A Contra corriente
Una revista de estudios latinoamericanos

Vol. 15, Num. 1 (Fall 2017): 313-318

Reseña / Review

Juliet S. Erazo, *Governing Indigenous Territories: Enacting Sovereignty in the Ecuadorian Amazon*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

Exploring Sovereignty in the Ecuadorian Amazon

Erin E. O'Connor

Bridgewater State University

Erazo's book explores indigenous sovereignty through the history and culture of the people of Rukullakta in the Upper Napo region of the Ecuadorian Amazon. Although her work treats familiar themes of indigenous rights, land tenure, and political organization, her approach to and analysis of these topics is innovative. While other scholars focus on indigenous influence on national politics, Erazo's work concentrates on regional governance; where others emphasize indigenous unity against an imposing central state, she explores both connections and conflicts with powerful outsiders, and divisions as well as unity among indigenous Amazonians. The result is an excellent and nuanced ethnography that challenges the reader to reconsider the meaning of territoriality, sovereignty, and the interplay of local, national, and global politics.

Erazo argues that sovereignty is a process rather than a product, and that in Rukullakta, this process was negotiated among indigenous leaders, residents, and a

variety of (ever-changing) powerful outsiders (xx, 2). At stake in these conflicts and negotiations was not only the question of how land should be owned and used in Rukullakta, but also what rights and responsibilities fell to residents of the region—what Erazo labels "territorial citizenship." She is interested in understanding both how territorial sovereignty developed in Rukullakta in the 1960s and 1970s, and why Rukullakta has maintained a viable governing body over time despite both internal challenges and changing national and international contexts. To explore these topics, Erazo draws on evidence from interviews, archival materials, and even aerial photographs.

The process of creating territorial citizens began in the wake of Ecuador's 1964 agrarian reform law, yet Erazo is careful to note that there was a long history of encounters between the people of the Napo region and religious, state, or business leaders (a nod to the past that this historian appreciated). Developments in the 1960s therefore did not mark a sudden break from centuries of isolation, but rather presented the people of the region with both challenges and opportunities that made collective claim to land appealing. After the passage of agrarian reform, the Ecuadorian government encouraged poor highland residents to migrate to the Amazonian lowlands, where the population was less dense. This created potential problems for the Amazonian Kichwa peoples, who did not have legal titles to their lands. Indigenous leaders and organizations in the 1960s and early 1970s decided to seek land rights collectively for two reasons: some leaders had worked periodically on coastal banana plantations, where they were exposed to communist ideas about the importance of collectivism; moreover, the state was promoting cooperatives in the Upper Napo region, making it easier to secure rights to land as a group than as individuals.

Erazo's detailed discussion of the quest to obtain land rights offers important new insights about the history of indigenous movements and governance in Ecuador. First, she notes this was not a process in which the state was the enemy. Instead, she reveals that state agents sometimes worked with indigenous leaders, with the goal of incorporating Kichwa peoples into the national economy. She also demonstrates that some of the early indigenous leaders, particularly Carlos Alvarado, had previous experiences with outsiders that helped them to navigate the process of acquiring land rights. Alvarado had a high school education, had been an assistant catechist, and worked on banana plantations. His knowledge of the world outside also led him to conclude these land rights were based on their indigenous identity. Erazo asserts that

early organizations were more than simply a means to securing land because they included statutes and regulations for the territorial members. These rules, she claims, meant that the people in Rukullakta were not just members of an organization, but citizens of a territory. Although I find this assertion interesting and potentially fruitful, Erazo could develop it in greater detail and depth. How were these statutes different from other organizations' rules, particularly in ways that encouraged members to develop a sense of citizenship? This was a rare case when Erazo's discussion seemed to fall short of its potential.

Though members of the region came together to assert land rights collectively, they had differing ideas about what members' rights and responsibilities should be. In part, these differences related to families' control of land before seeking collective title to it. Families that had contributed large amounts of land to the collective case for title often expected to have that land returned to their control, whereas individuals or families who had little land previously tended to think land should be divided equally among all members. Adding another layer to this conflict was the fact that indigenous leaders of the 1960s and 1970s advocated not only for collective control of land, but they also established large collective cattle ranches. These ranches advanced the economic aims of the Ecuadorian state, and they corresponded to the leftist ideas to which some indigenous leaders adhered; however, they ran counter to longstanding practices of land control and reciprocity in Rukullakta. Therefore, while Rukullakta's leaders expected residents to clear land and tend to cattle ranches according to a schedule, members complied inconsistently. Irregular care of the ranches, combined with members' general lack of knowledge and resources to tend to cattle, ended in the failure of the large cattle ranches.

By the 1980s, state money was no longer forthcoming, and many residents in Rukullakta felt their leaders had failed them. Even so, they maintained a sense of organized living and citizenship, albeit in a way that was more flexible and less centralized than the founding leaders envisioned. Although some cattle ranches and other projects continued, they were typically on a smaller scale and under the control of sub-centers in the region rather than the control of central governing powers in Rukullakta. As the population increased in the 1980s, struggles over control of land became more pronounced, especially between conservatives and egalitarians. Conservatives maintained pre-cooperative ideas about property rights in which kinship rights, land use, and natural boundaries determined one's access to land; for them, the state should intervene only to protect property rights. Egalitarians wanted

the land in Rukullakta divided evenly among members, with an initially strong role for government to ensure equal access. Erazo observes that these differing views of land and government are not simply "traditional" versus "modern," but rather both models (as well as collectivist visions) combine old and new ideas. One of the most important roles for the Rukullakta government in this period was to provide fair mediation and resolution for the many conflicts over land rights and uses. Therefore, while the territorial government was relatively weak in the 1980s, it continued to play a pivotal role in defining land rights, community identity, and patterns of reciprocity.

Changing national and global priorities also influenced the development of territorial sovereignty in Rukullakta. The Ecuadorian state, faced with financial problems in the 1980s, reduced funding for local and regional projects, turning instead to neoliberal austerity measures. At the same time, new international funding sources materialized whose priorities were different from those of the state in the 1970s. Conservation organizations were a particularly promising source of funds, since they had money, political connections, and interest in the Amazon. However, conservationists' views of nature as fragile were quite different from indigenous Amazonian perspectives that regarded nature as powerful. Western-style conservationism also contrasted with the three main models of territoriality in Rukullakta. Most obviously, conservationism clashed with collective projects that required clearing large swaths of tropical lowlands; it also differed significantly from egalitarians' vision for dividing up territory into equal parcels for members to control. And, although conservationists upheld many conservative views of land, their emphasis on leaving land in a pristine state ran counter to traditional methods of laying claim to land in Rukullakta. Over time, the people of Rukullakta altered their views of nature, land, and agriculture to more closely fit conservationists' western perspectives. Sometimes this shift resulted from members' experiences studying at university, while at other times members simply conceded to demands that conservation organizations made. Erazo shows Rukullakta's leaders and residents did not passively accept western ideas and demands; instead, they viewed conservation projects as a source of funding. They might have to promise to limit their impact on nature to get this money, but they could also use it to fund their own projects and advance community interests once they had it.

Decades of interactions among Rukullakta's leaders, residents, and outsiders resulted in stable-yet-evolving understandings of territorial citizenship and governance. Erazo refers to the processes in which Rukullakta's leaders and members

attempted to shape each other as "everyday forms of territory formation."[1] Sometimes leaders and members came together easily, such as when they faced a threat from an outsider, or when leaders called upon a history of resistance to give meaning to territorialism. Most of the time, however, leaders and members had distinct (if overlapping) ideas about territorial citizenship and government. Leaders worked to create engaged citizens, and they justified their power through their roles as mediators in both intracommunity conflicts and in negotiations with the Ecuadorian state or non-government organizations. For their part, Rukullakta members sought to set limits on their leaders' power. They might "govern through distance" by refusing to come to important meetings, or punish leaders who failed to uphold community interests. Some residents also collaborated with outsiders as a way of putting pressure on their own leaders.

Erazo presents fascinating examples of how Rukullakta's leaders and residents influence each other. Beauty contests provide a way for leaders to encourage active citizenship among members. Not only do contest participants have to answer questions about Rukullakta history or current concerns, but the contest winner has a prominent seat at public assemblies (as shown on the cover of Erazo's book). Rukullakta leaders hope to encourage these young women to consider running for office, particularly to take advantage of a 2000 Ecuadorian law that calls for 30% of candidates on all party lists to be women. According to Erazo, "Having women from the territory who were prepared to run for office increased the leaders' chance of having one of 'their own' elected to positions in the municipal and provincial governments" (185-186). At the same time, leaders' power is held in check with increased community rights to punish them by rubbing hot pepper in their eyes. Because this is a longstanding punishment for children, the practice reverses the power balance between leaders and members of the community, and reminds Rukullakta's leaders they need to adhere to the will of the group.

One of Erazo's objectives with this book on governance in Rukullakta was to "describe something that goes beyond resistance to domination" (7). She has succeeded with this goal on several levels. Her study highlights many ways Rukullakta leaders negotiated with either the state or global organizations in order to advance their interests. They were neither simply opponents of the Ecuadorian government,

[1] This is, of course, a reference to Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

nor passive recipients of agendas brought to them by powerful outsiders. The book also reveals that negotiations and power struggles occurred within Rukullakta itself, both between members and leaders and among various groups within the territory. Similarly, her discussion of the relationships among indigenous identity, property rights, and governance recognizes the people of Rukullakta as active agents of modern change, rather than a timeless culture defending unchanging ideas about land rights. Finally, and perhaps most important, Erazo provides the reader with a sophisticated understanding of how sovereignty functions both within Rukullakta and for Rukullakta within wider national politics.

This is an exceptional ethnographic work. It is essential reading for anyone who studies Ecuador or Indian-state relations in Latin America. Because Erazo engages closely with events and theories from around the world, the book will also be of interest to scholars working on problems of sovereignty and subaltern politics both within Latin America and other world regions.