body is Kyrgyz.*” However, Soviet nationalities policy classified the people as two separate nations.

On 14 October 1924, a Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast was formed. It was detached from the Kirgiz (Kazakh) Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and transferred to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic of the USSR.

On April 15-16, 1925, the Kirgiz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was renamed the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.

A month later, the Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast became the Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast. In February 1926, it became the Kyrgyz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic within the USSR.

Following the adoption of the 1936 Soviet Constitution on December 5, 1936, both the

Kazakh and Kyrgyz autonomous republics were detached from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and made union republics of the USSR as the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic and the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic.

Until 1926, the Bolsheviks had been denied complete control of southern Central Asia by the Basmachi insurgency. “By the end of the 1920s, Soviet historiography had settled on a characterization of the Basmachi as bandits and vilified them as forces of religious fanaticism and dark reaction, as well as being tools of foreign intervention...For their part, Western historiographical evaluations of the Basmachi have shifted over time. Early on, the Basmachi were seen as exemplars of a valiant national resistance to Soviet rule, a view that has been embraced by the post-Soviet regimes in Central Asia itself. In the 1980s, during the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the Basmachi came to be seen as noble forerunners of the Afghan mujahidin. Now, the circle has closed, and the Basmachi are often portrayed as ‘jihadist’ precursors to the Taliban and Osama bin Laden. What all these characterizations share is a lack of any real feel for the era and any basis in thick documentation.”⁵

According to *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, “The main arena of the Basmachi movement in Turkestan in 1918-20 was the Fergana Valley. In August 1919, the leader of the “Turkestan Muslim White Guard”

⁵ Op. cit. Adeeb Khalid (6) Between Empire and Revolution: New Work on Soviet Central Asia | Adeeb Khalid - Academia.edu

Madamin-bek concluded a military-political agreement on joint actions against Soviet power with the Commander of the kulak army K. Monstrov (Southern Kyrgyzstan). The Basmachi reached its greatest development in September-October 1919, when the combined armed forces of the Fergana Basmachi and the kulak army captured Osh, Jalal-Abad, blockaded Andijan and began to threaten Fergana. Soviet troops of the Turkfront (commander M.V. Frunze) defeated the kulak-Basmachi army by the beginning of March 1920...By April 1921, up to 7,000 Basmachi remained in Fergana, about 7,000 in Bukhara, and 1,000 in Khiva...By the end of 1922, the main forces of the Basmachi in Fergana and Khorezm were routed...The Basmachi gangs of Ibrahim-bek in Bukhara and Djunaïd-khan in Khorezm managed to hold out the longest. Djunaïd-khan's gang was liquidated in early 1924; Ibrahim-bek's gangs (about 4 thousand people) were routed in 1926.”⁶

Despite Basmachi activities, in 1924, the Bolsheviks, now called Communists, made the first attempt at the national delineation of southern Central Asia. It was based on Lenin's ideas, initially advocated in 1913, that Russia be divided along ethnic lines. In January 1916, this became Lenin's doctrine of the self-identification of the working people. Three years later, in March 1919, Lenin restricted the right to self-determination of working people to only the “exploited masses.”

Lenin took an uncompromising stance on “nations” and “national rights,” but one

based on the inequality of nations. There were “backward” nations and “civilized” nations. There were oppressor nations and oppressed nations.

This theory of “good (‘oppressed-nations’) nationalism formed the conceptual foundation of the Soviet Union and [the] policy of compensatory ‘nation-building’ was a spectacularly successful attempt at a state-sponsored conflation of language, ‘culture,’ territory and quota-fed bureaucracy...the Bolsheviks appeared to be the first state to institutionalise ethnoterritorial federalism, classify all citizens according to their biological nationalities and formally prescribed preferential treatment of certain ethnically defined populations.”⁷

This ethnoterritorial federalism was ideologically crafted. Each unit would be, in fact, a carbon copy of the others. There would be a cookie-cutter mold to delineation in which all political entities would be nationalist in form for diversity and socialist in content for uniformity. A political crucible in which nations are wedded to Socialism to create a Soviet people.

But what is a nation? In “Marxism and the National Question” (1913), Stalin wrote that “A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a

⁶ “Basmachi,” The Great Soviet Encyclopedia, Academician, 2000-2024, <https://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/>

⁷ Galym Zhussipbek, History of the Central Asian Region – 1700 to 1991,” Legacies of Division: Discrimination on the Basis of Religion and Ethnicity in Central Asia,” (9) HISTORY OF CENTRAL ASIA – 1700 TO 1991 | galym zhussipbek - Academia.edu

common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.”⁸ That definition would guide the implementation of Soviet nationalities policy.

It was ill-advised, however, to apply such a definition to the peoples of Central Asia. There, “it is difficult to identify distinct ethnic groups prior to the twentieth century. First of all, there was the problem of overlap and intermixing between groups. Populations and dialects blended into each other without any clear boundaries... People who claimed a common history or descent did not necessarily speak the same language; people who spoke the same language and lived on the same territory did not necessarily consider themselves to belong to the same ethnic group. As an example of the second phenomenon... certain tribes that lived on the territory of present-day Turkmenistan. They spoke Turkmen dialects, lived interspersed with the Turkmen population, and appeared in every way to be Turkmen. Yet they viewed themselves -- and were viewed by their Turkmen neighbors -- as Arabs, descendants of one of the early Muslim caliphs. These groups, known as ‘sacred tribes,’ played a special role as religious leaders and mediators in Turkmen communities... Along with the question of blurred boundaries between ethnic groups, there was the matter of multiple levels of identity.

Supraethnic and subethnic loyalties often were more important to people than ethnic categories. Particularly among sedentary Central Asians, it was common to consider oneself simply a “Muslim” or to identify with the state or region in which one lived— the Bukharan emirate, or the city of Samarqand. Among educated elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some identified with a supraethnic Turkestani or Turkic identity.”⁹

Stalin’s definition of a nation had an ominous qualification. “It goes without saying that a nation, like every historical phenomenon, is subject to the law of change, has its history, its beginning and end...”¹⁰

Over time, Soviet censuses became a testament to this “law of change” and the end of nations. The number of officially recognized nationalities would be continuously reduced from 172 to 106 and finally to 60.

In Central Asia, small nationalities like the Sart and Dungan were first recognized and then omitted from the Soviet Census. This occurred in a process of “ethnic consolidations” where smaller groups were combined with larger ones. “To cite just one example, there were a number of groups in the mountainous areas of what is today Tajikistan who spoke languages that were

⁸ Shoshana Keller, “The Bolshevik Revolution: Contradictions and Paradoxes, Hamilton College, Central Asian History - Keller: Bolshevik revolution - Hamilton College

⁹ Adrienne L. Edgar, “Identities, Communities, and Nations in Central Asia: A Historical Perspective,” Presentation from “Central Asia and Russia: Responses to the ‘War on Terrorism,’” a panel discussion held at the University of California, Berkeley, October 29, 2001, Sponsored by the Institute of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies; the Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post Soviet Studies; the Caucasus and Central Asia Program; and the Institute of International Studies at UC Berkeley

https://iseees.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/edgar_2001-1029.pdf#:~:text=Guided%20by%20the%20work%20of%20ethnographers%20and%20linguists,republishes%2C%20each%20named%20for%20a%20single%20ethnic%20group

¹⁰ Op. cit. Shoshana Keller, Central Asian History - Keller: Bolshevik revolution - Hamilton College

quite different from Tajik and were not originally considered Tajiks. These ‘Pamiri nationalities’ were eventually defined as ‘mountain Tajiks’ and incorporated, at least officially, into the Tajik ethnic group.”¹¹

The only purpose of national delineation was to advance Socialism. Lenin would impose Marxism, a Western ideology based on concepts of industrialization and class struggle in Central Asia where such concepts were alien to most of the indigenous population. The indigenous population was the majority population. The 1897 Russian Census found the population of the region to be 89 percent Turkic. Adding the Iranian Tajiks, the indigenous population was 97 percent. Instead of industrialization and class struggle, indigenous society was characterized by nomads and agriculturalists, religion, tradition, and the clans.

Among the indigenous population, there existed a sense of a shared, if inchoate, identity—one not based on nationality but on an overarching cultural unity.

“Common outlooks, their sense of justice, language and conditions of life closely related all these large and small groups of Turks to each other. Differences among the Uzbeks, Kirghiz (Kazakhs), Turkmen and others are explained by the cattle-breeding, agricultural and urban way of life, and dialects were formed under the greater or smaller influence of the Persian and Arabic languages with terms borrowed from them. That is why all the groups communicated without any difficulties.”¹²

However, Lenin insisted on fragmenting Central Asia through “national delineations.” In 1919, Lenin dispatched a commission to Central Asia [the Turkcommission], which on January 15, 1920, issued a report recommending Turkestan be partitioned into three national republics—Kirghiz (Kazakh), Uzbek and Turkmen.

There was a paradox in the opinion of these Bolsheviks. To them, the shape formations of the soviet republics of Turkestan, Bukhara, and Khorezm were “artificial.” But so would be the shape formations of the three “national” republics they proposed. They believed the multinational character of Turkestan, Bukhara, and Khorezm had a negative impact on those societies. But the Soviet society fashioned by Lenin, their sponsor, was to be multinational in character.

T. R. Ryskulov, N. Khodjaev, G. Bekh-Ivanov, and other local Party officials opposed the proposal to abolish the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, the Khorezm People’s Soviet Republic, and the Bukharan People’s Soviet Republic and replace them with three national republics. Known as the Turkdelegation, they traveled to Moscow in an attempt to dissuade Lenin from adopting the proposed partition.

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¹¹ Op. cit. Adrienne L. Edgar, https://iseees.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/edgar_2001-1029.pdf#:~:text=Guided%20by%20the%20work%20of%20ethnographers%20and%20linguists,republish%2C%20each%20named%20for%20a%20single%20ethnic%20group.

¹² Dr Mirzohid Rahimov & Dr Galina Urazaeva, “Central Asian Nations & Border Issues,” Conflict Studies Research Center, 2005, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319903644_Central_Asian_Nations_Border_Issues

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“The Turkdelegation claimed that the division of the tight-knit oblasts of Turkestan was inexpedient and to do that would be supersensitive. Of primary importance in preserving the integrity of Turkestan was the scarcity of water. The climatic and soil conditions of Turkestan gave rise to artificial irrigation, with strictly distributed irrigation systems and a necessary division of the population into cattle-breeding and agricultural ways of

life. It would not be possible to break the irrigation links with the long established right to water use; or the alteration of cattle-breeding and land-farming households with their existing system of interchange of products and raw materials between certain oblasts of Turkestan ...Exploiting the resources of Turkestan, its timber and fish resources, located along the shore of the Aral Sea, and in rivers and lakes, also required a single economic policy. Then, the Turkdelegation considered that the division of Turkestan would break the uniform plan of railway and post-and-telegraphic communication, and the regular supervision over international and currency accounts with neighbouring Asian states and foreign trade.”¹³

Their efforts failed. On June 16, 1920, Ryskulov submitted a report to Lenin. “It argued as follows: if to reach the goals of national self-determination one has to divide Turkestan into three republics, this would not be the logical ending, as it would be necessary to establish six more republics: Tajik, Kipchak, Kara-Kalpak, Djungan, Tarachin and Russian, because in rendering self-determination to the three large nations (the Kirghiz (Kazakh), Uzbeks and Turkmen), the plan subordinated to them the smaller nationalities.”¹⁴

¹³ Ibid. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319903644_Central_Asian_Nations_Border_Issues

¹⁴ Ibid. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319903644_Central_Asian_Nations_Border_Issues

Ryskulov's concern was in response to a rising popular belief within Central Asia that with a national republic, the titular nation would be in complete control of the territory and have the right to expel those whom they considered non-natives.

To resolve differences, Lenin sent a letter to Communist officials in Turkestan in 1920 asking "them to investigate how many states should be there and what they should be named...the idea of sovereign and independent ethnic-based states was alien and exotic for the locals. The concepts on the division of Turkestan were vague. The Bolsheviks applied to Vasily Bartol'd, a well-known scholar on Central Asia, with the question how they should divide the region. He warned them that Central Asia had no historic experience of the paradigm of an ethnic state, and it would be a great mistake to divide the region along ethnic lines now."¹⁵

However, the region was divided repeatedly between 1924 and 1936. Lenin and Stalin believed nationalism was a prerequisite for modernization and socialism. They believed it was necessary to establish national republics in order to foster class divisions. From class division would emerge the proletariat and the peasantry that were necessary for the consolidation of Soviet power in Central Asia. By promoting officially sanctioned national identities, it was assumed the appeal of local nationalisms in Central Asia would fade under the impact of modernization and socialism. An international identity, the Soviet people, would then replace national identities.

National delineation was a comprehensive program of 'nation-building' by the state in which the Soviets allotted to each officially recognized national minority its own territory (however small) and created for each a standardized written national language whether or not one had ever previously existed.

Initiated by Moscow and implemented by local cadres, the process was based upon the ethnographic findings of late Tsarist and early Soviet census data in conjunction with "raionirovanie," the creation of viable economic units.

What Bolshevik leaders and their local allies shared was a Western vision of Central Asia. They viewed its peoples through the lens of 19th-century European nationalism. They were, in fact, "nationalists" without "nations."

National delineation would correct this deficiency by constructing socialist nations. To achieve this, the Bolsheviks, initially politically weak in Central Asia, had to make timely concessions and form tactical alliances with various groups, including the Jadids of Bukhara and Turkestan, the Kazakh intelligentsia educated in Russia, local nationalists, Muslim reformers, and others. By doing so, the Bolsheviks successfully coopted many local adversaries into the emerging Soviet political structure with positions in the party and the government and

¹⁵ Anara Tabyshalieva, "Central Asia: Imaginary and Real Borders," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, December 19, 2001, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/7055-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2001-12-19-art-7055.html>

power in the local administrations. All that was required of them was to parrot the party line on the class struggle. Such cooptation was officially known as *korenizatsiia* or indigenization.

Its greatest victory was in the national delineation of the intellectuals of Central Asia who now defended their language and their 'nation' against their Central Asian neighbors, not Russia. Moscow was no longer their enemy but the mediator of their conflicts.

In 1924, two national republics were created as union republics of the USSR, which had been established by the Soviet republics of Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Transcaucasia in 1922. The western part of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, formerly the Russian oblast of Transcaspia, became the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic.

The Bukharan People's Soviet Republic and the southeastern portion of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, previously the Russian oblast of Ferghana, became the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. The remaining part of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was incorporated into the Kirghiz (Kazakh) Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic of the USSR. (Figure 3)

"Quite a bit of fudging had to be done in assigning populations to their 'correct' republics. Populations located on the border between two prospective republics often could not easily be identified as belonging to one group or another. On the border between the projected Uzbek

Figure 3

Map of the national state delimitation of the republics of Central Asia (1924-1925)



Note. Light pink designates Central Asian republics as part of the RSFSR in 1924. By Hellerick, Wikimedia Commons, July 25, 2019. ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_the_national_state_delimitation_of_the_republics_of_Central_Asia_\(1924-1925\).svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_the_national_state_delimitation_of_the_republics_of_Central_Asia_(1924-1925).svg)) CC BY-SA 4.0.

and Turkmen republics, there were people who spoke dialects with a mix of Turkmen and Uzbek elements and who were unable to say whether they were Uzbeks or Turkmen. Another border group claimed to be Turkmen, only to have this identification declared 'erroneous' by Soviet ethnographers. Some of the major cities of Uzbekistan had populations consisting predominantly of Tajik speakers.”¹⁶

While the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic was a single ethno-administrative unit, the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic was not. It included the non-Turkic Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist

¹⁶ Op. cit. Adrienne L. Edgar, https://iseees.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/edgar_2001-1029.pdf#:~:text=Guided%20by%20the%20work%20of%20ethnographers%20and%20linguists,republish%2C%20each%20named%20for%20a%20single%20ethnic%20group

Republic, which was located in eastern Bukhara and southern Ferghana. This subunit was detached from the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic in December 1929 and made a separate union republic of the USSR as the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic.

But this new national republic lacked a common Tajik identity. “The new Tajik government had to start nation-state building from scratch. Apart from the fact that eponymous people accounted for an absolute majority (74.6 per cent) of the republic’s population, there was little else to bind them together. A Tajik scholar has written that ‘Tajiks who lived in the Hisor Mountains did not have knowledge about Tajiks residing in Khujand. And Tajiks of the Zarafshon Valley were not in the least cognisant of the life of Tajiks in Gorno-Badakhshan.’”¹⁷

The new Tajik Republic was enlarged to include Sughd in the northeast. As a result, the border of Uzbekistan contracted from its 1927 delineation. But by 1938, it had expanded to the northwest, incorporating the Karakalpak Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. (Figures 4 and 5)

In these national delineations, the situation of Karakalpaks (the black hats) was unique. Part of the Khorezm People’s Soviet Republic, formerly the Khanate of Khiva, they were not designated a national republic. Related to the Kazakhs by language, customs, culture, and history, they were transferred twice to the jurisdiction of other soviet republics.

“The Karakalpak province [yellow in Map 7] was incorporated into Soviet

Figure 4
Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, 1927



Note. By Geoalex, Wikipedia, September 26, 2011. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Uzbek_SSR_in_1927.jpg). CC BY-SA 3.0

Figure 5
Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, 1938



Note. By Geoalex, Wikipedia, September 23, 2011. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Uzbek_SSR_01.12.1938.jpg). CC BY-SA 3.0

Kyrgyz Republic (later it was renamed to Kazakhstan), at that time an autonomous part of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic (RSFSR). Then it was directly subordinated to the RSFSR and in 1932 upgraded to

¹⁷ “Tajikistan in the Soviet Union,” Facts and Details, April 2016. https://factsanddetails.com/central-asia/Tajikistan/sub8_6a/entry-4850.html#chapter-5

an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR). In 1936, it became a part of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic also as the Karakalpak ASSR...The distinctiveness of the Karakalpaks is not questioned, as it is definitely a different nation [from the Uzbeks]. However, [today's] officials in Tashkent still seem to be doing their best to unify administrative practices, and are gradually promoting a model of centralized control over the situation in the autonomous republic and over its natural resources, including oil and natural gas under the dried Aral Sea bottom. Meanwhile, the desire for the full independence of Karakalpakstan has not disappeared. It is not openly manifested, but some segments of the population are secretly sympathetic to this idea...Article 1 [Constitution of Uzbekistan] states that "The Republic of Karakalpakstan has the right to secede from the Republic of Uzbekistan on the basis of a nation-wide referendum held by the people of Karakalpakstan."¹⁸

Inter-ethnic tensions resulting from national delineations in Central Asia were not limited to Karakalpaks and Uzbeks. The Ferghana Valley, home to the Khanate of Kokand, was partitioned among the Uzbek, Tajik, and Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republics. The borders established were meandering, geographically irrational, and incomplete.

Known as the "heart of Central Asia," the Ferghana Valley covers an area of 8,500 sq mi, roughly the size of Belgium. The most densely populated region in Central Asia; it is home to

12-15 million people or one-fifth of the total population of Central Asia. This represents approximately one-third of the population of Tajikistan, one-third of the population of Kyrgyzstan, and one-quarter of the population of Uzbekistan.

Under Soviet nationalities policy, the historic administrative unity of the Ferghana Valley was shattered. The complex fabric of society was nationalized and compartmentalized into Uzbek, Tajik, or Kyrgyz. Although administratively trifurcated, both the economy and the infrastructure of the Ferghana Valley were integrated.

But "the establishment of republican borders... acted to inscript new geopolitical entities onto both the landscape of the Valley and the consciousness of its inhabitants. It is unlikely that the original cartographers ever thought that the borders they were creating would one day delimit independent states: rather, it was expected that national sentiment would eventually wither away. Soviet planning approached the Valley in this light. Gas, irrigation, and transport networks were designed on an integrated basis. The industrial, urban, agricultural and transport planning projects of one state spilled freely over into the territory of its neighbour. Although sometimes formalised by inter-state rental contracts, rents were seldom collected nor was land reclaimed when the period of tenure expired. The result was a highly complicated pattern of land-use

¹⁸ Dr. Igor Savin, "Karakalpakstan: a little-known autonomy in the post-Soviet Central Asia," International Centre for Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity Studies (ICELDS), 2017-2019, <https://www.icelds.org/2018/05/10/karakalpakstan-a-little-known-autonomy-in-the-post-soviet-central-asia/>

that wantonly transgressed the administrative boundaries of the republics. Those borders themselves had never been fully demarcated: border commissions in the 1920s and 1950s had failed to complete their work, leaving different maps showing different borders.”¹⁹

Further complicating the border issue, each of the three republics has/had exclaves in the territory of the others. An exclave is a piece of land politically part of one state but physically located in another. A state within a state. Originally, there were eight exclaves. Uzbekistan has four in Kyrgyzstan. Tajikistan has two in Kyrgyzstan, one in Uzbekistan.

Kyrgyzstan had one exclave, which was located in Uzbekistan. On April 15, 2024, it was incorporated into the latter. “In accordance with the terms of a bilateral agreement, Barak -- a 208-hectare cutout of Kyrgyz territory entirely surrounded by Uzbekistan -- was absorbed by the larger country, with Kyrgyzstan receiving an equivalent parcel of Uzbekistan’s Andijon Province in exchange. Barak residents are set to be permanently resettled in that area by the end of the summer...the land swap deal that worked for Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan is likely a ‘unique case’ that may not be replicable for other exclaves in Central Asia.”²⁰

Two exclaves are anomalies. Sarvak belongs to Tajikistan and is located in Uzbekistan but the population is 99% Uzbek. While Sokh belongs to Uzbekistan and is located in Kyrgyzstan, the population is 99% Tajik.

With or without exclaves, with or without incongruous borders, to insure the new national

states of Central Asia were stable, rival loyalties had to be eliminated. The most powerful competitor was the clan. An entity the Soviets viewed as primordial. Soviet nationalities policy was to modernize clans out of existence; replaced by larger national identities, themselves, to be superceded by international “working class” solidarity.

“The Soviets hoped that ‘tribalism’ and kin-ship solidarities would be destroyed by the rise of class antagonism, which they actively promoted. At the same time, they pursued a policy of ‘tribal parity,’ a form of affirmative action for politically weak descent groups, as a way of disrupting existing balance of power between groups. But attempts at providing tribal parity only succeeded in making ‘tribes’ more real, and the languages of kinship and class became deeply intertwined.”²¹

The clans adjusted to Soviet reality and manipulated the Soviet policy of *korenizatsiia* or indigenization to advance their interests within state and party organs. The case of Islam Karimov is an example. Born in Samarkand, his father was a Uzbek, his mother was a Tajik, and he would

¹⁹ Nick Megoran, “The critical geopolitics of the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley boundary dispute, 1999–2000,” *Political Geography*, Volume 23, Issue 6, August 2004, Pages 731–764, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0962629804000320>

²⁰ Chris Rickleton, “Farewell Barak: Uzbekistan Absorbs Kyrgyz Exclave As Part Of Historic Border Deal,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Ferghana Valley Bureau*, April 23, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-kyrgyzstan-barak-exclave-historic-border-deal/32917744.html>

²¹ Adeeb Khalid, “Constructing Nations in Soviet Central Asia,” *Asian History*, May 24, 2023, <https://oxfordre.com/asianhistory/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277727-e-708?rskey=3M92Rq&result=3>

become president of Uzbekistan. In Samarkand, clans are often ethnically mixed. Geography and socioeconomics, more than nationality or religion, define a clan. Karimov's rise within the power structure of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic was facilitated by Sharaf Rashidov, Uzbekistan's Communist Party boss since 1959 and de facto leader of the Samarkand clan, and Ismail Jurabekov, Uzbekistan's Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers and recognized godfather of the Samarkand clan.

In providing services, opportunities, or necessities, clans were an effective alternative to an inefficient Soviet bureaucracy. They provided "the normative and organizational basis for internally powerful and cohesive networks... of relations, horizontal and vertical, which remain bound by identity bonds [of kinship real or fictitious] as the economic necessity of patronage rises and falls...Although the Soviet regime had visibly homogenizing effects on clans' social structure, in settling nomadic clans and collectivizing agriculture the Soviets also preserved and fostered kin and clan villages and increased clans' territorial attachment."²²

So, instead of Soviet Central Asian republics being national in form, socialist in content, they became national in form, clan-ist in content.

A symbiotic relationship arose between the state and the clans. To function, Soviet Central Asian republics needed the support of the clans. In exchange for that support, select state and party organs were allocated to clans. To retain clan cohesion, the clans needed control of select

state and party organs to provide patronage for their clientele.

In Turkmenistan, the Teke clan ran the government; the Balkan clan handled the energy trade, and the Mary clan controlled the cotton market and, allegedly, the drug trade.

In Kazakhstan, of the three clan confederations, the Major Zhuz, located in the southeast, controlled the government and security services, while the Minor Zhuz, situated in the west next to the Caspian Sea, exerted influence over the vital energy sector.

In Kyrgyzstan, the Buguu clan controlled the republic until the 1930s, when they fell out of favor with Stalin. The Sarybagysh clan then effectively ruled the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic for the next 70 years.

In Uzbekistan, the Samarkand clan controlled the Ministry of the Interior and the Tashkent clan ran the National Security Service. It has been alleged that a power struggle among the clans was behind the response to the Andijan events of 2005 in which the government violently crushed both civilian protestors and armed insurgents. Some Central Asian experts suggest the events may have been provoked by clans seeking to stage a coup d'état against Karimov in retaliation for his radical reshuffling of clan representation in the security services in 2004 and 2005.

²² Kathleen Collins, "The Political Role of Clans in Central Asia," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Jan., 2003), p. 174, *The Political Role of Clans in Central Asia* on JSTOR

Clan disputes could even start and end civil wars, as occurred in Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997.

Today, Central Asia consists less of states that possess clans and more of clans that possess states. Historically, the primary social bond in Central Asia was the clan. The Russian Empire

accepted clans. The Soviet Union tried to replace clans with nations and failed. First, the Soviet and then the post-Soviet national republics were co-opted by the clans. With the resurrection of clans to power and influence, Central Asia came full circle.

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Land Grabbing

A Colonial Tool to Marginalize an Indigenous Rural Santal Community in Bangladesh

By Mrinal Debnath, EdD

“When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible, and we had the land. They said, ‘Let us pray.’ We closed our eyes. When we opened them, the tables had been turned: we had the Bible, and they had the land.”

-Desmond Tutu

ABSTRACT

Employing a descriptive qualitative case study methodology, this article postulates that land grabbing is a man-made situation of coercion and oppression for the indigenous Santals in Bangladesh. The violent nature of land grabbing in Palashpur, a remote village in Bangladesh, has dispersed and dislocated the once closely-knit Santal community, destroyed Indigenous social and economic institutions, traditional ways of life, pristine and serene milieu, and the community's rhythm of life. The article analyses how land rights as essential components of human rights are being violated because of the colonial nature of the nation-state and its failure to protect the land of the indigenous peoples. By disregarding various international Indigenous land rights and the many state tenancy acts, the nation-state provides covert support to the land-grabbers. Thus, the state violates basic principles of human rights and acts as an accessory to the misery associated with territoriality. Moreover, the article explores a deep-seated nationalism engaged in insidious ethnic cleansing, resulting in an identity and existential crisis perpetrated through the dispossession of the Indigenous land in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Land grabbing, Indigenous Santals, Bangladesh, human rights, land rights, colonialism, Palashpur, dispossession, Indigenous social and economic institutions, state tenancy acts, territoriality

Figure 1*Santals in Their Ancestral Homeland*

Note. Photograph taken by the author.

Introduction

Land grabbing is a pervasive and insidious practice that perpetuates the exclusionary agenda of the nation-state concerning Indigenous land rights and access to land. This phenomenon not only undermines the rights of Indigenous communities but also reinforces racial inequalities within the broader socio-political landscape. Recognizing this crucial fact and its adverse impact on the lives of Indigenous peoples, Jo M. Pasqualucci¹ argues that “Indigenous peoples have long suffered violations of their basic land rights, either perpetrated by the state or by third parties who operate free of state interference.” In this context, this article analyzes a variety of mechanisms that contribute to the continual marginalization of Indigenous land rights, as well as the associated dehumanization and suffering experienced by this community. This has happened in an overpopulated country,

Bangladesh, where land is the scarcest of all resources. Indeed, land grabbing, which is the foremost cause of land dispossession in the area, is carried out by a group of corrupt people locally known as the *land mafia*² and state policies contribute to this surreptitious operation. The devious nature of the situation undermines the existence and sense of belonging of the Indigenous Santals in contemporary Bangladesh.

The predicament of the Indigenous Santals in Palashpur³, caused by land grabbing, is not an isolated occurrence. It reveals why and how the nation-state seizes the land, misappropriates resources, and exerts control through assimilation or elimination. It further exposes the colonial nature of imposing containment and control over ethnic minorities. It manifests itself in the acts of suppressing tradition through modernism and destroying spirituality and collectivism, privileging materialism and individualism. Colonialism in this respect emanates from a broader perspective, which is “conceptualized here not only as foreign or alien, but rather as imposed, dominating, and discriminatory.”⁴ Another layer of this issue is a deep-rooted Islamist nationalism covertly engaged in ‘insidious ethnic cleansing’ through premeditated dispossession of Indigenous land, resulting in a sustained decline of the

¹ Pasqualucci, International Indigenous Land Rights: A Critique of the Jurisprudence of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in Light of The United Nations, 51-98.

² Interview with the author, November 2005.

³ Palashpur is a pseudonym for the site of this research. A metaphor for the contested space of neo-colonial power and politics.

⁴ Dei, *Knowledge and Educational Reforms in Ghana*, 40.

Indigenous Santal population in the region. This demographic decline of Indigenous peoples due to land alienation is the result of the non-implementation of international conventions, state laws, and regulations supporting the land rights of Indigenous peoples. Until now, those laws and regulations exist behind red tape and remain unenforced⁵. These provisions of the law, at least on paper, are to prevent land alienation among Indigenous peoples⁶. On the contrary, government rhetoric and action deliberately fail to acknowledge the endemic problem, let alone take measures to prevent the ramifications of this inhumane condition. Indeed, the battle of the rural Santals against organized land-grabbing has multiple fronts in which the Santals encounter inescapable antagonism. Actual dispossession is vicious and lacks constitutional and moral support from the divided civil society. The other front manifests as a narrative that denies such oppressive and inhumane situations.

Indigenous Perspectives in Research

In this study of the Indigenous Santal people, I attempted to follow the methodology employed in Indigenous research to ensure it is conducted in a respectful, ethical, empathetic, and beneficial fashion from the perspective of the research participants. I gave much thought to the process of decolonization in the method of knowledge production and adopted “a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations, and values that inform research practices”⁷. In the process, this research is not only “a means of creating knowledge; it is simultaneously a tool for the education and development of consciousness

as well as mobilization for action”⁸. To create an epistemology compatible with the lived experiences of the research participants, I critically reflected on the research processes and outcomes, bearing in mind that the interests of the Santals, their experiences, and their knowledge are at the center of the research. This study is based on the principles of respect, reciprocity, and feedback from the participants. To this end, I employ a descriptive qualitative case study methodology. This explores the perspectives of the subjects in their struggle for survival and experiences of marginalization and dehumanization on their own terms and in their own words. I listened to their experience of land dispossession and critically reflected on what I heard and what it meant, both to the speakers and myself. Finally, I present here the echoes of their voice and knowledge.

As I was dealing with human subjects in this politically and socially volatile region, I was concerned about various emerging ethical issues. For the protection of the community and its participant members, the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants have been protected by concealing their names with pseudonyms. The names of places and communities where the participants were recruited have also been concealed using pseudonyms. I was forthright about the purpose

⁵ Roy, *The ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Population, 1957 and The Laws of Bangladesh: A Comparative Review*.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Tuhiwai-Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 20.

⁸ Gaventa, *Toward a Knowledge Democracy* 121-122, cited in Barua, *Colonial Education, and the Buddhist Community*, 113.

of this study and explained it to the potential participants as simply as possible with the help of community activists. The research findings have been shared with the research participants. They provided feedback for clarification.

The primary data of this case study was collected through in-depth audio-taped individual and focused group interviews and field notes recorded through personal observations, experiences, and reflections. The secondary data was collected from the analysis of the documents, census data, land records, land policies, and records of colonial and national history and the constitution of Bangladesh.

The sampling procedure involved two stages that incorporated a purposive sampling procedure⁹ and snowball techniques. In the first stage, a few leaders and grassroots-level activists were personally approached. Following the recruitment of these individuals, the rest of the participants were recruited through snowball techniques¹⁰. I spent two and a half months with the Indigenous Santal community in Palashpur and the adjoining villages of Kestapur Union in the Rajshahi district of Bangladesh. All participants were interviewed in Bengali according to their choice of language. Additionally, the interviews and informal chats before and after the interviews were also audio-taped and documented through self-guided shorthand. The audiotapes were transcribed, translated into English from Bengali, and edited, and immediate reflections were recorded. Audio-taped interviews were played back to the participants for verification after each interview session. Following the interviews, there were

informal discussions, which were also recorded. These discussions offered valuable insights and understandings into the inner voices of Santals.

I used NVivo7 and later NVivo 8 for data analysis. By using NVivo7-8 as a repository, I streamlined data management and created cases from the interviews. I combined the cases with extensive coding and queries to uncover the central themes in transcribed interviews and secondary data. Those cases generated crucial themes and insights into the direct personal and collective lived experiences of the participants. Indeed, they provided a critical understanding of the mechanisms that sustain dehumanization through land dispossession. They further revealed how land dispossession affects the Santals' lives on an ongoing basis. Some of the research themes emerged inductively from the data through the initial coding, while other themes emerged from coding queries. Data-driven nodes were inductively applied in coding. Codes were transformed into categorical labels or themes. In this manner, the transcribed data and data from other sources, namely, transcribed interviews, cases from individual and focus groups, field notes, and data from secondary sources, were also imported into NVivo 7/8 for coding. After coding, I used the 'Search' function to find coincidences in the coding structures across cases. I also consulted tree nodes and free nodes for the analysis and interpretation of the data and, later, created interpretations for reporting the data. I produced this article by combining the

⁹ Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Method*.

¹⁰ Debnath, *Living on the Edge: Predicament of Indigenous Rural Santal*.

frequencies of the nodes coded and qualitative examples of cases to show the occurrences of land grabbing and its dehumanization. Furthermore, identified nodes and coded queries drawn from the experiences of the participants have been used to portray the aftermath of imposed land alienation and how it violates land rights.

Figure 2

Santals in Their Ancestral Homeland



Note. Photograph taken by the author.

Land Rights and the History of Dehumanization

The land is the mother's milk of social, political, and economic power structures in Bangladesh, a predominantly agricultural society. In a country of about one hundred sixty million people with 147,570 sq. km¹¹ area, the land is "scarce and, therefore, establishing ownership right over land was always highly competitive, in which violence, speculation and other deceptive means were common."¹² The current landlessness within the broader society results from the misappropriation of state power,

the non-implementation of numerous tenancy acts, and entrenched hierarchical social and class structures in the subcontinent. For the Indigenous peoples, landlessness has been the most fundamental element of their individual and collective struggles to survive and sustain their existence, identity, and dignity.

Since time immemorial, Indigenous peoples have been living in the forest due to encroachment on their lands by the so-called mainstream population. As such, it was not a deliberate choice on their part to live in the forest. Their lived experience of adversity in the jungle within a hostile environment surrounded by wild animals, challenged by hunger, and diseases such as malaria were imposed upon them. This occurred in the ancient past, when "with the spread of *Sanskritization*¹³, the *Deva* or *Brahmana*¹⁴ would come down to the land of aborigines and would settle down there."¹⁵ According to Saxena¹⁶ "These *Adivasis*¹⁷ had been forced from the fertile land in the medieval period to seek refuge in forests by more aggressive communities who are currently the dominant ruling class." Therefore, the issue of cultural, territorial, and colonial domination of the *Adivasis* of the subcontinent, such as the Santals, has a long history. Not only have the

¹¹ Banglapedia, *National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*.

¹² Barkat, et al. *Political Economy of Khas Land in Bangladesh*.

¹³ *Sanskritization* has imposed social and cultural changes among Hindus and other minorities throughout Indian history.

¹⁴ *Brahmana* is the upper caste in the Hindu Society.

¹⁵ Choudhuri, *State Formation Among Tribals: A Quest for Santal Identity*, 11.

¹⁶ Saxena, *The Saga of Participatory Forest Management in India*, 8.

¹⁷ *Adivasis* is the Bengali term for Indigenous peoples.

Europeans brought misery and misfortune to the Indigenous peoples, but also other more powerful groups, such as the Muslims and the local Hindus known as *dikkus*¹⁸, have disenfranchised them. Indeed, the exploitation caused by European colonial policies and practices in the subcontinent exacerbated the existing marginalization and brought new challenges to the lives of the Indigenous peoples. The present-day land alienation of the Santals in Palashpur and other regions is symptomatic of the longstanding cultural and economic colonization manifested in territorial subjugation by a more powerful dominant populace.

The legacies of past policies and their ramifications have been continuing in different forms in the present day, particularly the lands categorized as “forests” or those required for state forestry¹⁹ and mining. Until the beginning of the 19th century, more than two-thirds of the land mass of the subcontinent remained uncultivated²⁰. These virgin forests were generally comprised of infertile highlands where the Indigenous communities lived. Unfortunately, the relationship that Indigenous peoples enjoyed with the land had been under threat since the expansion of the European empires in the 16th century. Under the development theory masked as Westernization, nature was regarded as a landscape of economic resources rather than cultural and social space²¹. Nature became an object of “imaginative geography”²² in the process of the socio-political construction of conquest and exploitation based on political economy. Therefore, when the British colonized India, little thought or empathy was offered to protect or

nurture Indigenous peoples and their lands. They viewed the Indigenous peoples and themselves as parts of two different systems—modernism versus primitivism and metropolitan versus peripheral wilderness—and held conflicting interests embedded in different epistemological and ontological perspectives. Thus, the Indigenous lands became soft targets to be seized not only for economic reasons but also for spiritual purposes.

The insensitivity expressed in colonizing the land of the Indigenous peoples is outlined in Lindsey Wireman’s²³ work, which states, “colonizers saw themselves not as dispossessing Indigenous peoples but as creating economic use out of wasted land.” The colonizers felt justified in taking land from the Indigenous peoples, following the Lockean doctrine, which claims “That they had no rights to land they did not cultivate”²⁴. In Locke’s opinion, “most Indigenous people lived by hunting and gathering; therefore, they had no claim to the property.”²⁵ This discriminatory *terra nullius*²⁶ devalued the existence of Indigenous peoples as sub-humans and perceived everything belonging to the

¹⁸ *dikkus* or *dekos* are oppressors, the outsiders.

¹⁹ Lasimban, *UNDP- RIPP Regional Synthesis Paper Natural Resource Management Country Studies*.

²⁰ Singh cited in Saxena, *The Saga of Participatory Forest Management in India*.

²¹ Willems-Braun cited in Neil, *A History of Christianity in India*.

²² Said, *Literature and Society*.

²³ Wireman, *Indigenous Lands as Cultural Property: A New Approach to Indigenous Land Claims*, 1065.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Allen, *The Right to Property in Commonwealth Constitution*, 134.

²⁶ *Terra nullius* is a Latin expression deriving from Roman law meaning land belonging to no one.

indigeneity unworthy, including the time-honored Indigenous system of land cultivation. The Lockean²⁷ land position continues to control the land policies and practices of many governments around the world concerning Indigenous lands. Thus, the British presence from the late 18th century onwards brought much change to land and forest usage in the Indian subcontinent. The imperialist land policy was masked by commercial interests as the British viewed forests as crown lands, limiting private property rights only to continuously cultivated lands. Even lands managed by the communities were annexed by the government. This alienated the people from their common resources. This imposed Western values and turned the land into property and resources only in material terms, ignoring the historical, cultural, spiritual, and existential ties of the forest dwellers to the land.

By the 18th century, the British in India believed that land as private property alone could bring about progress and stability. At the same time, the *Physiocrats*²⁸ in France claimed that land was the basis of all wealth. Influenced by physiocratic views, Philip Francis²⁹, who sat on the Bengali Council, proposed a plan for a “rule of property” for Bengal. He argued that the public revenue would sink fast along with the general produce of the country if the private property was not permanently secured on a solid footing³⁰. It was undeniable that this ‘rule of property’ policy intended to reproduce the 18th century Whig notion of a British hereditary landed aristocracy in Bengal. In fact, behind this vision was an intended replication of English-Bengali gentleman farmers who would be as enterprising as their English counterparts.³¹ Unfortunately,

Francis’ policy was misconceived because it did not conform to the social and cultural reality of the native soil. However, the notion of land as the source of all wealth, based on an analysis of agricultural production according to the Physiocrats, gained momentum in the introduction of the *Permanent Settlement Act*³² by Lord Cornwallis in 1793. This new act nullified inherent rights and privileges along with the communion Indigenous peoples had once enjoyed with the land.

The British rule brought to the tribal areas a new capitalist economy manifested in profit, surplus value, and competition. It further brought money, government officials, and moneylenders into these areas. This also contributed to the process of encroachment on Adivasi land by outsiders. As a result, there were tribal revolts in several parts of Eastern India beginning in the mid-19th century. These revolts forced the administration to recognize the vulnerable position of the tribal peoples and pass laws to protect their lands from outsiders. However, in practice, most of these laws were often violated without any consequences, and as a result, unscrupulous merchants, corrupt officials, and moneylenders found ways to get around the laws.

²⁷ Locke, *Two Treatises of Government in Laslett* (Ed).

²⁸ *Physiocrats* are economists who believed that the wealth of nations was derived solely from the value of “land agriculture” or “land development.” Their theories originated in France.

²⁹ Francis, Sir Philip 1740–1818 was a British statesman and pamphleteer; appointed to the council of Bengal in 1773, an advocate of various political reforms and the advancement of individual liberty.

³⁰ Metcalf & Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India*.

³¹ Guha, *Rules, Laws, and Powers: A Perspective from the Past*.

³² The *Permanent Settlement Act* was introduced in 1793 to extract revenue from land by Lord Cornwallis.

The consolidation of British authority through the land policy brought an unprecedented change in the then-undivided *Barind*³³ region, the home of many Santals. Barind is comprised of large tracts of land which currently belong to both India and Bangladesh. The Santal are the people who had cleared the inaccessible wild forests of this region and transformed them into cultivable land through their labor of love and the sweat of their brows. The historical occurrence of land grabbing in this particular context is relevant to the discussion as the site of this research is situated in this region. It was once the hotbed³⁴ of the marginalization and resistance of the Santals. Barind was torn apart by a broader colonial scheme to ‘divide and rule.’ As a result, Indigenous communities such as the Santals suffered further marginalization and territorial crises.

The current situation of land-grabbing in Palashpur is the continuation of the colonial policy that attached high value to land as private property to gain control, supremacy, and domination. This situation can be explained through the “core value” of the property theory the British employed during the periods of colonial and imperial expansion. The colonial property theory the British introduced was based on *deductive reasoning* which was a culture-free universal guide for the material and political interests of the empire. It denied the guidance of *inductive reasoning* based on contextualization and localized knowledge³⁵. Similarly, turning a blind eye to the traditional collective property rights commonly practiced by Indigenous communities, the new nation-state of Bangladesh

has also maintained and reintroduced numerous colonial land policies that have dispersed and disenfranchised Indigenous communities such as the Santals in rural areas. Consequently, this Santal community now exists in a state of isolation rather than as a closely-knit community.

Figure 3
Santals in Their Ancestral Homeland



Note. Photograph taken by the author.

Continuation of Colonial Policy

Indigenous communities across the subcontinent were territorially, politically, and culturally torn apart because of the partition. The partition of the subcontinent in 1947 based on religion had devastating impacts on the territorial privileges, belongingness, and marginalized position of the *Adivasi* Santals in

³³ *Barind* is the geographic region shared by Bangladesh and India.

³⁴ Choudhuri, *State Formation Among Tribals: A Quest for Santal Identity*.

³⁵ Tanner, *On understanding too quickly: Colonial and postcolonial misrepresentation of Indigenous Fijian land tenure*.

Bangladesh. After a prolonged coercive control of British rule over the Indigenous peoples, who were identified as criminals, a large-scale civilizing mission was undertaken to show the benevolence of the British Raj. Many laws were initiated to affirm Indigenous rights, such as land rights and other rights of Indigenous peoples in various parts of the subcontinent, including the *Barind* region. Regrettably, many of the laws that were established for the exclusive interests of the Indigenous people slipped into the fog of deliberate oblivion following the partition of the subcontinent. On the contrary, many discriminatory colonial policies and practices continued with more adverse ramifications in the Islamist nation-state of Pakistan. Many such conditions, which immediately affected the lives of the Indigenous peoples, especially the land issues, were overlooked. Regrettably, the colonial legacy continues to operate in contemporary Bangladesh, which emerged as an independent nation after a bloody campaign against the neo-colonial Pakistani rule in 1971. Roy portrays the marginalization of the *Adivasi* in the new nation-state of Bangladesh. He states:

The Bangladeshi polity generally has very little “space” for the political aspirations and basic human rights of its Indigenous peoples and other minorities. This is also the case with the Indigenous peoples’ custom-based land and natural resource rights.³⁶

The first National Forest Policy of Bangladesh, which was initiated on July 8, 1979, was not different from colonial policies during the pre-independence period. This policy was guided by

the economic interests of the state, dismissing pluralistic perspectives and discounting the existentialist issues of the forest dwellers. It emphasized the preservation and scientific management of forests, as well as the extraction of forest produce for economic development and ecological balance. Unfortunately, the Forest Department has failed to achieve material or ecological prosperity. It has further denied “people’s participation”³⁷ in the management of forest resources in the country. Furthermore, Indigenous peoples were evicted from their rightful place in the forests and ancestral lands by abusing the existing laws in the name of economic development. This was done through tricks, forgery, and extreme coercion by the government and its agents in the community.

The acquisition of Indigenous lands by the government for the construction of eco-parks and the leasing of land for mining represents a common practice through which Indigenous peoples, such as the Santals, lose their foothold in the land. The actions are justified in the interests of tourism and economic development, which excludes Indigenous interests and development. The nation-state never pays attention to the fact that the misappropriation of natural resources by third parties can result in environmental degradation, which interferes with the existential relationship of Indigenous people with their land. Controversial open-pit coal mining in Phulbari³⁸

³⁶ Roy, *The rights of Adivasis on land and forests: Bangladesh Government’s perspective*, 140.

³⁷ Halim, *Invisible Again: Women and Social Forestry in Bangladesh*, 86.

³⁸ Phulbari is in Bangladesh. It received international attention because of the controversial open pit- mining project and peasant movement against it.

in northwest Bangladesh is a case in point. Through an organized peaceful movement that turned violent, the local majority and Indigenous peoples had earlier forced the government to suspend a mining project by the Asian Energy Corporation, a London-based British Company. Currently, Global Coal Management Resources (GCM) has resumed aggressive efforts to push the project forward under a fresh deal with the government. If the government allows the project to go forward, it will forcibly displace 40,000 people in the region, including at least 2,200 Indigenous people whose history and tradition in the area date back 5,000 years.³⁹ According to Indigenous leaders, as many as 50,000 Indigenous people in 20 different tribal groups could lose their lands and livelihoods as mining would exhaust the water label. It would cause devastating ecological and humanitarian disaster in the region. If the project goes ahead as planned, it will violate the UN Declaration, Article 29(1), which states:

Indigenous peoples have the right to the . . . productive capacity of their lands or territories and resources.⁴⁰

The issue of land grabbing in Phulbari is critically important in weighing up the adverse impacts of land grabbing in Palashpur. Undoubtedly, the Phulbari mine project jeopardizes the human rights of thousands of people due to the mass evictions and destruction of agricultural land and the pollution that will result from the extraction activities. However, low-intensity forced evictions targeting primarily Indigenous peoples are more prevalent, yet they receive no media attention. Unlike the victims in

Phulbari, the victims in Palashpur are exclusively Indigenous Santals, and the process is slow and insidious. In Phulbari, the concentration of the Indigenous groups is high. Conversely, in Palashpur, the Santals have already been dispersed and are living in isolation. Besides, the perpetrators in Palashpur are local, while in Phulbari, the perpetrators are foreigners. As such, the issue of positional marginality plays out through the notion of “race to innocence”⁴¹ in the oppression of the Santals in Palashpur. By emphasizing the marginality of the Bangladeshi mainstream agenda in the transnational context, complicity in the oppression of Santals and other minorities is masked. As a result, Santals in Palashpur encounter silent ethnic cleansing without much uproar. In contrast, the situation in Phulbari has received much local and international media attention. Indeed, forced eviction, which constitutes a violation of human rights, is widespread throughout Bangladesh. In addition, many policies of the colonial past imposed through the hegemony⁴² of the nation-state have had devastating impacts on the lives of the Indigenous peoples in this part of the world. After the emergence of Bangladesh in 1972, land reform policies were enacted; however, the implementation of land reform laws has been significantly constrained, primarily due to deep-

³⁹ Cultural Survival, *Bangladesh: Ban Coal Mine, Save Forests and Farms: Phulbari open-pit mine would displace thousands of Indigenous people*.

⁴⁰ UN Declaration, cited in Pasqualucci, *International Indigenous Land Rights*, 79.

⁴¹ Razack, *Looking White People in the Eye: Gender, Race, and Culture in the Courtrooms and Classroom*.

⁴² Gramsci cited in Howson, & Smith: *Hegemony: Studies in Consensus and Coercion*.

seated structural prejudices within the country. These prejudices manifest in poor governance, entrenched vested interests, prevailing power dynamics, and systemic corruption.⁴³ Furthermore, the Adivasis are systematically excluded in government projects, such as the failed Agrarian Reform⁴⁴ and in the distribution of *Khasland*⁴⁵ to the landless people.⁴⁶

The most exclusionary act in the history of property rights in Bangladesh is the *Enemy Property Act*⁴⁷ of 1965 and its post-independence version, the *Vested Property Act*⁴⁸ of 1974⁴⁹. These acts have evicted millions of minorities, especially Hindus, from their ancestral lands, homes, and other property. This law, widely known as a powerful instrument for ethnic cleansing, has been cataclysmic for both the minority Hindus and Indigenous Santals who decades ago started practicing Hinduism⁵⁰. By abusing the Vested Property Act, the Santals and other Indigenous peoples all over Bangladesh, whose religious beliefs and rituals are akin to Hindu religious practices, were evicted from their lands as well. During this process, the Santals in Palashpur lost their property too. In line with the colonial past, the property rights established by the Bangladeshi government are fraught with politics of discrimination, domination, and deprivation. The Constitution of Bangladesh, a homogeneous country, does not have provisions for minority or *Adivasi* land rights, as articulated in the Constitutions of India and Pakistan. Land rights related to religious minorities and Indigenous peoples are overlooked by government and public policies. Thus, there is a total disregard for the declaration of the ILO

(International Labor Organization) Convention that states:

..... Indigenous peoples enjoy collective rights: to ownership, control, and management of their lands and territories; to exercise of their customary laws; to represent themselves through their representative institutions. It is also recognized that laws, policies, and “development” should not be imposed on them without their prior and informed consent.⁵¹

The ILO’s declaration has been discarded in the name of nation-building. The denial of *Adivasi* property rights and their customary laws negates their inherent rights of ownership, causing landlessness. Among the *Adivasi* communities across Bangladesh, customary laws do not traditionally require the type of documentation that is recognized by statutory law. In the *Adivasi* communities, personal or family land ownership and collective land ownership have always been entrusted to local chiefs and village leaders. Therefore, *Adivasis’* claims to land ownership have been considered void in the modern-day land laws that originated in the Euro-centric, colonial-imperial legal

⁴⁷ *Enemy Property Act*. The property of the Hindus who left for India in 1965 war was considered as enemy property..

⁴⁸ *Vested Property Act*: The Enemy property later turned into Vested is just a nomenclature.

⁴⁹ Trivedi, *The legacy of enemy turned vested property act in Bangladesh*.

⁵⁰ Choudhuri, *State Formation Among Tribals: A Quest for Santal Identity*.

⁵¹ Colchester, cited in Ulloa, *The Ecological Native: Indigenous Peoples’ Movements and Eco-governmentality in Colombia*, 3.

system. In the name of the national interest, land laws represent an ongoing colonial desire to exploit the land, resources, and people. This law aids unscrupulous officials and the powerful landed elite in exploiting the pristine, illiterate Santals. A large portion of Santal land has been appropriated, leaving many Santals locked in bitter and futile land disputes with dishonest and powerful *land mafias*⁵². Thus, the gaps between the international and local land rights of the nation-state sustain the monopoly of exclusionary vested property rights. In the mainstream discourse, *Adivasis*, such as the Santals, are portrayed as outsiders. By denying their history in the region, the Santals are labeled as anachronistic and outsiders in terms of modernity and progress. This vilification, portraying the existence of the Santals frozen in time, denies their hard labor that turned the region into a habitable space. Denying the Santals their *Adivasi* status also disregards the historical reality of the undivided terrain of the subcontinent where the Santals once built their homes unrestricted by the political boundaries erected in 1947. These political boundaries were erected based on the notion of the nation as an imagined community⁵³ such as India and Pakistan, and later Bangladesh. Anthropology and history suggest the Santals are one of the earliest inhabitants of the subcontinent and the *Barind* region. In the *Barind* region, they were the first settlers, coming before the Muslims who now claim to be mainstream people. Choudhuri⁵⁴ reports the “Santals came to Barind after 1871 in large numbers,” and “between 1881 and 1890 nearly 20 thousand Santals from the *Santal Parganas* and 16 thousand Mohammedans from Murshidabad migrated into

the district.” Ironically, the Muslims are entitled as the sons and daughters of the soil, while the Santals are portrayed as outsiders. Unless the land and property rights of the *Adivasis* are established, the Santals in Palashpur and elsewhere will continue to face marginalization and dehumanization, and their *Adivasi* status in the Constitution will remain unresolved.

Figure 4
Santals in Their Ancestral Homeland



Note. Photograph taken by the author.

Land as a Contested Terrain

Land nourishes the formation of Indigenous identity, survival, and religious practices. It is the material base for Indigenous cultural and spiritual activities that sustain Indigenous life and living. For the Santal *hor hopon* (the true

⁵² Kamal, *Alfred Soren and Adivasi's Struggle for Landownership*.

⁵³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on Origin and Spread of Nationalism*

⁵⁴ Choudhuri, *State Formation Among Tribals: A Quest for Santal Identity*, 62.

men) combined with *hor desom* (Santal country) convey deep-seated emotional relationships, collaboration, freedom, collectivism, alternative local knowledge, and cultural autonomy that unite land and people in oneness. The quintessence of profound connection between the Santals and their land, along with their deep appreciation for it, is often encapsulated in the saying, “*Noa do Hor disom kana*” meaning, “This is Santal country.”⁵⁵ It is a special place for the Santal. Therefore, the land, or ‘*terra firma*,’ which is the material and physical parameter of Santal country, is inseparable from the Santal people who call themselves “*Hor*.” On the contrary, modern Western lifestyles have grown out of an increasing estrangement from the natural world or ‘*terra firma*’. The mode of modern culture places humankind against nature, an attitude that tends to target ‘Mother Nature’ as an enemy that must be conquered and controlled. In this context, the inseparable union between Indigenous culture and land can be understood, and the profound rootedness of Indigenous identity as well as their existence on that land, can be appreciated and treasured. Besides, the construct of “the nature-culture dichotomy, prevalent in Western thought, is an alien epistemology for Indigenous peoples”⁵⁶. Nature is an inseparable part of the Santal tradition. Various Santal rituals and festivities are celebrated under the cycle of nature in which the land or the village is at the center. The symbolic and real significance of land or village is well defined by Mahapatra.⁵⁷ “A Santal village is not merely a location in geography or history; it crystallizes a whole system of ritual structure. It comes into being through the special

dispensation of the *Bongas*,⁵⁸ and is sanctified by their blessings.” Thus, nature, rituals, and the lives of the *Hor hopon* are essential parts of the holistic world manifested in the Indigenous Santal worldview. One cannot exist without the other, and therefore, when one is estranged or lost by the intrusive external forces, the whole society loses its internal and external equilibrium, its “rhythm of daily life.”⁵⁹

The rhythm of their daily life “grows out of the close relationship between the activities of man and the cycle of nature.”⁶⁰ Loss of one of the elements ultimately leads to the rejection of Santalness or their tribal depth and poses challenges to their existence. Therefore, the land, known as the nucleus of nature, which sustains and ties rituals and the people together, is paramount to the unique presence, survival, and growth of the Santals. The land helps sustain the Santals and their rituals, which in turn help promote and revitalize Santal culture, history, and tradition. Due to inherent ties with forests and groves, “Santal festivals and religion rest heavily on the seasonal manifestation of nature.”⁶¹ Before colonialism, the Santals and most other Indigenous peoples emphasized the use of mutual

⁵⁵ Somer, *the Dynamics of Santal Traditions in a Peasant Society*, 57.

⁵⁶ Dodson: Ridgeway, cited in Banerjee, *Whose Land Is It Anyway? National Interest, Indigenous Stakeholders and Colonial Discourse*, 8.

⁵⁷ Mahapatra, *Modernization and Ritual: Identity and Change in Santal Society*.

⁵⁸ *Bongas* are spirits. The Santals believe bonga or Bongas control human destiny and diseases. They are the ones who control both visible and invisible worlds.

⁵⁹ Interview with the author, November 2005.

⁶⁰ Culshaw, *Tribal Heritage: A Study of the Santals. The Dynamics of Santal Traditions in a Peasant Society*, 24.

⁶¹ Ray, Das & Basu, *To Be With Santals*, 72.

dependence on land rather than its formal possession as property.

In the past, the Santals had collective ownership of the land under the guidance of the village headman, known as the *Manjiharam*.⁶² This contrasts with the possession of documents, known as *Dalils*,⁶³ which are the acknowledgment and authentication of private ownership or title of land in the Western system of property rights. Relying on documents is still unpopular or not taken seriously by many Santals in Palashpur. Those are the major factors contributing to the land alienation of the Santals in Palashpur. However, the life of the Santals in Palashpur, as elsewhere, continues to revolve around the land—either working on their farms or working as day laborers on them.

Although 90 to 95 percent of the Santals in Palashpur are landless farmers, they sustain a profound connection to the land. Some of the participants in this study claim that the land is “the treasure trove of natural resources for our survival and the key to eradicating poverty, the most intimate enemy in our society.”⁶⁴ They “believe if they are without land, they do not have a soul, purpose in life, or identity”⁶⁵. Under the circumstances, it is painful that the Santals in Palashpur see their lands “*hor disom*” fall into the hands of the *Dikkus*, who resort to all means of coercive ploys to evict them from their lands.

The centrality of land to the Indigenous Santal identity and their existence is to be conceptualized in material, metaphorical, and cultural terms. Land is a contested site in which power and politics play out colonial relationships of domination and subordination. Ownership

of land grants a sense of material security and the continuation of survival of the Santal community as a distinct group. This further affirms that their community is not controlled by the more dominant group. Land ensures the reclamation of territorial identity and Indigenousness. On the contrary, the violence in land grabbing denies them their rightful ownership of land, makes them outsiders, and uproots them physically, culturally, spiritually, and historically from the spatial landscape.

For the Santals, the ancestral territories not only provide an economic base for their daily lives but also are intimately connected to their cosmologies and uniqueness. The land that they occupy is permeated with their history, and it is the abode of the *Bongus*, the spirits or departed souls of their ancestors. In their opinion, their invisible presence explains the functioning of the visible world. The Santal village or *hor disom*, which is an essential part of the larger landscape, is now diminishing physically, culturally, and ecologically because of the constant invasion of the so-called mainstream people. Thus, dispossessed of landownership individually and collectively, the Santals are on the brink of elimination from the nation-state. This concurs with Anaya and Williams’⁶⁶ study, which says:

⁶² *Manjiharam* is the head of the Santal village.

⁶³ *Dalil* is title deed/documents of ownership of land.

⁶⁴ Interview with the author, November 2005.

⁶⁵ Unger, The Role of Landscape Architects in Park Management, Planning and Design with Regard to Indigenous Peoples, 8.

⁶⁶ Anaya and Williams, *The protection of Indigenous peoples' Rights over lands and natural resources under the inter-American human rights system*, 56.

Rights to lands and resources are property rights that are prerequisites for the physical and cultural survival of Indigenous communities. Thus, land as a material, cultural, and spiritual space is essential for the continuation of Indigenous societies in their existing forms and for individual and collective well-being.

Figure 5

Santals in Their Ancestral Homeland



Note. Photograph taken by the author.

Land Grabbing in Palashpur

Various tricks and treacheries are employed to alienate the Santals from their ancestral property, agricultural land, and sacred burial grounds. The perpetrators are “a network of vested parasitic groups comprised of local influentials—rural *tauts and matabbars*⁶⁷, dishonest politicians and government officials.”⁶⁸ In Santal terms, they are *dikkus* of the contemporary world, representing the more powerful and resourceful usurpers who, since time immemorial, have been denying the

Santals’ territorial identity. Consequently, the successors of the *Great Tradition* still search for the “promised land”⁶⁹ that all Santals treasure in their collective consciousness. In the following sections, four cases will be analyzed to document scenarios of land grabbing that reveal the Santals’ vulnerability, unity, and resistance.

The Cases in Palashpur: Case Study No. 1: The loss of a sacred burial ground

In Palashpur there is a burial ground for the Santal community. This place has been considered sacred and important for final rites by all members of the Santal community. In 2004, the local Santals found themselves in a difficult situation when some local Muslims claimed that the burial ground belonged to them. Through falsification, the Muslims managed to obtain the necessary documents by bribing corrupt officials at the land office.

When the Muslims took hold of the land by force, they began to oppose the burial of Santals there. The loss of their sacred heritage site shocked the Santal community. The dispossession of agricultural and domestic homesteads was a common experience for them. However, they could never have imagined that their burial ground would be taken away and turned into agricultural land. The Santals turned to the local government for help; however, their demands

⁶⁶ *tauts, and matbars* –local influentials who impose their domination and tricks over others

⁶⁷ Barkat, et al. *Political Economy of Khas Land in Bangladesh*, xxiii.

⁶⁸ Mahapatra, *Modernization and ritual: Identity and Change in Santal Society*. 24.

were ignored. After two years of struggle, they managed to receive help from the Deputy Commissioner who asked to see the ownership record. The *Manjiharam* (the local Santal chief) instructed a few young Santal men to dig up the bones of their buried ancestors and made an emotional plea that those were their records of ownership. Overwhelmed by emotion, the DC declared that the property belonged to the Santal community of this area; he also ordered the demolition of the illegally erected structures by the land usurpers. Even though the perpetrators were ousted through the executive order from the DC office, this case remains pending in court.

Case Study No. 2: Misplaced trust

In 19192, Bidhu Soren of Palashpur, an illiterate Santal, began to work on the agricultural farm of a local Muslim landowner named Mohammed Kalimullah. Bidhu himself owned a few *bighas* of land as well. While working in the field, Bidhu was approached by Kalimullah, who asked if he had submitted his *khajna* (property tax) for the year. Kalimullah further mentioned that if Bidhu had not paid it yet, he could pay on his behalf when he went to town.

Bidhu had never paid the property tax himself. Someone had always helped him. Therefore, when Kalimullah offered to submit his outstanding tax for him. Bidhu felt grateful and relieved. He at once trusted the smiling and seemingly modest Kalimullah. Accordingly, Kalimullah asked Bidhu for his *dalilnama* (title deed) to take with him to the land office. Bidhu gave Kalimullah his *dalilnama* without any hesitation. The *dalilnama* allowed Kalimullah and the land office to know

the details of the property. Meanwhile, Bidhu and Kalimullah reached an agreement that Kalimullah would pay Bidhu's tax money from his pocket, and Bidhu would return the debt through work on the farm. Everything seemed okay to Bidhu when, three days later, his title deed was returned.

Within a few months, Kalimullah forcefully took over a portion of Bidhu's land and built a fence around it. With the help of land office officials, Kalimullah has illegally acquired part of Bidhu's land. Bidhu Soren was dismayed. Many advised Bidhu to file a case against Kalimullah, while others discouraged him from getting into further trouble. A *shalishi* (a hearing led by the local elites) was held in which it was alleged that Bidhu Soren had borrowed a large sum of money from Kalimullah to pay his debt and had to pawn his title deed. In the *shalishi*, which was merely a staged drama, everyone took Kalimullah's side. Therefore, the transfer of land ownership was formally justified. Bidhu, a poor and illiterate Santal, found no support nor any means to pursue his case further. In the process, he lost a portion of his land once and for all.

Case Study No 3: False friends are a curse

Jitu Hashda belongs to an affluent Santal family. The family has *bighas* of landed property. Jitu associates with local Muslim leaders who appear to be his friends. Like many Santals, Jitu has a drinking problem. In 2002 Jitu was charged with rape. This was a false charge filed against him by Dhauti, a poor Santal girl whose family was forced by some local Muslims to file the charge. The law enforcement officers then went

searching for Jitu to arrest him. To avoid this, Jitu went into hiding. While in hiding, Jitu managed to settle the issue with the victim's family through the mediation of his so-called friends.

Jitu was required to pay a large sum of money to law-enforcement officers for the settlement as well. To do this, he borrowed money from his close relatives. However, the matter did not end there. More money was demanded of him, which he borrowed from his Muslim friends, who were involved in the conspiracy against him. Jitu accumulated such a large amount of debt that he had to mortgage his property to repay it. Jitu Hashda lost his land to his unscrupulous Muslim friends and became a day laborer as a result.

Case Study No. 4: Fighting for Land is a Sacred Duty

Pran Murmu is well off among the Santals of Palashpur. He has a lot of land. His father left him many *bighas* (units of measurement in Bengali) of land before he passed away. However, most of Pran's properties are disputed because he does not have written documents to prove ownership. He has been fighting for his land for decades. The dispute began in the 1950s when his father was still alive. His father had acquired the land from the then-zamindar (landlord). The agreement was, however, verbal. Before 1947, his father did not encounter difficulties. When Pakistan was formed, and people began to migrate into the area from the other side of the border, the situation began to change drastically.

Pran has several pending cases in the courts. In the past, he lost most of the cases he filed

which made him desperate to acquire permanent rights to his other properties. To this end, he has spent large sums of money. However, the ownership of most of his properties continues to be disputed. Pran is frustrated, sick, and tired due to the material, physical, and psychological costs of dealing with these issues daily. For help, he turned to the local church and eventually became a convert. However, his struggle continues unabated.

In 2003, Pran lost a case to a local Muslim, who had sent a gang of men locally known as *Mastans*⁷⁰ to prevent him from attending a court hearing. The gangs threatened to kill him if he appeared at the final hearing. Due to his absence, the verdict went against him. In addition, Pran is often intimidated by enemies who threaten to rape or kidnap female family members of his family if he pursues the case further. Under such constant pressure, Pran has sometimes considered giving up and leaving the country. However, Pran's inner drive to continue the struggle is generated by his moral and ethical obligation to protect the land he inherited from his ancestors and to keep their memory alive. Pran is energized by a sense of the sacred duty of protecting the land. Now, the question is how long he can continue to fight to establish his rights. He is engaged in a struggle against the politics of discrimination, facing a formidable coalition of the courts, the administration, and the Constitution, all of which are united against him.

⁷⁰ *Mastans are local gang members*

Emerging insights

The first case involving the burial ground of the Santal community has special significance as it triggered immeasurable shock, anger, and frustration within the Santal community. In the metaphorical and real sense, a burial ground is not only a place where dead bodies are cremated or buried but also an inherent part of a community's ritualistic and historical consciousness. A burial ground brings the past, present, and future together in a special way. Also, for Santals, the burial ground is the spiritual gateway that separates and holistically brings the visible and invisible worlds together.⁷¹ It is the symbol of running history that reminds the Santals of their ancestors whose blessings and actions are essential parts of their mundane providence and prosperity. When a sacred place such as a burial ground is taken over and ravaged by intruders as it has been in Palashpur, the whole community is denied the joy and meaning of life. Moreover, by attacking a sacred place, the intruders send a strong message to the marginalized others that nothing is safe – be it sacred or ephemeral – from their greed. Such dispossession and desecration of sacred places belonging to religious and ethnic minorities are common occurrences that often go unreported, unresolved, and unpunished. It thus exposes an extreme lack of tolerance and respect for other ways of living and believing. For the Santals, this case was a wake-up call, and it awakened their sense of solidarity and resistance, bringing the community together. In the end, they were successful in ousting the land mafias from the burial ground. This proves that Santals are not

just passive recipients of marginalization; they can be the agency that recovers their territorial rights, which embody their history, culture, spirituality, and sense of well-being.

The second, third, and fourth cases illustrate premeditated land grabbing involving individuals who had experienced the misery of uprootedness at high emotional and material costs. They also demonstrate how ruthless, aggressive, organized, and powerful the land grabbers are. Indeed, the cases are also symptomatic of the prevailing situation in which the minority and Indigenous peoples face forced, illegal, and easy eviction from their ancestral properties. Although all cases portray a common feature of Indigenous lands falling into the hands of the *land mafias*, each of them is unique and recounts individual experiences leading to collective narratives. In the second case, the victim was an illiterate and innocent Santal who paid a high price for trusting an unscrupulous neighbor whose unbridled avidity caused him untold misery and misfortune. He trusted his friend with land ownership documents that were forged before he returned. The friend did not stop there; he took a portion of his property away from him. The irony is no one trusted the victim's side of the story during the *shalishi*. Here, a racist element of contestation 'us' versus 'them' played out. Any conflicts involving Indigenous lands unite the local influentials to wreak further havoc on the victims, and the brutality is perpetrated with an intensity that violates every tenet of human rights. In this

⁷¹ Debnath, *Living on the Edge: Predicament of Indigenous Rural Santal*.

case, Bidhu Soren⁷² found no support during the *shalishi*⁷³. He got confused as different people with vested interests offered different suggestions with no real solution. The outcome of this type of settlement is always a foregone conclusion, as the perpetrators are in command of selecting the individuals on the *Shalishi* committee.

While the second case involved the issue of trust, the third case revolved around fake friendships that devastated the life of a Santal named Jitu whose life had already been mired in drinking. Drinking, which has been taking a heavy toll on the Santal community, is as common amongst Santals in Palashpur as elsewhere. Many Santals have lost their lands for this reason. In this case, Jitu's Muslim friends were playing tricks on him using his vulnerability to alcohol. By offering liquor, one can easily entrap an alcoholic for personal gain. The third case thus reveals disgraceful and unacceptable practices that the *land mafia* use to their advantage.

The fourth case outlines the vulnerability of land owned by Indigenous peoples in Bangladesh. The customary *Adivasi* laws did not traditionally require the type of documentation required by statutory law. Both personal or family property ownership and communal land ownership had been entrusted to local chiefs and village leaders. With the emergence of the nation-state, these institutions have been rendered outmoded and ineffective. Pran's land in the fourth case is disputed because he does not have the proper ownership documents. He did not have a problem before the emergence of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as nation-states. Now everything has changed. The fourth case further reveals that

land-grabbers use violence and intimidation to accomplish their objectives. Pran was prevented by force and intimidation from attending the court on the day of the final hearing. The verdict went against him because of his absence. He often received threats and verbal abuse. This case thus exemplifies 'a reign of terror' the Santals in Palashpur and elsewhere negotiate daily. These cases reflect the lived experience of the Santals at the micro-level, an experience overlooked in conventional sociological and ethnic studies. These cases, instead of over-theorization, document that the land grabbers are organized and possess immense power, shrewdness, privileges, and resources to take advantage of silent support from all levels of government and civil society. Also, these land-grabbers can evade justice by abusing their power and position in Bangladesh.

Land Alienation and its implications

Land alienation has had devastating impacts on the lives of the Santals in Palashpur. It has robbed the Indigenous Santals of their physical, cultural, material, and spiritual survival and distinctiveness. It has further dismantled the traditional institutions that used to sustain their collective and individual spirit and consciousness. This consciousness grew from the memory and myth of the "Great Tradition," a guiding force of "their peoplehood and shared fate."⁷⁴ Land alienation undermines and fragments this

⁷² Interview with the author, November 2005.

⁷³ *Shalishi* is settling conflicts locally through a hearing led by the local elites.

⁷⁴ Mahapatra, *Modernization and ritual: Identity and Change in Santal Society*, 2.

consciousness as the loss of land deprives the Santals of their practices, ceremonies, and rituals that reinforce and renew this consciousness.

Disenfranchised from their land, estranged from the cycle of reciprocity between the community and nature, the Santals have been transformed into a commodity and have become dependent on their usurpers. They are being separated from the land where their ancestors were buried and their ceremonies and rituals were once performed. Also, they have been alienated from the land in which they pursued their livelihood and acquired and harnessed localized knowledge and skills. The Santals now have lost their sense of belonging, their physical and material security, and their intrinsic joy of living. Santals are thus overwhelmingly disturbed, dispersed, and frustrated; they have lost confidence in the law, justice, and administration of the nation-state and have been leaving Palashpur in large numbers. Many of the Santals have reportedly left the country for India. Others are turning to NGOs and churches for support.

The devastating land alienation has impoverished the Santals in Palashpur to such an extent that most of them have now become marginal day laborers and sharecroppers on the land that once belonged to them. Due to the seasonal nature of these occupations and the low wages, the Santals live from hand to mouth and remain unemployed for a significant part of the year. As a result, there is evidence of chronic poverty, hunger, and associated maladies that engulf every household. Bidhu Soren, a landless Santal Palashpur, describes his helpless situation in the following way:

If you have control over your land, you have control over your life because land is our life, our means of cultural and material survival. Now, the *Dikkus* control our land and our life. As a result, they have our land while we have their miseries and poverty.⁷⁵

A link between landlessness and poverty is evident in Palashpur. The ownership of land not only provided the Santals group solidarity but also was the means for their survival, sustenance, and financial security. The Santal community in Palashpur, as elsewhere, was highly dependent on natural resources for survival. Therefore, they had a much stronger relationship with the land than that of the mainstream people. When the Santals lost their land, the consequences were severe. The loss of land has led to a sense of powerlessness and alienation. Land alienation has undermined the Santal community's social capital or intra-community bonding. This is evident in the powerful influence of external forces such as NGOs and the churches in Palashpur. Any major decisions involving the Santals in Palashpur are no longer made by the community itself; they are pre-determined and prescribed by the churches and NGOs and come with certain conditions.

Land grabbing by the *land mafias*, together with the silent support from the government, reveals the colonial nature of state power over marginalized 'others.' The space or land that nourishes the distinctive culture and associated rituals is also under such control. The contestation of power indicates a colonial

⁷⁵ Interview with the Author, Nov. 2005

relationship in which the colonizers, namely the mainstream Bengali land grabbers under the direct and indirect patronage of the state, impose territorial, cultural, material, and physical domination over the Santals. Thus, land grabbing, as an action of exclusion, is dispossessing traditional Santal people of their ancestral land, destroying their self-sufficiency. They are stripped of their economic, cultural, and traditional autonomy forever.

The Santals' right to the land in Palashpur and elsewhere demands official and constitutional recognition of the presence of the Santals as Indigenous people in Bangladesh. Land alienation's most subtle and devastating impact manifests in the appropriation of space and history. By appropriating space, which is a site for knowledge production, the neo-colonizers put an end to the resources that produce and sustain empirical knowledge⁷⁶ for sustainable living, an intrinsic life force of survival of the Indigenous Santal community. Through dispossessing peoples of their sacred and cultural sites, such as the burial ground in Palashpur, the past is being remolded, rewritten, and finally distorted. The past "reflects the history, customs, cultural practices, ideas, and values handed down from one generation to the next generation."⁷⁷ This cementing force is being obliterated by imposing a mutated cultural imperialism manifested in the exclusionary policies of the nation-state in which Islamization also plays a role. Dispossession of Indigenous land is the first step in expediting this 'process of rewriting history' through territorial control.

Conclusion

Landlessness and associated violence cause cultural, material, physical, and spiritual extinction for the Indigenous groups in Bangladesh. Land rights are not just an issue of material belonging; they are connected to the spiritual, social, and cultural existence of the Santals with their distinct identity and history. By controlling land, the nation-state can accelerate the assimilation or elimination of the Indigenous peoples and, in the process, exclude them from the national policy of human development. This situation emphasizes the urgency of granting intrinsic and sublime integrity to Indigenous land. As long as individuals or the community have uncontested ownership over land, their material and spiritual rights remain intact. Without land, the Santal culture loses its life-support, economic viability, and contour of life and is destined to become extinct. The decreasing Santal population in the region foretells a catastrophic end to a vibrant community. Clearly, without ownership of land, they are left without an "anchor" to sustain their physical, cultural, and spiritual rootedness and material security. This research explores how the nation-state acts as a colonial agent that denies human rights by abolishing land rights outlined in Article 17 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It says: (1). *"Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.* (2). *No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his*

⁷⁶ Dei, *Rethinking of the Indigenous Knowledge in the Academy*.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 12.

⁷⁸ United Nation, Basic principles & guidelines on development-based evictions & Displacement

property.”⁸ However, the prevailing situation in Bangladesh undermines both elements of Article 17, which sets an appalling example of human rights violation through the non-recognition of the land rights of the Santals.

Hence, securing land rights would usher in the process of decolonization to reclaim Santal history and tradition, facilitating the recovery and celebration of their disappearing physical, spiritual, and cultural space.

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Pashtun Indigenous Knowledge and Resilience

Mitigating Climate Change in Northern Pakistan

By Zafar Khan, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Indigenous knowledge and resilience are embedded in the prevailing culture of traditional societies. This study aims to investigate the Pashtun culturally embedded indigenous knowledge and resilience to climate change. The Pashtun indigenous knowledge is culturally entrenched and guides them socio-culturally to mitigate the worst impact of climate change. It is revealed Pashtun indigenous knowledge and resilience are rooted in their culture and social structure. Their folk literature, metaphors, poetry, traditions, cultural capitals, social organizations, and colonial history are key elements to understanding the different aspects of Pashtun's traditional wisdom and resilience to climate change. Pashtun social structure (such as kinship bonds, brotherhood, and reciprocity) and cultural institutions (such as Jirga) also strengthen their resilience to bounce back from the worst impact of climate change. Indigenous knowledge, socio-cultural institutions, and resilience collectively help them to face the worst impact of climate change. Pashtun have bad memories of colonial exploitation and Pakistan's exploitative policies; hence, they do not trust state initiatives, and they rely on their traditions to counter the worst impact of climate change.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge, Pashtun culture, climate change, resilience, socio-cultural mitigation, folk literature, metaphors, poetry, traditions, cultural capitals, social organizations, colonial history, kinship bonds, brotherhood

Introduction

Climate change impacts indigenous communities across the globe (Shaffril, Ahmad, Samsuddin, Samah, & Hamdan, 2020; Khan, Khan, & Kamal, 2024). Indigenous communities are more vulnerable and have no access to sophisticated technology and effective state institutions to face the worst impacts of climate change. Climate change directly affects natural

resources like water, land, domesticated animals, and crops, on which indigenous communities depend, resulting in the displacement of these communities from their native places (Figueroa, 2011). This displacement results in the loss of their livelihood resources. Additionally, changes in the rain cycle and ecosystems have badly affected indigenous communities worldwide (Abate & Kronk, 2013).

Pashtun indigenous people in South Asia remained a colony of the British and faced their worst exploitative policies (Yousaf, 2019). In post-colonial times, Pakistan continued the policies of its predecessor and exploited their natural resources, which reinforced poverty in this region. The British and Pakistan, in colonial and post-colonial times, adopted different administrative policies and presented Pashtun communities as wild and uncivilized people to the outside world. Colonial history and Pakistan's exploitative policies in this region make them more vulnerable to climate change. Colonial history, conflicts, and climate change intersect their vulnerability.

The article also explores the Pashtun indigenous community's traditionally entrenched indigenous knowledge about climate change and focuses on the Pashtun indigenous resilience to mitigate climate change. This study also examines how climate change intersects their marginality as a minority ethnic group in this region.

Theoretical Framework

This research article focuses on the impact of climate change on indigenous communities and how they respond to climate change. The Indigenous Standpoint Theory allows the conduct of research in the prevailing socio-cultural context (Nakata, 2007). This distinct form of analysis integrates and advances the cultural knowledge and experiences of indigenous scholars. Indigenous Standpoint Theory produces more in-depth, culturally inclusive knowledge (Nakata, 2007). Additionally, this theoretical framework allows us to focus on the cultural interface and indigenous agency, as well as the responses

of indigenous people towards climate change. Hence, this framework provides theoretical insight to this study, and this research article focuses on the traditions, indigenous knowledge, and resilience of Pashtun indigenous people.

Methodology of the Study

This study follows the methodological rules and technicality required to ensure reliability and validity. According to the nature of this research and expected data, the qualitative paradigm was adopted. The purposive sampling technique was used to collect data from relevant people who are suffering due to climate change and facing natural disasters in their native towns. The data was collected from different age groups, both men and women. I conducted 6 months of fieldwork and collected data from the merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—previously called Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)—, the northern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Swat and Kalam Valley. I conducted 50 interviews, 30 from age 50 and above, to understand changes in climate in the last four decades and 20 from young men and women. The data was collected through in-depth interviews to draw a clear picture of the research problem. Themes are analyzed in the light of primary data and theoretical framework to link it with the broader literature on the issue at hand.

Origin of Pashtun and their Way of Living

The origin of Pashtun is a debatable issue in the available literature, and no single theory has been agreed upon regarding their origin. However, the Semitic race theory is a dominant theory suggesting that the Pashtun are

descendants of one of the original 12 tribes of Israel. (Pelevin, 2021). Alternative perspectives propose that the Pashtun are linked to Aryan tribes or Indo-European groups (Khan & Ahmed, 2013).

Pashtuns live in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They live in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces and in recently merged districts—previously called the Federal Administer Tribal Areas (FATA)—inside Pakistan. They have limited land and live in mountainous and difficult terrain. They are reliant on natural resources. Pashtun lands are rich in natural resources; however, both during the colonial and post-colonial periods, these resources were exploited by the British and Pakistan. As a result, the majority of Pashtun live under the poverty line due to the exploitative policies of the British and Pakistan in this region.

Figure 1
Pashtun Indigenous People



Note. Photograph taken by the author during fieldwork.

Their colonial history and the current policies of Pakistan have reinforced poverty in this region (Nichols, 2010). Due to poverty, they migrated to countries such as the United States, Europe,

and the Middle East. The migrated Pashtun earn a livelihood to support the remaining family members who live in their native towns. They have also internally migrated to urban centers of Pakistan, such as Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad, as well as to other countries in search of a livelihood. The majority of migrated Pashtun are doing demanding jobs for which they lack the necessary skills. The ruling states, Britain and Pakistan, exploited their resources, but they did not extend formal educational institutions to their homeland.

The geographical location of Pashtun connects Central Asia with the East and West. The British used this region for trade between China, Western Asia, and Europe (Mohammad, Thomas, & Tabassum, 2016). Gandhari (present-day Pakistan) used this region to connect the city of Taxila with Afghanistan. The area also experienced multiple Muslim invasions as Muhammad Ghaznavi, Muhammad Ghor, Ranjit Singh, and the Turks attacked the subcontinent through the Khyber Pass. However, the Pashtun region was invaded by many foreigners, but the British ruled it for decades. The British colonial administration significantly influenced their socio-cultural values and exploited their natural resources (Hanifi, 2016).

In 1849, The British came into direct contact with the Pashtun and attacked this region for strategic interest (Khan, 2020). Initially, the British adopted the policy of non-interference in the indigenous tribal Pashtun land. However, during the viceroyship of Lansdowne and Elgin (between 1887 and 1898), the British replaced

Figure 2

Pashtun Indigenous community going for Ashar (collective community work)



Note. Photograph taken by the author during fieldwork.

the policy of non-interference with the Forward Policy. The local indigenous Pashtun resisted this policy, and consequently, the British called them uncivilized and wild people. Hence, the colonial administration implemented the closed border policy in Pashtun tribal areas—now known as merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or northern Pakistan.

Under the closed border policy, the British established several tribal agencies, enclosed by a chain of posts and military garrisons. The closed border policy called for Pashtun customs and traditions to rule the region (*Riwaj*) (Tripodi, 2016). This became an excuse for the British to deny reforms and build institutions in the Pashtun areas. The British introduced inhumane and oppressive laws under the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR), a special set of British rules applicable in the Pashtun tribal areas. Under the FCR, they denied residents legal representation, the right to present evidence, and the right to appeal.

They also misinterpreted their culture and presented them as a violent ethnic group in the literature produced in colonial times. The colonial and post-colonial administrations bribed the local strongmen and *Jargaees* (members of Pashtun *Jirga*). Political Agent (PA), the administrative head of the British, manipulated their *Jirga* and local customs. Under the frontier crime regulation, they adopted the policy of collective responsibility and punished the whole tribe for the crime of a single person. Pakistan also adopted the same policy when the British left this region. Recently, in 2018, international pressure led the Pakistan government to extend constitutional rights to the tribal districts of Pashtun society. However, the people of merged districts have still been deprived of their civil and political rights. The government of Pakistan blames their culture and tribal traditions for the violence in this region.

However, violent social engineering by the British and, later on, Pakistan has slowed down the Pashtun cultural evolution and economic development. They are still dependent on conventional farming and domestic animals for their livelihood. The British and Pakistan exploited their culture and natural resources. These colonial and post-colonial times policies imposed extreme poverty and increased the ratio of migration of Pashtun from their native land (Amin-Khan, 2012). Moreover, climate change has directly affected Pashtun indigenous pastoral communities because they depend on natural resources. However, they are self-reliant; the

state does not provide help to these indigenous communities.

Pashtun indigenous tribal people are farmers or herdsman, or combinations of both, although several groups are renowned for specialized occupations. Agriculture, primarily grain farming and animal husbandry, is the most important economic activity in Pashtun society. The most common sources of livelihood in this region are agriculture, trade, minerals, and domesticated animals. In addition to raising stock, nomads and some farmers engage in the business of local indigenous products. They resolved their disputes through Jirga in the light of their tribal customs and traditions (Advocate & Sajid, 2013).

Pashtun Indigenous Knowledge, Indigenous Resilience, and Climate Change

Indigenous knowledge is embedded in the local culture and reflects their indigenous resilience (Přívára, & Přívarová, 2019). Indigenous communities support each other and give collective responses to natural disasters. The Pashtun indigenous community preserves and strengthens its social organizations and traditional practices to help each other during disasters or starvation (Ullah, Nihei, Nafees, Zaman, & Ali, 2018). Pashtun indigenous knowledge and resilience are entrenched in their culture, social structure, and traditions. Indigenous knowledge and resilience evolve in light of their experiences with the local environment and climate (Ullah, Nafees, Khurshid, & Nihei, 2019). They depend on their wider social networks and traditions in times

of climate change-induced disaster. The social structure of Pashtun society and their cultural values enable them to face the worst impact of climate change (Khan & Shah, 2021).

Figure 3

Pashtun Indigenous community Ashar (collective community work) to clear the road after heavy snow.



Note. Photograph taken by the author during fieldwork.

Indigenous communities have limited financial resources and are ill-equipped to deal with emergencies such as flooding or forest fires (Bayer, 2017). Furthermore, remote indigenous communities are at an even greater risk because external emergency responders may be too far to mitigate the impacts of dangerous situations. Winter season or monsoon rains damage their roads, impacting the delivery of supplies like fruits to markets, timbers for buildings, and gasoline for vehicles. They made their roads with the help of their communities. In the colonial and post-colonial periods, developmental projects had not been extended to the Pashtun tribal belt. The legacies of colonialism in economic, social, environmental, and educational systems have further heightened their vulnerability to climate

change. The indigenous Pashtun community works to renew and continue their culture by utilizing their socio-cultural capital to face the worst impact of climate change. In this regard, one of the elder community members stated:

“We made these roads with the help of our community, and we collectively came to build a road, and we culturally called it an Ashar.”
(Individual interview, 29 August 2024)

The socio-cultural capital and social structures help them to cope with adverse situations (Almedom, Brensinger, & Adam, 2016). Pashtun's social structure and cultural values guide all their social interactions, especially in crisis. They have strong cultural values and live in a collective structure that helps them to support each other and face the worst impact of climate change. In Pashtun society, supporting other fellow Pashtun when they need help is appreciated. They have extended and joint family systems where they are culturally bound to support each other. In this regard, one of the community members stated that

“It is highly appreciated by people who help people in crisis in Pashtun culture. The flood affects the homes and crops, but our people who work abroad support those families whose crops are affected by heavy rain.”
(Gul, individual interview, 25 July 2023)

Pashtun culture establishes general principles that define culturally approved behavior (Gioli, Khan & Scheffran, 2013). It guides interaction among clans, tribes, and families under commonly held norms and regulates all aspects of

individual, social, and political life. Cooperation and support for each other in difficult times are highly appreciated in the prevailing culture of Pashtun society. It is considered a *Sharam* (shame, humiliation, embarrassment) if someone does not support their fellow Pashtun or community, especially during disasters (Islam, Tamanna, Noman, Siemens, Islam, & Islam, 2022). Pashtun also has strong organizations like *Jirga* that resolve disputes or develop a consensus over issues that affect the community. The scarcity of resources due to climate change fuels conflicts among the local populations (Lieven, 2020). *Jirga* resolves these conflicts that arise due to scarcity of water or grazing land. The social structure of Pashtun reinforces reciprocity and *khair khaigarah* (to support each other), uniting Pashtun people to help each other and face challenging situations.

Pashtun Social Organizations, Socio-cultural Capitals and Resilience to Climate Change

As mentioned above, climate change impacts indigenous communities across the world. Rains have decreased by 40% in Pakistan. The World Food Programme classifies both rainfall-related and snowmelt-related droughts as current threats, owing to the same warming conditions in the Hindu Kush Mountains affecting Pakistan. (Caney, 2015). Pashtun indigenous communities are more likely to experience the adverse effects of climate change in several ways, including alterations to their diets due to changing ecosystems and demographic shifts, disruptions to transportation routes, impacts on their cultural

practices, and challenges in accessing essential resources and services, such as clean drinking water and grazing land for domesticated animals. (Norton-Smith, Lynn, Chief, Cozzetto, Donatuto, Redsteer, & Whyte, 2016). They face these challenges alone and rely on their socio-cultural institutions in the absence of effective state institutions. In this regard, one of the pastoral community members of Pashtun society states:

“Changes in the rain cycle affect grazing land; we face problems finding food for our domesticated animals. Our pastoral people, dependent on domesticated animals, left this profession. However, we support those who cannot economically survive due to climate change.” (Ali Kochay, individual interview, 9 Sep 2023)

Pashtun are famous for their tribal traditions, strong social bonds, and reciprocity (Tainter & MacGregor, 2011). They live in joint or extended families and must help each other. They collectively provide psychosocial support to each other in troublesome times and spend days with relatives in times of misfortune. Pashtun tribal values reinforce this collectivist structure and discourage individual liberty. It is everyone in the family's responsibility to support all members of the joint or extended family economically. They also support people outside the family or close kin, especially in times of need. Culturally, it is highly appreciated and prestigious (*izzatmand*) to support fellow Pashtuns or relatives (Alam, 2021). Expectations of reciprocity go beyond psychosocial and financial support. Pashtun people also support each other during disasters based on

tribal loyalties. It causes social humiliation for them when they do not support members of their tribe. One of the community members stated:

“My home was destroyed in the recent monsoon flood, and I do not receive any financial support from the government. My relatives supported me, and I built one room for my children.” (Gul, individual interview, 11 Sep 2023).

Reciprocity, a major cultural value, sustains them during times of socio-economic crisis. For this reason, despite being abandoned by the state, they rely on their social structure. Mutual aid is essential after natural disasters to make bridges or supply lines. Individuals do not have sufficient resources to bear the financial burden that arises after climate change, so they pool their resources. They give food, money, or cattle to each other to face the worst impact of climate change (Bustamante, Ramos, Jacoba, La Penia, & Gabriel, 2022). Reciprocity buffers economic vulnerabilities. It also helps them psychologically because they can face challenging situations with the collective support of their community. It is the responsibility of women and men in every household to reciprocate when they receive gifts or money in difficult times. They are socially bound by reciprocity, and old women try to remember the families from whom they got help. It is not necessary to return what they received, but they incur an obligation. They may support each other in any form, but they are bound to offer support in times of crisis. Reciprocity is vital to Pashtun survival in the absence of state help.

Figure 4

Hujra is a common place where Pashtun sit together to gossip or discuss issues with each other.



Note. Photograph taken by the author during fieldwork.

Pashtuns are economically dependent on agriculture or domesticated animals. Some of them seasonally migrated from the northern mountainous region to the lowlands in the winter seasons. Climate change affects the migration pattern. The farmers do not have advanced technology to face the adverse effects of climate change. They work collectively in fields to assist each other in farming (Steele, 2020). They are culturally bound to work together where they need the help of fellow Pashtuns. In Pashtun culture, the concept of *Ashar* (collective work) emphasizes mutuality, especially in harvesting, building houses, and collective community work (Mohyuddin & Khan, 2015). The entire community spares one person from each family to help another community member harvest crops or build a house. Climate change affects their homes and roads, and they collectively work to rebuild those pathways for local transportation. The community member stated:

“The recent flood affected our roads, and we all collectively work on building it again without state help.” (Arshad, individual Interview, 25 Sep 2023)

They also come together to work collectively in times of natural or man-made disasters. *Ashar* gives them the strength to survive in difficult situations. Culturally, *Ashar* compels them to help each other during difficult times. For example, the Pashtun indigenous communities work together to solve water shortages that often occur because of global warming or a shortage of rainfall. They work collectively to build bridges after the floods. The seasonally migrated Pashtun or other indigenous groups come together and start a journey towards low land. They come together to face challenging situations. Climate change affects the grazing land, and they face problems accessing food for their animals (Abdullah, Khan, Pieroni, Haq, Haq, Ahmad, & Abd_Allah, 2021).

The importance of mutual aid or *Achar* (collective work) is reflected in Pashtu literature. They appreciate those who support others during disaster. For instance, there is a Pashtu tappa (typical Pashtun poetic literature considered the oldest and integral part of the Pashto folk literature) that acknowledges those who support others: *haze pa harcha kunda kege aw saray hagha day che pa hawara kunda sheena* (when the husband dies, only his wife suffers, but when an honourable man dies, it affects the whole community) (Hartung, 2017).

Pashtun Indigenous Knowledge of Climate Change

As mentioned above, climate change poses critical implications for Indigenous cultures and livelihoods, including the transfer and use of Traditional Knowledge (TK), also known as Indigenous Knowledge (IK) (Rehman, Ahmad, & Khan, 2021). Certain elements of Traditional Knowledge that are threatened by climate change may include, but are not limited to, weather and climate indicators (ability to predict weather or seasonal forecasts) and ways of learning. Climate change affects plants, herbs, and grazing land of animals. Intergenerational knowledge transfers can be disrupted by climate change in the event of an extreme emergency, such as floods, fires, droughts, etc., that result in relocation, evacuation, or death of community members. The unpredictable change in weather causes damage to the socio-cultural fabrics and displaces the local community from their native town (Rahman, Ullah, Ali, Aziz, Alam, Sher, & Ali, 2022). In this regard, one of the community members stated:

“We collectively come together before the beginning of monsoon season and clean the pathways of water. It is based on our indigenous knowledge to evacuate the pathways and prepare and alert our community members about the monsoon season.” (Gul, individual interview, 23 Sep 2023).

Pashtun are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change because of their close dependency

on and connection with the natural environment for their culture, health, and livelihoods (Matthew, Halle, & Switzer, 2002). Pashtun, like other tribal groups, have an emotional attachment to their land and places, but climate change compels them to leave their native land. They face difficult social and economic conditions that may be exacerbated by climate change. As mentioned above, historically, the Pashtun tribal society faced the worst repression and draconian laws of the British, which continued during the post-colonial era in Pakistan. Both misinterpreted Pashtun culture and demeaned their cultural identity. The British portrayed Pashtun to the outside world as a martial race and demeaned their collective cultural identity and socio-cultural capital (Ashraf, 2018). Pashtun exploitation by the colonial authority and disregard for their indigenous wisdom intersect Pashtun marginality to climate change. The voices of indigenous communities are often absent in efforts to mitigate climate change. A community member stated:

“Historically and also in the present time, state policies exploited our resources and demeaned our cultural identity. They presented us as an uncivilized people, but they failed to achieve the trust of people.” (Darvash, individual interview, 25 Sep 2023)

The Pakistani state has failed to initiate effective policies to counter the worst impact of climate change on Pashtun indigenous communities. Additionally, Pashtuns do not trust states, as they still have memories of British colonialism and Pakistan’s exploitative policies.

They try to avoid state intervention because state policies do not properly address their problems, and they seek solutions through their own cultural institutions. These institutions have the potential to make them resilient to climate change. Indigenous mechanisms are used to face the worst impact of climate change while supporting resilience to cope. These Pashtun Indigenous mechanisms are entrenched in their cultural values and social structure.

Climate Change and Pashtun Marginality as an Ethnic Group

Tribal vulnerability varies and is affected by interacting and complex historical, political, and social factors, such as differential access to resources, poverty, and different ways of accessing (Ali, 2022). The existing historical context of colonial trauma, discrimination, neglect, and Pakistan's exploitative policies collectively intersect with Pashtun's marginality to climate change. A strong cultural identity is an essential element of indigenous resilience to socio-cultural and environmental problems. Pashtun have been exposed to outside cultures and colonial states over different eras, yet their strong ethnocentric attitude has helped to protect their cultural identity (Ingalls & Mansfield, 2017). They have preserved their distinctive identity despite changing social, economic, and cultural conditions. Pashtun people have resisted societal changes that are perceived to be against the specific cultural identity of the local inhabitants. The famous poet Hamza BaBa said, If the Pashtun adversaries believe Pashtu is the language of hell, I will go to the heaven along with my language

(*waye aghyar che dozakh jaba da, za ba janat da pakhtu sara zam*).

Historically, the powerful states attacked their culture, but they have preserved their cultural identity through Indigenous resilience (Lieven, 2023). Pashtun people disgraced or ridiculed those who worked in the interest of colonial forces. They also mocked those who adopted the cultural values of outsiders or supported invaders. Those who imitate the language or culture of other people (xenocentrists) face public ridicule, thus discouraging assimilation and preserving Pashtun cultural values and identity. Jokes and mockery are used to express cultural identity in times of conflict. They can also serve as mechanisms for defusing tension. Their strong cultural identity compels them to help each other. Pashtun people have experienced the impact of climate change, and it has directly affected their socio-cultural values. Proverbs, literature, and social movements reflect and reinforce Pashtun's resilience in culturally grounded ways. Their sociocultural values, social organization, and indigenous knowledge collectively help them to face the worst impact of climate change.

Conclusion

This research essay focuses on the Pashtun indigenous resilience to climate change. It is revealed that Pashtun's socio-cultural capital strengthens the Indigenous resilience of Pashtun people to face the adverse effects of climate change. Strong social bonds and kinship ties unite them to face difficult situations that arise due to climate change. Pashtun social organizations

and *Lashker* help them transcend adversity. Pashtu literature, poetry, and jokes reflect and strengthen Indigenous resilience to face the adverse effects of climate change. This essay is limited to Pashtun Indigenous resilience and masculine worldview. Pashtun women face significant adversity and have the additional challenge of depending on their male family members due to climate change. In Pashtun society, women are confined to indoor activities and cannot freely participate in outside realms. It is also important that focusing on resilience doesn't downplay the significant, ongoing challenges. Indeed, the dependence of Pashtun

people on their societal institutions could make them reluctant to develop more advanced, formal institutions. In addition to reducing economic disparities, measures are needed to address the historical traumas that Pashtun Indigenous peoples faced and revitalize those tribal institutions that are not contrary to global values, such as the traditional knowledge system. Activities that work to restore relations with the land, waters, and living world are necessary to restore balance in social systems (Adaptation planning is one type of actionable science that is improved through the use of locally relevant information derived from traditional knowledge).

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Re-territorializing Climate Governance

The REDD+ Initiatives in the DR Congo

By Marine Gauthier, MS

ABSTRACT

The Congo has long been a site of contestation for global environmental governance strategies, with Indigenous Batwa, Bambuti, and Baaka groups at the center of transnational climate discourse. One such strategy, the REDD+ initiative (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation), has come to the fore as a carbon-trading-based solution to the environmental challenges facing the Congo Basin. This article critiques the REDD+ initiative's deterritorialized approach, which favors the voices of international stakeholders over forest-dependent peoples Indigenous to the region. Taking a political ethnographical approach to the area of Mai-Ndombe, this research is based on formal and informal interactions with international actors, local communities, and Indigenous peoples. The strengths and weaknesses of mitigation methods like community forestry, institutionalized participation, and participatory mapping are explored. Ultimately, it is asserted that Indigenous decision-making, rather than institutionally imposed hegemony, must be integrated into the REDD+ initiative.

Keywords: REDD+ initiative, Congo Basin, Indigenous peoples, forest conservation, climate change, carbon trading, Batwa, Bambuti, Baaka groups, deterritorialized approach, political ethnography, Mai-Ndombe, community forestry, participatory mapping, Indigenous decision-making

Figure 1

A village in Lake Mai Ndombe



Note. Lake Mai Ndombe is located in the western part of the Congo Basin. From *Congo 2010-2011* [Photography album], by Jane Boles, 2010, Flickr. (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/janeboles/4857176457/in/album-72157624485450123>). CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Introduction

Over the past twelve years, Indigenous peoples in the Global South, particularly in the Central African Basin, have increasingly found themselves at the center of international environmental governance strategies aimed at mitigating climate change. These communities, whose lives, cultures, and identities are deeply intertwined with the forests they inhabit, are now recognized by international organizations as critical stakeholders in the fight against deforestation and biodiversity loss. Among these Indigenous groups are the Batwa, Bambuti, and Baaka of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), who have long depended on the Congo Basin's rainforests for their livelihoods, practicing sustainable forms of agriculture, hunting, and gathering that have preserved these ecosystems for centuries.

However, the recent surge in global interest in these forests, driven by climate change concerns, has introduced new challenges and opportunities for Indigenous peoples. International initiatives, particularly the REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) mechanism, have been promoted as solutions that not only aim to curb deforestation but also offer potential socio-economic benefits to forest-dependent communities. REDD+, developed under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), seeks to financially incentivize countries like the DRC to protect their forests by channeling funds from Northern nations and investors toward conservation efforts.

While REDD+ has been hailed as a progressive step in global environmental governance, its implementation has also raised significant concerns, especially regarding its impact on Indigenous peoples. The REDD+ framework, by design, acknowledges the importance of Indigenous peoples in achieving its goals, yet the realities on the ground often paint a different picture. In many cases, the introduction of REDD+ has led to the commodification of forests, where carbon is treated as a marketable asset, sometimes at the expense of Indigenous land rights and traditional practices. This shift from local stewardship to global carbon trading has the potential to marginalize the very communities that have historically safeguarded these ecosystems.

In Mai-Ndombe, a province in the DRC designated as a "REDD+ laboratory," these dynamics are playing out in complex and often troubling ways. Indigenous peoples in Mai-Ndombe have found themselves navigating a new regime complex where international organizations, state agencies, NGOs, and private actors converge, each with their own interests and agendas. The province, originally selected for the World Bank's Emission Reduction Program, has become a focal point for REDD+ initiatives, attracting significant investment and international attention. However, these developments have also brought about substantial risks for the 1.8 million forest-dependent people in the region, including the erosion of their land rights and exclusion from meaningful participation in decision-making processes.

This paper critically examines the risks and potential benefits that REDD+ poses to Indigenous peoples in Mai-Ndombe, focusing on how their rights and livelihoods are being addressed—or overlooked—within this emerging governance framework. By employing a theoretical approach that bridges regime complexity with postcolonial analysis, the study explores the extent to which REDD+ can truly support Indigenous interests or whether it perpetuates existing power imbalances. The paper also considers possible mechanisms to enhance Indigenous participation and benefit-sharing, emphasizing the need for grounded, territorialized approaches that genuinely reflect the voices and needs of Indigenous communities.

The Upsurge of “Indigeneity” on the REDD+ Scene in DRC

In Central Africa, particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the concept of “indigeneity” is not grounded in a historical narrative of colonization but rather in the complex power relations between different tribes. The Congo Basin is home to hundreds of tribes with intricate and often unequal power dynamics. The dominant ethnolinguistic group, the Bantu, consists of numerous sub-groups, among which power relations can be both unequal and conflictual. Minority groups such as the Batwa, Bambuti, and Baaka, collectively known as pygmies, meet the criteria for indigeneity and have therefore been recognized as “Indigenous peoples” by international organizations (IOs), in contrast to other groups referred to as “local communities” in REDD+ project documents and policies.

This recognition of pygmies as Indigenous peoples was bolstered by an existing international and African civil society movement dedicated to promoting local knowledge in natural resource governance (Bellier, 2016). Local and international NGOs quickly tied climate governance to Indigenous peoples, using it as a global framework to analyze their situation and to advocate for their recognition and the protection of their rights (Crawhall, 2011). However, the DRC government—and often international bureaucrats, even those within IOs that actively promote the recognition of pygmies as Indigenous peoples—argue that all African citizens are Indigenous, often referring to the original definition linked to pre-colonial history, as both Bantu and Pygmy tribes inhabited the region long before the arrival of Arabs and Europeans. The concepts of “self-determination” and “ethnic claims” are met with strong resistance from many African governments, as they evoke a painful history of secessionist movements and civil wars. Thus, the introduction of this new category of stakeholders by international bureaucracies unfolds within a context of significant discrepancies between national and international legislation. As a result of these long and sometimes contentious debates, all national REDD+ strategies and projects in the Congo Basin now explicitly mention and target Indigenous peoples, not only as beneficiaries but as stakeholders with valuable knowledge, expected to actively participate in REDD+ policymaking.

The debate on “indigeneity” has been particularly pronounced in the Democratic

Republic of Congo in recent years. The concept has been the subject of extensive discussion, both within and outside the context of REDD+, gradually becoming integrated into several national policies and programs. This process culminated in the passage of a law in 2020 recognizing the existence of Indigenous Peoples and their traditional rights to land. The DRC is also the Central African country where the connection between Indigenous peoples' rights and REDD+ has been most thoroughly explored. The DRC is seen by the international community as one of the leading REDD+ pilot countries. After formally adopting its REDD+ Investment Plan in December 2015, the DRC became the primary recipient of funds from the Central African Forest Initiative, a consortium of donors hosted by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), in 2016. The DRC also became the first country to sign an "Emission Reduction Payment Agreement" under the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility hosted by the World Bank in 2018. In both of these funding initiatives, the government of Norway has been a major donor, having made REDD+ one of its international cooperation policy priorities.

The focus of International Relations on pre-existing authority has often failed to consider the interests of marginalized stakeholders, particularly Indigenous peoples, within the REDD+ regime complex. While Indigenous peoples are acknowledged as part of this complex, they are frequently categorized as a "vulnerable group" with limited impact on decision-making processes (Zelli, 2017). This oversight stems

from a focus on the functions and authority of dominant actors, neglecting the power dynamics that shape the experiences of more marginalized communities.

Environmental governance scholars, such as Young (1994) and Wapner (1996), have highlighted the empowerment of new actors within the climate realm, noting how climate governance has expanded the boundaries of policy-making and increased the number of engaged actors. This growing pluralization of actors has created opportunities for more inclusive governance, yet it has also revealed the limitations of existing approaches to integrating Indigenous peoples. While regime complexity provides a useful framework for understanding the interactions between different stakeholders, it often overlooks the power asymmetries that hinder equitable participation.

Postcolonial scholars argue that understanding power dynamics in climate governance requires a historical perspective that accounts for colonial and postcolonial relations. The concept of "eco-colonialism" has been used to critique environmental projects that reinforce colonial power structures, particularly in the context of REDD+, which some view as perpetuating these asymmetries (Girvan, 2017). Despite significant investments in climate mitigation, the rights of Indigenous peoples often remain inadequately protected, leading to concerns that REDD+ may exacerbate existing inequalities.

Critical anthropology provides valuable insights into how Indigenous peoples are

integrated within the UN framework. While the rhetoric of empowerment is prevalent in programs like UN-REDD and the World Bank, ethnographic observations reveal that participation is often constrained by power dynamics that prioritize order over dissent (Hönke, 2018). Participation can reinforce existing hierarchies, as those selected to participate often align with the goals of dominant actors, leaving dissenting voices marginalized.

Moreover, the concept of participatory development has been critiqued as a “new tyranny” (Cooke and Kothari), where the inclusion of Indigenous voices is superficial, and the process ultimately serves to support mainstream stakeholders rather than redistribute power. This critique highlights the need to question the power dynamics behind participatory governance and to seek more meaningful ways to integrate Indigenous perspectives.

Postcolonial critiques of REDD+ focus on the challenges faced by Indigenous peoples, particularly in the context of private actors and market-based approaches to climate governance. However, these critiques often lack practical solutions for addressing these challenges. While it is crucial to highlight the marginalization of Indigenous peoples, there is also a need to propose pathways for more equitable climate governance.

To bridge the gap between postcolonial analysis and regime complexity, this research combines both approaches to examine how

institutional actors have addressed Indigenous peoples’ access to REDD+ benefits. By integrating historical perspectives on power dynamics with an analysis of multi-stakeholder structures, this research aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Indigenous interests can be better represented within the REDD+ framework.

A Political Ethnography of REDD+ Stakeholders in the Mai-Ndombe

This political ethnography of REDD+ stakeholders in Mai-Ndombe is grounded in extensive professional collaboration with a diverse array of actors, including civil society representatives, NGOs, local communities, and Indigenous peoples. Conducted between 2012 and 2019, the research is based on numerous multi-stakeholder interactions in a highly conflictual and fragile social environment, where building trust over seven years was crucial to gaining access to REDD+ stakeholders. The fieldwork involved six missions, each lasting between 10 and 30 days, during which I visited over 20 villages and the provincial capital, Inongo. This ethnographic approach allowed for the collection of rich, triangulated data through both formal and informal interactions, which provided insights into Indigenous peoples’ interests and reactions to REDD+ initiatives.

The research methodology included participating in more than 15 village assemblies and 10 focus groups organized by international organizations (IOs), as well as attending numerous REDD+ meetings at the provincial, national, and international levels. One-on-one

discussions with key stakeholders, including technical and financial partners, project holders, national civil society representatives, international NGOs, IO representatives, and government officials, further enriched the data. This diverse range of voices contributed to a nuanced understanding of the various risks and interests at stake in the REDD+ process. Additionally, the research involved a deep reflection on my own positionality as a white European woman, an international consultant, and a doctoral researcher in International Relations. This self-interrogation, inspired by Bourdieu's concept of reflexivity, was essential to mitigate bias and to approach the research as an emancipatory normative project.

The analysis also incorporated a thorough review of REDD+ program documents, including all Programme Documents of the Central African Forest Initiative (CAFI), the World Bank's Emission Reduction Programme, the PIREDD documents, the national Safeguards document, the national Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) guidelines, the national REDD+ strategy, and the REDD+ investment plan. Additionally, 12 official complaint letters from civil society organizations were included as ethnographic data. Observing the processes of document elaboration and consultation procedures provided valuable insights into how different interests and risks were identified and addressed, as well as the constraints faced by various stakeholders.

This methodological approach enabled a comprehensive analysis of the contextual risks linking REDD+ to human rights and an

evaluation of the cumulative impacts of the initiatives pursued to date. It also facilitated an examination of the conflicts present at different scales and the strategies implemented at both the national and local levels to mitigate negative effects. While the research considered various REDD+ initiatives, the focus was placed on larger programs, such as the World Bank's Emission Reduction Programme, the regional REDD+ Integrated Programme (PIREDD), and the Central African Forest Initiative. Special attention was given to the WWC conservation concession, the only REDD+ project certified to date, and the REDD+ Novacel-South Kwamouth pilot project, which aims to test the implementation of REDD+ on the ground and eventually generate carbon credits.

Direct and Indirect Risks Hinder the Regime's Ability to Benefit Indigenous Peoples

To thoroughly assess the impacts of the REDD+ regime complex in Mai-Ndombe, it is essential to delve into the various risks that threaten its ability to benefit indigenous peoples. The complexity of these risks is tied to the socio-economic, political, environmental, and legal contexts of the province. By analyzing these factors through ethnographic interviews with indigenous peoples, experts, and practitioners, as well as reviewing field studies and project documents, we can identify significant challenges. These challenges are not only structural but also operational, raising concerns about how well REDD+ initiatives can fulfill their dual objectives of reducing deforestation and providing

co-development benefits to the Congolese population, particularly indigenous communities. This comprehensive analysis reveals a series of critical risks that REDD+ must address to ensure that it does not harm indigenous peoples and instead contributes positively to their livelihoods.

1. Fragile Governance and the Risk of Land Grabbing and Corruption

A major concern regarding the REDD+ initiatives in Mai-Ndombe is the fragile and incomplete governance infrastructure that underpins the program. Despite the legal framework defining a national governance structure for REDD+, the implementation has been far from operational. This lack of effective governance is evident in the absence of coordination among the numerous REDD+ initiatives currently being developed in the province. The governance tools intended to provide oversight and accountability remain incomplete, and no independent observer has yet been mandated to monitor the program's implementation. Additionally, the local governance structures, particularly the local development committees (CLDs), suffer from a lack of representation and legitimacy, as they do not adequately reflect the communities they are meant to serve.

In this context, the risk of REDD+ benefits being captured by the most powerful groups becomes increasingly likely. The delay in implementing land reforms and the lack of customary forest owner identifications exacerbate this risk. The absence of a national land use

planning policy, coupled with the devolution of planning to project-level initiatives, creates opportunities for corruption. Each local development plan, driven by significant financial stakes, is vulnerable to illegal influence from various actors, including logging companies, project promoters, and agribusiness operators. These entities may manipulate the REDD+ process to include or exclude certain lands from the program, depending on their interests. This scenario raises fears among Indigenous communities that REDD+ could perpetuate “business as usual” mechanisms, favoring private actors over the poorest and most vulnerable populations.

The historical context of exploitation and marginalization in Mai-Ndombe further fuels these fears. Indigenous communities, having witnessed multiple waves of external intervention—from colonial exploitation to conservation efforts—express skepticism about the potential benefits of REDD+. A villager's poignant question during a REDD+ consultation meeting, “The Belgians came, the people who cut the forest came, the Park people came, now the REDD people. What difference does it make for us?” encapsulates the deep-seated distrust towards yet another external initiative. Before any financial support is provided to the Emission Reduction Payment Agreement (ERPA), civil society organizations have called for transparent recruitment processes for managing REDD+ programs, free from political patronage, and a clear system for issuing licenses and concession contracts. These demands highlight the broader

risk associated with regime complexes: the introduction of confusion over authority and rule uncertainty, which can reduce accountability and compliance with international commitments, as noted by Raustiala (2012).

2. De-territorialized Approach and the Neglect of Local Drivers of Deforestation

Another significant risk within the REDD+ regime in Mai-Ndombe is its de-territorialized approach, which fails to address the local structural factors responsible for deforestation and threats to indigenous livelihoods. The REDD+ study on deforestation drivers has been criticized for its generalized approach, which overlooks the specific socio-economic and environmental conditions in Mai-Ndombe. This approach assumes that the causes of deforestation in Mai-Ndombe are identical to those identified at the national level, which limits the program's ability to implement effective, context-specific solutions.

One of the key criticisms from civil society has been the emphasis on shifting slash-and-burn agriculture as a primary driver of deforestation while largely ignoring the impact of industrial logging. Despite evidence from communities and GIS mapping analysis pointing to industrial logging as a significant source of deforestation, REDD+ project documents have failed to adequately address this issue. Moreover, the list of deforestation drivers does not account for potential future threats, such as the exploitation of untapped resources like oil, coltan, and

diamonds, which could become major drivers of deforestation as infrastructure improvements are funded by REDD+ initiatives.

The neglect of migratory patterns and the resulting land-use changes further compound the issue. Processes such as the non-permanence of forestry or agricultural activities and the displacement of emission sites are not sufficiently considered in the current REDD+ framework. This oversight could result in REDD+ projects functioning as “virtual emission reduction machines,” which inflate the production of carbon credits without addressing the underlying economic and environmental factors driving deforestation (Sellier, 2016). Such an approach risks undermining the long-term sustainability of REDD+ and its ability to deliver real benefits to Indigenous communities.

3. Inadequate Land Rights and Conflict-Sensitive Planning

The absence of concrete measures to secure land rights and the lack of conflict-sensitive planning within the REDD+ framework pose significant risks to indigenous communities in Mai-Ndombe. Land tenure is a central issue in the region, and failure to adequately address it within REDD+ initiatives could exacerbate existing conflicts. Land ownership in Mai-Ndombe is often unclear, with overlapping claims from various stakeholders, including communities, the state, and private companies. This ambiguity creates a fertile ground for land grabs and disputes, particularly as the value of land increases due to the prospect of REDD+ benefits.

Without clarifying land ownership, the question of carbon ownership remains unresolved, allowing REDD+ project holders—often companies that have purchased land—to claim the majority of benefits. Indigenous communities, who have traditionally owned and managed these lands, are relegated to secondary beneficiaries, receiving only a small share of the profits. This arrangement undermines the principles of equity and justice that REDD+ is supposed to uphold. Furthermore, the complex land dynamics in Mai-Ndombe, including customary practices and sharecropping, are not adequately addressed by REDD+ initiatives, increasing the risk of land conflicts and the unlawful capture of REDD+ benefits by more powerful actors.

The lack of attention to land rights is particularly concerning given the history of land-related conflicts in the region. The introduction of REDD+ projects into this already volatile context is likely to amplify existing tensions, especially as the improvements proposed by the projects, such as infrastructure development and agro-forestry initiatives, lead to an increase in land prices. This price inflation limits small producers' access to land, favoring industrialists who may convert land into immovables for speculative purposes. The safeguards currently in place to mitigate these risks are insufficient, leaving major gray areas in their operationalization. For example, these measures fail to account for the impact of customary law on land tenure and provide no clear guidance on addressing the risks associated with carbon rights ambiguity.

Conflicts have already begun to emerge, with reports of community members being arrested, disputes between project holders and communities, and testimonies of the negative impact of REDD+ concessions on traditional activities and ways of life. These conflicts underscore the urgent need for REDD+ initiatives to adopt a more comprehensive approach to land rights and conflict-sensitive planning. Without such measures, REDD+ risks not only failing to deliver its promised benefits but also worsening the situation for Indigenous communities.

4. Limited Integration of Indigenous Peoples, Local Communities, and Women

Despite the growing discourse on the importance of indigenous peoples' participation in REDD+, the reality in Mai-Ndombe is that these marginalized populations remain on the periphery of decision-making processes. The limited integration of indigenous peoples, local communities, and women within the REDD+ regime complex is a significant barrier to the program's success. This marginalization is evident in several aspects of the REDD+ process, from the constitution of Local Development Committees (CLDs) to the application of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC).

CLDs, which are supposed to serve as the primary structure for community engagement in REDD+, have been criticized for their lack of representativeness and effectiveness. These committees are often composed of land chiefs, who do not necessarily represent the broader

community's interests. Indigenous peoples, who are estimated to make up between 1 and 50 percent of the local population, depending on the locality, are underrepresented in these committees, with only 10 percent of CLD representatives being Indigenous. Similarly, the goal of having 30 percent women in CLDs is rarely achieved, reflecting the broader exclusion of women from decision-making processes within REDD+.

The uneven application of FPIC further compounds these issues. While FPIC is intended to ensure that Indigenous communities have a say in REDD+ initiatives that affect their lands and resources, its implementation in Mai-Ndombe has been partial and inconsistent. Many communities are poorly informed about REDD+ processes, which have been largely conducted in Kinshasa, far from the communities they are supposed to serve. This disconnect between the decision-makers and the affected communities undermines the legitimacy of REDD+ initiatives and raises questions about the extent to which Indigenous peoples' rights and interests are truly being considered.

The exclusion of women from meaningful participation in REDD+ is particularly concerning, given the crucial role they play in traditional forest management and practices. The family planning program associated with REDD+, which targets demographics as a driver of deforestation, does not adequately address the diverse challenges faced by different categories of women, including rural women, Indigenous women, urban women, and girls. Without specific

and systematic support for women's leadership and participation, REDD+ risks perpetuating existing gender inequalities and failing to fully harness the potential of women as key stakeholders in forest conservation.

The limited integration of marginalized populations within the REDD+ regime complex is a reflection of broader power dynamics that favor more powerful actors, such as international NGOs and project developers, over indigenous communities and local women. This imbalance of power hinders the ability of REDD+ to deliver on its promise of equitable benefit-sharing and sustainable development.

5. Uncertainty Regarding Beneficiaries and Co-Development Objectives

The uncertainty surrounding the beneficiaries of REDD+ and the achievement of co-development objectives further complicates the program's ability to deliver meaningful benefits to indigenous communities in Mai-Ndombe. The concentration of REDD+ activities in the area has led to multiple overlaps in beneficiaries, geographical areas, and themes addressed, creating confusion and reducing the program's overall effectiveness. Given the history of poor natural resource revenue sharing in the DRC, there is a legitimate concern that REDD+'s neoliberal approach may exacerbate rather than alleviate, existing inequalities.

The privatization of REDD+ initiatives, as seen in the case of the WWC conservation concession, raises significant concerns about the equitable distribution of benefits. This concession, the

only Congolese REDD+ project authorized to sell carbon credits, exemplifies how REDD+ can lead to “green-grabbing,” where land and resources are appropriated by private actors at the expense of local communities. In this context, indigenous communities may receive only a small share of the benefits without their direct contribution to national deforestation reduction efforts being recognized or adequately compensated. This two percent strategy, which allocates only a minimal portion of benefits to communities, is a dangerous approach that avoids addressing the critical issue of land security.

The benefit-sharing plan currently proposed within REDD+ is likely to undermine ongoing land reform efforts at the national level, which are intended to clarify the duality between legal and customary rights. Without securing land tenure for communities, REDD+ risks creating a system that benefits private sector actors, who can easily obtain land and claim carbon rights while leaving Indigenous communities marginalized and disenfranchised. The exclusion of non-rights holders, such as women, migrants, and young people, from benefit-sharing mechanisms further exacerbates the inequities within REDD+ and undermines its effectiveness.

Community forestry, which could serve as a tool for securing communities’ land tenure and reducing deforestation, is not prioritized within REDD+ initiatives despite being classified as an enabling pillar of the program. No community tenure clarification tools, such as local communities’ forest concessions, are planned at the provincial level in Mai-Ndombe.

This oversight makes the REDD+ process and its benefits inaccessible to communities while offering a significant advantage to private-sector industrial project owners who are able to secure land and benefit from carbon rights. The current approach to community forestry in Mai-Ndombe, which focuses more on reinforcing territorial administration than on securing customary tenure, further limits the potential for REDD+ to empower local communities and contribute to sustainable forest management.

6. Institutionalized Participation as a Double-Edged Sword

REDD+ aims to reconcile forest conservation, indigenous peoples’ rights, and market-based logic, three elements that are often in tension with one another. The program’s emphasis on institutionalized participation is intended to integrate indigenous peoples as beneficiaries within the REDD+ regime complex. However, this approach often acts as a double-edged sword, offering both opportunities and constraints for indigenous communities.

On the one hand, institutionalized participation provides a platform for Indigenous representatives to engage in decision-making processes, potentially enabling them to influence outcomes and secure benefits for their communities. The establishment of the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform by the UNFCCC in 2019 is an example of such efforts to enhance Indigenous participation in climate governance. This platform aims to

strengthen the knowledge, technologies, practices, and efforts of local communities and indigenous peoples related to addressing and responding to climate change.

On the other hand, institutionalized participation tends to essentialize Indigenous identities, reducing them to a single narrative of “rainforest guardians” or “traditional hunters and gatherers.” This oversimplification of Indigenous culture and identity hinders a deep analysis of their diverse interests and dynamic cultural practices. By promoting a romanticized and static view of Indigenous peoples, institutionalized participation risks perpetuating colonial stereotypes and limiting the scope of Indigenous participation.

The strategic use of essentialism by indigenous civil society organizations can be an effective tool for securing recognition and rights, but it also comes with significant drawbacks. The reliance on a single narrative of indigenous identity can exclude those who do not fit the traditional mold, such as urbanized or educated indigenous individuals, from being recognized as legitimate representatives. This narrow representation limits the scope of Indigenous participation and reinforces existing stereotypes, ultimately weakening the potential for meaningful engagement in REDD+ processes.

Moreover, the institutionalized participation of indigenous peoples within REDD+ often fails to address the underlying power dynamics that continue to marginalize these communities. While indigenous representatives may gain access to decision-making arenas, their participation is

often constrained by the very structures that are supposed to empower them. The emphasis on formal, top-down consultation processes, such as those prescribed by FPIC, does not always align with the decision-making practices and cultural norms of Indigenous communities. As a result, institutionalized participation can serve to co-opt indigenous voices rather than genuinely empower them.

Opportunities: Indigeneity as a Stepping Stone to Re-Territorialize REDD+

The promise of Indigenous participation within REDD+ lies in its potential to re-territorialize climate governance and address the “reality schism” that often characterizes top-down approaches to environmental management. Indigeneity, in its definition and experience, is inherently linked to territory. Indigenous communities in Mai-Ndombe, like elsewhere, have a deep connection to their lands, which are central to their cultural and physical survival.

In Mai-Ndombe, pygmy communities are regarded as the original landowners, with a unique relationship to their ancestral territories. This connection is reflected in the ceremonial practices that involve pygmy participation in appointing Bantu chiefs, albeit symbolically, as well as in the mental maps that pygmy communities maintain of their traditional lands. These maps, which include detailed knowledge of the land’s geography, resources, and sacred sites, are invaluable for understanding the territory’s significance and for planning sustainable development.

Participatory mapping, a methodology that involves indigenous communities in the process of documenting and mapping their territories, has emerged as a crucial tool for re-territorializing REDD+. This approach allows communities to represent their territories in a way that reflects their cultural values and traditional knowledge, rather than relying solely on external data and standardized mapping tools like GIS. Participatory mapping not only uncovers unknown or invisible territorial information, such as clan boundaries and sacred sites but also fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among the community members involved.

Despite its potential, major REDD+ stakeholders have not fully embraced participatory mapping. While local civil society organizations have championed the methodology, larger organizations like WWF have implemented it in a more superficial manner, often due to time and resource constraints. For participatory mapping to be truly effective, it requires time, resources, and a commitment to engaging with communities on their own terms. This means spending extended periods in the field, involving all segments of the community in the mapping process, and ensuring that the resulting maps are used to inform REDD+ planning and decision-making.

The use of participatory mapping as a tool for re-territorializing REDD+ highlights the importance of integrating Indigenous knowledge into climate governance. By grounding REDD+ initiatives in the specific cultural and environmental contexts of indigenous

communities, the program can move beyond the limitations of a de-territorialized, top-down approach. This re-territorialization is essential for ensuring that REDD+ initiatives are not only effective in reducing deforestation but also equitable in their distribution of benefits.

Opportunities: Addressing Power Inequities Through Grounded Participation

To fully realize the potential of REDD+ to benefit indigenous communities, it is necessary to address the power inequities that have historically marginalized these groups. Indigeneity, as it is experienced locally, is deeply intertwined with power dynamics and domination mechanisms that continue to shape the distribution of resources and decision-making authority.

Institutionalized participation, as currently structured within REDD+, does not adequately address these power inequities. Instead, it often perpetuates the exclusion of marginalized groups, such as indigenous peoples, rural women, and youth, from meaningful participation in REDD+ processes. To overcome these challenges, REDD+ initiatives must be designed in a way that systematically supports indigenous leadership, recognizes their rights, and empowers communities to define their own participation structures.

This requires a shift away from the thematic silos that currently characterize REDD+ participation mechanisms. Indigenous representatives should not be confined to discussions on Indigenous issues alone but

should be involved in all aspects of REDD+ policy-making, including those related to land tenure, resource management, and extractive industries. Similarly, the participation of women and other marginalized groups should not be limited to gender-focused committees but should be integrated across all areas of REDD+ governance.

The implementation of FPIC, when done properly, offers a pathway to grounded participation that respects the autonomy and diverse interests of indigenous communities. FPIC allows indigenous peoples to receive sufficient information prior to the commencement of projects, enabling them to make informed decisions about activities that impact their territories and resources. However, for FPIC to be effective, it must be implemented in a way that aligns with the decision-making practices and cultural norms of Indigenous communities rather than being constrained by the timelines and priorities of external actors.

Grounded participation also requires the integration of local conflict management mechanisms within REDD+ initiatives. Given the contentious and conflict-prone nature of land tenure in Mai-Ndombe, it is essential that REDD+ projects include measures to clarify and secure land rights before any activities commence. This includes piloting land reform projects that address the complex dynamics between Bantu and pygmy communities, as well as developing community management structures that prevent the appropriation of REDD+ benefits by local elites.

A participatory support plan for the creation of community forest concessions within the framework of REDD+, based on customary tenure and developed in collaboration with Indigenous communities and civil society, could serve as a model for ensuring that REDD+ initiatives are grounded in local realities. Such a plan should be accompanied by efforts to strengthen indigenous women's leadership and empower project beneficiaries as active stakeholders in the REDD+ process.

Conclusion

REDD+ represents an unprecedented encounter between indigenous peoples and climate mitigation programs in Mai-Ndombe. While it offers a unique opportunity for climate governance to bring about positive change and benefit marginalized communities, the program's current structure and implementation raise significant concerns. The unbalance of power between Indigenous peoples and other REDD+ stakeholders, coupled with the risks identified in the program's governance, participation, and benefit-sharing mechanisms, threatens to undermine the potential benefits of REDD+ for Indigenous communities.

The REDD+ regime complex has undeniably contributed to raising the profile of indigenous peoples' issues on the political agenda in the DRC. The passage of the first law recognizing the existence, indigeneity, and customary rights of pygmies in 2020 is a testament to this progress. However, the program's reliance on institutionalized participation as a means of

integrating Indigenous communities into the REDD+ process has proven to be a double-edged sword. While it provides a platform for Indigenous participation, it also risks reinforcing postcolonial frameworks and perpetuating existing power dynamics.

To move from hindering to helping, REDD+ must adopt a more grounded and territorialized approach that truly integrates indigenous knowledge, addresses domination mechanisms, and empowers marginalized communities. This requires a shift from top-down, de-territorialized governance to a model that values local participation, recognizes the

diversity of Indigenous interests, and supports the development of community-led REDD+ initiatives.

Through such an approach, Indigenous peoples can become experts in their own right, shaping the REDD+ process in ways that reflect their cultural identity and interests. By embracing the full range of these interests and integrating them into the design of REDD+ projects, the program can create more effective and equitable policies that benefit the most local rung of climate governance—on indigenous lands, where the carbon is being stored.

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Siekopai Human Ecology Achieves Land Rights Victory

By Laura Corradi, MA

ABSTRACT

On November 24, 2023, the Siekopai indigenous population residing in the Ecuadorian Amazon won a claim for the titling of their lands to their Nation. Ecuador recognized indigenous land ownership within a protected area for the first time in history. This decision also acknowledges the value of land management by the indigenous population, who, through their profound knowledge of the place, environment, animals, and spirits that inhabit it, are the best stewards of this green space as a common heritage of humanity. This paper challenges the Western logic that typically drives conservation efforts and examines the role of Indigenous self-determination as a means of ecological advancement. It further outlines the complex role of International mechanisms like Free, Prior, and Informed Consent, ILO Convention 169, and the Rio Declaration as enforcers of sustainable resource management. The court's decision sets a valuable precedent for government collaboration with Indigenous peoples worldwide and the inclusion of Indigenous stewardship practices into environmental justice frameworks.

Keywords: Siekopai indigenous population, Ecuadorian Amazon, land titling, indigenous land ownership, protected area, indigenous stewardship, conservation efforts, indigenous self-determination, ecological advancement, international mechanisms, Free, Prior, and Informed Consent, ILO Convention 169, Rio Declaration, sustainable resource management, environmental justice, Ecuador, Amazon rainforest, indigenous rights, land rights, environmental protection

On November 24, 2023, the Siekopai Nation¹ achieved a landmark victory in the Ecuadorian Amazon region known as Oriente. The Ecuadorian tribunal issued a final verdict mandating the return of their ancestral lands

and a public apology for the infringement of their territorial rights. This ruling signifies a pivotal recognition by the Ecuadorian national government of the significance of ancestral practices as a symbol of enduring and deliberate

¹ Siekopai Nation: their name means “multicolored people,” a characteristic derived from their colorful attire. Their name can also appear as Secoya, referring to the same nation. The Secoya are an indigenous ethnic group residing in the Ecuadorian Amazon and Peru. The population of these people is estimated to be around 297 individuals in Ecuador and approximately 144 in Peru. They speak the Secoya language, which belongs to the Tucanoan linguistic group. They share a territory near the Shushufindi, Aguarico, and Cuyabeno rivers with the Siona, and are sometimes considered a single indigenous group.

Figure 1*Cuyabeno Wildlife Production Reserve River*

Note. Photograph taken by the author, 2017.

environmental conservation and ecological sustainability. This decision sets a historic and exemplary legal and moral precedent for the nation and indigenous peoples globally, marking the first instance of an indigenous community obtaining title to territory within a protected area.

Contemporary discourse on environmental issues frequently addresses topics such as climate change, CO₂ emission reduction, deforestation, intensive cattle farming, oil extraction, and contamination. However, discussions on environmental conservation often neglect to consider the rapid changes occurring in the daily lives of indigenous populations as a result of these

phenomena. This oversight is remarkable, given the critical role that indigenous communities play in maintaining ecological balance and promoting sustainable practices.

In the Amazon, often referred to as the “lung of the world,” the current scenario, including oil extraction, new colonization, internal migration, tourism, and geopolitical division, poses a significant challenge to the world’s most biologically diverse area. Nevertheless, indigenous populations, who have coexisted with and relied upon the forest for generations, possess unparalleled knowledge of its needs and dynamics.

This article examines the victory of the Siekopai Indigenous Nation in the Ecuadorian Amazon region, reclaiming legitimacy over their ancestral lands within the Cuyabeno Wildlife Production Reserve. It is argued that indigenous practices represent the only ecologically sustainable means for the conservation of this area, given its vibrant biodiversity and its value as a common good for humanity. Through this analysis, the broader implications of recognizing and supporting indigenous stewardship in environmental conservation are highlighted, emphasizing the necessity of integrating traditional knowledge with contemporary conservation efforts.

Conservation of Protected Areas: Siekopai Human Ecology

The Secoya, or Siekopai, are an indigenous Amazonian people who, between 1500 and 2000, inhabited the area between the Aguarico River and the upper courses of the Napo and Putumayo Rivers. Today, they are located in the Ecuadorian region of Sucumbíos and the Peruvian region of Loreto, belonging to the Western Tukano linguistic family. Their territorial dispersion involved high mobility and diverse exchanges among kinship groups, which underpin their social cohesion.

In the 17th century, the Secoya first encountered missionaries, officials, soldiers, and Spanish encomenderos, leading to the establishment of indigenous reductions by Jesuits. By the early 20th century, the Secoya

faced increased sedentarization due to the expansion of the extractive mercantile economy in the Amazon, most notably during the rubber boom, followed by forestry and oil activities. Some families responded by fleeing to new areas within their territory.

The Ecuador-Peru War in 1941 and subsequent peace agreements in 1998 significantly restricted Secoya mobility due to the suspension of free transit and the increase in military checkpoints along the border. The boundaries between the two countries were drawn, splitting a nation that had lived along the border into two. This Indigenous Nation then had two different names based on their new residences: Siekopai on the Ecuadorian side and Airo Pai on the Peruvian side, with no contact between them for decades (Rojas, 2007). The most pressing concern shared between these two groups was, and continues to be, the struggle to reclaim the right to ancestral land ownership.

From the mid-20th century to the present, the Secoya have experienced new religious influences from the Evangelical Church through the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). In 1955, SIL missionaries settled by the Cuyabeno River to convert the Secoya and Siona but left after Ecuador expelled SIL in 1981. Furthermore, beginning in 1970, oil activities by Texaco, followed by Occidental Exploration and Production Company (OXY) from 1985, intensified pressure on Secoya territory and its resources, leading to deforestation, water and air pollution, and a reduction in the game population. (Rojas, 2007).

Due to the unique ecological characteristics of the territory, the Cuyabeno Wildlife Production Reserve was established in Ecuador in 1979. This area includes Lagartococha in the province of Sucumbíos, the ancestral land of the Siekopai Nation. At that time, the creation of protected areas followed a U.S. model that established parks devoid of human presence to preserve untouched flora and fauna. This approach prioritized nature, sidelining the human rights of the populations living in the area, who were forcibly displaced and dispossessed as a result.

Figure 2

A hut in the Cuyabeno Wildlife Production Reserve



Note. Photograph taken by the author, 2017.

The history of the Siekopai Nation, divided by the border between Ecuador and Peru, is a prolonged narrative of land rights struggles aimed at legitimizing ownership of their ancestral territories with ongoing claims. The land known as *Pë'kë'ya*², or Lagartococha, holds particular significance as it constitutes the border between the two countries. Declared an intangible zone in 1999, it was deemed illegal to conduct any economic activity there.

In 1979, the Cuyabeno Wildlife Production Reserve was established in Ecuador. Similarly, in Peru, the Güeppí Reserved Zone was created in 1997, overlapping a large portion of the Airo Pai territory. Its creation, driven by geopolitical and ecological incentives, did not require the consent of the indigenous populations. Later, in 2003, these same populations proposed the establishment of the Airo Pai Communal Reserve and part of the National Park as ancestral territory (Rojas, 2007), as shown in the following map (Borbor, 2024).

Figure 3

Map of Protected Areas



Note. Map showing the division of protected areas across Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia (Panorama).

Initially, the concept of creating natural parks was rooted in the dichotomous division of nature and culture, as well as between biodiversity and cultural diversity—a typical notion of Western society (Descola & Palsson, 1996). Indeed, “nature” can be understood as the set of neutral

² Historically, the ancestral or traditional territory of the Siekopai is said to have extended between the Putumayo and Napo rivers (Vickers, 1989), which included Pë'kë'ya, also known as Lagartococha, now a border area between Ecuador and Peru.

objects transformed into an environment through the cultural interpretation of individuals or social groups, asserting that the environment is a cultural construction of nature (Milton, 1997). Thus, the territory is seen as a “social construction” (Sack, 1986), defined by the actions of those living and moving within it.

According to the theory of “New Ecology” (Zimmerer, 2000), environmental management is related to conservation because nature tends towards a state of equilibrium, and any devastation resulting from human presence must be considered within the context of conservation. In this way, spaces acquire meaning when they have cultural significance and reflect the power relations of a specific group. In managing national parks, these power relations are closely tied to the political and economic goals of the state.

In the beginning, indigenous populations were not directly involved in managing protected areas; later, their true potential was recognized. Initially, a co-management agreement with Park Authorities was established, subject to what Agrawal (2005) describes as “disciplinary environmentalism” or “eco-governmentality”—the set of environmental practices and representations, whether local, national, or transnational, that interact with direct social actors to think and behave in specific ways concerning environmental goals such as sustainable development, environmental security, biodiversity conservation, and resource access (Ulloa, 2005).

Robbins (2004) emphasizes a basic premise underlying the creation of such protected spaces: that nature must be preserved free from any human interference, creating a “territorialization of conservation.” This implies the institutionalization of acts and knowledge through which state power establishes a relationship between the population and a geographic space, imposing permitted and prohibited identities as well as specific forms of action and inaction.

The strengthening of the indigenous self-determination movement worldwide, within the framework of multiculturalism, has played a central role in shaping the discourse of environmentalism. This portrayal has been strategically developed by indigenous organizations themselves as a means to negotiate agreements that improve their quality of life. Since identity is a relational and dynamic process, new ecological identities are emerging within the scope of eco-governmentality, distinguishing indigenous populations as ecological natives (Ulloa, 2004).

Ulloa (2005) and Castro (2008) argue that indigeneity is often depicted as both savage and ecological. Castro (2008) introduces the concept of a “new ecological identity” that portrays indigenous peoples as guardians of the environment and knowledgeable about how to protect the planet from global disasters. However, Castro notes that this categorization, while seemingly valuing them as holders of superior knowledge, perpetuates the image of the “noble savage” living in harmony with nature.

In the context of ecological advancement, the relationship between identity, culture, and territory has been a focal point for proponents of development studies, who view local knowledge as essential in offering an “alternative” to capitalist development and globalization (Molano, 2006). Miraglia (2007) emphasizes that sustainable development reveals the ongoing tension between economic growth and environmental preservation. This concept, as defined in the 1987 United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development report “Our Common Future,” is development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

Considering the profound interrelationship between humans and nature, it is imperative to reference a contemporary conservation principle: *Kawsak Sacha* (Living Forest), advocated by indigenous groups like the Kichwa Sarayaku community. This principle promotes the protection of natural and cultural heritage, considering the forest a living being with rights: “the protection of the existing natural and cultural heritage in indigenous lands and territories through a new legal construction of conservation originating from the worldview of indigenous peoples. This construction implies that the Living Forest or *Kawsak Sacha* is considered a subject with rights, endowed with life” (Sarayaku, 2018).

This concept is closely linked to *buen vivir* (good living), which signifies a harmonious coexistence of all forms of life. However, the

spiritual connection between indigenous peoples and nature is often ignored by the state. Yet no one could better implement conservation policies and sustainably develop these areas than the Indigenous populations native to them, Victory: The Collective Identity Emerging from the Connection to the Land.

Since 1995, the Siekopai Nation has actively appealed to the Ecuadorian State for the official adjudication of this land, demanding not only the return of their territories but also a public apology for the violation of their collective territorial rights. For years, these rights have been contested, but all requests have been consistently blocked.

Moreover, it is essential to recognize that indigenous peoples are highly reliant on the natural resources within their environments. These groups have typically co-evolved in relative harmony with their natural surroundings, which are frequently remote areas abundant in biodiversity. Consequently, these regions are often designated as national parks and other protected areas (Nepal, 1999).

For the Siekopai, the relationship with the land is profoundly spiritual rather than merely a matter of geographic demarcation. There exists an intimate connection between humans and the natural environment. As Ingold (1986) articulates: “The land is a much more energetic configuration of earth and air, water and minerals, animals and plants, as well as people, in contrast to a surface contained by lines on a map.”

For indigenous populations, borders do not carry the same significance as they do for the state; instead, they are perceived as mechanisms of control or limitation that challenge their autonomy and usufruct of natural resources. It is, therefore, essential to recognize that the relationship between the various actors can be conflictual due to vastly different ontological perspectives. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that such processes are slow and delicate, given their economic, ecological, and sociocultural significance.

Living in this border area, which Kroijer (2024) describes as a “transition zone,” involves engaging with the transformability inherent in the indigenous conception of the land. This conception is constituted by a multiplicity of beings, practices, and objects that do not conform to Euro-American notions of individuality.

The Cuyabeno Wildlife Production Reserve is an example of an agreement for managing protected areas between the indigenous peoples who inhabit them and the state in which they are located. Many people, such as the Siona, Cofán, and Siekopai, find in this model a form of environmental sustainability that translates into benefits regarding the availability of natural resources. These agreements work when the people depend on the forest, and there is a low population density within the protected area, creating a small green paradise (FAO, 2007).

Looking ahead, ancestral land property rights are constitutionally protected in Ecuador, so if the ministry does not grant these rights, the

Siekopai can pursue legal action. This legal process is unprecedented in the country, leaving many aspects of land management uncertain. In Ecuador, the doctrine of prior and informed consent is not binding, meaning that even if a community opposes extractive projects, such projects may still proceed. This situation underscores the complexities surrounding the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consultation (FPIC).

FPIC is foundational to the participatory rights established in the 2008 Constitution of Ecuador, the International Labour Organization’s Convention 169, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has elaborated on FPIC, emphasizing the need to respect indigenous worldviews and decisions when their fundamental rights are involved, as demonstrated in the landmark *Sarayaku vs. Ecuador* case (IHRC, 2009). While the Ecuadorian government holds the authority to develop public policy on mineral extraction, FPIC is often non-binding, especially with a prior declaration of national interest. This allows the state to proceed with extractive activities without necessarily obtaining community consent, undermining the principle’s intent (Condolo Acaro et al., 2022).

Beyond legal interpretations, FPIC challenges capitalist political models and various democratic forms by acting as a mechanism of direct democracy and societal sovereignty over the state. Consequently, it is perceived as a threat to state authority and is often evaded or manipulated

to reinforce state control, weakening its defenders (Simbaña, 2012). The non-binding nature of FPIC leads to severe consequences for the constitutional rights and well-being of affected communities. FPIC aims to ensure fair negotiations between extractive industries and indigenous nations, establishing political equality and providing a framework for sustainable resource management (Ryser, 2023).

Rebuilding a Nation: The Siekopai Nation's Path to Cultural Continuity

Reoccupying these places is not about self-exoticization or reaffirming ancestry (Kroijer, 2024); rather, it carries the desire to return to origins, reviving past ways of life, family histories, and relationships with the spiritual beings of the forest, ultimately creating a harmonious space for future existence. Ulloa (2005) argues that in the processes of constructing “green identities,” indigenous people “use” their identity as a performative strategy to establish relationships with the state and as a strategy that allows them to “manipulate” their historical and cultural situation to fight for political interests at national and international levels.

Victory, therefore, encompasses not only the acquisition of property titles but also an identity-cultural redemption that acknowledges the intrinsic value of these people and the profound significance of their relationship with nature and ancestral land.

The war between Ecuador and Peru, which began in 1941 and ended definitively with the peace accords of 1998, divided a nation along two borders. This division led the populations to undertake an initiative to rebuild their nation and become one people again. The first meeting took place in 1999, followed by a second in 2001, with the aim of sharing collective experiences and laying the foundations for future projects for the entire group, with territorial claims as the cornerstone.

To ensure their cultural continuity, the Siekopai wrote a document titled “Reunification, Cultural Revaluation, and Continuity of the Siekopai People” to continue their cultural history, develop their self-determination capacities, and improve their living conditions. This project, presented to the European Commission under the “European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights,” emphasized “Combating racism, xenophobia, and discrimination against ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples” and was approved in the first quarter of 2003 (Rojas, 2007).

Conclusion

A “new” victory for the Siekopai was achieved on November 24, 2023. But why is it novel? The freshness of the Provincial Court of Sucumbios’ verdict lies in the fact that, for the first time, the Ecuadorian government granted a land title to an indigenous community within a protected area, setting a legal precedent for future struggles of indigenous peoples to reclaim land ownership in Latin America and worldwide.

The historical context leading to this victory is fundamental, but the current context is equally relevant. Indeed, during 2023, Ecuador faced challenges amidst the “Gran Padrino” scandal, leading to President Lasso’s impeachment and subsequent elections. Amidst political turmoil, Daniel Noboa won the October runoff with 51.83% of the vote. However, his ascension coincided with a state of emergency due to escalating violence and drug-related issues. As well as Daniel Noboa’s rise to power, the indigenous people’s victory was achieved just before the COP28 climate talks in Dubai, sending a strong message within the country about respecting human rights, land rights, and ownership as a key solution to climate issues.

Now that they have the official title to their lands, the Siekopai can exercise sustainable management over their natural resources. They now control their land, and the national government must respect the community’s

capacity to self-determine its management plans. Once their management plan is established, the Siekopai will consult with the Ministry of Environment and Water for any necessary technical advice.

The preservation of protected natural areas is crucial for environmental and human well-being, with indigenous communities playing a pivotal role due to their deep connection to the land and traditional ecological knowledge. International frameworks like ILO Convention 169 and the Rio Declaration emphasize government collaboration with indigenous peoples to protect and preserve their environments, recognizing the cultural and spiritual importance of their relationship with the land. These agreements mandate the participation of indigenous communities in the management and conservation of natural resources, affirming their role in sustainable land management and biodiversity preservation.

Figure 4

Cuyabeno Wildlife Production Reserve River at the Sunset



Note. Photograph taken by the author, 2017.

The Rio Declaration highlights the need to incorporate indigenous knowledge into national legislation, protect indigenous lands from harmful activities, and develop dispute-resolution procedures for land-use concerns. Similarly, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) underscores the importance of protected areas in maintaining key habitats, supporting biodiversity, providing livelihoods, and contributing to global food security and climate change mitigation. The CBD recognizes that well-managed protected areas, governed

by equitable mechanisms, yield significant benefits to both biodiversity and human well-being. Thus, respecting the territorial rights of indigenous peoples is fundamental to effective natural land management, sustainable resource management, and conservation efforts.

Indigenous stewardship practices, honed over generations, offer valuable insights into biodiversity conservation. The inclusion of indigenous communities in environmental management is supported by international frameworks, which advocate for the recognition of their rights and knowledge. Their involvement is not only a matter of justice but also effective conservation, aligning with

global efforts to combat climate change and promote sustainable development. Recognizing indigenous communities as key stakeholders in environmental conservation is vital for preserving biodiversity and ensuring a healthy and productive future for all.

A significant question mark follows the inquiry about the next step in this land tenure reclamation journey. Reasonably, the aspiration is for the Siekopai people to be able to exercise their ownership free of interference, creating sources of benefits and visibility to regain their legitimacy after a past of dispossession and rights violations, despite current political tension.

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L'ecologia umana dei Siekopai ottiene la vittoria sui diritti territoriali

By Laura Corradi, MA

ABSTRACT

Il 24 novembre 2023, la popolazione indigena Siekopai, residente nell'Amazzonia ecuadoriana, ha vinto la causa per la titolazione delle proprie terre a favore della loro nazione. Così facendo, l'Ecuador riconosce per la prima volta nella storia la proprietà indigena all'interno di un'area protetta. La decisione della Corte Provinciale di Sucumbíos riconosce anche il valore della gestione territoriale da parte della popolazione indigena, che, grazie alla profonda conoscenza del luogo, dell'ambiente, degli animali e degli spiriti che lo abitano, rappresenta la migliore custode di questo spazio verde, considerato patrimonio comune dell'umanità.

Parole chiave: Biodiversità, conservazione, Siekopai, aree protette, ecologia umana, sostenibilità ambientale, Amazzonia ecuadoriana

Il 24 novembre 2023, la Nazione Siekopai¹ ha ottenuto una vittoria storica nella regione amazzonica ecuadoriana conosciuta come Oriente. Il tribunale ecuadoriano ha emesso un verdetto definitivo che impone la restituzione delle loro terre ancestrali e pubbliche scuse per la violazione dei loro diritti territoriali. Questa sentenza segna un riconoscimento fondamentale da parte del governo nazionale ecuadoriano

dell'importanza delle pratiche ancestrali come simbolo di conservazione ambientale duratura, deliberata e di sostenibilità ecologica. Questa decisione costituisce un precedente legale e morale storico ed esemplare, sia per la nazione che per i popoli indigeni a livello globale, rappresentando il primo caso in cui una comunità indigena ottiene la titolazione di un territorio all'interno di un'area protetta.

¹ La Nazione Siekopai: il loro nome significa "popolo multicolore," un riferimento ai loro vivaci abiti tradizionali. Il loro nome può apparire anche come Secoya, riferendosi alla stessa nazione. I Secoya sono un gruppo etnico indigeno che risiede nell'Amazzonia ecuadoriana e peruviana. Si stima che la popolazione di questo popolo sia di circa 297 individui in Ecuador e approssimativamente 144 in Perù. Parlano la lingua Secoya, che appartiene al gruppo linguistico tucano. Condividono un territorio vicino ai fiumi Shushufindi, Aguarico e Cuyabeno con i Siona, e talvolta sono considerati un unico gruppo indigeno.

Figura 1*Riserva di Produzione Faunistica del Cuyabeno**Nota. Foto dell'autrice, 2017.*

Il discorso contemporaneo sulle questioni ambientali affronta frequentemente temi come il cambiamento climatico, la riduzione delle emissioni di CO₂, la deforestazione, l'allevamento intensivo di bestiame, l'estrazione petrolifera e la contaminazione. Tuttavia, spesso le discussioni sulla conservazione ambientale trascurano i rapidi cambiamenti che avvengono nella vita quotidiana delle popolazioni indigene a causa di questi fenomeni. Questa lacuna è notevole, considerando il ruolo critico che le comunità indigene svolgono nel mantenere l'equilibrio ecologico e nel promuovere pratiche sostenibili.

Nell'Amazzonia, conosciuta anche come il "polmone del mondo", lo scenario attuale, caratterizzato da estrazione petrolifera, nuove colonizzazioni, migrazioni interne, turismo e divisioni geopolitiche, rappresenta una sfida significativa per l'area biologicamente più diversificata al mondo. Tuttavia, le popolazioni indigene, che convivono con la foresta e vi si affidano da generazioni, possiedono una conoscenza impareggiabile delle sue esigenze e dinamiche.

Questo articolo esamina la vittoria della Nazione Indigena Siekopai nella regione

amazonica ecuadoriana, che ha rivendicato la legittimità sulle proprie terre ancestrali all'interno della Riserva di Produzione Faunistica del Cuyabeno. Si sostiene che le pratiche indigene rappresentino l'unico mezzo ecologicamente sostenibile per la conservazione di quest'area, data la sua vibrante biodiversità e il suo valore come bene comune dell'umanità. Attraverso questa analisi, si mettono in luce le implicazioni più ampie del riconoscimento e del supporto alla gestione indigena nella conservazione ambientale, sottolineando la necessità di integrare il sapere tradizionale con gli sforzi di conservazione contemporanei.

Conservazione delle Aree Protette: L'Ecologia Umana dei Siekopai

I Secoya, o Siekopai, sono un popolo indigeno amazonico che, tra il 1500 e il 2000, abitava l'area tra il fiume Aguarico e i corsi superiori dei fiumi Napo e Putumayo. Oggi si trovano nella regione ecuadoriana di Sucumbíos e in quella peruviana di Loreto, appartenendo alla famiglia linguistica Tukano occidentale. La loro dispersione territoriale implicava un'elevata mobilità e scambi diversificati tra i gruppi di parentela, che costituiscono la base della loro coesione sociale.

Nel XVII secolo, i Secoya incontrarono per la prima volta missionari, funzionari, soldati ed encomenderos spagnoli, portando alla creazione di riduzioni indigene da parte dei gesuiti. All'inizio del XX secolo, i Secoya dovettero affrontare una crescente sedentarizzazione a causa dell'espansione dell'economia mercantile estrattiva nell'Amazzonia, in particolare durante

l'era del boom del caucciù, seguita dalle attività di sfruttamento forestale e petrolifero. Alcune famiglie risposero fuggendo in nuove aree all'interno del loro territorio.

La guerra tra Ecuador e Perù del 1941 e i successivi accordi di pace del 1998 limitarono significativamente la mobilità dei Secoya, a causa della sospensione del libero transito e dell'aumento dei posti di blocco militari lungo il confine. I confini tra i due paesi furono tracciati, dividendo una nazione che aveva vissuto lungo il confine in due. Questa Nazione Indigena assunse allora due nomi diversi in base alle nuove residenze: Siekopai sul lato ecuadoriano e Airo Pai su quello peruviano, senza alcun contatto tra di loro per decenni (Rojas, 2007). La preoccupazione più urgente condivisa da questi due gruppi era, e continua a essere, la lotta per riconquistare il diritto alla proprietà della terra ancestrale.

Dalla metà del XX secolo fino ad oggi, i Secoya hanno subito nuove influenze religiose da parte della Chiesa Evangelica attraverso l'*Instituto Lingüístico de Verano* (ILV). Nel 1955, i missionari del ILV si insediarono lungo il fiume Cuyabeno per convertire i Secoya e i Siona, ma lasciarono l'area dopo l'espulsione del ILV dall'Ecuador nel 1981. Inoltre, a partire dal 1970, le attività petrolifere condotte da Texaco, seguite dall'*Occidental Exploration and Production Company* (OXY) dal 1985, intensificarono la pressione sul territorio Secoya e sulle sue risorse, portando alla deforestazione, all'inquinamento dell'acqua e dell'aria, e alla riduzione della fauna selvatica (Rojas, 2007).

Date le caratteristiche ecologiche uniche del territorio, nel 1979 venne istituita la Riserva di Produzione Faunistica del Cuyabeno in Ecuador. Questa area comprende Lagartococha nella provincia di Sucumbíos, terra ancestrale della Nazione Siekopai. In quel momento, la creazione di aree protette seguiva un modello statunitense che istituiva parchi privi di presenza umana per preservare flora e fauna incontaminate. Questo approccio privilegiava la natura, mettendo in secondo piano i diritti umani delle popolazioni che vivevano nell'area, le quali furono costrette a spostarsi e a essere espropriate di conseguenza.

Figura 2

Capanna, Riserva di Produzione Faunistica del Cuyabeno



Nota. Foto dell'autrice, 2017.

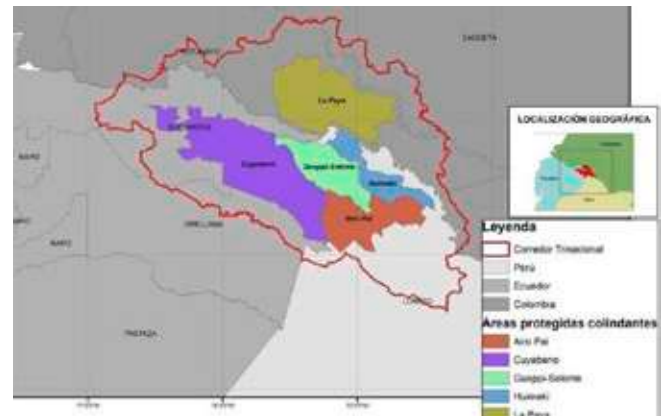
La storia della Nazione Siekopai, divisa dal confine tra Ecuador e Perù, è caratterizzata da una lunga narrazione di lotte per i diritti alla terra, finalizzate a legittimare la proprietà dei loro territori ancestrali con rivendicazioni che sono attualmente in corso. La terra conosciuta come *Pë'këya*², o Lagartococha, ha un particolare significato in quanto costituisce il confine tra i due

paesi. Dichiarata zona intangibile nel 1999, è stato vietato svolgere qualsiasi attività economica in quella zona.

Se da un lato, nel 1979, fu istituita in Ecuador la Riserva di Produzione Faunistica del Cuyabeno, allo stesso modo, in Perù, fu creata nel 1997 la Zona Riservata di Güeppí, sovrapponendosi a gran parte del territorio Airo Pai. La sua creazione, motivata da incentivi geopolitici ed ecologici, non richiese il consenso delle popolazioni indigene. Successivamente, nel 2003, queste stesse popolazioni proposero la creazione della Riserva Comunale Airo Pai e di dichiarare una parte del Parco Nazionale come territorio ancestrale (Rojas, 2007), come mostrato nella mappa seguente (Borbor, 2024).

Figura 3

Mappa delle Aree Protette



Nota. Mappa: Divisione delle aree protette tra Ecuador, Perù e Colombia (Panorama).

² Storicamente, il territorio ancestrale o tradizionale dei Siekopai si diceva si estendesse tra i fiumi Putumayo e Napo (Vickers, 1989), comprendendo *Pë'këya*, noto anche come Lagartococha, attualmente un'area di confine tra Ecuador e Perù.

Inizialmente, il concetto di creazione di parchi naturali era radicato nella divisione dicotomica tra natura e cultura, nonché tra biodiversità e diversità culturale, una nozione radicata nella società occidentale (Descola & Palsson, 1996). Infatti, la “natura” può essere intesa come l’insieme di oggetti neutrali trasformati in ambiente attraverso l’interpretazione culturale degli individui o dei gruppi sociali, affermando che l’ambiente è una costruzione culturale della natura (Milton, 1997). Così, il territorio viene visto come una “costruzione sociale” (Sack, 1986), definito dalle azioni di coloro che lo abitano e lo attraversano.

Secondo la teoria della “Nuova Ecologia” (Zimmerer, 2000), la gestione ambientale è legata alla conservazione perché la natura tende verso uno stato di equilibrio, e qualsiasi devastazione risultante dalla presenza umana deve essere considerata nel contesto della conservazione. In questo modo, gli spazi acquisiscono significato quando hanno un valore culturale e riflettono le relazioni di potere di un gruppo specifico. Nella gestione dei parchi nazionali, queste relazioni di potere sono strettamente legate agli obiettivi politici ed economici dello Stato.

Le popolazioni indigene non furono direttamente coinvolte nella gestione delle aree protette, solamente in seguito è stato riconosciuto il loro potenziale. Inizialmente, fu istituito un accordo di co-gestione con le Autorità dei Parchi, soggetto a ciò che Agrawal (2005) descrive come “ambientalismo disciplinare” o “eco-governamentalità”—l’insieme di pratiche e rappresentazioni ambientali, sia locali, nazionali

che transnazionali, che interagiscono con attori sociali diretti per farli pensare e agire in modi specifici riguardo agli obiettivi ambientali come lo sviluppo sostenibile, la sicurezza ambientale, la conservazione della biodiversità e l’accesso alle risorse (Ulloa, 2005).

Robbins (2004) sottolinea una premessa fondamentale alla base della creazione di tali spazi protetti: la natura deve essere preservata libera da qualsiasi interferenza umana, creando una “territorializzazione della conservazione.” Ciò implica l’istituzionalizzazione di atti e conoscenze attraverso i quali il potere statale stabilisce una relazione tra la popolazione e uno spazio geografico, imponendo identità consentite e proibite, nonché specifiche forme di azione e inazione.

Il rafforzamento del movimento per l’autodeterminazione indigena a livello mondiale, nel quadro del multiculturalismo, ha svolto un ruolo centrale nella modellazione del discorso ambientalista. Questa rappresentazione è stata sviluppata strategicamente dalle organizzazioni indigene stesse come mezzo per negoziare accordi che migliorino la loro qualità di vita. Poiché l’identità è un processo relazionale e dinamico, stanno emergendo nuove identità ecologiche nell’ambito dell’eco-governamentalità, distinguendo le popolazioni indigene come nativi ecologici (Ulloa, 2004).

Ulloa (2005) e Castro (2008) sostengono che l’indigenità viene spesso rappresentata sia come selvaggia che come ecologica. Castro (2008) introduce il concetto di una “nuova identità

ecologica” che dipinge i popoli indigeni come custodi dell’ambiente e detentori di conoscenze su come proteggere il pianeta dai disastri globali. Tuttavia, Castro osserva che questa categorizzazione, pur sembrando valorizzarli come detentori di una conoscenza superiore, perpetua l’immagine del “buon selvaggio” che vive in armonia con la natura.

Nel contesto dell’avanzamento ecologico, la relazione tra identità, cultura e territorio è stata un punto focale per i sostenitori degli studi sullo sviluppo, che vedono le conoscenze locali come essenziali per offrire un’“alternativa” allo sviluppo capitalista e alla globalizzazione (Molano, 2006). Miraglia (2007) sottolinea che lo sviluppo sostenibile rivela la tensione in corso tra crescita economica e conservazione ambientale. Questo concetto, come definito nel rapporto del 1987 della Commissione Mondiale su Ambiente e Sviluppo delle Nazioni Unite “Il nostro futuro comune”, si riferisce a uno sviluppo che “soddisfa i bisogni del presente senza compromettere la capacità delle future generazioni di soddisfare i propri bisogni”.

Considerando la profonda interrelazione tra esseri umani e natura, è imperativo fare riferimento a un principio contemporaneo di conservazione: *Kawsak Sacha* (Foresta Vivente), sostenuto da gruppi indigeni come la comunità Kichwa di Sarayaku. Questo principio promuove la protezione del patrimonio naturale e culturale, considerando la foresta un essere vivente dotato di diritti: “la protezione del patrimonio naturale e culturale esistente nelle terre e nei territori indigeni attraverso una nuova costruzione legale

della conservazione, derivante dalla cosmovisione dei popoli indigeni. Questa costruzione implica che la Foresta Vivente o *Kawsak Sacha* sia considerata un soggetto con diritti, dotato di vita” (Sarayaku, 2018).

Questo concetto è strettamente legato al *Buen Vivir* (buon vivere), che indica una convivenza armoniosa tra tutte le forme di vita. Tuttavia, la connessione spirituale tra i popoli indigeni e la natura è spesso ignorata dallo Stato anche se nessuno potrebbe meglio attuare politiche di conservazione e sviluppare queste aree in modo sostenibile quanto le popolazioni indigene native di quei territori.

Dal 1995, la Nazione Siekopai ha attivamente fatto appello allo Stato ecuadoriano per l’assegnazione ufficiale di queste terre, chiedendo non solo il ritorno dei loro territori ma anche scuse pubbliche per la violazione dei loro diritti territoriali collettivi. Per anni, questi diritti sono stati contestati, ma tutte le richieste sono state costantemente bloccate.

Inoltre, è essenziale riconoscere che i popoli indigeni dipendono fortemente dalle risorse naturali presenti nei loro ambienti. Questi gruppi hanno generalmente vissuto insieme in relativa armonia con i loro ambienti naturali, che spesso sono aree remote ricche di biodiversità. Di conseguenza, queste regioni sono spesso designate come parchi nazionali e altre aree protette (Nepal, 1999).

Per i Siekopai, il rapporto con la terra è profondamente spirituale piuttosto che semplicemente una questione di demarcazione

geografica. Esiste un'intima connessione tra gli esseri umani e l'ambiente naturale. Come articola Ingold (1986): "La terra è una configurazione molto più energetica di terra e aria, acqua e minerali, animali e piante, così come persone, in contrasto con una superficie contenuta da linee su una mappa."

Per le popolazioni indigene, i confini non hanno lo stesso significato che hanno per lo Stato; piuttosto, sono percepiti come meccanismi di controllo o limitazione che sfidano la loro autonomia e l'usufrutto delle risorse naturali. Pertanto, è essenziale riconoscere che il rapporto tra i vari attori può essere conflittuale a causa di prospettive ontologiche radicalmente diverse. Inoltre, bisogna riconoscere che tali processi sono lenti e delicati, dati i loro significati economici, ecologici e socioculturali.

Vivere in quest'area di confine, che Kroijer (2024) descrive come una "zona di transizione", comporta l'impegno con la trasformabilità intrinseca nella concezione indigena della terra. Questa concezione è costituita da una molteplicità di esseri, pratiche e oggetti che non si conformano alle nozioni euro-americane di individualità.

La Riserva di Produzione Faunistica del Cuyabeno è un esempio di un accordo per la gestione delle aree protette tra i popoli indigeni che le abitano e lo Stato in cui si trovano. Molti popoli, come i Siona, i Cofán e i Siekopai, trovano in questo modello una forma di sostenibilità ambientale che si traduce in benefici riguardo alla disponibilità di risorse naturali. Questi accordi funzionano quando le persone dipendono dalla

foresta, e c'è una bassa densità di popolazione all'interno dell'area protetta, creando un piccolo paradiso verde (FAO, 2007).

Guardando al futuro, i diritti di proprietà delle terre ancestrali sono costituzionalmente protetti in Ecuador, quindi se il ministero non dovesse concedere tali diritti, i Siekopai potrebbero intraprendere azioni legali. Questo processo legale è senza precedenti nel Paese, lasciando molti aspetti della gestione del territorio incerti. Nonostante ciò, in Ecuador, la dottrina della Consultazione Libera, Previa e Informata (FPIC) non è vincolante, il che significa che anche se una comunità si oppone ai progetti estrattivi, tali progetti potrebbero comunque andare avanti. Questa situazione sottolinea le complessità legate al principio di FPIC.

Il FPIC è fondamentale per i diritti partecipativi sanciti dalla Costituzione del 2008 dell'Ecuador, dalla Convenzione N°169 dell'Organizzazione Internazionale del Lavoro e dalla Dichiarazione delle Nazioni Unite sui Diritti dei Popoli Indigeni. La Corte Interamericana dei Diritti Umani ha elaborato il FPIC, sottolineando la necessità di rispettare le cosmovisioni e le decisioni indigene quando i loro diritti fondamentali sono coinvolti, come dimostrato nel caso storico *Sarayaku vs. Ecuador* (IHRC, 2009). Sebbene il governo ecuadoriano abbia l'autorità di sviluppare politiche pubbliche sull'estrazione mineraria, il FPIC è spesso non vincolante, specialmente con una dichiarazione preventiva di interesse nazionale. Ciò consente allo Stato di proseguire con le attività estrattive senza necessariamente ottenere il consenso della

comunità, minando l'intento del principio (Condolo Acaro et al., 2022).

Oltre alle interpretazioni legali, il FPIC sfida i modelli politici capitalistici e varie forme di democrazia, agendo come un meccanismo di democrazia diretta e sovranità sociale sullo Stato. Di conseguenza, è percepito come una minaccia all'autorità statale e viene spesso evitato o manipolato per rafforzare il controllo statale, indebolendo i suoi difensori (Simbaña, 2012). La natura non vincolante del FPIC porta a gravi conseguenze per i diritti costituzionali e il benessere delle comunità coinvolte. Il FPIC mira a garantire negoziazioni eque tra le industrie estrattive e le nazioni indigene, stabilendo un'uguaglianza politica e fornendo un quadro per una gestione sostenibile delle risorse (Ryser, 2023).

Ricostruire una Nazione: Il Cammino della Nazione Siekopai verso la Continuità Culturale

La rioccupazione di questi luoghi da parte dei Siekopai non riguarda l'auto-esotizzazione o il semplice riaffermare la propria ascendenza (Kroijer, 2024); piuttosto, essa rappresenta il desiderio di tornare alle origini, rivivere i modi di vita passati, le storie familiari e le relazioni con gli esseri spirituali della foresta, creando infine uno spazio armonioso per un'esistenza futura. Ulloa (2005) sostiene che nei processi di costruzione delle "identità verdi," i popoli indigeni "usano" la loro identità come una strategia performativa per stabilire relazioni con lo Stato che permette loro di "manipolare"

la propria situazione storica e culturale per combattere per interessi politici a livello nazionale e internazionale.

La vittoria, quindi, non riguarda solo l'acquisizione dei titoli di proprietà, ma anche una redenzione identitaria e culturale che riconosce il valore intrinseco di queste popolazioni e il significato profondo della loro relazione con la natura e la propria terra ancestrale.

La guerra tra Ecuador e Perù, iniziata nel 1941 e terminata definitivamente con gli accordi di pace del 1998, ha diviso una nazione lungo due confini. Questa divisione ha spinto le popolazioni a intraprendere un'iniziativa per ricostruire la loro nazione e tornare a essere un unico popolo. Il primo incontro si è tenuto nel 1999, seguito da un secondo nel 2001, con l'obiettivo di condividere esperienze collettive e gettare le basi per progetti futuri per l'intero gruppo, con le rivendicazioni territoriali come pietra angolare.

I Siekopai, per garantire la continuità culturale, hanno redatto un documento intitolato "Riunificazione, Rivalutazione Culturale e Continuità del Popolo Siekopai," per continuare la loro storia culturale, sviluppare le capacità di autodeterminazione e migliorare le loro condizioni di vita. Questo progetto, presentato alla Commissione Europea nell'ambito dell'"Iniziativa Europea per la Democrazia e i Diritti Umani," ha sottolineato la necessità di "combattere il razzismo, la xenofobia e la discriminazione contro le minoranze etniche e i popoli indigeni" ed è stato approvato nel primo trimestre del 2003 (Rojas, 2007).

Conclusioni

Una “nuova” vittoria per i Siekopai è stata ottenuta il 24 novembre 2023. Ma perché questa è una novità? La novità della sentenza della Corte Provinciale di Sucumbíos risiede nel fatto che, per la prima volta, il governo ecuadoriano ha concesso un titolo di proprietà a una comunità indigena all'interno di un'area protetta, stabilendo un precedente legale per le future lotte dei popoli indigeni per reclamare la proprietà della terra in America Latina e nel mondo.

Il contesto storico che ha portato a questa vittoria è fondamentale, ma quello attuale è altrettanto rilevante. Infatti, nel 2023, l'Ecuador ha affrontato le sfide derivanti dallo scandalo del “Gran Padrino,” che ha portato all'impeachment del presidente Lasso e alle successive elezioni. In mezzo a turbolenze politiche, Daniel Noboa ha vinto il ballottaggio di ottobre con il 51,83% dei voti. Tuttavia, la sua ascesa è coincisa con uno stato di emergenza dovuto all'aumento della violenza e dei problemi legati al narcotraffico. Oltre all'ascesa di Daniel Noboa, la vittoria del popolo indigeno è stata ottenuta poco prima della COP28 a Dubai, inviando un forte messaggio all'interno del Paese sul rispetto dei diritti umani, dei diritti alla terra e della proprietà come soluzione chiave ai problemi climatici.

Ora che hanno il titolo ufficiale sulle proprie terre, i Siekopai possono esercitare una gestione sostenibile delle proprie risorse naturali. In questo modo il governo nazionale deve rispettare la capacità della comunità di autodeterminare il proprio piano di gestione. Una volta che questo

sarà stabilito, i Siekopai consulteranno il Ministero dell'Ambiente e delle Risorse Idriche per qualsiasi consiglio tecnico necessario.

Figura 4

Riserva di Produzione Faunistica di Cuyabeno al tramonto



Note. Foto dell'autrice, 2017.

La preservazione delle aree naturali protette è cruciale per il benessere ambientale e umano, dove le comunità indigene svolgono un ruolo centrale grazie alla loro profonda connessione con la terra e alle conoscenze ecologiche tradizionali. Quadri normativi internazionali come la Convenzione N°169 dell'Organizzazione Internazionale del Lavoro e la Dichiarazione di Rio sottolineano la necessità della collaborazione tra i governi e i popoli indigeni per proteggere e preservare i loro ambienti, riconoscendo l'importanza culturale e spirituale della loro relazione con la terra. Questi accordi impongono la partecipazione delle comunità indigene nella gestione e conservazione delle risorse naturali, confermando il loro ruolo nella gestione sostenibile del territorio e nella preservazione della biodiversità.

La Dichiarazione di Rio evidenzia l'esigenza di incorporare le conoscenze indigene nella legislazione nazionale, proteggere i territori indigeni da attività dannose e sviluppare procedure di risoluzione delle controversie relative all'uso del territorio. Allo stesso modo, la Convenzione sulla Diversità Biologica (CDB) sottolinea l'importanza delle aree protette per il mantenimento di habitat chiave, il sostegno alla biodiversità, la fornitura di mezzi di sussistenza e il contributo alla sicurezza alimentare globale e alla mitigazione del cambiamento climatico. La CDB riconosce che aree protette ben gestite, governate da meccanismi equi, apportano significativi benefici sia alla biodiversità che al benessere umano. Di conseguenza, il rispetto dei diritti territoriali dei popoli indigeni è fondamentale per una gestione efficace delle terre naturali, una gestione sostenibile delle risorse e gli sforzi di conservazione.

Le pratiche di gestione territoriale indigena, affinate nel corso delle generazioni, offrono preziosi spunti per la conservazione della

biodiversità. L'inclusione delle comunità indigene nella gestione ambientale è supportata dai quadri internazionali, che promuovono il riconoscimento dei loro diritti e delle loro conoscenze. Il loro coinvolgimento non è solo una questione di giustizia, ma anche di efficacia nella conservazione, in linea con gli sforzi globali per combattere il cambiamento climatico e promuovere lo sviluppo sostenibile. Riconoscere le comunità indigene come attori chiave nella conservazione ambientale è vitale per preservare la biodiversità e garantire un futuro sano e produttivo per tutti.

Quello che ci si domanda per il futuro riguarda i prossimi passi nel percorso di rivendicazione dei diritti di proprietà terriera. Ragionevolmente, l'aspirazione è che il popolo Siekopai possa esercitare la propria proprietà senza interferenze, nonostante le attuali tensioni politiche, creando fonti di benefici e visibilità per riconquistare la propria legittimità dopo un passato di espropriazioni e violazioni dei diritti.

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BIOGRAFIA DELL'AUTORE



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La ecología humana Siekopai logra la victoria en derechos sobre la tierra

Por Laura Corradi, MA

Traducción al español por Yesenia Cortés

RESUMEN

El 24 de noviembre de 2023, la población indígena Siekopai residente en la Amazonía ecuatoriana ganó una demanda por la titularidad de sus tierras a su Nación. Ecuador reconoció por primera vez en la historia la propiedad indígena de la tierra dentro de un área protegida. La decisión de la Corte Provincial de Sucumbíos también reconoce el valor del manejo de la tierra por parte de la población indígena, quienes, a través de su profundo conocimiento del lugar, el medio ambiente, los animales y los espíritus que la habitan, son los mejores guardianes de este espacio verde como un patrimonio de la humanidad.

Palabras clave: Población indígena Siekopai, Amazonia ecuatoriana, propiedad indígena de la tierra, área protegida, administración indígena, esfuerzos de conservación, autodeterminación indígena, avance ecológico, mecanismos internacionales, Consentimiento Libre, Previo e Informado, Convenio 169 de la OIT, Declaración de Río, gestión sostenible de recursos, justicia medioambiental, Ecuador, selva amazónica, derechos indígenas, derechos sobre la tierra, protección medioambiental

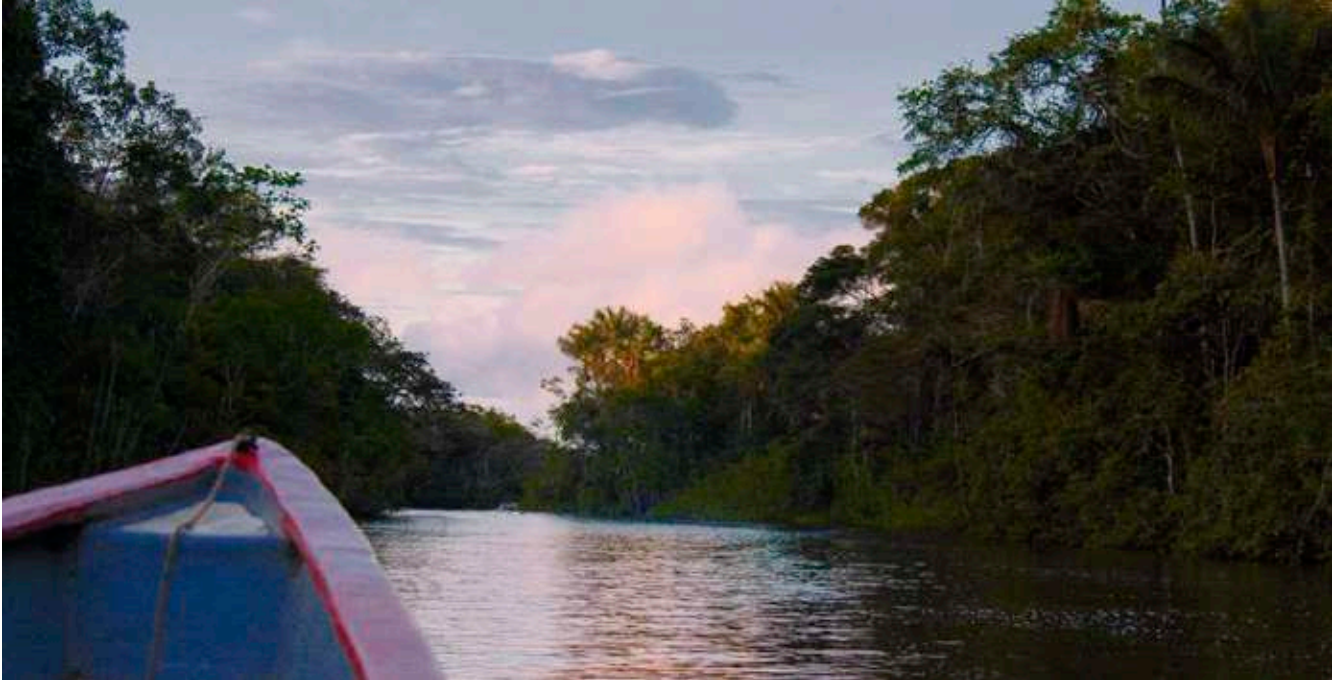
El 24 de noviembre de 2023, la Nación Siekopai¹ logró una victoria histórica en la región amazónica ecuatoriana conocida como Oriente. El tribunal ecuatoriano emitió un veredicto final ordenando la devolución de sus tierras ancestrales y una disculpa pública por la infracción de sus derechos territoriales. Este fallo significa un reconocimiento fundamental por parte del gobierno nacional ecuatoriano de

la importancia de las prácticas ancestrales como símbolo de conservación ambiental duradera y deliberada y de sostenibilidad ecológica. Esta decisión sienta un precedente legal y moral histórico y ejemplar para la Nación y los pueblos indígenas en todo el mundo, marcando el primer caso en el que una comunidad indígena obtiene títulos de propiedad de un territorio dentro de un área protegida.

¹ Nación Siekopai: su nombre significa “gente multicolor”, característica derivada de su vestimenta colorida. Su nombre también puede aparecer como Secoya, haciendo referencia a la misma Nación. Los Secoya son un grupo étnico indígena residente en la Amazonía ecuatoriana y Perú. La población de este pueblo se estima en alrededor de 297 individuos en Ecuador y aproximadamente 144 en Perú. Hablan la lengua secoya, que pertenece al grupo lingüístico tucano. Comparten un territorio cerca de los ríos Shushufindi, Aguarico y Cuyabeno con los Siona y, en ocasiones, se les considera un solo grupo indígena.

Figura 1

Río de la Reserva de Producción de Fauna Cuyabeno



Nota. Fotografía tomada por el autor, 2017.

El discurso contemporáneo sobre cuestiones ambientales aborda con frecuencia temas como el cambio climático, la reducción de las emisiones de CO₂, la deforestación, la ganadería intensiva, la extracción de petróleo y la contaminación. Sin embargo, los debates sobre la conservación del medio ambiente a menudo pasan por alto los rápidos cambios que se producen en la vida cotidiana de las poblaciones indígenas como resultado de estos fenómenos. Esta supervisión es notable, dado el papel fundamental que desempeñan las comunidades indígenas en el mantenimiento del equilibrio ecológico y la promoción de prácticas sostenibles.

En la Amazonia, a menudo denominada el “pulmón del mundo”, el escenario actual, que incluye extracción de petróleo, nuevas colonizaciones, migraciones internas, turismo y división geopolítica, plantea un desafío importante para el área con mayor diversidad biológica del mundo. Sin embargo, las poblaciones indígenas, que han coexistido con el bosque y dependido de él durante generaciones, poseen un conocimiento incomparable de sus necesidades y dinámica.

Este artículo examina la victoria de la Nación Indígena Siekopai en la región amazónica

ecuatoriana, reclamando legitimidad sobre sus tierras ancestrales dentro de la Reserva de Producción de Fauna Cuyabeno. Se argumenta que las prácticas indígenas representan el único medio ecológicamente sostenible para la conservación de esta área, dada su vibrante biodiversidad y su valor como bien común para la humanidad. A través de este análisis, se destacan las implicaciones más amplias de reconocer y apoyar la gestión indígena en la conservación ambiental, enfatizando la necesidad de integrar el conocimiento tradicional con los esfuerzos de conservación contemporáneos.

Conservación de áreas protegidas: la ecología humana Siekopai

Los secoya, o siekopai, son un pueblo indígena amazónico que, entre 1500 y 2000, habitó la zona comprendida entre el río Aguarico y los cursos superiores de los ríos Napo y Putumayo. Hoy en día, se ubican en la región ecuatoriana de Sucumbíos y la región peruana de Loreto, pertenecientes a la familia lingüística tucano occidental. Su dispersión territorial implicó una alta movilidad y diversos intercambios entre grupos de parentesco, que apuntalan su cohesión social.

En el siglo XVII, los secoya se encontraron por primera vez con misioneros, funcionarios, soldados y encomenderos españoles, lo que llevó al establecimiento de reducciones indígenas por parte de los jesuitas. A principios del siglo XX, los secoya enfrentaron una mayor sedentarización debido a la expansión de la economía mercantil extractiva en el Amazonas, sobre todo durante

el auge del caucho, seguido de las actividades forestales y petroleras. Algunas familias respondieron huyendo a nuevas zonas dentro de su territorio.

La Guerra Ecuador-Perú de 1941 y los acuerdos de paz posteriores de 1998 restringieron significativamente la movilidad de Secoya, debido a la suspensión del libre tránsito y el aumento de los puestos de control militares a lo largo de la frontera. Se trazaron los límites entre los dos países, dividiendo en dos una Nación que había vivido a lo largo de la frontera. Esta Nación Indígena tuvo entonces dos nombres diferentes en función de sus nuevas residencias: Siekopai del lado ecuatoriano y Airo Pai del lado peruano, sin contacto entre ellos durante décadas (Rojas, 2007). La preocupación más apremiante compartida entre estos dos grupos fue, y sigue siendo, la lucha por reclamar el derecho a la propiedad ancestral de la tierra.

Desde mediados del siglo XX hasta la actualidad, los secoya han experimentado nuevas influencias religiosas de la Iglesia Evangélica a través del Instituto Lingüístico de Verano (ILV). En 1955, los misioneros del ILV se establecieron junto al río Cuyabeno para convertir a los Secoya y Siona, pero se marcharon después de que Ecuador expulsó al ILV en 1981. Además, a partir de 1970, las actividades petroleras de Texaco, seguida por la Occidental Exploration and Production Company (OXY) a partir de 1985, intensificaron la presión sobre el territorio Secoya y sus recursos, lo que lleva a la deforestación, la contaminación del agua y del aire y una reducción de la población de caza. (Rojas, 2007).

Debido a las características ecológicas únicas del territorio, en 1979 se estableció en Ecuador la Reserva de Producción de Fauna Cuyabeno. Esta área incluye Lagartococha en la provincia de Sucumbíos, tierra ancestral de la Nación Siekopai. En ese momento, la creación de áreas protegidas siguió un modelo estadounidense que establecía parques desprovistos de presencia humana para preservar la flora y la fauna vírgenes. Este enfoque priorizó la naturaleza, dejando de lado los derechos humanos de las poblaciones que viven en la zona, quienes fueron desplazadas y despojadas por la fuerza.

Figura 2

Cabaña en la Reserva de Producción de Fauna Cuyabeno



Nota. Fotografía tomada por el autor, 2017.

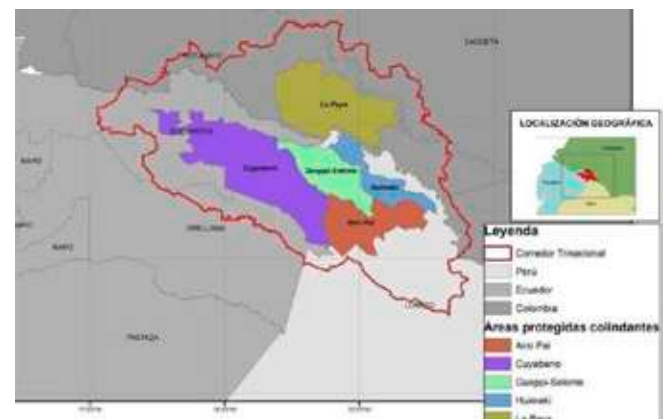
La historia de la Nación Siekopai, dividida por la frontera entre Ecuador y Perú, es una narrativa prolongada de luchas por el derecho a la tierra destinadas a legitimar la propiedad de sus territorios ancestrales con demandas continuas. La tierra conocida como Pë'këya², o Lagartococha, tiene especial importancia, ya que constituye

la frontera entre los dos países. Declarada zona intangible en 1999, se consideraba ilegal realizar allí cualquier actividad económica.

En 1979 se estableció en Ecuador la Reserva de Producción de Fauna Cuyabeno. De manera similar, en Perú, la Zona Reservada Güeppí fue creada en 1997, superponiendo gran parte del territorio Airo Pai. Su creación, impulsada por incentivos geopolíticos y ecológicos, no requirió el consentimiento de las poblaciones indígenas. Posteriormente, en 2003, estas mismas poblaciones propusieron el establecimiento de la Reserva Comunal Airo Pai y parte del Parque Nacional como territorio ancestral (Rojas, 2007), como se muestra en el siguiente mapa (Borbor, 2024).

Figura 3

Mapa de las áreas protegidas



Nota. Mapa: División de áreas protegidas entre Ecuador, Perú y Colombia (Panorama).

² Históricamente, se dice que el territorio ancestral o tradicional de los Siekopai se extendía entre los ríos Putumayo y Napo (Vickers, 1989), que incluía Pëkë'ya, también conocida como Lagartococha, hoy zona fronteriza entre Ecuador y Perú.

Inicialmente, el concepto de creación de parques naturales estaba arraigado en la división dicotómica entre naturaleza y cultura, así como entre biodiversidad y diversidad cultural, una noción típica de la sociedad occidental (Descola y Palsson, 1996). De hecho, la “naturaleza” puede entenderse como el conjunto de objetos neutros transformados en un ambiente a través de la interpretación cultural de individuos o grupos sociales, afirmando que el ambiente es una construcción cultural de la naturaleza (Milton, 1997). Así, el territorio es visto como una “construcción social” (Sack, 1986), definida por las acciones de quienes viven y se mueven en él.

Según la teoría de la “Nueva Ecología” (Zimmerer, 2000), la gestión ambiental está relacionada con la conservación porque la naturaleza tiende a un estado de equilibrio, y cualquier devastación resultante de la presencia humana debe considerarse dentro del contexto de la conservación. De esta manera, los espacios adquieren sentido cuando tienen significado cultural y reflejan las relaciones de poder de un grupo específico. En la gestión de parques nacionales, estas relaciones de poder están estrechamente ligadas a los objetivos políticos y económicos del Estado.

Al principio, las poblaciones indígenas no participaban directamente en la gestión de las áreas protegidas; más tarde se reconoció su verdadero potencial. Inicialmente, se estableció un acuerdo de cogestión con las autoridades del parque, sujeto a lo que Agrawal (2005) describe como “ambientalismo disciplinario”

o “eco-gubernamentalidad”: el conjunto de prácticas y representaciones ambientales, ya sean locales, nacionales o transnacionales, que interactúan con actores sociales directos para pensar y comportarse de maneras específicas en relación con objetivos ambientales como el desarrollo sostenible, la seguridad ambiental, la conservación de la biodiversidad y el acceso a los recursos (Ulloa, 2005).

Robbins (2004) enfatiza una premisa básica que subyace a la creación de tales espacios protegidos: que la naturaleza debe preservarse libre de cualquier interferencia humana, creando una “territorialización de la conservación”. Esto implica la institucionalización de actos y conocimientos a través de los cuales el poder estatal establece una relación entre la población y un espacio geográfico, imponiendo identidades permitidas y prohibidas, así como formas específicas de acción e inacción.

El fortalecimiento del movimiento indígena de autodeterminación en todo el mundo, dentro del marco del multiculturalismo, ha jugado un papel central en la configuración del discurso del ambientalismo. Esta representación ha sido desarrollada estratégicamente por las propias organizaciones indígenas como un medio para negociar acuerdos que mejoren su calidad de vida. Dado que la identidad es un proceso relacional y dinámico, nuevas identidades ecológicas están surgiendo en el ámbito de la eco-gubernamentalidad, distinguiendo a las poblaciones indígenas como nativos ecológicos (Ulloa, 2004).

Ulloa (2005) y Castro (2008) sostienen que con frecuencia, la indigeneidad se describe tanto como salvaje, como ecológica. Castro (2008) introduce el concepto de una “nueva identidad ecológica” que retrata a los pueblos indígenas como guardianes del medio ambiente y conocedores de cómo proteger el planeta de los desastres globales. Sin embargo, Castro señala que esta categorización, si bien aparentemente los valora como poseedores de un conocimiento superior, perpetúa la imagen del “buen salvaje” que vive en armonía con la naturaleza.

En el contexto del avance ecológico, la relación entre identidad, cultura y territorio ha sido un punto focal para los defensores de los estudios de desarrollo, quienes ven el conocimiento local como esencial para ofrecer una “alternativa” al desarrollo capitalista y la globalización (Molano, 2006). Miraglia (2007) enfatiza que el desarrollo sostenible revela la tensión actual entre el crecimiento económico y la preservación del medio ambiente. Este concepto, tal como se define en el informe de 1987 de la Comisión Mundial sobre Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo de las Naciones Unidas, “Nuestro futuro común”, es el desarrollo que “satisface las necesidades del presente sin comprometer la capacidad de las generaciones futuras para satisfacer sus propias necesidades”.

Considerando la profunda interrelación entre los humanos y la naturaleza, es imperativo hacer referencia a un principio de conservación contemporáneo: *Kawsak Sacha* (Bosque Viviente), defendido por grupos indígenas como la comunidad Kichwa Sarayaku. Este principio

promueve la protección del patrimonio natural y cultural, considerando al bosque un ser vivo con derechos: “la protección del patrimonio natural y cultural existente en las tierras y territorios indígenas a través de una nueva construcción jurídica de conservación proveniente de la cosmovisión de los pueblos indígenas. Esta construcción implica que el Bosque Viviente o *Kawsak Sacha* es considerado un sujeto de derechos, dotado de vida” (Sarayaku, 2018).

Este concepto está íntimamente ligado al *buen vivir*, que significa una convivencia armoniosa de todas las formas de vida. Sin embargo, el Estado suele ignorar la conexión espiritual entre los pueblos indígenas y la naturaleza. Empero, nadie podría implementar mejor políticas de conservación y desarrollar sustentablemente estas áreas que las poblaciones indígenas nativas a ellas, Victoria: La identidad colectiva que emerge de la conexión con la tierra.

Desde 1995, la Nación Siekopai ha apelado activamente al Estado ecuatoriano para la adjudicación oficial de estas tierras, exigiendo no solo la devolución de sus territorios, sino también una disculpa pública por la violación de sus derechos territoriales colectivos. Durante años, estos derechos han sido impugnados, pero todas las solicitudes han sido bloqueadas sistemáticamente.

Además, es esencial reconocer que los pueblos indígenas dependen en gran medida de los recursos naturales de sus entornos. Estos grupos típicamente han co-evolucionado en relativa armonía con su entorno natural, que

frecuentemente son áreas remotas con abundante biodiversidad. En consecuencia, estas regiones suelen ser designadas como parques nacionales y otras áreas protegidas (Nepal, 1999).

Para los Siekopai, la relación con la tierra es profundamente espiritual y no una mera cuestión de demarcación geográfica. Existe una conexión íntima entre los seres humanos y el entorno natural. Como expresa Ingold (1986): “La tierra es más una configuración a nivel energético de tierra y aire, agua y minerales; animales y plantas, así como personas; en contraste con una superficie delimitada por líneas en un mapa”.

Para las poblaciones indígenas, las fronteras no tienen el mismo significado que para el Estado; más bien, se perciben como mecanismos de control o limitación que desafían su autonomía, y usufructo de los recursos naturales. Por lo tanto, es esencial reconocer que la relación entre los diversos actores puede ser conflictiva debido a perspectivas ontológicas muy diferentes. Además, hay que reconocer que tales procesos son lentos y delicados, dada su importancia económica, ecológica y sociocultural.

Vivir en esta zona fronteriza, que Kroijer (2024) describe como una “zona de transición”, implica comprometerse con la transformabilidad inherente a la concepción indígena de la tierra. Esta concepción está constituida por una multiplicidad de seres, prácticas y objetos que no se ajustan a las nociones euroamericanas de individualidad.

La Reserva de Producción de Fauna Cuyabeno es un ejemplo de acuerdo para el manejo de

áreas protegidas entre los pueblos indígenas que las habitan y el estado en el que se ubican. Muchos pueblos, como los Siona, Cofán y Siekopai, encuentran en este modelo una forma de sostenibilidad ambiental que se traduce en beneficios en cuanto a la disponibilidad de recursos naturales. Estos acuerdos funcionan cuando la gente depende del bosque y hay una baja densidad de población dentro del área protegida, creando un pequeño paraíso verde (FAO, 2007).

De cara al futuro, los derechos de propiedad de las tierras ancestrales están protegidos constitucionalmente en Ecuador, por lo que si el ministerio no concede estos derechos, los Siekopai pueden emprender acciones legales. Este proceso legal no tiene precedentes en el país, lo que deja inciertos muchos aspectos de la gestión de la tierra. En Ecuador, la doctrina del consentimiento previo e informado no es vinculante, lo que significa que incluso si una comunidad se opone a los proyectos extractivos, dichos proyectos aún pueden continuar. Esta situación subraya las complejidades que rodean el principio de Consentimiento Libre, Previo, e Informado (CLPI).

El CLPI es fundamental para los derechos de participación establecidos en la Constitución de Ecuador de 2008, el Convenio 169 de la Organización Internacional del Trabajo y la Declaración de las Naciones Unidas sobre los Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas. La Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos ha profundizado en el CLPI, enfatizando la necesidad de respetar las cosmovisiones y decisiones

indígenas cuando sus derechos fundamentales están involucrados, como se demostró en el histórico caso *Sarayaku vs. Ecuador* (IHRC, 2009). Si bien el gobierno ecuatoriano tiene la autoridad para desarrollar políticas públicas sobre extracción de minerales, el CLPI a menudo no es vinculante, especialmente con una declaración previa de interés nacional. Esto permite al Estado proceder con actividades extractivas sin necesariamente obtener el consentimiento de la comunidad, lo que socava la intención del principio (Condolo Acaro et al., 2022).

Más allá de las interpretaciones legales, el CLPI desafía los modelos políticos capitalistas y diversas formas democráticas al actuar como un mecanismo de democracia directa y soberanía social sobre el estado. En consecuencia, se percibe como una amenaza a la autoridad estatal y a menudo se elude o manipula para reforzar el control estatal, debilitando a sus defensores (Simbaña, 2012). La naturaleza no vinculante del CLPI tiene graves consecuencias para los derechos constitucionales y el bienestar de las comunidades afectadas. El CLPI tiene como objetivo garantizar negociaciones justas entre las industrias extractivas y las Naciones indígenas, estableciendo igualdad política y proporcionando un marco para la gestión sostenible de los recursos (Ryser, 2023).

Reconstrucción de una Nación: El Camino de la Nación Siekopai hacia la Continuidad Cultural

Reocupar estos lugares no se trata de auto-exotización ni de reafirmación de los ancestros

(Kroijer, 2024); más bien, conlleva el deseo de regresar a los orígenes, reviviendo formas de vida pasadas, historias familiares y relaciones con los seres espirituales del bosque, creando en última instancia un espacio armonioso para la existencia futura. Ulloa (2005) sostiene que en los procesos de construcción de “identidades verdes”, los pueblos indígenas “utilizan” su identidad como una estrategia performativa para establecer relaciones con el Estado y como una estrategia que les permite “manipular” su situación histórica y cultural para luchar por intereses políticos a nivel nacional e internacional.

La victoria, por lo tanto, abarca no solo la adquisición de títulos de propiedad, sino también una redención identitaria-cultural que reconozca el valor intrínseco de este pueblo y el profundo significado de su relación con la naturaleza y la tierra ancestral.

La guerra entre Ecuador y Perú, que comenzó en 1941 y terminó definitivamente con los acuerdos de paz de 1998, dividió a una Nación en dos fronteras. Esta división llevó a las poblaciones a emprender una iniciativa para reconstruir su Nación y volver a ser un solo pueblo. El primer encuentro tuvo lugar en 1999, seguido de uno segundo en 2001, con el objetivo de compartir experiencias colectivas y sentar las bases de proyectos futuros de todo el grupo, teniendo como piedra angular las reivindicaciones territoriales.

Para asegurar su continuidad cultural, los Siekopai escribieron un documento titulado “Reunificación, Revalorización Cultural y

Continuidad del Pueblo Siekopai” para continuar su historia cultural, desarrollar sus capacidades de autodeterminación y mejorar sus condiciones de vida. Este proyecto, presentado a la Comisión Europea bajo la “Iniciativa Europea para la Democracia y los Derechos Humanos”, hacía hincapié en “ combatir el racismo, la xenofobia y la discriminación contra las minorías étnicas y los pueblos indígenas” y fue aprobado en el primer trimestre de 2003 (Rojas, 2007).

Conclusión

El 24 de noviembre de 2023 se logró una “nueva” victoria de los Siekopai. Pero, ¿por qué es novedosa? La frescura del veredicto de la Corte Provincial de Sucumbíos radica en el hecho de que, por primera vez, el gobierno ecuatoriano otorgó un título de propiedad a una comunidad indígena dentro de un área protegida, sentando un precedente legal para futuras luchas de los pueblos indígenas por reclamar la propiedad de la tierra en América Latina y el mundo.

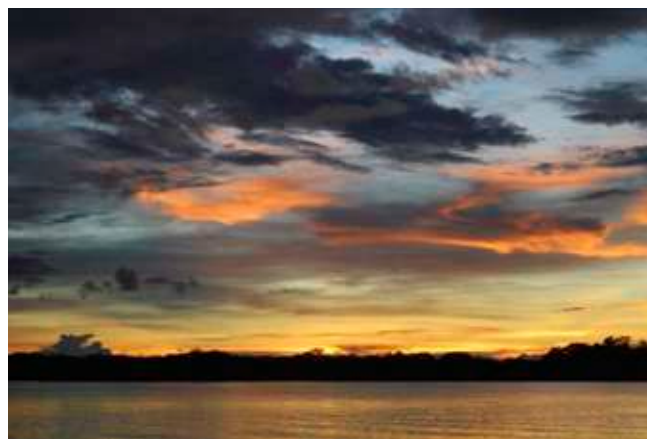
El contexto histórico que condujo a esta victoria es fundamental, pero el contexto actual es igualmente relevante. De hecho, durante 2023, Ecuador enfrentó desafíos en medio del escándalo del “*Gran Padrino*”, que condujo a la destitución del presidente Lasso y a las elecciones posteriores. En medio de la agitación política, Daniel Noboa ganó la segunda vuelta de octubre con el 51,83% de los votos. Sin embargo, su ascenso coincidió con un estado de emergencia debido a la escalada de violencia y problemas relacionados con las drogas. Además del ascenso al poder de Daniel Noboa, la victoria de los pueblos indígenas se logró justo antes de la Conferencia de las

Naciones Unidas sobre el Cambio Climático (COP28) en Dubai, enviando un fuerte mensaje dentro del país sobre el respeto a los derechos humanos, los derechos a la tierra y la propiedad como una solución clave a los problemas climáticos.

Ahora que tienen el título oficial de sus tierras, los Siekopai pueden ejercer una gestión sostenible de sus recursos naturales. Actualmente controlan sus tierras y el gobierno nacional debe respetar la capacidad de la comunidad para autodeterminar sus planes de gestión. Una vez que se establezca su plan de gestión, los Siekopai consultarán con el Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Agua para obtener cualquier asesoramiento técnico necesario.

Figura 4

Río de la Reserva de Producción de Fauna Cuyabeno al atardecer.



Nota. Fotografía tomada por el autor, 2017.

La preservación de áreas naturales protegidas es crucial para el bienestar ambiental y humano, y las comunidades indígenas desempeñan un papel fundamental debido a su profunda conexión con

la tierra y su conocimiento ecológico tradicional. Marcos internacionales como el Convenio 169 de la OIT y la Declaración de Río enfatizan la colaboración gubernamental con los pueblos indígenas para proteger y preservar sus entornos, reconociendo la importancia cultural y espiritual de su relación con la tierra. Estos acuerdos exigen la participación de las comunidades indígenas en la gestión y conservación de los recursos naturales, afirmando su papel en la gestión sostenible de la tierra y la preservación de la biodiversidad.

La Declaración de Río destaca la necesidad de incorporar el conocimiento indígena a la legislación nacional, proteger las tierras indígenas de actividades nocivas y desarrollar procedimientos de resolución de disputas sobre cuestiones de uso de la tierra. De manera similar, el Convenio sobre la Diversidad Biológica (CDB) subraya la importancia de las áreas protegidas para mantener hábitats clave, apoyar la biodiversidad, proporcionar medios de vida y contribuir a la seguridad alimentaria mundial y la mitigación del cambio climático. El CDB reconoce que las áreas protegidas bien gestionadas, regidas por mecanismos equitativos, generan importantes beneficios tanto para la biodiversidad como para el bienestar humano. Por lo tanto, respetar los derechos territoriales de los pueblos indígenas es

fundamental para una gestión eficaz de las tierras naturales, una gestión sostenible de los recursos y los esfuerzos de conservación.

Las prácticas de gestión indígena, perfeccionadas a lo largo de generaciones, ofrecen conocimientos valiosos sobre la conservación de la biodiversidad. La inclusión de las comunidades indígenas en la gestión ambiental está respaldada por marcos internacionales, que abogan por el reconocimiento de sus derechos y conocimientos. Su participación no es solo una cuestión de justicia, sino también de conservación efectiva, alineándose con los esfuerzos globales para combatir el cambio climático y promover el desarrollo sostenible. Reconocer a las comunidades indígenas como partes interesadas clave en la conservación del medio ambiente es vital para preservar la biodiversidad y garantizar un futuro saludable y productivo para todos.

Un relevante signo de interrogación sigue a la pregunta sobre el próximo paso en este camino de recuperación de la titularidad de la tierra. Razonablemente, la aspiración es que el pueblo Siekopai pueda ejercer su propiedad libre de injerencias, creando fuentes de beneficios y visibilidad para recuperar su legitimidad después de un pasado de despojo y violaciones de derechos, a pesar de la tensión política actual.

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SOBRE EL AUTOR



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Laura Corradi tiene una maestría en Cooperación Internacional para la Protección de los Derechos Humanos por la Universidad de Bolonia, con enfoque en la antropología económica de las poblaciones indígenas de América Latina. Ha vivido en varios países latinoamericanos, ha trabajado con comunidades Quichua, Cofàn y Siekopai en Ecuador y realizó su investigación de tesis de maestría sobre seis comunidades Mocoví en Argentina. Actualmente reside en Perú, donde trabaja con el Centro Amazónico de Antropología y Aplicación Práctica (CAAAP), centrándose en un proyecto de apoyo a las mujeres de los pueblos Awajún, Quichua y Shawi. Su trabajo se enfoca en fortalecer el liderazgo femenino, promover el empoderamiento y abordar los roles de la mujer, los conocimientos ancestrales, la violencia y los derechos de propiedad territorial.

La ecología humana Siekopai logra la victoria en derechos sobre la tierra

Por Laura Corradi, MA

Traducción al español por Yesenia Cortés

RESUMEN

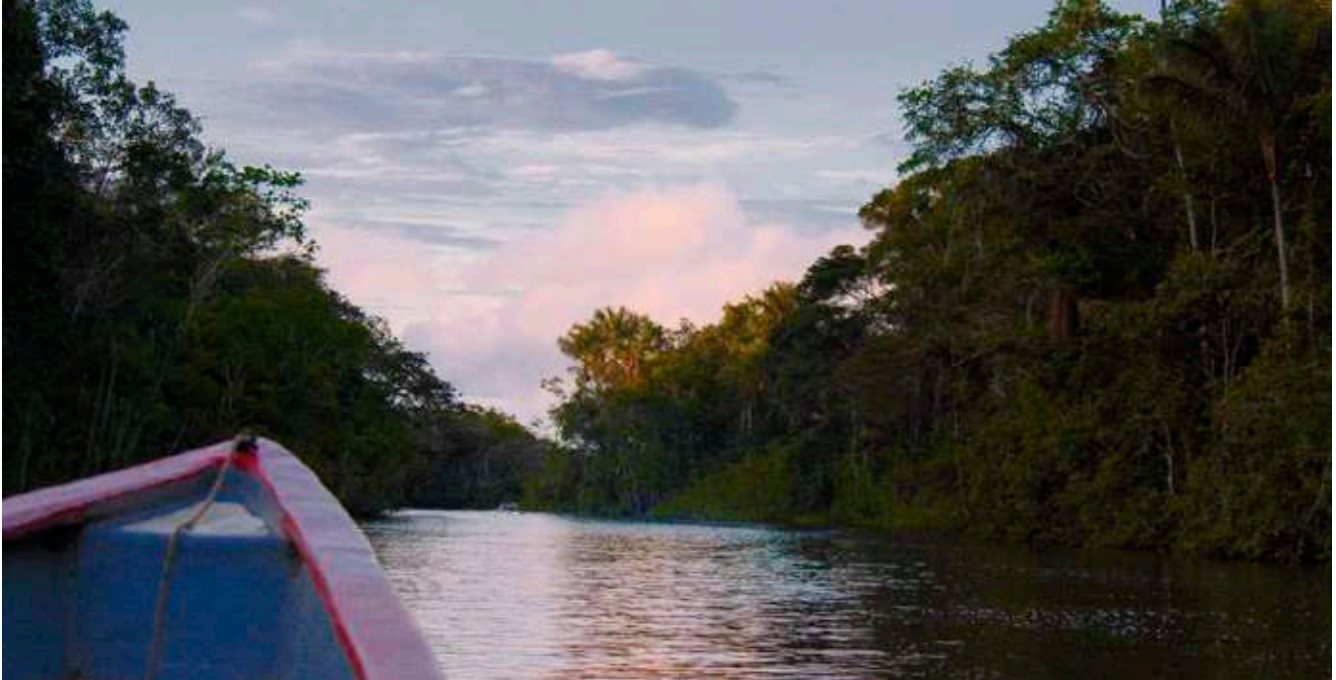
El 24 de noviembre de 2023, la población indígena Siekopai residente en la Amazonía ecuatoriana ganó una demanda por la titularidad de sus tierras a su Nación. Ecuador reconoció por primera vez en la historia la propiedad indígena de la tierra dentro de un área protegida. La decisión de la Corte Provincial de Sucumbíos también reconoce el valor del manejo de la tierra por parte de la población indígena, quienes, a través de su profundo conocimiento del lugar, el medio ambiente, los animales y los espíritus que la habitan, son los mejores guardianes de este espacio verde como un patrimonio de la humanidad.

Palabras clave: Población indígena Siekopai, Amazonia ecuatoriana, propiedad indígena de la tierra, área protegida, administración indígena, esfuerzos de conservación, autodeterminación indígena, avance ecológico, mecanismos internacionales, Consentimiento Libre, Previo e Informado, Convenio 169 de la OIT, Declaración de Río, gestión sostenible de recursos, justicia medioambiental, Ecuador, selva amazónica, derechos indígenas, derechos sobre la tierra, protección medioambiental

El 24 de noviembre de 2023, la Nación Siekopai¹ logró una victoria histórica en la región amazónica ecuatoriana conocida como Oriente. El tribunal ecuatoriano emitió un veredicto final ordenando la devolución de sus tierras ancestrales y una disculpa pública por la infracción de sus derechos territoriales. Este fallo significa un reconocimiento fundamental por parte del gobierno nacional ecuatoriano de

la importancia de las prácticas ancestrales como símbolo de conservación ambiental duradera y deliberada y de sostenibilidad ecológica. Esta decisión sienta un precedente legal y moral histórico y ejemplar para la Nación y los pueblos indígenas en todo el mundo, marcando el primer caso en el que una comunidad indígena obtiene títulos de propiedad de un territorio dentro de un área protegida.

¹ Nación Siekopai: su nombre significa “gente multicolor”, característica derivada de su vestimenta colorida. Su nombre también puede aparecer como Secoya, haciendo referencia a la misma Nación. Los Secoya son un grupo étnico indígena residente en la Amazonía ecuatoriana y Perú. La población de este pueblo se estima en alrededor de 297 individuos en Ecuador y aproximadamente 144 en Perú. Hablan la lengua secoya, que pertenece al grupo lingüístico tucano. Comparten un territorio cerca de los ríos Shushufindi, Aguarico y Cuyabeno con los Siona y, en ocasiones, se les considera un solo grupo indígena.

Figura 1*Río de la Reserva de Producción de Fauna Cuyabeno**Nota. Fotografía tomada por el autor, 2017.*

El discurso contemporáneo sobre cuestiones ambientales aborda con frecuencia temas como el cambio climático, la reducción de las emisiones de CO₂, la deforestación, la ganadería intensiva, la extracción de petróleo y la contaminación. Sin embargo, los debates sobre la conservación del medio ambiente a menudo pasan por alto los rápidos cambios que se producen en la vida cotidiana de las poblaciones indígenas como resultado de estos fenómenos. Esta supervisión es notable, dado el papel fundamental que desempeñan las comunidades indígenas en el mantenimiento del equilibrio ecológico y la promoción de prácticas sostenibles.

En la Amazonia, a menudo denominada el “pulmón del mundo”, el escenario actual, que incluye extracción de petróleo, nuevas colonizaciones, migraciones internas, turismo y división geopolítica, plantea un desafío importante para el área con mayor diversidad biológica del mundo. Sin embargo, las poblaciones indígenas, que han coexistido con el bosque y dependido de él durante generaciones, poseen un conocimiento incomparable de sus necesidades y dinámica.

Este artículo examina la victoria de la Nación Indígena Siekopai en la región amazónica

ecuatoriana, reclamando legitimidad sobre sus tierras ancestrales dentro de la Reserva de Producción de Fauna Cuyabeno. Se argumenta que las prácticas indígenas representan el único medio ecológicamente sostenible para la conservación de esta área, dada su vibrante biodiversidad y su valor como bien común para la humanidad. A través de este análisis, se destacan las implicaciones más amplias de reconocer y apoyar la gestión indígena en la conservación ambiental, enfatizando la necesidad de integrar el conocimiento tradicional con los esfuerzos de conservación contemporáneos.

Conservación de áreas protegidas: la ecología humana Siekopai

Los secoya, o siekopai, son un pueblo indígena amazónico que, entre 1500 y 2000, habitó la zona comprendida entre el río Aguarico y los cursos superiores de los ríos Napo y Putumayo. Hoy en día, se ubican en la región ecuatoriana de Sucumbíos y la región peruana de Loreto, pertenecientes a la familia lingüística tucano occidental. Su dispersión territorial implicó una alta movilidad y diversos intercambios entre grupos de parentesco, que apuntalan su cohesión social.

En el siglo XVII, los secoya se encontraron por primera vez con misioneros, funcionarios, soldados y encomenderos españoles, lo que llevó al establecimiento de reducciones indígenas por parte de los jesuitas. A principios del siglo XX, los secoya enfrentaron una mayor sedentarización debido a la expansión de la economía mercantil extractiva en el Amazonas, sobre todo durante

el auge del caucho, seguido de las actividades forestales y petroleras. Algunas familias respondieron huyendo a nuevas zonas dentro de su territorio.

La Guerra Ecuador-Perú de 1941 y los acuerdos de paz posteriores de 1998 restringieron significativamente la movilidad de Secoya, debido a la suspensión del libre tránsito y el aumento de los puestos de control militares a lo largo de la frontera. Se trazaron los límites entre los dos países, dividiendo en dos una Nación que había vivido a lo largo de la frontera. Esta Nación Indígena tuvo entonces dos nombres diferentes en función de sus nuevas residencias: Siekopai del lado ecuatoriano y Airo Pai del lado peruano, sin contacto entre ellos durante décadas (Rojas, 2007). La preocupación más apremiante compartida entre estos dos grupos fue, y sigue siendo, la lucha por reclamar el derecho a la propiedad ancestral de la tierra.

Desde mediados del siglo XX hasta la actualidad, los secoya han experimentado nuevas influencias religiosas de la Iglesia Evangélica a través del Instituto Lingüístico de Verano (ILV). En 1955, los misioneros del ILV se establecieron junto al río Cuyabeno para convertir a los Secoya y Siona, pero se marcharon después de que Ecuador expulsó al ILV en 1981. Además, a partir de 1970, las actividades petroleras de Texaco, seguida por la Occidental Exploration and Production Company (OXY) a partir de 1985, intensificaron la presión sobre el territorio Secoya y sus recursos, lo que lleva a la deforestación, la contaminación del agua y del aire y una reducción de la población de caza. (Rojas, 2007).

Debido a las características ecológicas únicas del territorio, en 1979 se estableció en Ecuador la Reserva de Producción de Fauna Cuyabeno. Esta área incluye Lagartococha en la provincia de Sucumbíos, tierra ancestral de la Nación Siekopai. En ese momento, la creación de áreas protegidas siguió un modelo estadounidense que establecía parques desprovistos de presencia humana para preservar la flora y la fauna vírgenes. Este enfoque priorizó la naturaleza, dejando de lado los derechos humanos de las poblaciones que viven en la zona, quienes fueron desplazadas y despojadas por la fuerza.

Figura 2

Cabaña en la Reserva de Producción de Fauna Cuyabeno



Nota. Fotografía tomada por el autor, 2017.

La historia de la Nación Siekopai, dividida por la frontera entre Ecuador y Perú, es una narrativa prolongada de luchas por el derecho a la tierra destinadas a legitimar la propiedad de sus territorios ancestrales con demandas continuas. La tierra conocida como Pë'këya², o Lagartococha, tiene especial importancia, ya que constituye

la frontera entre los dos países. Declarada zona intangible en 1999, se consideraba ilegal realizar allí cualquier actividad económica.

En 1979 se estableció en Ecuador la Reserva de Producción de Fauna Cuyabeno. De manera similar, en Perú, la Zona Reservada Güeppí fue creada en 1997, superponiendo gran parte del territorio Airo Pai. Su creación, impulsada por incentivos geopolíticos y ecológicos, no requirió el consentimiento de las poblaciones indígenas. Posteriormente, en 2003, estas mismas poblaciones propusieron el establecimiento de la Reserva Comunal Airo Pai y parte del Parque Nacional como territorio ancestral (Rojas, 2007), como se muestra en el siguiente mapa (Borbor, 2024).

Figura 3

Mapa de las áreas protegidas



Nota. Mapa: División de áreas protegidas entre Ecuador, Perú y Colombia (Panorama).

² Históricamente, se dice que el territorio ancestral o tradicional de los Siekopai se extendía entre los ríos Putumayo y Napo (Vickers, 1989), que incluía Pëkë'ya, también conocida como Lagartococha, hoy zona fronteriza entre Ecuador y Perú.

Inicialmente, el concepto de creación de parques naturales estaba arraigado en la división dicotómica entre naturaleza y cultura, así como entre biodiversidad y diversidad cultural, una noción típica de la sociedad occidental (Descola y Palsson, 1996). De hecho, la “naturaleza” puede entenderse como el conjunto de objetos neutros transformados en un ambiente a través de la interpretación cultural de individuos o grupos sociales, afirmando que el ambiente es una construcción cultural de la naturaleza (Milton, 1997). Así, el territorio es visto como una “construcción social” (Sack, 1986), definida por las acciones de quienes viven y se mueven en él.

Según la teoría de la “Nueva Ecología” (Zimmerer, 2000), la gestión ambiental está relacionada con la conservación porque la naturaleza tiende a un estado de equilibrio, y cualquier devastación resultante de la presencia humana debe considerarse dentro del contexto de la conservación. De esta manera, los espacios adquieren sentido cuando tienen significado cultural y reflejan las relaciones de poder de un grupo específico. En la gestión de parques nacionales, estas relaciones de poder están estrechamente ligadas a los objetivos políticos y económicos del Estado.

Al principio, las poblaciones indígenas no participaban directamente en la gestión de las áreas protegidas; más tarde se reconoció su verdadero potencial. Inicialmente, se estableció un acuerdo de cogestión con las autoridades del parque, sujeto a lo que Agrawal (2005) describe como “ambientalismo disciplinario”

o “eco-gubernamentalidad”: el conjunto de prácticas y representaciones ambientales, ya sean locales, nacionales o transnacionales, que interactúan con actores sociales directos para pensar y comportarse de maneras específicas en relación con objetivos ambientales como el desarrollo sostenible, la seguridad ambiental, la conservación de la biodiversidad y el acceso a los recursos (Ulloa, 2005).

Robbins (2004) enfatiza una premisa básica que subyace a la creación de tales espacios protegidos: que la naturaleza debe preservarse libre de cualquier interferencia humana, creando una “territorialización de la conservación”. Esto implica la institucionalización de actos y conocimientos a través de los cuales el poder estatal establece una relación entre la población y un espacio geográfico, imponiendo identidades permitidas y prohibidas, así como formas específicas de acción e inacción.

El fortalecimiento del movimiento indígena de autodeterminación en todo el mundo, dentro del marco del multiculturalismo, ha jugado un papel central en la configuración del discurso del ambientalismo. Esta representación ha sido desarrollada estratégicamente por las propias organizaciones indígenas como un medio para negociar acuerdos que mejoren su calidad de vida. Dado que la identidad es un proceso relacional y dinámico, nuevas identidades ecológicas están surgiendo en el ámbito de la eco-gubernamentalidad, distinguiendo a las poblaciones indígenas como nativos ecológicos (Ulloa, 2004).

Ulloa (2005) y Castro (2008) sostienen que con frecuencia, la indigeneidad se describe tanto como salvaje, como ecológica. Castro (2008) introduce el concepto de una “nueva identidad ecológica” que retrata a los pueblos indígenas como guardianes del medio ambiente y conocedores de cómo proteger el planeta de los desastres globales. Sin embargo, Castro señala que esta categorización, si bien aparentemente los valora como poseedores de un conocimiento superior, perpetúa la imagen del “buen salvaje” que vive en armonía con la naturaleza.

En el contexto del avance ecológico, la relación entre identidad, cultura y territorio ha sido un punto focal para los defensores de los estudios de desarrollo, quienes ven el conocimiento local como esencial para ofrecer una “alternativa” al desarrollo capitalista y la globalización (Molano, 2006). Miraglia (2007) enfatiza que el desarrollo sostenible revela la tensión actual entre el crecimiento económico y la preservación del medio ambiente. Este concepto, tal como se define en el informe de 1987 de la Comisión Mundial sobre Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo de las Naciones Unidas, “Nuestro futuro común”, es el desarrollo que “satisface las necesidades del presente sin comprometer la capacidad de las generaciones futuras para satisfacer sus propias necesidades”.

Considerando la profunda interrelación entre los humanos y la naturaleza, es imperativo hacer referencia a un principio de conservación contemporáneo: *Kawsak Sacha* (Bosque Viviente), defendido por grupos indígenas como la comunidad Kichwa Sarayaku. Este principio

promueve la protección del patrimonio natural y cultural, considerando al bosque un ser vivo con derechos: “la protección del patrimonio natural y cultural existente en las tierras y territorios indígenas a través de una nueva construcción jurídica de conservación proveniente de la cosmovisión de los pueblos indígenas. Esta construcción implica que el Bosque Viviente o *Kawsak Sacha* es considerado un sujeto de derechos, dotado de vida” (Sarayaku, 2018).

Este concepto está íntimamente ligado al *buen vivir*, que significa una convivencia armoniosa de todas las formas de vida. Sin embargo, el Estado suele ignorar la conexión espiritual entre los pueblos indígenas y la naturaleza. Empero, nadie podría implementar mejor políticas de conservación y desarrollar sustentablemente estas áreas que las poblaciones indígenas nativas a ellas, Victoria: La identidad colectiva que emerge de la conexión con la tierra.

Desde 1995, la Nación Siekopai ha apelado activamente al Estado ecuatoriano para la adjudicación oficial de estas tierras, exigiendo no solo la devolución de sus territorios, sino también una disculpa pública por la violación de sus derechos territoriales colectivos. Durante años, estos derechos han sido impugnados, pero todas las solicitudes han sido bloqueadas sistemáticamente.

Además, es esencial reconocer que los pueblos indígenas dependen en gran medida de los recursos naturales de sus entornos. Estos grupos típicamente han co-evolucionado en relativa armonía con su entorno natural, que

frecuentemente son áreas remotas con abundante biodiversidad. En consecuencia, estas regiones suelen ser designadas como parques nacionales y otras áreas protegidas (Nepal, 1999).

Para los Siekopai, la relación con la tierra es profundamente espiritual y no una mera cuestión de demarcación geográfica. Existe una conexión íntima entre los seres humanos y el entorno natural. Como expresa Ingold (1986): “La tierra es más una configuración a nivel energético de tierra y aire, agua y minerales; animales y plantas, así como personas; en contraste con una superficie delimitada por líneas en un mapa”.

Para las poblaciones indígenas, las fronteras no tienen el mismo significado que para el Estado; más bien, se perciben como mecanismos de control o limitación que desafían su autonomía, y usufructo de los recursos naturales. Por lo tanto, es esencial reconocer que la relación entre los diversos actores puede ser conflictiva debido a perspectivas ontológicas muy diferentes. Además, hay que reconocer que tales procesos son lentos y delicados, dada su importancia económica, ecológica y sociocultural.

Vivir en esta zona fronteriza, que Kroijer (2024) describe como una “zona de transición”, implica comprometerse con la transformabilidad inherente a la concepción indígena de la tierra. Esta concepción está constituida por una multiplicidad de seres, prácticas y objetos que no se ajustan a las nociones euroamericanas de individualidad.

La Reserva de Producción de Fauna Cuyabeno es un ejemplo de acuerdo para el manejo de

áreas protegidas entre los pueblos indígenas que las habitan y el estado en el que se ubican. Muchos pueblos, como los Siona, Cofán y Siekopai, encuentran en este modelo una forma de sostenibilidad ambiental que se traduce en beneficios en cuanto a la disponibilidad de recursos naturales. Estos acuerdos funcionan cuando la gente depende del bosque y hay una baja densidad de población dentro del área protegida, creando un pequeño paraíso verde (FAO, 2007).

De cara al futuro, los derechos de propiedad de las tierras ancestrales están protegidos constitucionalmente en Ecuador, por lo que si el ministerio no concede estos derechos, los Siekopai pueden emprender acciones legales. Este proceso legal no tiene precedentes en el país, lo que deja inciertos muchos aspectos de la gestión de la tierra. En Ecuador, la doctrina del consentimiento previo e informado no es vinculante, lo que significa que incluso si una comunidad se opone a los proyectos extractivos, dichos proyectos aún pueden continuar. Esta situación subraya las complejidades que rodean el principio de Consentimiento Libre, Previo, e Informado (CLPI).

El CLPI es fundamental para los derechos de participación establecidos en la Constitución de Ecuador de 2008, el Convenio 169 de la Organización Internacional del Trabajo y la Declaración de las Naciones Unidas sobre los Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas. La Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos ha profundizado en el CLPI, enfatizando la necesidad de respetar las cosmovisiones y decisiones

indígenas cuando sus derechos fundamentales están involucrados, como se demostró en el histórico caso *Sarayaku vs. Ecuador* (IHRC, 2009). Si bien el gobierno ecuatoriano tiene la autoridad para desarrollar políticas públicas sobre extracción de minerales, el CLPI a menudo no es vinculante, especialmente con una declaración previa de interés nacional. Esto permite al Estado proceder con actividades extractivas sin necesariamente obtener el consentimiento de la comunidad, lo que socava la intención del principio (Condolo Acaro et al., 2022).

Más allá de las interpretaciones legales, el CLPI desafía los modelos políticos capitalistas y diversas formas democráticas al actuar como un mecanismo de democracia directa y soberanía social sobre el estado. En consecuencia, se percibe como una amenaza a la autoridad estatal y a menudo se elude o manipula para reforzar el control estatal, debilitando a sus defensores (Simbaña, 2012). La naturaleza no vinculante del CLPI tiene graves consecuencias para los derechos constitucionales y el bienestar de las comunidades afectadas. El CLPI tiene como objetivo garantizar negociaciones justas entre las industrias extractivas y las Naciones indígenas, estableciendo igualdad política y proporcionando un marco para la gestión sostenible de los recursos (Ryser, 2023).

Reconstrucción de una Nación: El Camino de la Nación Siekopai hacia la Continuidad Cultural

Reocupar estos lugares no se trata de auto-exotización ni de reafirmación de los ancestros

(Kroijer, 2024); más bien, conlleva el deseo de regresar a los orígenes, reviviendo formas de vida pasadas, historias familiares y relaciones con los seres espirituales del bosque, creando en última instancia un espacio armonioso para la existencia futura. Ulloa (2005) sostiene que en los procesos de construcción de “identidades verdes”, los pueblos indígenas “utilizan” su identidad como una estrategia performativa para establecer relaciones con el Estado y como una estrategia que les permite “manipular” su situación histórica y cultural para luchar por intereses políticos a nivel nacional e internacional.

La victoria, por lo tanto, abarca no solo la adquisición de títulos de propiedad, sino también una redención identitaria-cultural que reconozca el valor intrínseco de este pueblo y el profundo significado de su relación con la naturaleza y la tierra ancestral.

La guerra entre Ecuador y Perú, que comenzó en 1941 y terminó definitivamente con los acuerdos de paz de 1998, dividió a una Nación en dos fronteras. Esta división llevó a las poblaciones a emprender una iniciativa para reconstruir su Nación y volver a ser un solo pueblo. El primer encuentro tuvo lugar en 1999, seguido de uno segundo en 2001, con el objetivo de compartir experiencias colectivas y sentar las bases de proyectos futuros de todo el grupo, teniendo como piedra angular las reivindicaciones territoriales.

Para asegurar su continuidad cultural, los Siekopai escribieron un documento titulado “Reunificación, Revalorización Cultural y

Continuidad del Pueblo Siekopai” para continuar su historia cultural, desarrollar sus capacidades de autodeterminación y mejorar sus condiciones de vida. Este proyecto, presentado a la Comisión Europea bajo la “Iniciativa Europea para la Democracia y los Derechos Humanos”, hacía hincapié en “combatir el racismo, la xenofobia y la discriminación contra las minorías étnicas y los pueblos indígenas” y fue aprobado en el primer trimestre de 2003 (Rojas, 2007).

Conclusión

El 24 de noviembre de 2023 se logró una “nueva” victoria de los Siekopai. Pero, ¿por qué es novedosa? La frescura del veredicto de la Corte Provincial de Sucumbíos radica en el hecho de que, por primera vez, el gobierno ecuatoriano otorgó un título de propiedad a una comunidad indígena dentro de un área protegida, sentando un precedente legal para futuras luchas de los pueblos indígenas por reclamar la propiedad de la tierra en América Latina y el mundo.

El contexto histórico que condujo a esta victoria es fundamental, pero el contexto actual es igualmente relevante. De hecho, durante 2023, Ecuador enfrentó desafíos en medio del escándalo del “Gran Padrino”, que condujo a la destitución del presidente Lasso y a las elecciones posteriores. En medio de la agitación política, Daniel Noboa ganó la segunda vuelta de octubre con el 51,83% de los votos. Sin embargo, su ascenso coincidió con un estado de emergencia debido a la escalada de violencia y problemas relacionados con las drogas. Además del ascenso al poder de Daniel Noboa, la victoria de los pueblos indígenas se logró justo antes de la Conferencia de las

Naciones Unidas sobre el Cambio Climático (COP28) en Dubai, enviando un fuerte mensaje dentro del país sobre el respeto a los derechos humanos, los derechos a la tierra y la propiedad como una solución clave a los problemas climáticos.

Ahora que tienen el título oficial de sus tierras, los Siekopai pueden ejercer una gestión sostenible de sus recursos naturales. Actualmente controlan sus tierras y el gobierno nacional debe respetar la capacidad de la comunidad para autodeterminar sus planes de gestión. Una vez que se establezca su plan de gestión, los Siekopai consultarán con el Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Agua para obtener cualquier asesoramiento técnico necesario.

Figura 4

Río de la Reserva de Producción de Fauna Cuyabeno al atardecer.



Nota. Fotografía tomada por el autor, 2017.

La preservación de áreas naturales protegidas es crucial para el bienestar ambiental y humano, y las comunidades indígenas desempeñan un papel fundamental debido a su profunda conexión con

la tierra y su conocimiento ecológico tradicional. Marcos internacionales como el Convenio 169 de la OIT y la Declaración de Río enfatizan la colaboración gubernamental con los pueblos indígenas para proteger y preservar sus entornos, reconociendo la importancia cultural y espiritual de su relación con la tierra. Estos acuerdos exigen la participación de las comunidades indígenas en la gestión y conservación de los recursos naturales, afirmando su papel en la gestión sostenible de la tierra y la preservación de la biodiversidad.

La Declaración de Río destaca la necesidad de incorporar el conocimiento indígena a la legislación nacional, proteger las tierras indígenas de actividades nocivas y desarrollar procedimientos de resolución de disputas sobre cuestiones de uso de la tierra. De manera similar, el Convenio sobre la Diversidad Biológica (CDB) subraya la importancia de las áreas protegidas para mantener hábitats clave, apoyar la biodiversidad, proporcionar medios de vida y contribuir a la seguridad alimentaria mundial y la mitigación del cambio climático. El CDB reconoce que las áreas protegidas bien gestionadas, regidas por mecanismos equitativos, generan importantes beneficios tanto para la biodiversidad como para el bienestar humano. Por lo tanto, respetar los derechos territoriales de los pueblos indígenas es

fundamental para una gestión eficaz de las tierras naturales, una gestión sostenible de los recursos y los esfuerzos de conservación.

Las prácticas de gestión indígena, perfeccionadas a lo largo de generaciones, ofrecen conocimientos valiosos sobre la conservación de la biodiversidad. La inclusión de las comunidades indígenas en la gestión ambiental está respaldada por marcos internacionales, que abogan por el reconocimiento de sus derechos y conocimientos. Su participación no es solo una cuestión de justicia, sino también de conservación efectiva, alineándose con los esfuerzos globales para combatir el cambio climático y promover el desarrollo sostenible. Reconocer a las comunidades indígenas como partes interesadas clave en la conservación del medio ambiente es vital para preservar la biodiversidad y garantizar un futuro saludable y productivo para todos.

Un relevante signo de interrogación sigue a la pregunta sobre el próximo paso en este camino de recuperación de la titularidad de la tierra. Razonablemente, la aspiración es que el pueblo Siekopai pueda ejercer su propiedad libre de injerencias, creando fuentes de beneficios y visibilidad para recuperar su legitimidad después de un pasado de despojo y violaciones de derechos, a pesar de la tensión política actual.

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Indigenous Food Sovereignty

Literature Review

By Robert M. Hansell

ABSTRACT

Indigenous peoples have practiced food systems intertwined with the plants, animals, lands, and waters around them for thousands of years. These connections have frequently been severed by colonialism, producing devastating effects on Indigenous health, culture, and sovereignty. In the face of this devastation, the reflourishing of Indigenous food sovereignty constitutes a critical form of resistance. This paper provides a broad review of the academic literature on Indigenous food sovereignty, analyzing themes and case studies. This paper argues that 5 themes (health, law and the state, social perceptions of food, gender, and free trade) reflect helpful entry points for understanding this multidimensional topic. The case studies detail important aspects of food sovereignty, such as data ownership, anticolonial resistance, relationality, and seed saving. First, background on traditional food systems is given, followed by an exploration of food sovereignty, Indigenous food sovereignty, and food security in common literature. Five themes are used to ground Indigenous food sovereignty in key debates and challenges. Using the five case studies, this review aims to give the reader a sense of the inherently political nature of food systems in the experiences of Indigenous peoples by touching on a wide set of illustrative texts, examples, and cases.

Keywords: Indigenous food sovereignty, Indigenous peoples, food systems, colonialism, traditional food systems, health, law, social perceptions, free trade, data ownership, anticolonial resistance, seed saving, food security, Indigenous health, cultural sovereignty, political nature of food systems, academic literature

Introduction

Traditional foods are central to culture and self-determination for Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples have practiced food systems intertwined with the plants, animals, lands, and waters around them for thousands of years. The essential link between Indigenous cultures and the environments they are a part of is exemplified in the names of peoples such as the Tsleil-Waututh Nation, who are called the People of

the Inlet, and the Anishinabe, who are called the People of the Wild Rice. These connections with Lands have frequently been severed by colonialism, producing devastating effects on Indigenous health, culture, and sovereignty. In the face of this devastation, the reflourishing of Indigenous food sovereignty constitutes a critical form of resistance to colonial violence.

This paper provides a broad review of the academic literature on Indigenous food

sovereignty, analyzing themes and case studies. I argue that 5 themes—health, law and the state, social perceptions of food, gender, and free trade—serve as valuable entry points for understanding this multifaceted issue. These were identified by first analyzing recurrent themes across 39 reviewed texts from the literature. The first theme selected was “health,” both for its prominence in the literature and its importance in articulating food systems as both sites of colonial violence and anticolonial resistance. Then, “free trade” and “law and the state” were selected to bring forth issues of power across different scales (i.e., international forms of power in “free trade” and state and local forms of power in “law and the state”). Finally, “gender” and “social perceptions of food” were selected to highlight the relationship between ideational factors and material conditions of food sovereignty.

The case studies were chosen to illuminate specific practices and challenges that Indigenous peoples encounter and use around the core themes of food sovereignty. The RSAFG case was chosen for its links to health and healing and for its articulation of gathering and owning data about plants as a decolonial act. The Traditional Foods of Puget Sound Project case was included because it directly illustrates legal and practical challenges facing tribes in efforts to restore traditional foods. The Urban Indigenous Food Sovereignty in Canada case was selected because urban spaces emphasize the importance of relationality and social networks for maintaining food sovereignty in the face of displacement, particularly as approximately half of First Nations Peoples now live in cities in Canada. Braiding the

Sacred shows how seeds embody the survivance of Native cultures. This is demonstrated through the role of education, traditional knowledge restoration, and inter-tribal resource-sharing. Finally, Sharaka demonstrates the centrality of “the local” and the “authentic” in Indigenous food sovereignty efforts, especially in a context where the settler-colonial occupation is going to great lengths to deny and erase the existence of Indigenous culture and population in Palestine.

Before engaging with each of these case studies, I start with a background on traditional food systems and their disruption, followed by establishing how food sovereignty, Indigenous food sovereignty, and food security differ in the literature. Then, I explore the 5 themes to place Indigenous food sovereignty in key debates and challenges and to cover different analytical approaches. Finally, I ground these themes in practice by detailing 5 case studies. This review aims to give the reader a sense of the inherently political nature of food systems in the experiences of Indigenous peoples by touching on a wide set of illustrative texts, examples, and cases that emphasize its multi-dimensionality.

Background

Traditional foods are critical to Indigenous peoples’ physical and cultural survival worldwide. Research has consistently shown that Indigenous peoples who consume traditional foods are physically and mentally healthier, experience greater food security, and have more connection with their cultures (Bersamin et al., 2008; Schultz, 1999; Smith et al., 2019; Walch and Bersamin, 2019, cited in Land et al., 2021).

Traditional foodways serve as an important infrastructure for passing cultural and traditional knowledge down through generations (Drugova, Curtis, and Kim 2022, cited in Gutierrez, Kaloostian, and Redvers, 2023), making them essential to the survivance of Native cultures.

While self-determination over food systems is of particular importance for Indigenous peoples, it is a universal and vital political goal. In the face of interrelated global food crises, the climate crisis, and extractivism driven by global capitalism, asserting popular determination over food systems has never been more critical. Agricultural production and food distribution play an immense role in greenhouse gas emissions (as much as 34% globally) and land-use conversion (Ritchie, 2021). It is the colonial and capitalist model of industrial agriculture that is driving the vast majority of these emissions, demonstrating both the unsustainability of this model as well as the need to elaborate Indigenous-led solutions that are based on traditional ecological knowledge systems with a more sustainable ontology of the human-environment connection.

Indigenous knowledge systems about food production, based on a fundamentally different worldview than colonial epistemologies, which see a disconnect between humans and “nature,” have been repeatedly subjugated and erased by colonial processes. Settler colonialism has devastated Indigenous food systems. As a practice, structure, and logic, settler colonialism consistently entails the weaponization of food against Native peoples as a tool of genocide and a mechanism of colonial power. Burnett, Hay, and Chambers (2016) demonstrate how North

American settler governments have intentionally and systematically imposed hunger, malnutrition, and food insecurity in order “to erase and replace Indigenous peoples and cultures” (cited in McKinley and Jernigan, 2023). This form of colonial violence transcends geographic and temporal boundaries: food has been weaponized throughout Israel’s occupation of Palestine (Abu Awwad, 2016; Haddad, 2024; Meneley, 2014) and by the settler colonial state of Australia (Fazzino, 2019).

A common technique colonizers use to disrupt traditional foodways is imposing bans on traditional foods. Amaranth is a staple food for Aztec people and other groups in Mesoamerica. It is a crucial source of protein and amino acids and, beyond its nutritional value, is a cultural centerpiece with immense spiritual importance (Siegal, 2022). The amaranth plant was used in celebrations of Huītzilōpōchtli, the god of the sun and war (Siegal, 2022). Seeing this spiritual importance as a threat to the spread of Christianity, Spanish colonizers banned amaranth and punished Aztecs for saving amaranth seeds (Siegal, 2022). However, through covert acts of resistance, Indigenous farmers secretly saved and cultivated amaranth seeds, allowing amaranth to remain a prominent food today (Siegal, 2022). Likewise, in Palestine, foraging for the culturally important za’atar, ‘akkoub, and miramiyyeh plants was made a criminal offense by the Israeli state beginning in 1977 under the paradigm of nature conservation (Snaije, 2022). This was despite a lack of evidence that the foraging practices of Palestinians were harming the ecosystem. In 2019, Palestinian human rights

lawyer Rabea Eghbariah challenged the ban, arguing that it went deeper than “protecting nature” and instead was part of the ongoing dispossession of Palestinians from their land and cultural practices (Snaije, 2022). As a result, the ban was modified to allow a small amount of edible plants to be collected.

Colonizers have also banned ceremonial practices associated with food in order to disrupt traditional foodways. In Canada, between 1885 and 1951, Indigenous ceremonies known as the Potlatch were prohibited by a federal ban (Noakes, 2023). While the specific forms of Potlatch ceremonies vary by Nation and clan, they are usually centered around a feast alongside other cultural practices such as ceremonial dancing. The Potlatch is important for wealth redistribution, governance, reinforcing solidarity, and celebrating important events (Noakes, 2023). The ban resulted not only in disruption to these

Figure 1
Amaranth



Note. Photo by Hardyplants (2014). *Amaranthus* flowering. 30 March 2014. In the public domain.

Figure 2
Potlatch Ceremony



Note. Photo by Pillsbury, A. C. (1898) *Dancers at Klukwan Potlatch ceremony, Alaska, October 14, 1898*. In the public domain.

feasts and the material and social exchanges and practices that accompanied them but also in the confiscation of important cultural objects. There are also adverse social impacts, including a lingering patriarchal culture resulting from colonial influence. When the ban was imposed, the Potlatch had to be practiced in secret, so men would tell federal “Indian agents” that they were going hunting and then practice the Potlatch in secret (Monkman, 2017). Women, however, could not use this same excuse, leading to the Potlatch being celebrated with only men present (Monkman, 2017). After decades of this pattern, the Potlatch became a male-centric practice, which has marginalized the participation and role of women.

In the face of multi-pronged attacks on their food sovereignty, Indigenous peoples have used the reflourishing of traditional foodways as a site

of resistance. Projects that restore the traditional foods and medicinal practices of Indigenous peoples embody the practice of Indigenous food sovereignty. I will define the term Indigenous food sovereignty in the next section, wherein I establish distinctions between food security, food sovereignty, and Indigenous food sovereignty.

Disentangling Food Security, Food Sovereignty, and Indigenous Food Sovereignty

In the following section, I will engage with the literature that defines and distinguishes between three terms used in food politics: food security, food sovereignty, and Indigenous food sovereignty. I argue Indigenous food sovereignty is a distinct concept due to its incorporation of Indigenous knowledge about relationality and reciprocity and its expansion beyond the legal and right-based approaches that constitute the (non-Indigenous) food sovereignty approach.

Food Security

Readers have likely encountered the term “food security” before, which the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines as “access by all peoples at all times to *enough* food for an active, healthy life [emphasis added]” (Maudrie et al., 2023, p. 1076). Following this definition, food security policies tend to focus on the *quantity* and *availability* of food. However, this can come at the expense of considering the nutritious or cultural *quality* of food. Ultimately, it is not enough to have access to sufficient quantities of food; that food must also be culturally appropriate and healthy.

Food security’s narrow focus on access eludes how communities might control the wider social and political conditions that shape that access. After all, one can be “food secure in a prison[,] where one might continually *access* safe and nutritious food, yet remain fundamentally disempowered over the process and politics of the food’s production, consumption, and distribution” (Patel, 2012, p. 1). This is the key limitation of food security: its compatibility with dependency and, therefore, its incompatibility with self-determination. It is thus an inadequate framework for addressing the food system concerns of Indigenous peoples, for whom, like any population, self-determination is paramount.

Food Sovereignty

The limitations of food security contributed to the rise of alternative frameworks like food sovereignty. As its name suggests, food sovereignty differs from food security in its emphasis on a peoples’ expanded parameters of control and determination over food systems. Food sovereignty was popularized by the international grassroots peasant movement La Vía Campesina (LVC) at the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome, Italy. The most popular definition of the term comes from the Nyéléni Declaration, which asserts that “food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems” (*Declaration of Nyéléni, 2007*). This illustrates food sovereignty’s expanded focus, as compared with food security, which is evident

in its inclusion of concerns such as ecological sustainability, the cultural nature of food, and the importance of self-definition. However, while it is a more expansive category, food sovereignty is not necessarily incompatible with food security. As Edelman (2014, cited in Trauger, 2014) shows, the food sovereignty approach is sometimes positioned purely *against* food security, but elsewhere, it is positioned as a means of *achieving* it.

In either case, what makes food sovereignty unique is its radical challenge to neoliberalism's impact on the global food system. Beginning in the early 1990s, the global food system came to be dominated by the notion that food should be determined as a market relation (rather than an inherent right). Under this neoliberal logic, the "corporate food regime shifted the locus of control for food security away from the nation-state to the world market" (Kaur Plahe, Hawkes, and Ponnampereuma, 2013, p. 309). This shift was supported by the United States, which used its hegemonic position in the 1993 Uruguay Round of World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations to promote the power of US agribusiness firms in the global food system (Kaur Plahe, Hawkes, and Ponnampereuma, 2013, p. 309). This was part of the broader era of neoliberalism, which drove the retreat of states and the expanded power of multinational corporations as actors in trade and development. Food sovereignty movements like LVC partly emerged as a response to this global shift, aiming to resecure the support of nation-states for small, Indigenous, and peasant producers who were being displaced by multinationals. Food sovereignty movements

reframed being self-determined, small food producers as a right that could be protected by the laws of states. Since its popularization in the 1990s, food sovereignty has become a widespread movement and term, leading some to argue that it has become too all-encompassing, while others point to how its broadness means a variety of actors can contribute to the movement (Portman, 2018; Bellinger and Fakhri, 2013).

Indigenous Food Sovereignty

Food sovereignty resonates with Indigenous peoples by emphasizing self-determination over food systems (Huambachano, 2019, p. 1). Despite this resonance, Indigenous scholars have demonstrated that *Indigenous* food sovereignty takes the concept in a new direction, expanding it beyond legal and rights-based approaches. Indigenous food sovereignty does this by incorporating relationality, reciprocity, and place. Hoover and Miheesuah (2019, p. 11) argue that "Indigenous food sovereignty places primacy on [...] sacred responsibilities and connections to land, culture, relationships, spirituality, and ancestral peoples." Indigenous food sovereignty can, therefore, be understood as a separate concept from food sovereignty due to its embeddedness in worldviews articulated by Indigenous peoples, which understand the place of humans in their food systems differently than other non-Indigenous food sovereignty discourses. As Maudrie et al. (2023, p. 1075) have shown in their research, Indigenous food sovereignty (IFS):

is a holistic approach to food that incorporates values of relationality,

reciprocity, and relationships. Fundamental differences exist between food security and food sovereignty, yet dominant society often reduces IFS as a solution to food security, rather than an entirely different food system that is predicated on values that contrast with that of dominant society” (2023, p. 1075).

The distinctions between food sovereignty and Indigenous food sovereignty and between food security and these concepts are essential to understand because they reveal the unique nature of Indigenous food sovereignty. In the following section, I explore the literature on Indigenous food sovereignty through 5 thematic entry points, selected for their prominence in the literature and their capacity to highlight important elements of these concepts.

Core Themes in the Literature

Theme 1: Health

The necessity of food sovereignty for Indigenous peoples' health is an omnipresent theme in the literature. The essence of the link between harvesting, preparing, and consuming traditional foods and being able to live healthy lives is encapsulated in the dictum “nature cures” (Korn, 2023); this phrase refers to the longstanding practice of using products from one's natural environment to ward off illnesses, eat a healthy diet, and cure ailments.

Traditional foods are critical to Indigenous peoples' health in several ways. Firstly, they are important in maintaining physical health and avoiding the diet-related illnesses that

have become prevalent among Indigenous communities as a result of colonial disruption to their foodways (such as bans on amaranth or the Potlatch, detailed above). Burnett, Hay, and Chambers (2016) suggest that imposing malnutrition on Indigenous peoples is a core settler colonial strategy to eradicate Native people. In North America, many Indigenous populations, after being forced onto reservations, were made dependent on commodity foods and government food aid programs. Research has consistently demonstrated that Indigenous families who are more reliant on commodity foods (as opposed to those with greater access to traditional foods) experience higher rates of diseases like diabetes (McKinley and Jernigan, 2023; Krohn and Segrest, 2008, p. o). This has been partly due to the impacts on the body of the rapid diet transitions that followed assimilation policies (such as the abduction of Native American youth to ‘boarding schools’).

The rapid diet transition from traditional to introduced foods has been characterized as “nutrition trauma,” which is defined as “the disruption in access to endemic, natural food resources due to overwhelming forces that make inaccessible foods that are bio-culturally and biochemically suited to healthy digestion and nutrient utilization” (Korn, 2023). It is important to understand the causes of nutrition trauma as political rather than natural. Dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands results in loss of access to their food systems, which in turn harms their nutritional well-being. The external forces of market expansion of commodity foods into Indigenous communities

“overwhelm the capacity of the local Indigenous peoples to digest and metabolize these new foods, which often cause conditions that were unknown or rare before the colonial process” (Korn, 2023). By harming the physical health of Indigenous peoples, the erosion of traditional foodways harms their self-determination. Some argue this represents cultural genocide (Ryser, Marchand, and Parker, 2020) due to food and water constituting the “second pillar” of culture, following language. The reciprocity between the Land, the food, and the survival of cultures is evident in the base word *túm* in *nsexlein*, a Salish language, which means ‘mother,’ being part of the word *túm_x(w)lax(w)*, meaning ‘the land in all its diversity’ (Ryser, Marchand, and Parker, 2020). Thus, the Land is the mother, which supplies the sustenance that keeps culture alive. When the land is taken away or polluted, the culture will struggle to survive.

Traditional foods are central to the cultural health of Indigenous peoples. In many Indigenous cultures, such as those of the Puget Sound region of the northwest United States and southwest Canada, food is “a living part of the culture” (Krohn and Segrest, 2006, p. 0). The plants, animals, Land, water, and skies of a nation’s territory are integral not only to its food systems but also to its knowledge systems, ceremonial and cultural practices, and broader understandings of the world. In Māori understandings of the world, Papatūānuku, the Earth Mother, is a sacred space where “all human and non-human kin...flourish within a symbiotic and nurturing environment” (Huambachano, 2019, p. 3). By harming traditional foods, whether through contamination, dispossession, deforestation, legal

prohibition, or other methods, the overarching network and personhood of Papatūānuku is damaged, and along with it, the culture for whom its survival is integral. Additionally, harvesting, preparing, and consuming traditional foods are vital to culture and provide a forum for elders to transfer cultural knowledge to younger generations. Impeding these harvesting practices stops this intergenerational cultural knowledge transfer as well.

Traditional foods are also critical for the mental health of Indigenous peoples. The mental health of Indigenous peoples is a vital area of concern, given the high rates of suicide and substance abuse experienced by Indigenous peoples in the United States (Polcano, 2022) and elsewhere. The activities associated with the practice of Indigenous food sovereignty, such as gardening, communal cooking, food preparation, foraging, hunting, and connecting with Land, are all helpful in building relationships that facilitate positive mental health (Jernigan et al., 2023; Jonasson et al., 2019). Indigenous people may also be displaced, which occurs as a result of dislocation from ancestral Lands. Minkoff-Zern et al. (2023) demonstrate the many positive impacts of gardening and food-growing programs on the mental health of displaced peoples, including creating a sense of self-sufficiency and providing a forum for socializing.

The mental health impacts of traditional foodways disruption on Indigenous peoples is a form of traumatic stress. Just as “nutrition trauma” describes the bodily trauma a population can experience from a rapid diet transition, traumatic psychological stress can result from

the impacts of development on a community's life and foodways. Development projects have impacted the Cowlitz Tribal territory by damming rivers, cutting forests, and damaging topsoil through road construction (Korn, 1997), inflicting trauma on the Cowlitz Tribe, who face overwhelming external forces they cannot control. When stress responses are induced constantly, Indigenous peoples can experience chemical changes such as lactic acid build-up, as well as weakened immune systems, worsened digestion, and other impacts of stress (including substance abuse, self-medication, and other dissociative responses that aim to restore control) (Korn, 1997). Southern Ute Tribe member Shereena Baker describes how her struggles with mental health were linked to her use of alcohol, as well as her poor diet consisting of pasta, bread, rice, and fast food (Polanco, 2022). But, after turning to a diet of traditional foods, she experienced profound benefits in alleviating her anxiety and boosting her general mental health. Baker's new diet, including Southern Ute traditional foods like elk, deer, pumpkin seeds, and dried cherries, also helped her to regain cultural knowledge about the foods and practices of her ancestors (Polcano, 2022).

The principles of Indigenous food sovereignty can provide an alternative path to some of the ways that harm is being inflicted on Indigenous health. In Canada, the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion represents a health threat to the Tsleil-Waututh Nation, as it contaminates the culturally and nutritiously important shellfish harvest (Jonasson et al., 2019). The pipeline also risks the health of the Orca whale communities that are co-

residents of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation's territory (Jonasson et al., 2019, p. 511). However, through the integration of Indigenous food sovereignty principles of relationality and reciprocity with lands, waters, plants, and animals—principles that recognize the needs of humans, as well as those of the seas, shellfish, and Orcas, and their complex, codependent interrelations—an alternative path for development and cohabitation emerges as possible.

Theme 2: Law and the State

The relationship between the laws of states and food sovereignty is nuanced: these laws sometimes facilitate and other times obstruct the practice of sovereign foodways. As I have argued above, Indigenous food sovereignty is distinct from other food sovereignty movements in its expansion beyond legal approaches. This sometimes means pursuing traditional foods harvesting, even when doing so is illegal, through acts of civil disobedience. The White Earth Tribe of Anishinabe provides one example of this practice. In 1837, the Chippewa/Ojibwe Tribes of the Upper Midwest ceded 3 million acres of land to the United States in a Treaty, retaining rights to hunting, fishing, and ricing. Ricing is essential for Ojibwe groups, such as the Anishinabe, as rice has been a staple crop for centuries (Trauger, 2014). However, when White Earth Tribe members try to assert their Treaty rights by seeding rice or fishing in lakes off-reservation, they are harassed by state conservation officials and issued citations (because seeding lakes is illegal in Minnesota unless practiced by state conservation officials) (Trauger, 2014). This highlights how, in asserting its governance rights to protect commercial ricing

and fishing, the state's (colonial) sovereignty can impede Indigenous peoples' attempts to access traditional foods under their original sovereignty. Despite this, Trauger (2014) shows that in practicing traditional foodways illicitly, food sovereignty can "[reconfigure] notions of power (through [civil] disobedience), economy (through acting on rights to subsistence and non-commodified food exchanges) and shared access to property through overlapping zones of authority (tribal, state, federal) over territory."

State conservation laws also inhibit the food sovereignty of the Nuuchah-nulth Nations of Vancouver Island, Canada. Before settler contact, the Nuuchah-nulth Nations managed local sea otter populations by selectively hunting individual otters from a demarcated area to ward off otters from harvesting shellfish in that area. This enabled both Nuuchah-nulth peoples and sea otters to flourish in mutual conditions of food security (Salomon et al. 2015, 2020), and sea otter hunts were carefully regulated by the principle of *ʔiisaak*, meaning respect for all things (Popken et al., 2023). However, reflecting how settler-led conservation projects often disrupt Indigenous lifeways, economies, and food sovereignty (Sandlos, 2001; Binnema and Niemi, 2006; Côté, 2010, 2022; Purdy, 2015; Schmidt and Peterson, 2009; Herriman, 2017), Canada's sea otter management program made the hunt of sea otters illegal (Plummer, 2018), harming the ability of the Nuuchah-nulth peoples to carry out the culturally and nutritiously important shellfish harvest. This is despite the fact that Nuuchah-nulth otter hunting was not, and is not, a threat to the health of the sea otter

population. This reflects the broader importance of using Indigenous knowledge when designing conservation programs to ensure they do not harm human subsistence while protecting animal populations. However, it is not enough to simply integrate/incorporate Indigenous knowledge performatively into management, which remains led by settlers. "Indigenous knowledge" must not be co-opted by settler initiatives; instead, its application to practices like sea otter stewardship must be achieved through self-governance by Indigenous peoples themselves. This necessarily implies the state ceding sovereignty to Indigenous peoples and allowing their original sovereignty to be the basis for environmental self-governance. Following this logic, Popken (et al., 2023) thus suggest that sea otter conservation governance be restructured around Nuuchah-nulth principles of *hišukʔiš cawaak* (everything is one), *ʔiisaak* (respect with caring), and *ʔuʔaahuk* (taking care of) via environmental self-governance by Nuuchah-nulth Nations.

The state's role as a sovereign law-maker is not always contradictory to Indigenous food sovereignty, as the experiences of Indigenous activists in Ecuador demonstrate. While I have defined Indigenous food sovereignty as a distinct concept in part due to its expansion *beyond* legal approaches, this does not mean that Indigenous peoples are not using legal forums as a method to pursue food sovereignty where opportunities arise. Rather, when the state and its laws provide openings through which to pursue food sovereignty, Indigenous peoples have engaged with legal approaches. In Ecuador, the new constitution in 2008 provided an entry

point through which Indigenous activists could incorporate food sovereignty into the structures of the state, including by securing legal guarantees. A central component of the success of this strategy was the choice to frame food sovereignty as a necessary part of achieving the right to *sumak kawsay*, a Kichwa term often translated as “living well” (Peña, 2016, p. 221). This enabled the Red Agraria coalition (the main actor pushing for food sovereignty to be in the constitution) to build a broad support base across different groups in the country. While the choice to integrate a grassroots social movement into the institutions of the state may seem to risk its co-optation away from its more radical aims, Peña (2016) points out that it provided an opportunity for the food sovereignty movement in Ecuador to channel underrepresented voices and claims directly into policy-making processes (p. 230) which would not have been possible without this integration.

Legal approaches have also led to some significant victories for Indigenous peoples in pursuing food sovereignty. In Brazil, the *Marco Temporal* (time marker) is a restrictive legal mechanism promoted by the agribusiness sector that seeks to refute Indigenous land claims by arguing that Indigenous peoples who did not occupy lands in 1988, when the constitution was adopted, have no right to make claims to those lands. In 2023, following years of pressure from Indigenous activists, the Brazilian Supreme Court ruled against the right of agribusiness companies to use *Marco Temporal* to ignore Indigenous land rights (Phillips, 2023). *Marco Temporal* created legal legitimacy for the theft of Indigenous land, particularly by food companies. The rejection of *Marco Temporal* has been called “the most

Figure 3

Performance outside Brazilian Supreme Court Against Marco Temporal



Note. Photo by Mídia Ninja (2017) *Indígenas fazem ato em frente ao STF contra marco temporal* [Indigenous people perform in front of the STF against the marco temporal], Brazil, 3 August 2017. CC-BY-NC

significant victory of the Indigenous movement in the 21st century” (Alfinito and Oliveira, 2024). However, despite this major victory, the struggle for Indigenous land rights in Brazil is ongoing, as new, anti-Indigenous laws such as Bill 2903 have been passed in response to *Marco Temporal*’s nullification (Alfinito and Oliveira, 2024).

The contrast between Ecuadorian, Brazilian, and White Earth Tribe & Nuuchah-nulth experiences with the state and law *vis-a-vis* food sovereignty reveals a nuanced relationship between law and food sovereignty. Law is neither *necessarily* a barrier nor a tool for achieving food sovereignty for Indigenous peoples. However, both where it obstructs and enables citizens to develop and practice sovereign foodways, analyzing, challenging, and/or using law has an important role to play in the movement for food sovereignty. Bellinger and Fakhri (2013) note the

variety of legal approaches being used to pursue food sovereignty globally: from a community ordinance in Maine to the national constitution in Ecuador, to legislation like Nicaragua's food sovereignty law, to regional trade agreements like the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas. While it is outside the scope of this paper to examine, comparing the cases of bottom-up approaches (like community food sovereignty ordinances or the civil disobedience of the White Earth Tribe members in Minnesota) with top-down approaches (like the constitutional provision in Ecuador or the Supreme Court ruling in Brazil) raises questions about which approach can more effectively guarantee food sovereignty (Bellinger and Fakhri, 2013). Ultimately, a core reason it is important to analyze law's impacts on food sovereignty lies in how many legal frameworks currently serve as major barriers to its realization, from international trade laws to federal and state laws preempting local ordinances (Bellinger and Fakhri, 2013), as well as in how critical national-level legal victories can be in protecting Indigenous food and Land rights.

Theme 3: Social perceptions of food

Food sovereignty discourse tends to assume that the barriers to food sovereignty are primarily political and economic. Furthermore, there is a common assumption that consumers will prefer local and traditional foods over imported and market ones and that the root causes of "poor" food choices are financial and time poverty (Steckley, 2016, p. 26). While these material barriers are indeed critical, these assumptions are challenged by analyzing the role of social perceptions of food in food/food system choices.

Understanding how social perceptions complicate these assumptions is important for Indigenous food sovereignty movements because it draws attention to often overlooked, ideological (rather than material) barriers to achieving food sovereignty.

Sociologists have extensively analyzed how consumption choices are part of how people form their identities and senses of social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). These processes extend to food; it is well documented that people's ideas about food, not just its actual nutritional or economic value, will influence their choice to consume it. Higgs and Thomas (2016) illustrate how eating behaviors are strongly shaped by social context through the influence of "social eating norms." These social norms can prove harmful to public health and food sovereignty by stigmatizing foods that are healthy and accessible while valorizing foods that are not.

Different eating patterns among different socio-economic groups are often attributed to differences in food access based on price and geography. Fielding-Singh (2017) shows that these differences are also due to disparate *meanings* attached to foods. In contexts of material deprivation, Fielding-Singh (2017, p. 424-425) found that parents of low socio-economic status use food as a "symbolic antidote" to this deprivation, and thus "can often oblige adolescents' inexpensive food requests," which can bolster their worth as caregivers, but also undermine healthy nutrition. This insight is pertinent to the experiences of Alaska Native and Native American families, who experience starkly higher rates of poverty than other groups in the

United States (*American Indians and Alaska Natives - by the numbers*, 2012).

Classed ideas about food also intersect with race, particularly in colonial contexts. In Haiti, Steckley (2016, p. 27) shows that foods considered “prestigious” are those associated with lighter-skinned urban elites, while those foods associated with the Black peasantry are deemed inferior and rejected. Foods like pitimi, despite having nutritious, economical, and caloric value, are considered shameful due to their association with “the poor” (Steckley, 2016, p. 28). The role of race in these preferences is present in subtler ways as well, such as in preferences for white sugar, considered more “prestigious,” over brown sugar, or preferences for imported white crackers over traditional (brown) molasses bread (Steckley, 2016, p. 28). An area that requires further investigation is how perceptions of race, color, and class may shape food preferences among Native peoples in settler colonial contexts like Canada and the United States.

Racism and classism shape food systems in broader ways as well. Barry et al. (2020) have shown how the influence of race, color, class, and gender in 500 years of the Caribbean food system has led to a societal dynamic where “perceived social status and economic mobility...matter more than social welfare and economic justice” (Scott, 2002). This influences consumption choices against the interests of food sovereignty, e.g., through preferences for plastic-wrapped, imported vegetables over local or home garden produce (Barry et al., 2020). But the issue goes deeper than consumption choices and reflects how ideas about what it means to be “developed”

have become “deeply, psycho-socially, engrained” (Barry et al., 2020). Looking at race and class in postcolonial Caribbean agriculture, Giovinnetti (2006, cited in Barry et al., 2020) shows how local food and farm work, which was not particularly stigmatized by Indigenous, Black, or South Asian groups before colonial plantation economies taking hold, has become a badge of being “lowly” and “pitiable.” This has undermined local production in favor of neoliberal structural adjustment policies that erode community self-determination over food.

Racialized perceptions of food also permeate how people frame the causes of diet-related illnesses and the erosion of the food sovereignty of Indigenous peoples. Examining the experiences of the Marind people in West Papua, Chao (2021) shows how palm oil plantations and the expansion of agribusiness “obliterates the very environments from which Marind derive their culturally valued forms of subsistence.” Despite this reality, racist rhetoric blames the experience of Marind people with diet-related illnesses not on attacks on their traditional foods but instead on their own ‘ignorance’ or ‘backwardness.’ Development projects that harm Marind’s lifeways are made legitimate, and therefore politically possible, through racist rhetorics of “gastrocolonialism,” which infantilize and animalize Papuan bodies, foods, and traditional subsistence practices (Chao, 2021). Gastrocolonialism describes imposed food regimes that perpetuate the racist violence of imperialism and capitalism through the racialization of food (Chao, 2021). Gastrocolonialism is a useful overarching

framework for understanding the link between discursive and material obstacles to Indigenous food sovereignty, as it connects ideas about food, race, and Indigeneity to their influence on material processes like accessing traditional foods, healthcare, and one's ancestral Land.

While social perceptions of food undergirded by colonialism, racism, and classism are barriers to food sovereignty, Indigenous food education programs have played an important role in changing these perceptions. In the Garden Hill First Nations community in Canada, food systems education among Native youth has promoted positive perceptions of their culture through traditional food knowledge. The Garden Hill education program encourages First Nations youth to seek knowledge from the Creator about their foods and to understand food systems as a way to relate to and live in the world from an Anishiniwuk perspective (Michnik, Thompson, and Beardy, 2021, p. 120). Education programs like these are critical in resisting Canada's cultural genocide, which aims to "take the Indian out of the child" (Michnik, Thompson, and Beardy, 2021, p. 121) by emphasizing the restoration of cultural knowledge and ancestral perceptions of foodways. Participants in the Michnik, Thompson, and Beardy (2021) study described how Land-based education was crucial to changing social perceptions imbued in Anishiniwuk people by dominant society: "Learning from the land provides cultural meaning to youth and counters the dominant society's negative influences. A feeling of mastery and pride is developed from harvesting and sharing land food that enriches Indigenous youth"

(p. 122). The Garden Hill program is just one example that shows how social perceptions of food, beyond being merely a barrier to Indigenous food sovereignty, are also a site of contestation and how education programs, in particular, have been core to these perceptions as one element of promoting Indigenous sovereign foodways.

From individual consumption choices to the broader economic and political regimes that shape food systems, perceptions of food are highly social and influential. Research in Haiti, the Caribbean, and West Papua demonstrates that ideas about race and class are particularly impactful. However, as the Garden Hill Indigenous food education program shows, these ideas are being contested and changed by Indigenous education initiatives. To realize food sovereignty across contexts permeated by racism and classism, Indigenous food sovereignty movements must continue to account for the importance of education in changing harmful social perceptions.

Theme 4: Gender

The link between gender and food sovereignty is important and under-explored in the literature. Since the earliest articulations of the concept, food sovereignty has included commitments to gender equality (Portman, 2018). The most common argument as to why food sovereignty movements must explicitly address gender injustice is that, as women constitute the majority of the world's food producers (including up to 80% of food production in developing countries), then the policies that govern food systems are a women's issue; and, that changing agriculture

policies will require a focus on gender injustice because it influences relations like access to credit, Land, and inputs (Davies, 2023; Portman, 2018).

Patriarchal social norms can harm women's equitable access to Land and agricultural inputs in a variety of ways, depending on the specific context. However, when applying "patriarchy" or "gender" as analytical categories, it is important to consider decolonial feminist critiques which show the tendency of Western feminisms to reproduce racist and other prejudices (like Islamophobia) in the name of women's liberation (Bechiche, 2021); e.g. for Indigenous peoples, the striking reality that "native sovereignty, land rights and reparations[...] for massive dispossessions; displacements; and acts of violence, abuse, and ethnocide' have been missing on the feminist agenda" (Grey, 2004, p. 16, cited in Lemke and Delormier, 2017, p. 4).

With this in mind, some cases rooted in local/particular contexts demonstrate how gender can limit access to land critical for food production. Giovarelli, Wamalwa, and Hannay (2018) show that, in India and Pakistan, low rates of women's Land ownership are due in part to the practice of dowries, in which a woman's inheritance of Land can be given to her husband's family. While women do not need to own Land individually to produce food on it, the lack of ownership can mean greater vulnerability to seizure in Land grabs or expropriation, less determination about the inputs that can be used on the Land, as well as generally having less self-determination over the process of food production which takes place on that Land. Another barrier to women's

equitable access to Land is postcolonial Land distributions, transactions, and laws, which frequently displaced traditional rules that were more gender-egalitarian (Giovarelli, Wamalwa, and Hannay, 2018). For example, in southern Ethiopia, the traditional rules of the Borana pastoral communities provided strong protections for women's primary and secondary rights to Land (Flintan, 2010). However, the weakening of customary institutions and the lack of effective provisions from the state to protect women's property rights has meant an increasing set of challenges for Borana women's Land access in pastoral areas (Flintan, 2010).

While the argument that food sovereignty must include gender justice in its framework is bolstered by the global pattern wherein gender discrimination limits the opportunities, security, and self-determination of female food producers, critics have questioned whether food sovereignty is being made too expansive of a concept (Portman, 2018) by trying to incorporate gender justice. This critique raises the question of whether food sovereignty risks becoming "all-encompassing to the point of incoherence" by trying also to be a feminist framework (Portman, 2018). Yet, as Portman (2018) argues, an ecofeminist perspective allows one to see gender justice as a natural part of food sovereignty as a coherent and counter-hegemonic worldview, which grounds the concept's main claims around "the interplay between ecological health, economic and political self-determination, and social justice" (Portman, 2018, p. 465). From an ecofeminist perspective, all three of these aims can be linked to the

logic of masculine, rationalist, and economic domination that undermines gender justice and the realization of self-determined, equitable, and ecologically sustainable food systems. That is, food sovereignty is a feminist issue because the same ideologies and logic that subjugate women globally also underpin corporate-controlled, environmentally damaging, and anti-poor food systems. This argument can be linked with Calvário and Desmarais' (2023) identification of the "nuanced" school of thought on the feminist potential of food sovereignty, which identifies the framework as "potentially feminist," depending on the specific context it is embedded in.

When examining the link between gender and Indigenous food sovereignty, and in particular how food sovereignty can be a 'feminist' framework, it is important to look at how Indigenous women are using food system politics as sites of resistance and reclaiming roles of leadership. Turner et al. (2020) study of Afro-Colombian women shows how everyday food provisioning practices embody "women's expressions of resistance and the under-recognized work rooted in specific cultural contexts, places, and ecosystems around which food systems are built, adapted and sustained." Examining "provisioning," a concept centering on the social and cultural ideals that economic activities are always embedded in (Polyani, 1977, cited in Turner et al., 2020), is key to recognizing Indigenous women's agency in food sovereignty movements. This is because a "provisioning" lens enables one to see how the "traditional" economies of Indigenous food systems are constituted by an interplay between productive/

distributive economic activities and religious/social/cultural practices (Turner et al., 2020) and how this interplay is mediated by the everyday practices of women like those in Colombia.

Among the Zapatista movement in Mexico, Indigenous women have played a particularly central role in the reclamation of food sovereignty and restoring Indigenous autonomy amidst the harms of neoliberalism (Gahman, 2017b). The core of the Zapatista's moves to gender justice has been through the Women's Revolutionary Law (WRL). The WRL mandates women's rights to self-determination, bodily autonomy, and reproductive agency; it inscribes a number of gender-equity provisions, including that women must be able to hold important positions in the EZLN (the Zapatista's army) and the 'Councils of Good Government,' that they take part in Land-based agroecology projects (and other work outside domestic labor), and that they can develop their own cooperatives (Klein, 2015, cited in Gahman, 2017b). The WRL also demonstrates the potential for Indigenous food sovereignty movements to change harmful gender norms, especially regarding labor. The WRL has upended ideas that women are less capable of Land-based food cultivation work, thus increasing the level of decision-making power for Zapatista women (Marcos, 2014, cited in Gahman, 2017b). It has also helped to change ideals and practices around masculinity by "obliterating regressive ideals" that men are less able to perform emotional and socially reproductive labor (Gahman, 2017b). Through the WRL, Zapatista autonomous Indigenous governance shows how creating alternatives to the mainstream,

Figure 4*Zapatista International Summit for Women in the Struggle*

Note. Photo by Global Justice Now (2018). [Banner from the International Summit for Women in the Struggle called by the Zapatistas], 10 March 2018. CC-BY-NC.

neoliberal food regime is interlaced with efforts towards gender equity.

Given this potential, food sovereignty movements must look at how their aims and practices are embedded in the 'gender order' of a given society (Zinn and Hofmeister, 2022), defined as the invisible expectations around gender that underlie visible interactions. In other words, food sovereignty must be attentive to how, in seeking self-determination for a community over its food system, this self-determination is only legitimate to the extent that it is accessible to all genders.

Theme 5: Free Trade

One of the greatest obstacles to Indigenous food sovereignty globally is the doctrine of free trade. Associated with the ideology of

neoliberalism, free trade describes the notion that states should minimize barriers and impediments to the movement of goods across their borders. It is based on the principles of a capitalist global market, which dictate that states import goods they cannot produce as efficiently and specialize in the export of goods they can produce efficiently. This pattern was produced by colonialism and remains structured by colonial practices today. Many states were forced by their colonizers to develop specialized, export-oriented economies without being allowed to retain the wealth they produced for the global core, leading to underdevelopment (Wallerstein, 2019; Rodney, 1972), often through the labor of enslaved Indigenous and Black people. This was a formative process, for example, in the economies of many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Free trade is institutionalized primarily through free trade agreements (FTAs), which are agreements between 2 or more states to lower barriers to exchange. Free trade principles have also been institutionalized in many global South countries through aid conditionality and structural adjustments tied to loans from organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Free trade agreements can harm Indigenous peoples' food sovereignty in several ways.

Firstly, free trade agreements can hurt Indigenous peoples' agricultural livelihoods. In 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect, eliminating policies like tariffs designed to protect small domestic producers. On the same day that NAFTA went into force, January 1, 1994, the largely Mayan

Figure 5*Zapatista March*

Note. Photo by Tlacaclael, L. (2012) *EZLN March 2012*. (The EZLN, Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, is the Zapatista's Liberation Army). CC-BY-NC

Zapatista movement led an uprising against the Mexican government in Chiapas, southern Mexico; the Zapatistas called NAFTA a “death certificate” for the country’s Indigenous peoples (Gahman, 2017a). By ‘opening up’ Mexico’s economy to cheap imported corn from the United States, NAFTA meant that corn produced by Indigenous peasants would not be competitive, leading them to be unable to support themselves and their families through sales to local and national markets (Gahman, 2017a). The result of free trade agreements like NAFTA has been a widespread worsening of food insecurity and poverty for Indigenous peoples (Gahman, 2017a).

The negative impacts of free trade policies on the livelihoods of Indigenous farmers have led movements like the Zapatistas and La Vía Campesina to propose local and sustainable food

systems as an alternative to the neoliberal model of industrial, non-sustainable, export-oriented farming. However, not all Indigenous and smallholder farmers desire or follow a local and sustainable model. Despite this, food sovereignty discourses can problematically and incorrectly essentialize Indigenous peasant farmers as ‘inherently’ supportive of local and agroecological food systems. Soper (2019) highlights that some Indigenous peasant communities in Ecuador are practicing chemically-intensive, monocrop, and export-oriented farming. This example emphasizes that, as Bernstein (2014) argues, Indigenous peasants are not “capitalism’s other” but a social group that has experienced class differentiation, wherein some peasants pursue livelihoods through models that follow neoliberal and free trade ideals. Indigenous peasants like those in the Quilocha quinoa cooperative in Ecuador “gladly engage with global industrial agriculture... [seeing] modern industrial production methods and global markets as necessary in order to maintain viable agrarian livelihoods” (Soper, 2019). Additionally, Soper (2015) notes that many Indigenous Andean peasant producers, counter to mainstream assumptions of the food sovereignty movement, view export markets as fairer than local markets because they provide more stable and viable livelihoods. This highlights the importance of movements intending to support Indigenous and peasant producers in considering the multitude of diverse and often conflicting perspectives within these groups.

Engagement with global and export markets has been assisted by the Ecuadorian government, which has pursued policies that help to facilitate

the integration of peasant producers into global industrial agricultural commodity chains (including through price support and technical assistance) (Soper, 2019). Thus, while some communities *are* pursuing global markets, they are doing so with the help of the state and, therefore, against the neoliberal model. Thus, the relationship between free trade and Indigenous farmer's livelihoods is evidently a complex one. The principle remains, though, that without intervention (such as by the state), neoliberal free trade policies harm the ability of Indigenous peasant producers to maintain their livelihoods, leading to issues like food insecurity and poverty.

Among Pacific Island countries, WTO free trade policies have harmed Indigenous peoples' ability to pursue local food systems and have increased dependency on imported foods, leading to public health crises for Native communities. In Fiji, policies like the Fijian Farm Assistance Scheme were designed to help Indigenous Fijians grow food for local markets with assistance through inputs like outboard motors, chainsaws, and planting material (Kaur Plahe, Hawkes, and Ponnampereuma, 2013, p. 323). However, these policies are discouraged under WTO pressure, which opposes the state from supporting less-efficient local farmers over more efficient food imports from industrial countries. The prioritization of efficiency, and therefore profit, over healthy and local food harms Indigenous food sovereignty by decreasing support mechanisms for Native farmers who grow (generally healthier) foods for their communities. When countries are made dependent on imported foods, populations

are highly vulnerable to price fluctuations and may not be able to grow food themselves if they cannot afford to purchase staple crops at market prices, leading to malnutrition (Kaur Plahe, Hawkes, and Ponnampereuma, 2013, p. 324). Additionally, states may not be able to ban unhealthy imported foods for fear of these policies harming their ability to join the WTO. This was the case in Tonga, where unhealthy meat imports were contributing to health issues among the Indigenous population. However, in hopes of joining the WTO, the Health Ministry of Tonga overturned the ban on these meat imports. The outside pressures faced by states like Tonga from the WTO illuminate one of the limitations of using the state as a guarantor of food sovereignty for Indigenous peoples. While it is beyond the scope of this review to explore, it is also worth noting that the influence of supranational organizations like the WTO and the IMF on postcolonial states' domestic policies highlights the colonial nature of state sovereignty itself. The coloniality of sovereignty, including its conditionality based on Eurocentric notions of economics and "progress," has implications for Indigenous peoples in several areas, including in violent 'humanitarian' interventions and neocolonialism (see Pourmokhtari, 2013; Glanville, 2013).

As in other areas that harm their sovereignty, Indigenous peoples globally are actively pursuing alternatives to free trade economies. One such alternative is the co-operative (co-op) model. The co-op structure entails ownership of an enterprise by its members instead of ownership by shareholders or managers who employ laborers. The British Columbia-based New

Relationship Trust's (NRT) Indigenous Co-operative Initiative assists First Nations and Indigenous organizations to create co-operatives. The NRT emphasizes that the idea of co-ops is not new to Indigenous peoples, who have long practiced "co-operative development and communal approaches to...sustain livelihoods, distribute resources, and develop communities" (New Relationship Trust, n.d.). This model centers on the importance of meeting the needs of First Nations community members, as opposed to corporate models that are designed to meet shareholder objectives. The NRT co-ops intersect with Indigenous food sovereignty through initiatives like a cooperative for communal gardening and for sustainable commercial fishing (New Relationship Trust, n.d.). However, these co-ops remain embedded in larger contexts of supply chains, regulations, and other elements that are shaped by neoliberal and free trade policies. This shows the difficulty of engaging with alternative economic models for Indigenous communities' livelihoods amidst the broader conditions of neoliberal economic governance.

Other alternative practices, including unions and co-ops in South America, have centered Indigenous worldviews such as *sumak kawsay* in order to refuse the epistemologies underpinning free trade. Researchers such as Bhatia (2024) have examined how *sumak kawsay* has been consciously articulated and practiced as an alternative to hegemonic capitalist models through organizations in Ecuador, such as UNORCAC. UNORCAC (the Union of Indigenous Peasant Organizations of Cotachachi) is composed of 48 communities and pursues

development projects around core needs like enhancing access to water, food, land, education, and agricultural production (Bhatia, 2024). UNORCAC, by promoting solidarity, parity, and complementarity (Bhatia, 2024), demonstrates how basing economies of development on holistic and relational worldviews (i.e., *sumak kawsay*) rather than individualistic, extractive worldviews, bolsters alternative practices that support the needs of small and Indigenous producers and communities.

Free trade agreements have the potential to seriously harm Indigenous food sovereignty when state protections for Indigenous producers are removed, enabling actors with a competitive advantage (such as large-scale industrial corn farming in the United States or imported white flour in Fiji) to displace livelihoods. Markets are flooded with imported foods, which are often less healthy than locally produced, traditional foods and issues like poverty and resultant malnutrition follow. However, global markets, export-orientation, and non-agroecological (e.g., with chemical inputs and monocropping) farming are all pursued by some Indigenous peasant producers. Thus, food sovereignty discourses should not essentialize Indigenous farmers as inherently local and sustainable producers; rather, they must recognize that, while free trade policies can harm Indigenous peoples, these producers may still use the state to secure their access to capitalist global markets.

Case Studies of IFS Initiatives

In the final section, I examine 5 case studies of Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives

revitalizing traditional foodways and Indigenous self-determination. I highlight their intersection with the key themes established above and provide a more detailed picture of what Indigenous food sovereignty looks like in practice.

Case 1: The Restoring Shoshone Ancestral Food Gathering (RSAFG) Community Group (The Great Plains)

In the Wind River Reservation of the Eastern Shoshone people, located in what is now the US state of Wyoming, the Restoring Shoshone Ancestral Food Gathering (RSAFG) project is the leading grassroots effort restoring Eastern Shoshone Indigenous food Sovereignty (Land et al., 2021). In this case study, the reader will see information about the RSAFG cited with the author's name, "Land." This is because the Shoshone Ancestral Land is the lead author of the article detailing the RSAFG, as it is the "primary source of knowledge" embodied in the paper, representing a practice of "decenter[ing] colonial frames of knowledge" (Land et al., 2021) by recognizing the personhood of the land and its reciprocal relationship with the Eastern Shoshone people. The RSAFG emerged from a fall 2016 meeting of tribal elders who, working with the Tohono O'odham Nation, Eastern Shoshone tribal members, and a non-Indigenous ethnobotanist and nutrition researcher, came up with the name of the Restoring Shoshone Ancestral Food Gathering project to name what they were doing (Land et al., 2021).

At its core, the story of the RSAFG is one of Indigenous food sovereignty as a decolonial practice. Its members articulate it as promoting

community empowerment through three "acts of decolonization: 1) enacting treaty rights through gathering traditional plants, 2) demanding equitable partnerships in community-based research, and 3) sharing the story through radical authorship via layered narrative" (Land et al., 2021). By enacting the Treaty rights, which constitute external recognition of the Eastern Shoshone's sovereignty, and engaging in a reciprocal relationship with Land (negating the colonial, capitalist logic of an extractive, property relationship with land), the community plant gathering program of the RSAFG is a "radical act of decolonization, self-determination, and sovereignty" (RSAFG member 'L.O.' cited in Land et al., 2021).

The RSAFG is situated in the context of the ongoing colonial occupation of Shoshone Lands, where, for thousands of years, the Eastern Shoshone people survived and thrived through their traditional foodways (Land et al., 2021). But as Land et al. (2021) show, over a couple of hundred years, "imperialism, settler-colonization, war and massacres, bison slaughter, boarding schools, and conscription to reservations have decimated traditional foodways and, today, have yielded enormous health disparities between Indigenous and white communities in the US." The RSAFG directly intervenes against these disparities by redressing their root causes in the decimation of traditional foods. This redress of health disparities is articulated by RSAFG members like 'L.O' as a broader process of healing (Land et al., 2021):

Although reclaiming ancestral foods is hard work, much easier to go to the store, it's not

just about feeding the body it's also physical exercise. It's about healing the past so we can go on in a good way. Because when you think about the way food has been used to genocide us--weaponized to destroy our health, our connection to the land, each other, our culture and the way we lived--regenerating food knowledge and food practices becomes a way to heal from these multiple harms. –LO

The RSAFG is also decolonial in the realm of knowledge, intellectual property, and research. Reflecting the second “act of decolonization,” “demanding equitable partnerships in community-based research,” the RSAFG places primacy on Eastern Shoshone data sovereignty by controlling the data sharing agreement with researchers. RSAFG member “J.L.” describes the importance of data ownership for the IFS project: the “study of our native plants belong to us, the Eastern Shoshone Tribe. This aspect of hunting our native plants makes our treaty stronger. If our data is controlled by colleges or Euro-Americans, it gets exploited”, but if the Eastern Shoshone own it, “the knowledge cannot be co-opted, commodified and sold for the benefit of others outside the community” (Land et al., 2021). The process of co-optation, commodification, and ultimately, theft of the intellectual knowledge and plant resources which the Eastern Shoshone are trying to fight is what Efferth et al. (2019) call “biopiracy,” a “term used to blame the use of biological resources and knowledge of Indigenous communities without sharing the venues generated by the economic exploitation of these resources and knowledge, respectively.”

The RSAFG rejects the principle of biopiracy, wherein, by failing to acknowledge the ownership of Indigenous knowledge as their intellectual property, contemporary sciences view Indigenous peoples “simply as raw material” in a knowledge-extraction procedure that mirrors colonial processes (Efferth et al., 2016 cited in Efferth et al., 2019). Therefore, RSAFG is assertive of Eastern Shoshone self-determination on two fronts: in its revitalization of traditional foodways to restore health and culture and in its assertion of ownership over data and intellectual property in research partnerships. These elements, together, provide an example of Indigenous food sovereignty as an explicitly decolonial project.

Case 2: The Traditional Foods of Puget Sound Project (The Pacific Northwest)

The Traditional Foods of Puget Sound Project, launched through the Northwest Indian College, aims to “improve individual, family, and community wellness” among Coastal Salish people in western Washington through a revival of traditional foods. The wellness benefits derived from traditional foods are both nutritional and in the connections they cultivate with place and culture (Krohn and Segrest, 2008, p. 1). As in the first core theme highlighted above and in the RSAFG program, health and nutrition are core aims of the Traditional Foods of Puget Sound Project.

Members of the Squaxin Island Tribe of the Medicine Creek Nation confirm that it used to be common for their people to live beyond 100 years of age; however, with the loss of traditional foodways engendered by colonization, new diet

patterns emerged which produced increased incidences of diseases like diabetes which were unheard of before the colonial process (Krohn and Segrest, 2008, p. 0). In efforts to combat these disparities, the Project mirrors the RSAFG's conscious approach to ensuring that research is non-extractive and generates genuine benefits from within the community. The Project included discussions that revealed participants' perspectives on present access to traditional foods, barriers to access, and ways to increase this access.

These discussions emphasized the importance of a Land base. Members of the Cowlitz and Snoqualmie tribes have said that their lack of a Land base impedes their ability to harvest traditional foods (Krohn and Segrest, 2008, p. 7). The experiences of the Cowlitz and Snoqualmie peoples intersect with the problem of state sovereignty for Indigenous foods, as they describe the need to form difficult-to-create partnerships with actors like the US Forest Service (USFS), who control many of the Lands from which they harvest. Conversely, members of tribes like the Lummi, which have larger Land bases, expressed that harvesting traditional foods was easier (Krohn and Segrest, 2008, p. 7).

Fishing laws and marine toxins further hinder Puget Sound area tribes' food sovereignty. As in Minnesota, where the struggles of the White Earth Tribe of Anishinabe to enact sovereign ricing and fishing rights are blocked by state conservation officials, "tension among sports and commercial fishers, the State of Washington, tribes and tribal fishers has persisted to the present" (Krohn and Segrest, 2008, p. 9). Even

where Washington state tribal members can access waters to harvest traditional foods, they must navigate the dangers of environmental toxins, which every group in the Project identified as "one of the most powerful barriers to accessing traditional foods" (Krohn and Segrest, p. 7-8).

In the face of these and other barriers, participants in the Project provided their perspectives on some ways Indigenous food sovereignty can be realized. Tribal members named food restoration programs such as community food gardens, food education programs, small family gardens, restoration projects for native plants, fish, and shellfish, community food banks where hunters, fishermen, and gatherers can donate extra food, partnerships with the USFS and private landowners, and partnering with local farmers to access produce as important routes to traditional food restoration (Krohn and Segrest, 2008, p. 16).

This myriad of programs illustrates that Indigenous food sovereignty movements, even when concentrated in a specific region, need not take a single form or approach. Instead, a plurality of strategies can be deployed to realize greater access to traditional foods and cultural continuance of long-standing foodways against the barriers that may arise from multiple directions.

Case 3: Urban Indigenous Food Sovereignty in Canada (Winnipeg and Grand River Territory, southern Ontario)

The third case study delves into the Canadian context to examine the unique but frequently

overlooked experiences of Indigenous peoples in urban centers. There is an oversimplified perception that First Nations, Inuit, and Metis people who migrate from rural communities to cities leave their cultures “behind” (Cidro et al., 2015, p. 31). This notion is based on the faulty premise that Indigenous cultures are spatially bound to particular territories and, therefore, cannot be made mobile through the practices of migrant communities. While connections to Land are critical for many First Nations cultures, these connections can be maintained and adapted in urban environments through a variety of innovative strategies. Indigenous peoples in urban areas are actively challenging the idea that urban migration means leaving their cultures “behind” through the practice of Indigenous food sovereignty. In Canadian cities, Indigenous food sovereignty has become a site through which “urban communities...become centers of cultural identity and resurgence” (Cidro et al., 2015, p. 31). Studies in Winnipeg and southern Ontario demonstrate that relationships with people in the food industry, people visiting from rural areas, community gardens, and education programs are important vessels for maintaining food sovereignty off of traditional territories.

In Winnipeg, Indigenous food sovereignty is articulated as a ceremonial, reciprocal, and educational practice. Urban Indigenous people are able to maintain cultural ceremonies through growing, harvesting, preparing, and eating traditional foods (Cidro et al., 2015, p. 33). The notion of “ceremony” emphasizes the community and relationship-building aspects of food sovereignty while also centering cultural

continuance in the face of dislocation from ancestral Lands. This cultural continuance is also reflected in the reciprocal connection to Land that is embodied in the consumption of cultural foods. These connections are enabled through strategies such as using relationships and networks with people outside cities with access to Land, who can provide city-dwellers with traditional foods through gifts and exchanges such as bison, moose, and fish (Cidro et al., 2015, p. 36).

The provision of traditional foods to urban residents has a sacred element. As Cidro et al. (2015) suggest and other studies confirm (Miltenburg, Neufeld, and Anderson, 2022), relationships are the core facet of urban Indigenous food sovereignty. These relationships are imbued with sacredness due to their reciprocity. This is because cultural foods are a sacred gift that embodies a connection between urban Indigenous peoples, Land, and their communities (Miltenburg, Neufeld, and Anderson, 2022). This sacredness is partly derived from the fact that traditional food is understood as a gift from the Land to the people. Even where Indigenous peoples are restricted physical access to Land, they are able to maintain sacred connections via the practice of consuming the gifts that the Land provides to them.

Connections with Land are also part of place-making practices in urban settings. The types of connections with Land that Indigenous food sovereignty facilitates (kin, spiritual, relational) differ from colonial understandings (legal, property, ownership). Despite this, legally owning Land can be a necessary precondition in

contexts like Canada in order to relate with it in a relational, reciprocal way (Milteneburg et al., 2023). This ownership creates practices of place-making through the fulfillment of responsibilities to the Land. One participant, Beth, from Milteneburg et al. (2023) study, summed up how connections to Land are embodied in the notion of responsibilities to the Land of the backyard of her urban home: “It’s the land I’m responsible for. I don’t see it as mine...where the Creator has my feet, there I will be responsible”. This statement casts light on how place and relationality can be understood in contexts of urban Indigenous food sovereignty. It is not that a person must be within the bounds of a particular territory in order to connect with Land. Rather, relationships with the Creator and the Land can be cultivated wherever a person finds themselves through practices of reciprocity with and responsibility to the Earth. The idea that “where the Creator has my feet, there I will be responsible” suggests that an Indigenous relationality with Land is a mobile phenomenon that can be adapted to urban settings.

Some elements of urban environments pose unique challenges to Indigenous food sovereignty, such as reduced access to a Land base for activities like hunting and fishing. Additionally, in urban settings, income is a more significant barrier to cultural food access (Richmond et al., 2020), whereas in reserve settings where time is a greater barrier. However, the centrality of relationships (with communities and with Land) is a throughline between urban and rural food sovereignty. The experiences of urban Indigenous peoples pursuing food sovereignty demonstrate

the mobility, adaptability, and resilience of Aboriginal (food) cultures and how community connections and networks can be leveraged to maintain traditional food access without a Land base.

Case 4: Braiding the Sacred Indigenous Corn Growers Network and the Onondaga Nation Farm crew (Turtle Island & Onondaga Lands)

Braiding the Sacred is a network of Indigenous corn keepers aiming to help Indigenous nations across Turtle Island recover sacred seeds and food sources (Bleir, 2020). The organization, founded by Onondaga Nation member Angela Ferguson, works with the Onondaga Nation Farm crew to cultivate and return seeds to their people and to help restore ancestral methods of hunting, fishing, agriculture, and food preparation (Bleir, 2020). The story of Braiding the Sacred is ultimately a story of the importance of seeds—culturally, historically, and for the future.

Seeds are vital across many different Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives (such as the Palestine Heirloom Seed Library and the White Earth Seed Library) because seeds are the key to the continuance of traditional crop cultivation and consumption. Seeds embody longstanding cultures and carry the memories of the peoples who cultivated them, even when those peoples no longer exist—some of the seed varieties in Braiding the Sacred’s seed bank have no people left, but through this organization, they can continue to be cultivated (Bleir, 2020). The living legacies of past peoples in their seed varieties demonstrate the close connection between foods

and the cultures and peoples that consume them.

As many of the seeds in the collection are the last of their kind on the planet and are no longer actively cultivated by their people, Braiding the Sacred's intervention is vital in growing and returning these seeds to the communities they originate from (Bleir, 2020). While restoring the culinary and cultural heritage embodied in the corn plant, this project also resists the colonial erasure of Indigeneity—both in plants and people.

The process of propagating and sharing seeds builds connections within and between nations, reinforcing community and solidarity. After propagating seeds at home in the Onondaga Nation, Ferguson takes the seeds to the Mohawk Nation so they can propagate them. The Mohawk can then pass on these seeds to other Native communities, representing a journey that incrementally restores Indigenous seed sovereignty and forms relationships along the way. Within the Onondaga community, coming together to harvest, prepare, and eat traditional foods is healing: as Ferguson describes, "It's not just the food that's the medicine, it's also the coming together, the exchange, the laughter, the conversation, food energy, and then the food at the end is the gift" (Bleir, 2020).

Beyond its seed initiative, the broader work of the Onondaga Nation Farm crew toward restoring the Onondaga traditional food system shows the importance of traditional knowledge in sustainably acquiring food and restoring ancestral skills in community members. The Farm crew's hunts provide access to fresh and local turkey, deer, rabbit, and fish meat, which

reduces dependence on packaged meats and is governed according to traditional hunting cycles to prevent over-harvesting (Bleir, 2020). These hunts reinstall skills in people that their ancestors have known and practiced for centuries: e.g., how to clean, skin, and distribute the meat of the deer in a respectful and effective manner to nourish oneself and one's community directly from the Land. Having skills from one's ancestors empowers community members to become educators themselves. Thomas Benedict, who is part of the Onondaga hunting and fishing crews, describes how, following hands-on learning during the hunting season, he "could confidently go out and get a deer...and what I've been taught I can pass on to the next group that comes in" (Bleir, 2020). Additionally, reflecting the importance of connections to the Land in Indigenous agriculture, the crew's farming uses traditional methods where all labor is done by hand. This promotes sustainable production, in contrast to mainstream agriculture in the US, which relies heavily on non-renewable energy while also making the garden a Sacred Space (Bleir, 2020). Through hands-on experiences with agroecological farming directly on the Land, people are able to resist the disconnection with the earth promoted by industrial, market-based food systems. Food preparation and cooking in the initiative have also helped to challenge harmful colonial legacies like patriarchy. While today, some people believe that cooking is 'women's work,' the work of this food sovereignty initiative reconnects Onondaga men with the practice of meat and soup preparation (a common male task prior to colonialism) (Bleir, 2020).

Braiding the Sacred and the Onondaga Nation Farm crew are the driving force behind the restoration and continuation of Onondaga food sovereignty. But, their work highlights universal elements of Indigenous food sovereignty. By connecting people with the Land through the act of preparing and eating traditional foods, this initiative mirrors the experiences of urban Indigenous peoples in Canada, even where the methods of acquiring these foods differ. Additionally, the focus on educating community members about traditional practices is reflected in other Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives like those of Zapatistas (Gahman, 2017a) in Chiapas, Mexico, who use a Land-based and hands-on approach to agroecological pedagogy.

Case 5: Sharaka (Palestine)

Sharaka is a volunteer-run food sovereignty initiative operating in Ramallah, Palestine. It runs a weekly farmers market, provides produce baskets to subscribers, operates a seed exchange, volunteers with farmers, and runs a mobile restaurant 2-4 times per year with dishes made from local crops (Isma'il and Dajani, 2021; Meneley, 2014, p. 73). The core of the Sharaka initiative is the concept of *baladi*, an Arabic word that translates to the English word "local" but has a deeper connotation: *baladi* is authenticity, the connection of the Palestinian people to their Land and country, and to the agricultural products that sustain them (Meneley, 2014, p. 73). While *baladi* is a concept specific to Sharaka's context, it reflects the universality of connections with Land and

place in Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives. Sharaka's vision is a food-sovereign Palestine where Palestinians have a sufficient food supply of traditional and sustainably farmed foods (Meneley, 2014, p. 73).

The principle of self-determination and cultivating self-sufficiency is central to the work of Sharaka. The initiative achieves this by rejecting foreign aid money, which produces dependency and comes with conditions (Isma'il and Dajani, 2021). Like Braiding the Sacred, Sharaka views seed saving and exchange as crucial to Indigenous food sovereignty and holds a local seed exchange at the beginning of farming seasons so that people can grow their own foods. One of the founders of Sharaka, Aisha Mansour, described the importance of seeds to the concept of *baladi*: "When we refer to *baladi*, we are referring to our heirloom seeds that have been saved by our *falaheen* [peasant farmers] year after year" (Meneley, 2014, p. 73). The resilience of heirloom seed cultivation takes on a special significance in the Palestinian context, where a core aim of the occupying power has been the denial of Palestinian sovereignty in all aspects of daily life.

All Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives are political, but Sharaka pursues political strategies and faces political challenges that are unique to the context of the occupation it operates under. One of these strategies is supporting the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement. Sharaka's support for BDS entails the general rejection of consuming Israeli goods (and therefore rejecting supporting the economy of the occupying power), as well as encouraging

people to grow and prepare their own foods in order to reduce/eliminate dependence on Israeli produce and foods. For example, by pickling and preserving foods, Sharaka envisions a revival of Palestinian preservation practices that, in providing people with food throughout the winter, enables them to boycott Israeli imports (Meneley, 2014, p. 74). Growing foods is made particularly difficult, though, by the occupation's control over water, as well as Land and farming inputs. One of Mansour's tomato crops, for example, died out because Israel withheld water, and the plants could not be bathed (Meneley, 2014, p. 73). Fertilizers, seeds, and other planting materials can be held up at military checkpoints for long periods, making farming difficult, precarious, and unpredictable.

Like many Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives, Sharaka shows that people can pursue food sovereignty in the absence of political sovereignty as one component of reclaiming their overall self-determination. Sharaka shares an emphasis on connections with Land, ancestral practices, traditional foods, and relationship-building with other initiatives. It also practices political strategies unique to its context, such as boycotting goods from the occupier. Ultimately, it highlights the political nature of food and farming and articulates agriculture as a site of resistance to colonialism.

Conclusion

Food systems, as this paper has explored, are inherently political. They are intimately tied with self-determination and are a key

Figure 6

Woman at Sharaka Initiative



Note. Photo by Vieira, M. (2015). [Woman at Sharaka initiative]. CC-BY-NC

site at which colonial power is exercised and contested. Decolonial resistance is the essence of Indigenous food sovereignty. It has been through food systems that settler occupations, government policies, and development projects have attacked the health and culture of Native communities, and, as the case studies presented demonstrate, it has been through the resurgence of ancestral food systems that Indigenous peoples have resisted these attacks. Indigenous food sovereignty movements represent Indigenous innovations that, in addressing the limitations of food security and food sovereignty paradigms, present a valuable approach to pursuing food justice. The realization of Indigenous food sovereignty continues to be impeded by a range of factors, including, as this review has explored, laws, introduced foods and diet changes, racism, classism, gender injustice, free trade, and illegal occupation. However, Indigenous

food sovereignty initiatives are in resurgence across North America, South America, and Southwest Asia, and though it has been mostly beyond the scope of this paper to investigate, worldwide. These initiatives have produced

outstanding results for Indigenous health and self-determination and represent great promise, despite remaining severe challenges, to a decolonial and self-determined future for food systems across geographies.

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Appendix A: List of Organizations and Initiatives working on Indigenous Food Sovereignty Worldwide (by Region)

- Turtle Island (North America)
- Braiding the Sacred <https://braidingthesacred.org/>
- The Restoring Shoshone Ancestral Food Gathering Program <https://restoring-shoshone-ancestral-food.org/>
- Lakota Food Sovereignty Coalition <https://lakotafoodscoalition.wixsite.com/website>
- Cheyenne River Youth Project <https://lakotayouth.org/>
- Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative <https://www.indigenousfoodandag.com/>
- Intertribal Agriculture Council <https://www.indianag.org/>
- Inuit Circumpolar Council–Alaska <https://iccalaska.org/>
- Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation <https://thundervalley.org/>
- Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance <https://nativefoodalliance.org/>
- Montana Indigenous Food Sovereignty Initiative <https://www.montana.edu/smallfarms/mifsi/>
- Na-ah Illahee food sovereignty fund <https://naahillahee.org/food-sovereignty-fund/>
- The Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe Community Gardens <https://www.elwha.org/>
- The Muckleshoot tribal food school program <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/pnw-history-culture/muckleshoot>
- The Nooksack Indian Tribe Diabetes Program and Traditional Plants Grant <https://nooksacktribe.org/departments/health/community-health-fund-program/>
- The Suquamish Tribe Community Health Program <https://suquamish.nsn.us/health-division/community-health/>
- Zuni Youth Enrichment Project <https://www.zyep.org/>
- Sierra Seeds <https://sierraseeds.org/>
- North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems [https://natifs.org/#:~:text=our%20ancestors%20prayers-,North%20American%20Traditional%20Indigenous%20Food%20Systems%20\(N%C4%80TIFS\)%2C%20founded%20by,by%20re%2Destablishing%20Native%20foodways.](https://natifs.org/#:~:text=our%20ancestors%20prayers-,North%20American%20Traditional%20Indigenous%20Food%20Systems%20(N%C4%80TIFS)%2C%20founded%20by,by%20re%2Destablishing%20Native%20foodways.)
- Native Seed Search <https://www.nativeseeds.org/>
- US Food Sovereignty Alliance <https://usfoodsovereigntyalliance.org/>

Asia & Oceania

- The Palestine Heirloom Seed Library <https://viviensansour.com/Palestine-Heirloom>
- Sharaka <https://www.facebook.com/SlowFoodPalestineAklyBldy>
- Café Melanesia <https://pawankafund.org/blog-news/cafemelanesia/>
- Tebtebba <https://www.tebtebba.org/>
- Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee <https://www.facebook.com/p/Pakistan-Kissan-Rabita-Committee-100063802850639/>

Africa

- South African Food Sovereignty Campaign <https://www.safsc.org.za/>
- Mtandao wa Vikundi vya Wakulima Tanzania (MVIWATA) <https://www.mviwata.or.tz/>
- Eastern and Southern Africa Small Scale Farmers Forum <https://esaff.org/index-php/>
- Kenyan Peasants League <https://kenyanpeasantsleague.org/>

- Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa <https://afsafrika.org/>
- Food Sovereignty Ghana <https://www.fian.org/en/news/article/food-sovereignty-ghana-fights-for-right-to-seeds-3005>

South & Central America

- Tirakam Association <https://www.forestpeoples.org/en/node/50346>
- Wangki Tangni <https://www.facebook.com/WangkiTangni/>
- Trabajadores Unidos por la Tierra https://www.facebook.com/TrabajadoresUnidosporlaTierra/?locale=es_LA
- Movimiento Nacional Campesinas e Indígena <https://proyectoballena.ckk.gob.ar/movimiento-nacional-campesino-e-indigena-mnci/>
- Movimento de Pescadores e Pescadoras Artesanais <https://mpppeloterritorio.blogspot.com/>
- Federación Nacional de Asociaciones Cooperativas Agropecuarias <https://www.confras.org/fenacoa/>
- Confederación Nacional Agraria (CNA) <https://www.cna.org.pe/>
- Confederación de Pueblos, Organizaciones indígenas Campesinas del Ecuador (FEI) <https://confederacionfei.org/>
- La Red de Semillas <https://www.redsemillas.info/presentacion/>
- National Association of Rural and Indigenous Women (Chile) <https://www.anamuri.cl/>

Global

- La Vía Campesina <https://viacampesina.org/en/>
- International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty <https://www.foodsovereignty.org/>

Appendix B: Glossary

Food security: defined by the USDA as “access by all peoples at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life,” food security is an access-based paradigm for understanding food politics.

Food sovereignty: the most widely used definition in the academic literature is from the Nyéléni Declaration, where food sovereignty is defined as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.”

Food systems: the network of processes and relationships that shape how food makes it from production to distribution to consumption, including the economic, cultural, political, and social aspects of these processes.

Foodways: the traditional practices and beliefs of a society governing how food is produced, collected, and consumed.

Hegemon(ic): the dominant political actor or discourse in an area or network.

Indigenous Food Sovereignty: The principle wherein Indigenous peoples define, control, and practice their own traditional, place-based foodways, including notions of relationality and reciprocity with the territories from which they derive their food systems.

Patriarchy: a social system wherein men and masculinity are privileged, and women and femininity are subjugated.

Relationality: the concept of connectedness and existing in relationships.

Settler colonialism: a form of colonialism where a group invades a region and displaces, eradicates, or subjugates the Indigenous population with the intention of permanently occupying and resettling in the new territory; it entails gradual or immediate attempts to eliminate the Native population and their cultures and histories and their replacement with a settler population, culture, and history.

Self-Determination: The ability of an individual or group to make decisions and pursue actions about itself free from external influence, based solely on its own desires and intentions.

Sovereignty: the supreme power or authority of a state or government, often linked with the power to make laws and use force and to govern free from outside influence or interference.

Survivance: a term originating in Native American studies that combines survival and resistance to describe the continued, active practice and presence of Indigeneity and Indigenous culture in the face of erasure and genocide; used to counter the static nature of the word “survival” and highlight the active nature of resistance by Indigenous peoples.

Traditional foods: The foods that a society has historically chosen to sustain itself from its environment, often associated with culture, rituals, knowledge systems, and values.

The Uruguay Round: a series of international trade negotiations that covered wide-ranging issues governing the global exchange of goods and services, leading to the founding of the World Trade Organization in Marrakesh, Morocco, at its conclusion.

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Aillaquillen: The Island of Nine Moons

Cosmovision and Animism in Performance

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the narrative of the co-created community theatre show *Aillaquillen: The Island of Nine Moons*, presented at the Liquen Cultural Centre in the town of Villarrica, Chile, in 2022. The show was the result of a practice research project, in which I partnered with local Mapuche activist Alejandra Aillapan Huiriqueo to explore how the intrinsic values of the Mapuche worldview or cosmovision and (new) animism could be translated into intercultural theatrical practice and the performance of an environmental narrative. The intercultural process of co-creation transformed my own approach to my surroundings and culminated in a performance that told a story out of local cultural and environmental necessity.

Keywords: Intercultural theatre, Indigenous theatre, Mapuche theatre, environmental theatre, eco-theatre, Indigenous rights, environmental justice, cultural exchange, Mallolafken Lake, Chilean Indigenous environmentalism, Indigenous knowledge

Staging a Mapuche Legend

The Mapuche are the largest of all Indigenous nations living in what is now Chile¹. They are perhaps most noted by the connection to their land as the link is expressed in their name itself: *Mapu* means land or earth, *Che* means people. *Mapuche* are the people of the land, and the language they speak, *Mapudungun*, the language of the land or earth – “a language symbolically associated with nature: it is not only human language, but also the language of the ‘earth, wind, natural sounds, and voices.’” (Carcamo-Huechante & Paillan, 2012, as cited in Echeverría, 2018, p. 287). Similarly, the land for the Mapuche isn’t solely a designated territory

or an arable resource, but “a set of dimensions, energies and types of lives” (Ranjan et al., 2023, p. 4), in which their culture and traditions are deeply rooted. While historically successfully repelling first the Inca and then the Spanish invaders, the Mapuche lost most of their land and sovereignty in the 19th century, when the freshly independent Chilean state decided to ‘pacify’ the region of Araucania, first with a mix of political means, settlement, and land redistribution in the early 1850s, then with a military occupation (Echeverría, 2018). To this day, tensions between

¹ Numbering around 1.7 million, while another 200,000 live in Argentina

the Mapuche communities and the Chilean state center around stewardship and protection of their ancestral land, or *Wallmapu*, which is being changed, threatened, or destroyed by industry, agrarian use, private development, and tourism. This type of destruction is “not just territorial but encompasses the destruction of an entire society in which human beings, territory, and more-than-human entities have been closely linked since ancient times” (Echeverría, 2018, p. 283).

Alejandra lives in Villarrica, a small town on the shore of an eponymous lake (called Mallolafken, or lake of white clay, in Mapudungun) lying at the feet of a majestic, also eponymous volcano (called Rukapillan by the Mapuche, or house of spirits). A nutrition engineer by profession, she considers herself a *Dhomo Weichafe Mapu del Mallolafken*, which translates as the (Woman) Guardian of the Land of the Mallolafken Lake. While wary of ‘well-meaning’ Western academics, she agreed to meet with me upon finding out I was also a theatre director. Through the work we did together, she generously shared the Mapuche culture and cosmovision with me, for which I am humbly grateful.

Constantly aware of my position as a Western, white, European male affiliated with a university of a historically colonizing nation, I strived to avoid replications, conscious or not, of colonial, Eurocentric, or patriarchal-like power dynamics. Instead, I endeavored to undertake the approach to the work “in the way Westerners should have approached all other beings: in asking to be received, in accepting to know less, rather than more” (Weber, 2020, p. 22). This

encompassed a process of becoming ‘culturally worthy’: “intellectually, emotionally, physically, and spiritually ready to fully absorb cultural knowledge” (Archibald, 2008, p. 376), as well as learning about and practicing a set of Indigenous-inspired values: permission, respect, ritual, reciprocity, interconnectedness, and gratitude², while adding my own background of Western theatre-making to the process.

The performance dramatized a local Mapuche *epew* or story with a lesson chosen by Alejandra. The story is an etiological legend, which explains the creation of the only island on the Mallolafken Lake. The narrative includes a young Mapuche couple who, in the excited expectation of the birth of their first child, disregard the practice of asking permission and showing respect and reciprocity in relation to the environment. While crossing the Mallolafken Lake, they are punished for this in the form of the strong wind *puelche* that hinders their progress. They realize their error and ask forgiveness of the elements who come to their aid, combining fire from the volcano, water from the lake, the wind blowing fiercely, and the earth underneath to create a small island on which the young couple can land and give birth safely. The Mapuche name for the island, *Aillaquillen*, translates to ‘Nine Moons’ in memory of this legendary event. The *epew* contests a currently better-known but colonially-colored³ version of the legend, in which a Mapuche ‘princess’ falls in

² Archibald outlines a similar set of seven principles comprising Indigenous storywork: respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, wholism, interrelatedness, and synergy (2008, p. 376)

³ Alejandra referred to it as ‘the Disney version’.

love with a white Spanish colonizer. It also holds a clear message about the relationship with the land and the environment, and it was a narrative Alejandra felt needed to be told to the Mapuche community just as much as to the *winkas* or non-Mapuche audiences.

Figure 1

The Rukapillan volcano rising over the Mallolafken Lake



Note. Photograph taken by the author.

The performance, therefore, became part of the Mapuche struggle: “Many Mapuche political mobilizations associate the struggle for reclaiming territory with the preservation of elements of Mapuche worldview. This is because they understand how the maintenance of their social order depends on the ritual activities that take place in a specific territory and the memories that are rooted in the landscape” (Echeverría, 2018, p. 299). The Aillaquillen *epew* is a memory of the landscape, of the Mallolafken Lake with the island and the Rukapillan volcano, affirming once again that from the Mapuche perspective, “the Che [people] and Mapu [earth] do not exist separately, that is why the only way to recreate

our own institutionality, our values and customs, our culture and our language, is to the extent that we recover the territory” (Marimán, 2002, p. 93). The Mapuche are understandably wary of the *winka* and tend to keep their rituals and traditions to themselves, but Alejandra is an activist for dialogue and interculturality. The performance of *Aillaquillen: Island of Nine Moons* was seen by an auditorium of mixed Mapuche and *winka* audience, not to mention other spectators outside of the cultural center: the lake, island, and volcano themselves. It was a communal practice of cosmovision and new animism through an overlap of Indigenous methodology and Western theatre, and it told the story of the territory that needed to be told: for the Mapuche, an affirmation of their culture and connection to the land currently suffering from contamination, industry, tourism, and the effects of climate change, and for the *winka*, a reminder of the values needed when positioning oneself within the environment and relating to it.

Western Structure, Indigenous Content

From the start, our collaboration with Alejandra was to be co-creative, each of us bringing our own culture, background, and training to the process. My response to the *epew* that Alejandra presented was an Aristotelian dramatic model for the performance, which we then filled with creative interpretations of the chapters of the story, additional content devised by the rest of the company (a group of local artists and creatives gathered for this project), and Mapuche performative and ritualistic elements overseen by Alejandra.

Introduction: Acknowledgment of the Land

The performance started with the showing of a short video made from material gathered in the initial phase of exploring the region, learning—on my part—about Mapuche cosmovision, and creating an initial relationship with the land itself. In the video, Alejandra, as the narrator, introduced the Mallolafken island and the importance of the four elements, all gathered within the lake and the Rukapillan volcano. “The Villarrica volcano is a mystic center of the Mapuche world. /.../ The breathing of the earth is felt in the fumaroles, in the hot springs and the lakes. Inside, there is a house where the spirits of the *pillan*, or intermediary spirit between human beings and the *Ngenchen* [four celestial beings in Mapuche mythology] live; also the spirits of the dead pass through this volcano on their journey to their final destination” (Skewes & Guerra, 2016, p. 70). It is also of special importance for the glaciers on its slopes, from which Mapuche tradition believes all life originated. In lower altitudes, the mountain is also the home of *araucaria* trees, whose seeds or *piñones* have nourished local communities for centuries.

The initial video immediately introduced the values of permission and interconnectedness: “We Mapuche understand that the Aillaquillen island is here to remind us of the importance of being integrated into nature. Each time that a human enters its spaces, she needs to ask for permission and recognize the presence of the *ngen*, its protectors, for herself to be a protector as well,” says Alejandra, the narrator. The concepts and attitudes of permission, respect,

ritual, reciprocity, interrelatedness, and gratitude create a scaffolding of values that enables a worldview of balance within the environment, consisting of humans, nature, and spirits. This type of active interaction with the ecosystem gives a possibility to “intentionality, the ability to use an intentional vocabulary. Above all, it is permission to depict nature in the active voice, the domain of agency” (Plumwood, 2014, p. 451).

Figure 1
Aillaquillen Island



Note. Photograph taken by the author.

I experienced my own widening of self through this process; despite wandering around frequently in the various environments of my native Slovenia and appreciating their beauty and value, I'd rarely thought to interact directly with them, ask permission to enter, or reflect on the agency of the environment itself. Indeed, what I was experiencing is what Tim Ingold calls *astonishment*: “Astonishment is the other side of the coin to the very openness of the world that I have shown to be fundamental to the animic way of being. It is the sense of wonder that comes from riding the crest of the world's continued

birth” (2011, p. 74). The connection to a world constantly in flux, constantly becoming, needs to be experienced, not just analysed or studied. Andreas Weber emphasizes a similar point: “It is important to stress that engaging in indigenous practices is not purely theoretic endeavor and is not possible by a theoretical approach alone. Indigenous practices have to be enacted and embodied. The spirits of rivers and mountains, which are entangled with our own lives, have to be invoked and asked for their participation” (2020, p. 32). The practice research was, therefore, the exploration of an embodiment of cosmovision and a way of relating to and within the world that focused on “embodied aliveness [instead of] abstract theory” (Ingold, 2011, p. 27).

Embodied aliveness is one of the crucial concepts of the Indigenous worldview or cosmovision, which is usually referred to as animism by the Western world. Contesting the 19th century Tylorian definition of animism, in which, linked to social Darwinism, animistic societies “were placed toward the bottom of the evolutionary ladder, whereas monotheistic religions, especially Christianity, with its clearly defined dualistic metaphysics, were placed at the pinnacle” (Howell, 2014, p. 104), (new) animism approaches criticize dualisms of human-nature and mind-body, and attempt a different understanding, looking for a “synthesis of current environment theory (insisting that the environment does not necessarily consist dichotomously of a physical world and humans) and current personhood theory (asserting that personhood does not necessarily consist dualistically of body and spirit)” (Bird-David,

1999, p. S68). New animism, influenced by Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, Philippe Descola’s definitions of possible ontologies based on the interplay of interiority and physicality, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s notion of perspectivism, and Harvey Graham’s definitions of the world as a community of living persons, among other concepts, now understands Indigenous worldviews as “incorporating all forms of being within the ontological category person. /.../ For them, ontology, epistemology and axiology form an undifferentiated relational field” (Morrison, 2014, p. 48). Such a relational approach generates a particular worldview, which Alejandra and I explored through performed narrative.

Exposition: Western Science and Traditional Indigenous Knowledge

The first scene of the show was, in fact, an audio recording of the two protagonists discussing, as their contemporary selves, facts about the Mallolafken Lake and the Aillaquillen Island. The lake, with its two adjacent towns (Villarrica and Pucon, the ‘adrenaline capital of Chile’), is a hugely popular tourist site and subject to overdevelopment, industrial misuse, and contamination. The latter comes from an oversaturation of nutrients from pisciculture, wastewater treatment plants in parallel with untreated sewage, urban and agricultural use (“Contaminación masiva de la Cuenca del Lago Villarrica,” 2022), as well as tourist and thermal spa activities (Simon & Ceballos Saez, 2023, p. 630). The population in the basin of the lake has grown significantly in just a few years, and the land is increasingly divided and privatized, ignoring Mapuche claims or historical

rights. Consequently, the lake is subject to eutrophication processes, leading to frequent algae blooms and a decreasing quality of water. It is generally considered a health risk to bathe in it, although this is consistently ignored by visitors, and there are periods of time when swimming is forbidden due to high levels of contaminants. In 2017, the Chilean Ministry of Environment declared the lake a 'saturated zone' (a euphemism for contamination), a first step towards a Decontamination Plan that has been in the works since then, often criticized (Simon & Ceballos Saez, 2023) and not yet implemented (Parra, 2024, "Estamos viendo morir el lago Villarrica"). Somewhat dryly and economically driven, Rodriguez-Lopez et al. concluded their 8-year study of the levels of Chlorophyll-a in the lake using satellite images and monitoring data by observing that "the increasing occurrence of algal blooms poses a threat to the organisms and the scenery of the lake, and decreases income generated from tourism in the southern part of the country" (2023, p. 16). This says little of the value that the lake has for the Mapuche community and culture. Considered a living being in Mapuche cosmovision, Mallolafken is an integral part of the land, while water itself, as the originator of life, is perhaps the most important of all four elements. The chemical analysis of the lake's water, although highly important, also says little about Traditional Indigenous Knowledge woven into place and land, often expressed through narrative: "The story and the storyteller both serve to connect the past with the future, one generation with the other, the land with the people and the people with the story." (Tuihawai Smith, 2012, p. 146). The answers to seemingly

geological, geographical or demographic questions are therefore presented in the form of narrative, which itself is knowledge, not to be dismissed as fiction: "Reductive assumptions of traditional ecological knowledge can be read as a recasting of colonial ideas of 'primitive superstition, savage nobility, or ancestral wisdom' that re-inscribe colonial domination by seeing Indigenous knowledge as 'an object for science rather than as a kind of knowledge that could inform science'" (Cruikshank, 2004, p. 21). The exposition of the show attempted to contest this type of view by juxtaposing Western-style facts with Indigenous myth, as knowledge of equal value, searching for a balance between the two, just as Western new animists are searching to reconnect with principles that exist in Indigenous cosmovisions, the Mapuche are not negating Western science. Both aspects are important in a holistic approach: "This sense of deep relatedness to the world transforms consciousness into a means for holistic perception through which we are able to apprehend the intrinsic qualities of things as well as their inherent wholeness" (Harding, 2014, p. 375). Both the geological/geographical facts about the Mallolafken Lake and the Aillaquillen Island, as well as the story of its creation and the connection to the land and its people, are important and able to co-exist.

LIFKOYAM⁴

We need to go, my love.

The lake is vast and the waters deep.

The baby will not wait for us to sleep.

⁴ The dialogue between Lifkoyam and Nautüll from this scene was my own proposal, edited and approved by Alejandra.

Dawn will be upon us soon.
The sun will come and bless our voyage.
It's time to go.

NAUTÚLL

Should we not wait for the sun?
Should we not wait for his blessing?

Will the waters not close their waves to us,
If we tread them without warning?
Without asking permission?

LIFKOYAM

There is no time, my love
The sun will wait
The waters will understand
The journey is long
We will need all our strength
All the time of night and day
To bring our child
Safely to the other side
It's time to go
The deep black of the horizon is thinning
Time to go

The elements, however, did not understand. Trouble followed in the form of the *puelche* wind (performed by a white-clad dancer), stopping their progress and generating the crisis of the story, as the baby chose that very moment to start making its way into the world. The threat of losing their future was a consequence of not acknowledging their place within the relational network of beings and land—a poignant message for the audience.

Asking permission is the quintessential Mapuche ritual: “Mapuche believe that human beings must ask permission to enter the domain

Figure 3

The puelche dancing around the couple in their boat



Note. Photograph taken by the author.

protected by the spirit masters” (Echeverría, 2018, p. 289). The latter, in this case, are the *ngen*, spirit protectors of nature, who, along with the major beneficial spirits (found in the land above or *wenü mapu*), the *weküfe* or bad spirits (found in the land below, *minche mapu*), and the shamanism and witchcraft practiced by the *machi* (‘good shamans’) or *kalku* (‘bad shamans’), form the major axes of Mapuche spirituality and practice (Grebe, 1993). The purpose of the *ngen* is to preserve life, well-being, and continuity of various natural phenomena. This generates “principles of a native ethnoecology, contributing to the balance of the environment, avoiding both the excessive exploitation and predation of natural resources as well as their contamination” (Grebe, 1993, p. 48). Each *ngen* protects and gives life or animating force to a certain element or part of the natural world, such as water, the native forest, stones, the wind, fire, the earth, wild animals, medicinal plants, etc. The *ngen* can be connected to powerful elemental forces such as water and fire, or protectors of ‘smaller

units' such as trees, birds, and streams. What is important is the manner of interacting with them: a Mapuche person "first needs to ask permission to enter [their] dominion. To use any natural element protected by the *ngen*, she needs to justify why she requires it and how much of it she means to take to cover her immediate need. Once the announced quantity is obtained, she needs to express her gratitude to the *ngen*; /.../ It is necessary to give [the *ngen*] a small offering to comply with the traditional principle of reciprocity. This offering usually consists of some breadcrumbs or grains of wheat and/or corn, or a small coin" (Grebe, 1993, p. 51). Every Mapuche who acknowledges her roots and culture follows this code of ethics and behavior in most situations.

In new animistic terms, based on the idea expanded by Nurit Bird David, the young couple forgets, for a moment, to act as 'dividuals': "When I individuate a human being I am conscious of her 'in herself' (as a single separate entity); when I dividualate her I am conscious of how she relates with me. This is not to say that I am conscious of the relationship with her 'in itself', as a thing. Rather, I am conscious of the *relatedness with* my interlocutor *as I engage with her*, attentive to what she does in relation to what I do, to how she talks and listens to me as I talk and listen to her, to what happens simultaneously and mutually to me, to her, to us" (1999, p. S72, author's emphasis). The consequence of dividualating is an ethical approach to relating to the world and environment: "Within the interpersonal epistemology of indigenous ethics, morality

plays out positively in kinship, interpersonal and communal ways that bridge the dividual and others, and negatively in individualistic, antisocial ways that isolate the individual from the group" (Morrison, 2014, p. 49).

While wandering around the area in our preparations for the show, Alejandra was practicing her code of ethics and dividualating, situating us in a relation with the volcano and the land it represented by asking permission to enter its space, presenting small offerings in return, and expressing gratitude at the end of a safe passage. The simple gestures, expressed by means of direct address, created an interpersonal relationship or connection between us and the mountain. After a couple of such hikes, I came to think of Rukapillan as a friend or kin—almost more so than other mountains I had visited more frequently prior; my experience of visiting a particular place or land has now irrevocably changed. Importantly, these were not instances of Western romantic or idealistic misrepresentations of Indigenous cultures as those of 'noble savages' living simple but pure lives in harmony with nature. Rather, at that moment, I was able to access a knowledge system that stresses "the intentional, relational and interpersonal character of reality as both locally grounded and socially emergent," stressing "who is dividual, and therefore collectively, acting, rather than what causes" and emphasizing "interdependence, influence, mutuality, responsibility, and respect (or not)" (Morrison, 2014, p. 49). This was what the young couple in the show momentarily ignored, provoking a reaction from the beings

around them that placed them and their about-to-be-born child in danger. They needed to remember and correct their mistake:

LIFKOYAM

What do we do, my love?
I am rowing as fast as I can
And we are barely moving
We will not make it to shore before the baby is born
She will not be well if she is born here in the wampo
My heart is bleeding at the thought
I am sorry my love
I am sorry for not asking permission
I am sorry for hurrying too much
What can we do?

NAUTÚLL

We need to pray now
We need to beg forgiveness
We need to ask permission
Dear Mallolafken,
Forgive us for entering without permission
Please hear us now
We come with open hearts
We come with love and respect
All we want is for our baby to be safe
So that we can raise her
And teach her how to respect the land
How to respect the elements
We ask forgiveness, Mallolafken
And we ask permission to cross safely!

LIFKOYAM

Water, the source of all life,
Sun, the giver of all strength,
Earth, the mother of all,
Wind, the mover of all

Please hear our repentance
We ask to be forgiven
In our hurry and haste,
We did not spare a thought to things bigger than ourselves
We now ask permission
To be accepted into this place
To be able to cross the waters
So that our baby can enter the world safely
So that we can continue to show reverence
To the land around us
To the Rukapillan
To the Mallolafken
To the Puelche
Please help us now
In our hour of need

In addition to expressing the values of permission, respect, interconnectedness, and ritual (reciprocity and gratitude manifested later on in the show), the scene was an illustration of how the 'wild' is constructed in Indigenous practice as compared to Western imagination. Weber compares the two: the latter sees the wild as without rules, egoistic, threatening with death, opposed to man, emotionally detached, opaque to human understanding, and better off without man (Weber, 2020, p. 69). Although the threat is present in the *epew*, it is only a consequence of imbalance, and the restoration of the relationship that happens through the young couple's prayers shows how the wild (or nature, the environment) is constructed in an Indigenous view: it is based on rules, devoted to mutuality, is life-giving, includes man, is nourishing, is like kin, and requires gratitude (Weber, 2020, p. 69). Once these rules are respected and followed, balance is the result.

Climax: The Elements Dance

Once the couple begged for forgiveness and asked for help, the elements came to their aid. In the performance, this scene was created by four dancers, who took on the roles of the elements and created, through individual and collective dance, the island as a safe haven for the protagonists.

As the initial video of the performance explained, the four elements are highly important in Mapuche cosmovision. Water (*ko*), in its many forms, is the giver of life; wind (*kürüf*) and fire (*kütral*) add dynamics and provide breath and the spark of creativity, while earth (*mapu*) supports it all. In another interlacement of Indigenous and Western approaches, the dancers embodied the elements using choreographies reminiscent of Michael Chekhov's approach to elementally-inspired performance, with flying (air), flowing (water), radiating (fire), and molding (earth) movements. Chekhov's approach to acting resonates with a (new) animist worldview, especially regarding his notion of 'creative individuality': "Igniting 'life,' a dynamic creative state and artistic freedom in sympathy and harmony with the world as a whole, would all become part of Chekhov's central tenets encapsulated in the principle of creative individuality" (Rushe, 2019, p. 8). The idea of the whole or entirety is important; working with it, "in conjunction with a feeling of form develops complete kinaesthetic awareness" (Rushe, 2019, p. 91). The Indigenous values of interconnectedness, respect, and reciprocity are mirrored in Chekhov's practice, which imagined, to a certain degree, a world constantly in flux.

"Indigenous worldviews /.../ are neither conceptual, nor only ethical, but always performative. They enact the world by being a part of it. In Indigenous thinking, you are a worldview, you represent cosmos, so you behave as such. You are kin to all beings, and all beings are persons" (Weber, 2020, p. 20). Being part of the world, stepping into the being of an element, demands a type of crossing of ontological boundaries, explored in the West by invoking neuroscience and mirror neurons as a neurological basis for empathy or through versions of the Deleuzian concept of becoming. Signe Howell, writing about her experiences with the Chewong people, claims understanding Indigenous cosmologies will make more clear "what it means to be human in a world within which the idea of a neutral nature is foreign" and hints at something bigger: "The mere fact that many of us have no problem in empathizing with the animic and anthropomorphic modes may, by itself, indicate some form of psychic unity of mankind" (2014, p. 110-111). Performance is a productive way of exploring this unity, as was shown by the elements dancing to unite and create new relations with the human couple.

Resolution: Connecting Through Song

As soon as the couple gratefully took refuge on the newly created Aillaquillen island, the baby (in the legend, she grows to be an important and famous Mapuche *machi* or healer and interlocutor with spirits) was safely born. Accompanying the birth was a song representing another fusion of Western and Mapuche elements. Originally composed by the Spanish singer and actress Tànit Navarro, the lyrics narrated the perspective of an

unborn child asking her mother for a lullaby that will resonate with her forever. The performers in our show substituted the Mapudungun word for mother, *ñuke*, instead of the Spanish *mama* and added traditional Mapuche instruments to their rendition. The result was a haunting song that evoked not only the life of the unborn child but painted that image against the context of the Mapuche history and struggle without expressing it through specific language.

Figure 4
Birth of the baby



Note. Photograph taken by the author.

Epilogue: How It Started

Once the baby was born, Alejandra herself took to the stage, dressed in traditional Mapuche clothes, and introduced her father, Lorenzo Aillapan, a respected member of the community and an *hombre pajaro*, ‘man who can speak to birds,’ who helped end the show with a *kimche*’s (wise man’s) reflection. Before bows, the whole company, as well as the Mapuche members of the audience present in the auditorium, performed the *afafan* or ritual cry, which cry affirmed the *newen* or vital energy of the endeavor and announced Mapuche and our presence to the *ngen* and the *Ngenchen*. These elements not only confirmed the Mapuche content of the story

Figure 5
The afafan at the end of the show



Note. Photograph taken by the author.

but elevated the show from just a portrayal of an interesting tale to a practice of cosmovision, affirmation of Mapuche traditions, resistance against the hegemonic culture, and a part of the larger Mapuche struggle.

The show concluded as it started: with a video. The final act was a short documentary-style video showing the audience a crucial part of the process of preparation for the performance. The whole group of performers and creators made a trip to the Aillaquillen island itself to put the values of cosmovision into practice: ask permission of the lake and the island to enter their territory and create a show about them, show respect through this action, acknowledge our interrelatedness, express gratitude, and offer, through a ritual Alejandra guided, a reciprocal gift—*araucaria* saplings, to return the tree to the island from which it had already disappeared in the past decades.

The *araucaria* has an important cultural and symbolic significance for the Mapuche. The seeds, similar to large pine nuts, are collected each year in February and used in various ways for food, including being ground into flour. The

trees grow slowly and can reach ages of more than a thousand years, while seed production only starts after several decades of growth at the earliest. The life of the *araucaria* forests has been intimately intertwined with Mapuche communities for centuries: “the biophysical space /.../ is a product of the history of human societies and reflects the uses, values, learning and the particular cosmovisions of the societies that have used it” (Sedrez dos Reis et al., 2014, p. 3). Araucarias represent resilience to the Mapuche, as they have withstood these threats for decades and centuries. However, they are now threatened by exploitation, the timber industry, and the effects of climate change. As temperatures rise, fewer and fewer young saplings survive, and the species is currently being affected by a dieback called ‘Araucaria leaf damage’ (Varas-Myrik et al., 2022).

In the ritual planting, Alejandra thanked (the *ngen* of) the elements and noted the symbolic nature of the gesture; since araucaria trees grow so slowly, most likely none of the team present will be alive to see the fruit of the saplings, which means we were planting them for future

generations. Bringing back the araucarias that used to be there but were cut down is highly important as a gesture not only of conservation but also of resistance. It is a show of connection to the land, as well as a practice of reciprocity: “That is why, for the Mapuche being, the territory is so relevant, since it does not only involve a material space where people live or plant but also considers sacred space that must be respected by the *gijañmawün* [action of giving and receiving]” (Ranjan et al., 2021, p. 5).

Conclusion

The co-creation of the show *Aillaquillen – Island of Nine Moons* explored the expression of cosmovision and (new) animism on stage through a story of resilience and environmental importance, using an intercultural mix of approaches and concepts. Mapuche elements worked in dialogue with Western theatrical approaches, and bonds were created of narrative, connection, and friendship. Ultimately, in the words of Linda Hogan, “With many methods, we are all reaching for the same thing, not power, not riches, but recognition of our place in the whole of creation. We know that a healthy-minded human, a healthy community, yearns toward the love and care for earth and all of earth’s creations” (2014, p. 22). The performances and practices of permission, respect, ritual, interrelatedness, reciprocity, and gratitude represent expressions of what could be called the sacred: “What matters is the sacred that is present in everything, everyone. This contributes the most toward humanity and creation. This requires an act of attention, an acknowledgment that all are sentient beings and of the smallness of our own being in this world of the living, ongoing life force” (Hogan, 2014, p. 22).

Figure 6
Planting the araucarias



Note. Photograph taken by the author.

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Indigenous Peoples and the Law

INDIGENOUS CULTURAL PROPERTY AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

RESTITUTION, RIGHTS AND WRONGS

Shea Elizabeth Esterling



BOOK REVIEW

Indigenous Cultural Property and International Law

Restitution, Rights and Wrongs

By Shea Elizabeth Esterling

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ABSTRACT

This review of Elizabeth Esterling's monograph *Indigenous Cultural Property and International Law: Restitution, Rights and Wrongs*, emphasizes the complexities of cultural property restitution rights under International Law. The article examines the language of customary international law, expanding on Esterling's analysis of UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples) with a comparative analysis of ICRIN (International Covenant on the Rights of the United Nations. Following Esterling's use of textual, purposive, and contextual lenses, particular attention is given to Article 11 of UNDRIP in relation to paragraph 11 of ICRIN. The legal language surrounding culture and its relationship to territory is significant in these texts. Even under these frameworks, the self-determination of Indigenous peoples has been historically minimized and complicated by the formation of international legal codes. Human rights discourse too often becomes an obstacle to indigenous rights, given the pitfalls of essentialism as a political strategy.

Keywords: Indigenous cultural property, international law, restitution rights, UNDRIP, ICRIN, self-determination, human rights, legal language, territory, essentialism

How can international law, as it has evolved since the United Nations General Assembly adopted the UNDRIP in 2007, be used to resist human rights violations and achieve social transformation? Professor Esterling poses this general question and asks more specifically what

benefits Indigenous Peoples have achieved from participating in international law-making to regain restitution of their cultural property.

The author, who is on the faculty of law at the University of Canterbury (Aoteroa/

New Zealand), has also served as chairperson of the interest groups Rights of Indigenous Peoples and Cultural Heritage and the Arts of the American Society of International Law (ASIL, an organization associated with US foreign and military policy elites).

The monograph results from Professor Esterling's interest in cultural rights and restitution of cultural property, as well as her personal journey of grappling with her heritage as both an immigrant and an indigenous person. She describes herself as an outsider in the struggle for indigenous justice.

The book is an important first in the international law of cultural rights and realistic academic writing, informed by practice, in its assessment of international human rights law to address the impact of colonialism. Using a comprehensive critical commentary on Article 11 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), the author focuses on how that provision has affected the restitution of cultural property.

Esterling divides her analysis of Article 11 using three lenses: textual, purposive, and contextual. The textual part looks at the history of indigenous rights as human rights, distinctions between cultural heritage and cultural property, the development of the right to cultural integrity, and the evolution of human rights law within different parts of the UN system. Through her purposive lens, she looks at the drafting history of UNDRIP, the current absence of a right to restitution, and the impact of Indigenous participation. Focusing on context,

she analyzes the international human rights system, which is driven by state concerns about maintaining existing property rights, problems with acceptance of collective rights, and fears of erosion of state sovereignty.

Professor Esterling characterizes UNDRIP as a non-binding "soft" law, which has been a success. ("Soft" means influencing practice and obligation, with normative content). She mentions that the International Law Association, despite the non-binding status of UNDRIP, concluded in 2008 that some provisions have become customary international law but not restitution of cultural property (p. 196)

Customary international law, like treaty law, is based on the consent of states. This is in addition to a non-consensual alternative kind of customary law, *jus cogens*, or a peremptory norm which binds all states. Customary international law evolves and is recognized by international and domestic courts when states create binding legal duties for all by accepting a legal obligation (*opinio juris*) and showing evidence of general practice. The process of customary law-making exists and continues despite the inability to transform UNDRIP into a legally binding treaty. However, the evolution of customary law is not stopped by a single state's refusal to accept its legal obligation or by the "persistent objector" practice of a hegemonic state like the United States.

Despite the difference in political identity between Peoples and Nations, much of the language of Article 11 of UNDRIP is similar to Para. 11 of the International Covenant on the

Rights of Indigenous Nations (ICRIN), adopted in 1994. Both provisions are part of a section devoted to cultural rights, including Arts. 12 and 13/Paras. 12 and 13. Significant legal differences exist between the two instruments of international law, and the differences reflect the conflicts between states and nations in the drafting and final text of UNDRIP. Esterling does not address ICRIN in her book.

UNDRIP Article 11 provides:

1. *Indigenous peoples have the right to practice and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artefacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies, and visual and performing arts and literature.*

2. *States shall provide redress through effective mechanisms, which may include restitution, developed in conjunction with indigenous peoples, with respect to their cultural, intellectual, religious and spiritual property taken without their free, prior and informed consent or in violation of their laws, traditions and customs.*

Compare this with ICRIN Para. 11:

*Indigenous Nations have the right to practice their cultural traditions and **evolve culture in relation to lands and territory without interference.** This includes the right to maintain, protect*

*and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites and structures, artifacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature, **as well as the right of restitution** of cultural, religious and spiritual property taken without their free and informed consent or in violation of their laws (emphasis added).*

Viewing the texts side by side, one can see that the forceful taking of land and territory is absent from UNDRIP's Article 11, sidelining the issues of ownership and control of land. Culture also, is rendered static and can only be revitalized. This is a problem of essentialism, which Professor Esterling explores in detail in her chapter on the discursive limits of the human rights approach. The right of restitution in 11(2) has ended up as one optional mechanism for states to select to redress their violations of law. Yet restitution is an old remedy of the colonial system. In thirteenth-century English law, the writ of restitution was issued by the King's Bench where there was no remedy in law or equity or where the remedies available didn't allow full recovery.

In her purposive analysis, the author examines how a sui generis right, a new right to the restitution of cultural property, was reversed during negotiations. The retrogression occurred after a draft, which had been developed between human rights expert staff, NGOs from civil society, and especially the representatives of Indigenous Peoples, was submitted to the states' delegates. State delegates, those with the voting

power, reduced the right to a discretionary measure. The states' positions on the right to restitution of cultural property not unsurprisingly conformed to their positions on the right of self-determination under international law. These positions were and are "maximalist" and "minimalist." The UNDRIP minimalists insisted on preventing the full autonomy of Indigenous Nations, supposedly because it would destroy existing sovereign states and demanded changes that resulted in acceptance of an internal self-determination modality within the human rights framework.

Even in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, some states have continued to argue for the language of "Indigenous Populations" rather than "Indigenous Peoples," and commentators on treaties have substituted "populations" for "peoples." ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples has long settled this error. The right to self-determination in individual rights treaties is often muddled. An example is the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the most ratified human rights treaty by all UN members (except the US). In CRC Article 30, which protects a child's right to culture "in community with other members of his or her group," indicating recognition of the collective right to culture, that article links Indigenous Peoples with ethnic minorities within a state who lack the right to self-determination.

Esterling notes that protection of the right to culture under Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) has been strategically deployed by advocates of

Indigenous Peoples to claim a collective right to culture and to link land to culture and that some claims have resulted in recognition of fluidity of culture. But she concludes that the ICCPR as a basis for advancing a right to restitution of cultural property, as with other human rights treaties, is not going to be workable as an approach for Indigenous Nations, given the conceptualization and treatment of Indigenous culture and identity as static and one-dimensional rather than dynamic and multidimensional.

The author sees a tension between Indigenous participation in international law-making and an ability to realize the claims made as human rights: a "dissonance flows from discursive limitations in human rights; limitations which manifest themselves in essentialism" (pp. 180-181). While strategic use of essentialism has benefited some Indigenous Peoples it has also sidelined others. Categorization opens the door to gate-keeping, what Indigenous Peoples have been resisting, and interferes with a Nation's right to self-identification. "Colonial structures and neocolonial discourse," Esterling points out, "employ essentialism to establish and maintain hegemonic control," which places "Indigenous Peoples in contrast to Western culture with the effect that they are homogenized into an undifferentiated other" (p. 185).

This monograph was of particular interest to me as a person educated in anthropological and international law methodologies. I am attempting to understand how international human rights law can advance the rights of Indigenous Nations and what the limitations of this approach may be.

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