

Seeds of Peace: The Power of Claiming, Naming, and a Path Forward

Roselyn Poton

First Seed

“How many is that so far?” I asked, as a long double-bed truck with the logo “VOLVO” hauling giant logs of valuable tropical wood and kicking up reddish brown dirt drove past our white passenger van. I was in Bolivia participating in a service-learning study abroad program that I applied for through my school called “Indigenous Rights and Environmental Justice in Bolivia”. The program accepted only ten students and three of us, including myself were asked to do a photo and video session with two students from Urubichá’s School of Music and Art. The pictures and videos that we took during the session were to be used later to help create awareness of deforestation and the consequences of it. We were guided to an area of the Amazon forest near Urubichá by our tour guide, driver, and an instructor at the music school. It was a bright, hot, humid and sunny day. We had been driving for a while on an unpaved dirt road that led into the forest when we stopped on the side of the road. Deforestation is higher in areas where roads like these are built. Two of our guides went up ahead on foot to arrange with the drivers of the trucks to drive slowly towards the students while they stood in the middle of the road walking slowly towards the logger’s trucks playing their violins. They would both then stop at a safe distance from each other at which point the students would stretch their arms out, holding their violins and bow out in protest towards the loggers. To protest deforestation. The drivers agreed to the arrangement and I took pictures using my professor’s professional still camera while someone else held the Go-pro to film them playing and walking towards the logging trucks. That day, we

counted about 17 double-bed trucks stacked with tropical wood in a two hour time period. For the community in Urubichà, deforestation and its consequences is an immediate reality and changing the lived experiences of the indigeneous peoples.

University of Oregon Professor Dr. Derrick Hindery has been working with indigeneous communities in Bolivia for many years. During one of his visits to Bolivia he was shown a plot of land by a former leader of COPNAG in Guarayos territory that had been clear cut and contaminated by chemical pesticides:

“The former leader of COPNAG took me and [another UO professor] to see and film/photograph a plot of land in Guarayos TCO deforested by “outsider” campesinos that they denounced, in which forest was clear cut and apparently chemical pesticides were used. The leader complained that sometimes Guarayo community members sold access to guarayo territory even though “TCO’s” by law are collective, indivisible and cannot be sold.”

There are social and economic forces shaping this conflict. The need to make a living and survive and a drive to meet market demands with opaque ends. I hope to highlight some of the ways this conflict manifests itself and plant some “seeds” as to how to move forward. Another goal of this paper is to share some of the ways that indigeneous peoples have mobilized themselves and asserted their agency in claiming their land and naming for themselves their rights.

Second Seed

The ability to articulate how something is remembered and what it is called or named is an act of power (Merry). One of my most memorable experiences during my study abroad program was my first night in Lomerio, “Welcome to our grand house,” is how the Chiquitano/Monkoxi indigenous community of Lomerio greeted the study abroad group I was in on our first night visiting them. What they meant by “grand house” is that for them, their house included the trees, land, water, air, and all that you can see as you look out into the world. For the indigneous communities in Bolivia and for many indigneous peoples around the world, land is sacred. The structures that make up that house include all that you see around you when you walk outside: mountains, forests, rivers, oceans, ... trees, water, rocks, etc. When I think of a home it brings up notions of a space where important life activities happen such as daily interactions with loved ones, dreams are planned, a space where I can grow and be, and where I can rest and heal. In Desmond’s book “Evicted” he describes a process that seems to reoccur for a woman and her children that continually are forced out of the spaces which they’ve attempted to make a “home” and the tensions that created in her daily life. In a way, indigneous peoples have been told for hundreds of years to “move” and coerced out of their “homes” to make way for things like cattle ranches and large agricultural farms to meet demands not created by themselves but by the larger whole, the global community. What we can see happening in Desmond’s book are legal processes articulated by the State and landowners policies and procedures that create tension in the lived experiences of the woman and her children. On a larger scale what is happening is similar in that there are external pressures in the form of State development plans and socio-economics that contribute to creating tensions within

indigenous communities in relation to land which is part of the “grand house” for many indigneous communities. Conflict over land and natural resources is nothing new but an ongoing conflict. Each struggle is unique and I only uncover a few factors that contribute to land conflict and my research has been mostly focused on indigenous communities in Bolivia.

My inspiration for taking a closer look at the tensions that arise from struggles over land is inspired from my time abroad in Bolivia visiting indigneous communities in Guarayos and Chiquitano/Monkox territories. The communities were beautiful and I remember feeling welcomed. I also realized I didn't know alot and I had a lot to learn. I believe we are all connected and that we must learn to listen to what indigneous peoples are saying. I hope this paper will shed some light as to why I believe these things.

Third Seed

A defining feature of this conflict is the relationship to land that indigneous peoples have is considerably different than the extractivist industries and State have demonstrated to have. When viewing land, extractivist industries see resources and think of ways to extract those resources. There is no end to the extraction unless technology fails or people rise up to end destructive methods of development. What makes it destructive is the excessive extraction, unsustainable methods used, and the fact that when extractivist industries take up land to build cattle ranches or large scale agricultural farms, indigneous peoples are dispossessed of their lands. Land conversion into cattle ranches and large industrialized agricultural farms as seen in Bolivia, also

contribute to climate change. Another burden that indigenous people take on but haven't been the main contributors of. Climate change has been linked to prolonged dry seasons, contamination of land by toxic byproducts (pesticide run-off, mining wastes) from extractivist activities, deforestation, increased wildfires, and more. These issues can all be linked to the excessive extractive activities that occur.

Indigenous peoples in Bolivia who live within indigenous territories are experiencing threats to their ways of life as a result of commodity driven extractivist companies. Underlying these activities appear to be differing principles. Extractive industries and the State appear to support market principles which give rise to tensions because these principles often ignore the rights of indigenous peoples and their close ties to their territories. Socio-economic forces also help shape the conflict in the form of the demand for certain commodities such as soy and beef. About 78% of deforestation is attributed to cattle ranching and large scale mechanized agriculture while the rest occurs due to gradual conversion of communal lands from subsistence farming to semi-mechanized commercial farming (de la Vega-Leinert and Huber). In Urubichá, the music and art school teach students how to make violins made from tropical wood harvested from the nearby forest. One of the instructors at the school expressed concern about the constant back and forth of loggers and all the valuable timber they were taking away. It made it difficult to find wood to make the violins, a skill that helps express their culture and identity and strong ties to land.

Political forces shaping this conflict include development plans and land-use policies. These policies create downward pressure for indigenous peoples to assimilate and reflect the priorities of the State. Setting the stage for deforestation and extractive

industries was an internationally prescribed economic development plan, led and funded by the United States of America called the Bohan Plan. It sought to transform and make “productive use” of fertile lands in eastern Bolivia. This development plan based on neoliberal ideologies opened up Bolivia to extractivist foreign industries such as American corporate giant Cargill and is considered “the greatest development program planned, implemented, and financed by the United States” that helped shape ‘la marcha hacia el oriente’ (de la Vega-Leinert and Huber). ‘La marcha hacia el oriente’ (march to the east) refers to the large-scale migration to the east and driven by “unequal distribution of land by the state” (McKay and Colque) . The march to the east resulted in more land distributed to capitalist entrepreneurs and local elites (500-500,000 hectares) than Andean colonists (20-50 hectares)(McKay and Colque).

Fourth Seed

Sarat et al. discussed the “transformative perspective” in their paper which views “individuals as the creators of opportunities for law and legal activity”. When Bolivia created a process for claiming territory many indigenous groups began the legal process dictated by the state on how to claim their territory. By claiming “land” as indigenous territory people are able to govern themselves according to their rules and ways of governing. Claiming land as “territory” is a way for indigenous peoples to assert their right to self-determination as defined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). UNDRIP articulates several important indigenous rights:

- Right to “self-determination” and including the right “to freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development”
- Article 26 states that “Indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired,”

UNDRIP also creates a legal responsibility for States to recognize and observe the rights of indigenous peoples and their territories.

Another legal framework supporting indigenous rights includes the ILO Convention No.169. In Article 2 of the Convention it articulates, ‘self-identification as indigenous or tribal shall be regarded as a fundamental criterion for determining the groups to which the provisions of the Convention apply’. By self identifying, indigenous peoples exercise the power of naming and alter the way they relate to the State. By claiming and naming, indigenous peoples have asserted their agency. In the process, indigenous peoples are having to navigate the space that the State and extractive industries create and impose on their way of life. How much land, or “house” can extractive industries cut, drill, modify and draw from before the sacred space that has been referred to by some indigenous communities like the one in Lomerio, as their “grand house”, becomes something unrecognizable and unlivable? Does the existence of international declarations and policies such as UNDRIP and ILO Convention No.169 imply a responsibility for the international community to support indigenous peoples around the world in their efforts to assert their rights to self-determination and control over their territories and the resources within it? If so, what response is appropriate?

Other ways some indigneous peoples have resisted the socio-political and economic forces is by creating partnerships with third parties such as schools, nonprofits, and other entities that have an interest in supporting and advocating for indigneous and environmental rights. Awareness of issues through study abroad programs can be one way to respond to issues related to land, deforestation, climate change and related issues that arise from them. For example, the service-learning study abroad program I was on allowed students to live and interact daily with indigneous peoples which helped participants realize some of the issues associated with climate change and deforestation like droughts. This allowed students on some level, to experience for a short period the impact it had on the community (limited water supplies, limited access to natural resources, limited economic opportunity etc). Prolonged dry seasons were experienced in the communities we visited during the time of our 2019 study abroad trip and conserving water was a priority for the communities. I remember there were times the water would just not run in our bathrooms in our dorms. This is not the same experience I have in the United States where I live and so that attribute of climate change is not something I feel regularly. The scarcity of water. During our time in Lomerio, we had to be aware of how much water we were using and to not use more than what we needed. It also hadn't rained for the longest time the year our group visited and I remember that it had finally rained one day during our last days in Lomerio after a long period of no rain. The community of Lomerio and our study abroad group were celebrating that it rained and because it would help replenish water supplies. Amazon Watch, CEJIS, WWF Bolivia, and CIPCA are all organizations working to help indigneous peoples resist the loss of land within their territories by offering support in

conservation, connecting resources and creating awareness of issues through publications and in some cases, social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. It should be noted that the study abroad group I was in were invited to join the communities and learn from them. That part of our study abroad program was to help build relationships with indigneous communities in Bolivia to help create opportunities where our school by way of this program can help promote indigenous rights and environmental justice. The program has a “service-learning” component to it to help create benefit to the communities we are invited to meet with. Our group helped with trash pick up but we also helped with creating awareness about deforestation in addition to providing support in other projects that communities indicated were important.

Planting

I have given a brief overview of some of the forces that shape land conflict in Bolivia and the tensions that emerge as a result of those forces. Moving forward, I’d suggest building partnerships with indigenous communities and listen carefully to what they are saying. I think support from third party actors such as the international community or nonprofit organizations can also help generate awareness and create access to resources that support the agency of indigenous peoples. Partnerships and building relationships with trusted organizations that center their work on indigneous and environmental rights can be useful in supporting indigenous peoples efforts to assert their rights. I’d also consider moving away from a “market based” economy and move towards one based on principles of reciprocity and redistribution which were “...of greater significance than the market system in pre-industrial societies” according to Karl

Polanyi, a Hungarian economic historian (Ojong). He also “predicted ... the market system as the dominant form of social organization would face resistance because societies could not tolerate the buy and selling of nature” (Ojong). The idea of building an economy based on principles of reciprocity involves the concept of interdependence. Each of us is in some way dependent on the other. That dependency may not appear to be obvious at first. However, the Amazon Rainforest spans across several countries including Bolivia and it is a major carbon sink that helps remove circulating greenhouse gases (GHG) from the global atmosphere that we all exist in simultaneously. GHGs increase global warming and exacerbate climate change locally and on a global scale. Deforestation, unsustainable methods commonly implemented by large scale agriculture, and market demand for products produced from cattle ranching and soy all contribute to the release of GHG. To operate our economy and social organization on principles of reciprocity is to have it “premised on each party respecting its obligations”(Ojong). What obligations do each of us have to the larger whole? What obligations does the State, international community, and extractive industries have regarding this conflict which has links to international demand for soy and beef that drive deforestation and climate change? An economy based on principles of “reciprocity” would have limits to extraction, recognize interdependence, and respect those obligations by helping to establish balance when a part of the whole is in need of support and not disrupt that balance. Those are some of the things I’d suggest as a way forward in addition to acknowledging the right of indigeneous peoples to self-determination and how that relates to land and each other.

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