



Indigenous land reconfiguration and fragmented institutions: A historical political ecology of Tsimane' lands (Bolivian Amazon)



Victoria Reyes-García^{a,b,*}, Jaime Paneque-Gálvez^b, Patrick Bottazzi^c, Ana C. Luz^b, Maximilien Gueze^b, Manuel J. Macía^d, Martí Orta-Martínez^b, Pablo Pacheco^e

^a Institució Catalana de Recerca i Estudis Avançats (ICREA), Barcelona, Spain

^b Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 08193 Bellaterra, Barcelona, Spain

^c Centre for Development and Environment, University of Bern, Switzerland

^d Departamento de Biología, Unidad de Botánica, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Calle Darwin 2, 28049 Madrid, Spain

^e Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), Jalan CIFOR Situ Gede, Bogor Barat 16115, Indonesia

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Lands inhabited by indigenous peoples often have low population density but abundant natural resources. For those reasons, many actors have historically attempted to occupy those lands or use the resources in them. Increasing pressures over lands occupied by indigenous peoples have resulted in the awakening of indigenous peoples over their rights to land and resources generating many debates over indigenous peoples' rights to land and self-governance. In this article, we provide a historical and geographical overview of territorial and governance issues among the Tsimane', an indigenous group native to the Bolivian Amazon. We examine how the Bolivian state economic policies implemented during the 20th century affected the Tsimane' ancestral lands, and how – over the late-20th century – the Bolivian state accommodated Tsimane' claims to lands in between multiple interests. We show how national policies led to the reconfiguration of Tsimane' territoriality and to a fragmented institutional representation. Current indigenous territories and indigenous political representation are an expression of conflictive policies that have involved multiple actors and their specific interests on indigenous lands and its resources.

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1. Introduction

Lands inhabited by indigenous peoples usually have low population density (Stocks, 2005) but abundant natural resources (Finer et al., 2008; Sunderlin et al., 2005). For those reasons, many actors have historically attempted to occupy those lands or use the resources in them. For example, between the 1960s and 1980s, several Latin American governments implemented policies to promote the economic integration of the Amazon region into national economies by creating incentives for the expansion of the private sector (Schmink and Wood, 1992; Urioste and Pacheco, 1999). Those policies led to the commodity frontier expansion, to an increase in the pressure over forested areas inhabited by indigenous peoples (Medina et al., 2009), and to the consequent

increase of conflicts (Orta and Finer, 2010). Biodiversity conservation policies promoted by neoliberal governments in Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s added additional pressures over lands occupied by indigenous peoples (West et al., 2006; Zimmerer, 2011).

Increasing pressures resulted in the awakening of indigenous peoples over their rights to land and resources (Kay, 2002). When lands inhabited by indigenous peoples were marginal for the global economy, indigenous peoples, without any land title, held the *de facto* control over the land. However, as those lands became the frontiers of many commodities and as powerful elites started to draw maps to convert large tracts of forests into real estate (Chapin et al., 2005; Finer et al., 2008), indigenous peoples rushed into land titling processes. Since the 1970s, indigenous peoples around the world have progressively claimed rights to “indigenous land,” defined as the area that a particular indigenous community has ‘traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired’ (Chapin et al., 2005; Offen, 2009). Those rights to land were internationally recognized in the 1989 International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169 on the Rights of Tribal and

* Corresponding author. Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 08193 Bellaterra, Barcelona, Spain. Tel.: +34 93 586 8549; fax: +34 93 581 3331.

E-mail address: victoria.reyes@uab.cat (V. Reyes-García).

Indigenous Peoples in Independent States (Stavenhagen, 2005). Throughout the 1990s many Latin American countries ratified the ILO convention and several engaged in constitutional reforms that granted territorial rights to indigenous peoples in unprecedented ways (Stocks, 2005). Nevertheless, as it became clear that land-titles were not synonymous with secure property rights, the claim for indigenous people's rights moved a step forward to also demand the recognition of indigenous governance (Colchester et al., 2004; Chumacero, 2011; Martínez-Alier, 2007; Surrallés and García-Hierro, 2005).

Political ecology analysts have pointed out that the state recognition of indigenous peoples' rights to land and self-governance has taken place within unavoidable compromises with multiple stakeholders, during complex socio-political processes (Peet and Watts, 2004; Zimmerer and Bassett, 2003). Indeed, territorial reforms in Amazonian countries to grant land rights to indigenous peoples have been implemented while parallel contradicting environmental and productive policies were promoted by both private and public agents (Escobar, 1998).

This article follows a historical political ecology framework (see Offen, 2004; Rubenstein, 2004) to examine how over the 20th century, and especially during its second half, the Bolivian state accommodated lowland indigenous peoples' claims to land and natural resources in between multiple interests (e.g., colonists, logging companies, conservationists). We analyze how the negotiation of those interests affected both the configuration of indigenous lands and indigenous institutional representation. We use indigenous territory to refer to the formal land titling process granted by the state, and indigenous territoriality as a broader acceptance that includes the specific relation between indigenous society, politics, and space.

The Bolivian Amazon provides an interesting case for understanding the process through which national-states have recognized indigenous peoples' rights to land and for elaborating on the consequences of those policies for indigenous territories and political institutions. Since the early 1990's, the Bolivian government launched important reforms aiming at recognizing lowland indigenous peoples' territorial claims. Pressed by grassroots mobilizations and fostered by a new international framework in favor of indigenous self-governance, Bolivia ratified the ILO Convention 169 in 1991 and reformed its Constitution in 1994 to recognize indigenous peoples' rights to land. More recently, the 2009 constitutional reform flaunted of giving political autonomy to indigenous political and territorial entities. How did Bolivian lowland indigenous peoples gain land rights? How did the Bolivian government respond to the different political pressures in its attempt to grant indigenous peoples' rights to land? And how land rights gained by indigenous peoples subsequently affect their claims for self-governance? This article aims at answering such questions.

2. Methods

2.1. The Tsimane' case study

There is not internationally agreed upon legal definition of 'indigenous' peoples, although there is some agreement that the concept implies "priority with respect to the occupation and use of a specific territory; the voluntary perpetuation of cultural distinctiveness; self-identification, as well as recognition by others as a distinct collectivity; and an experience of subjugation, marginalization, dispossession, exclusion, or discrimination" (Stavenhagen, 2005, p. 17). In Latin America, the concept has been used by political forces to classify groups to make them fit with bureaucratic categories (Langer and Muñoz, 2003).

In the latest census (Censo, 2001), 62% of the population in Bolivia identified themselves as "indigenous people." The 2009 constitution recognizes 36 indigenous groups, the Quechua and the Aymara in the highlands being the two largest ones (2.5 and 2.1 million). The Bolivian Amazon hosts a larger number of indigenous groups, but all of them have small populations (the largest being the Guarani with 300,000 people). Among these Amazonian indigenous peoples, we study the Tsimane', a group of about 10,000 people, mostly living in the department of Beni.

The Tsimane' are a native Amazonian society of hunter-horticulturalists. Although their origins are unclear, historical accounts have typically localized them in what is now the Beni Department. Currently, the Tsimane' live in about 125 rather permanent communities (Fig. 1). Traditionally, Tsimane' communities were settled next to rivers, although nowadays many are also settled next to road axes. Currently, there are 50 Tsimane' communities in the shores of the Maniquí, 16 in the Quiquibey, and 3 in the Sécure River. There are also 25 communities along the Yucumo-Rurrenabaque road or nearby, and 27 along logging concession roads (or close to them) that mostly run parallel to the Maniquí River. Some Tsimane' communities have recently moved to new areas, such as the area around the city of Ixiamas, department of La Paz.

Ethnographic work describes the traditional Tsimane' lifestyle as highly mobile, emphasizing the cultural importance of *sóbaqui* (traveling or visiting), and the semi-nomadic settlement pattern (Ellis, 1996). As a result of this mobility, the traditional Tsimane' land use pattern was characterized by dispersed land occupancy, low intensity of natural resources use, and spatial overlap of resources usage among households and communities. Due to shared resource use and governance, land and natural resources probably fell under the broad category of common-property tenure, *sensu* Ostrom, 1990. Within a community, households owned specific agricultural fields in the sense that they could exclude other community members from using them (for example, once established an agricultural plot remained permanent unless the owner decided to move out); but households could not sell the land they cultivated or used (Huanca, 2008). Land uses (i.e., fishing, hunting, gathering) and resource users overlapped. Even nowadays, although villages have informal internal boundaries, villagers routinely trespass them in daily activities. Dispersed land occupancy, low intensity of natural resources use, and spatial overlap of resources usage continues to be the norm in communities far from roads and market towns.

2.2. Methods of data collection

This article draws on three main sources of information. First, we reviewed the existing literature on land tenure issues in the Bolivian Amazon since the 19th century, focusing on the impacts of different actors (i.e., loggers, colonist farmers, conservationists) over land and resources. We have also reviewed classical ethnographies of the Tsimane' to identify their historical settlement patterns and typical land use types.

Second, information on current Tsimane' settlement patterns comes from a participatory mapping project conducted during 2008–2010 (Reyes-García et al. 2012) and from a revision of the geographical database of the National Institute for Agrarian Reform. During the mapping project, we obtained GPS readings of the position of all Tsimane' communities, which we cross-checked with official data on land tenure status to map the current distribution of Tsimane' villages.

Third, part of the information presented here comes from our own ethnographic work in the area. For over more than one decade we have conducted several prolonged field studies among the

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