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I. COMMUNITIES & CONSUMPTION

Of Ants and Tigers: Indigenous Politics Regarding Oil Concessions in the Peruvian Amazon – The First Year of “PUINAMUDT”

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Abstract

In this article, I analyze the first year of a nascent indigenous movement in the northeast Peruvian Amazon that adopted the name PUINAMUDT – “Amazonian Indigenous Peoples United in Defense of their Territories.” While the movement’s goal to defend territories was broad, their primary focus was to raise awareness and seek political action to address detrimental social and environmental impacts from 40 years of oil operations in the region. Drawing on indigenous metaphors about the power of ants, I critically analyze the strengths and limitations of increased efforts at regional unity and state-focused advocacy. On the one hand, increased unity has been successful in achieving increased state and media attention to indigenous concerns with oil concessions. However, advocacy efforts are also hindered by a “politics of truth” that questions and contests indigenous assertions about environmental and social impacts from oil. Despite limitations, indigenous advocacy and indigenous narratives about how ants can claim victory over tigers are potentially significant in and of themselves for the ways that they point to different forms and expectations of power relations and political leverage.

Introduction

In June 2010 a 500 barrel oil spill slicked down a large stretch of the Marañón River in the northeast Peruvian Amazon, staining the shores and waters of more than 40 communities along the way. In October 2011, indigenous leaders representing many of these communities gathered at the annual Congress of the Cocama indigenous federation ACODECOSPAT (the Cocama Association for Development and Conservation San Pablo de Tipishca) to discuss the status of a legal complaint they collectively filed earlier in the year in regards to the 2010 spill, as well as to set the federation’s agenda for the following year.

It was in this context that the communal president from the town of Tarapaca presented a story about ants and tigers. In this story, a tiger sat down directly on the nest of the Isula (a large species of ant that is known
for its painful bite) to eat a meal, and was bitten by the *Isula*, after which he ran around, yelping in pain. After realizing he had been bitten by an ant, the tiger got very angry and declared war on the ants. The *Isula*, the king of the ants, agreed to the battle and they both left to gather their forces—the tiger gathered the animals on his side, and the *Isula* gathered the ants on his side. On the day of the battle the attack call was yelled out, and the animals began to stamp their feet, while the ants crawled up the bodies of the animals and began to thrash around in their noses, eyes, and all of their other openings. Before long, the tiger yelled out that they surrender, and he and the other animals ran away. Thus, the ants were triumphant as the winners of the war.

In listening to this David and Goliath story being told, I could not help but wonder if the leader was using the ants and the tiger as an allegory for their own struggles with the Argentinean oil company, PlusPetrol, especially following the aforementioned 2010 oil spill. Sure enough, the communal leader went on to make this connection explicit:

> This is what I wanted to tell you, my brothers—this example of the ant and the tiger. We are launching a fight…against a monster that has a lot of money, that has a lot of power, and is using its power to meddle with all levels of government, in everything—everything that we call big, right? … We are referring to the company, PlusPetrol—we have decided to denounce them for the harms they have committed over 40 years, so you look at them and say, we are little ants in front of them. But if we unite as we are doing today and we begin to strengthen ourselves as we need to do, we will win—we will overcome this situation, this monster that we say has so much power…Just as the ants beat the tiger and his whole army, with all of his power, we too can win.

The metaphor of ants was also raised by the president of the primary national indigenous federation for Amazonian indigenous peoples in Peru, known as AIDESEP—the Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest. During a February 2012 meeting of roughly 60 indigenous federation leaders that was held in AIDESEP’s Lima office, AIDESEP’s president, Alberto Pizango, called the leaders over to share a few words about “operation ant” (*operación hormiga*). He described how ants, among all animals, have the best capacity for communication—even over humans. Ants, he said, can emit a signal from 15 kilometers away that will call his brothers to his aid, and “there are no broken telephones—all of them go there.”

In both stories, the leaders describe ants as tiny and often underestimated, yet having distinct strengths, especially strength in numbers. This suggests that indigenous peoples, similarly, can find strength in the face of seeming invisibility—especially if they join together. This call for unity is not new, but is difficult to achieve among indigenous communities and federations that are located in remote areas of the Peruvian Amazon. That said, there was a surprising upsurge in efforts at unity among indigenous federations in 2011 – 2012 that was important in increasing the visibility of indigenous communities and of indigenous concerns with social and environmental impacts from oil activities in the northeast Peruvian Amazon.

Apart from unity, the strength of the bite of the *Isula* was also key to the ant’s victory
over the tiger—it was the pain of the ant bites (as they thrashed around in all of the openings of the animals) rather than the animals stamping their feet that won the war. The question is, if the ants are indigenous peoples in this metaphor, what constitutes the “bite” of indigenous communities, and how much of an effect can indigenous advocacy efforts really have on oil industry policies and practice? In the remainder of this article, I examine both indigenous unity and bite during the first year of advocacy of a regional coordination effort that adopted the name PUINAMUDT: Amazonian Indigenous Peoples United in Defense of their Territories.

The First Year of PUINAMUDT

PUINAMUDT arose in early July 2011 when leaders from nine indigenous federations came together to discuss their thoughts about key threats to their territories and livelihoods, especially the actual or potential social and environmental impacts stemming from oil concessions located in indigenous territories. In order to articulate their key concerns, these leaders drafted a “common agenda” for “Amazonian Indigenous Peoples United in Defense of their Territories,” which included demands for recognition and respect of the rights to their territories and resources, respect for indigenous organizations, a rejection of new extractive industry concessions, and the end of legal persecution of their leaders for defending their rights. Leaders of the newly launched coordination effort soon went on to distribute this agenda at the regional and national levels, including at public forums held in Iquitos in July and November 2011 and through meetings with regional and national government officials. Notably, leaders of the movement were able to present the agenda to high-level government officials, including to the Prime Minister, the Vice President, the Minister of the Environment, the Vice-Minister of Energy for the Ministry of Energy and Mines, and a number of congress people during trips to Lima in September 2011, January 2012, and August 2012. As a result of these advocacy efforts, indigenous leaders were able to bring about a Multi-Ministerial Commission and a Congressional working group to examine concerns with oil in Loreto. They were also able to reach an agreement with the regional government of Loreto to fund a series of environmental analyses to test for water contamination resulting from oil activities.

Strengths and Limits of Indigenous Unity and Advocacy

Returning to the metaphor of ants and tigers, what does the first year of activities of PUINAMUDT tell us about indigenous unity and “bite”? A first finding is that unity was important in increasing visibility for indigenous communities and their concerns with oil operations in the northeast Peruvian Amazon. While individual federations had previously conducted advocacy about oil activities in their specific watersheds, this was the first time a concerted effort was undertaken to call attention to impacts across multiple watersheds over a 40-year time span. These efforts at unity seemed to have paid off, as evidenced by their increased traction with government officials at the regional and national levels to examine contamination from oil operations.

On the other hand, a potential limitation of increased unity was that indigenous leaders spent increasing amounts of time outside of their communities and watersheds, and more time in regional and national capitals, some of whom took up primary residence in regional capitals like Iquitos. This tendency
contributed to critiques that were issued by a range of company and government officials that federation leaders do not accurately reflect or represent community views and positions. Many oil company and government representatives instead asserted that, in their experience, communities were generally supportive of oil activities since they brought increased employment and material benefits, and that the most appropriate and legitimate form of engaging with indigenous communities was to communicate and negotiate directly with community members, rather than federation leaders. Federation leaders countered these positions, suggesting that companies were engaging with “divide and conquer” tactics rather than respecting indigenous institutions. This debate and power struggle suggests that unity has its limits when structures of representation are actively contested as illegitimate or irrelevant.

When it came to indigenous “bite,” or actions to defend their territories from oil contamination and other threats, it was evident that the leaders of PUINAMUDT focused their advocacy on state institutions. Given that the tiger in the ant and tiger story represented the oil company, it may seem unexpected that indigenous advocacy was directed primarily at the state. However, this approach was strategic in so far as it recognized that the oil companies would not be present in the region without state approval, and that company practices (or malpractices) were shaped by state regulations and oversight (or lack thereof). The focus on the state also reflected the limited advances in actions that were directed at the companies themselves, such as the aforementioned legal complaint about the 2010 oil spill directed at PlusPetrol, which was quickly dismissed by the courts for lack of evidence. A final driver for the focus on the state had to do with the rights-based approach that was frequently employed by indigenous leaders. Indigenous leaders often made their demands in terms of internationally recognized human and indigenous rights, and international law is structured in such a way that it is the responsibility of states, rather than private companies, to recognize and ensure that such rights are respected.

Indigenous state-focused advocacy was also subject to limitations. First, the Multi-Ministerial Commission and Congressional working group were tasked with investigation and recommendations having to do with the oil industry, but had little power to enact policy changes. This is important given the broader political context in which the central government continued to promote oil concessions as a national priority. Additionally, the rights-based claims of indigenous leaders were undermined by state positions that oil operations did not actually have negative social or environmental impacts. For example, many government representatives suggested that contamination was minimal or non-existent and that the few oil spills that did exist were generally attributable to vandalism by the indigenous communities themselves, as opposed to negligence or degraded pipelines. This litany of arguments served to marginalize and minimize indigenous assertions about contamination and rights violations, impeded broader recognition that a problem exists, and ultimately limited the possibilities for meaningful social and political change.

**Conclusion**

The first year of PUINAMUDT reveals that, in addition to forging a higher degree of unity than ever before when it came to the issue of oil, indigenous leaders were also faced with the difficult task of attaining official acknowledgement that oil operations
were in fact negatively impacting the environment and their communities. Put another way, indigenous leaders were forced to engage in a “politics of truth” (Foucault 1980: 133)—to declare their assertions about the social and environmental impacts from oil operations as the actual truth in the face of alternative narratives being fore-fronted by government and company officials that oil operations did not harm the environment and greatly benefited indigenous communities. Along these lines, during meetings in Lima, indigenous leaders frequently demanded that government officials visit the zone to verify the harms and see “who’s really lying” about the impacts. Furthermore, in the face of continued government assertions that oil brings development, indigenous leaders like Alfonso Lopez Tejada have countered, saying that

We have had 40 years of extraction in our territories—but if this is development we want you to show us even one community that is developed. We have problems with education, with health care. For us oil has not signified development—it has signified abuse, sickness, and death.

While Peruvian government officials and the broader public ponder which assertions

Photograph 1. Indigenous leaders heading up a public march in Iquitos in November 2011 to protest oil contamination in Loreto. Banner text reads “40 years of oil exploitation in Loreto. Wonder of the world—thanks to the blood of indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples united in defense of their territories.”
they consider to be closer to the truth, oil companies continue to forge onward with exploration and extraction in the over 70% of the Peruvian Amazon that is currently superimposed with oil concessions. Meanwhile, indigenous peoples continue to take the lead of ants as they seek alternative forms and definitions of power that may be held not only by the tigers of the Amazon, but also by the seemingly diminutive underdogs.

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Reference