

# State Evocations, Affect and Indigenous Organizations in Contemporary Peruvian Amazonia

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**ABSTRACT** *In this article, I offer an ethnographic and historical analysis of an alternative governmental project emerging in Ampiyacu basin, a highly biodiverse tropical area in Peruvian Amazonia. By considering the ways in which the Bora and Huitoto communities produce and deal with procedures and documentation that evoke the traditional structures of the State bureaucracy, I seek to understand the complex means by which these communities relate to the State's forms of authority in their attempts to self-regulate logging activities within their claimed territories. I argue that the governmental project advanced by these communities is interwoven in a dialectical relationship between authoritative claims formulated through State evocations and the contingency of everyday affects. While any form of regulation ultimately depends on the uncoordinated actions and partial agreements achieved among indigenous dwellers, such regulations continuously produce innovative ways of interpreting the State's forms of authority and experimenting (with) liberal democratic institutions. I show how different forms of biopolitical production take place in this process, and how this alternative governmental project is not reducible to either State's forms of authority or to the commonalities of affective immaterial labour. Rather, I seek to draw attention on the ways in which State authority is evoked, appropriated, transformed and disputed in the contingent flow of life in common in Ampiyacu basin.*

**KEYWORDS** *Amazonia; indigenous peoples; governmental projects; biopolitics; documentation*

## Introduction

Over the last four decades, indigenous organizations in Amazonia have emerged as new political agents with increasing capacities for contesting the states' governmental projects (Chase Smith, 1994; Espinosa, 2009). One of the most underexplored and innovative ways through which these organizations are contesting state projects is through the enforcement of alternative rules and regulations on the access to valuable forest goods. By this means, indigenous organizations have created paralegal forms of regulation that are not subsumed under the state's authority and institutions (Smith and

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Pinedo, 2002), but that claim exclusive usage rights for indigenous communities while at the same time embodying an attempt to self-regulate the limits and forms of usage of valuable forest goods. This combined movement of exclusion and self-regulation reveals that their emergence entails both a territorial and a *governmental* project: an attempt to defend a claimed common space from external threats, while at the same time refashioning and conducting the economic behaviour of a given population (Foucault, 2006).

The fact that such alternative governmental projects emerge at the edges of the market's expansion in the rainforest reveals interesting aspects of their relation with the state's political power. In a way, such projects have been able to flourish precisely in places that could be qualified as marginal to the political authority of the state; that is, political and geographical locations where the boundaries between the legal and the extra-legal, the political and the economic, and the private and the public have to be constantly negotiated and rebuilt (Das and Poole, 2004). Nonetheless, such projects constantly evoke state practices and rhetoric in order to formulate authoritative claims with some form of collective legitimacy. Hence, norms and regulations promoted by indigenous organizations are mostly based on the production of documents, institutional procedures and quantitative representations that echo the state's forms of liberal governmentality (Miller and Rose, 1990; Burchell *et al.*, 1991). By flourishing in the dubious margins of the state where official institutions are incapable of hegemonizing collective authority, while at the same time using the state as a powerful evocation, these alternative projects might entail innovative forms of government that both evoke and transform liberal democratic institutions.

In what follows, I analyze the case of Ampiyacu basin, an area located in the easternmost part of northern Peruvian Amazonia that has, over the last few decades, been exposed to the extractive pressures of informal loggers and timber businessmen. My goal in this article is to show the paradoxical ways in which alternative governmental projects in Peruvian Amazonia relate to the state's forms of authority in their attempts to

produce authoritative claims on forests. Most of my analysis is based on fieldwork experiences conducted over several trips that took place between 2010 and 2014. In order to support my arguments, I refer to the ideas on affect and biopower formulated by Negri and Hardt (Hardt, 1999; Hardt and Negri, 2006). Both Negri and Hardt retake the concept of biopolitics in order to 'turn it into a fully Spinozist concept' (Casarino and Negri, 2004: 167) that is able to account not only for 'the power that creates the *bios*', but also for the '*bios* that creates power' (Casarino and Negri, 2004:167). Hardt and Negri identify the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics as a form of *biopolitics from above* (or *biopotere*) that aims at 'the institution of a dominion over life' (Casarino and Negri, 2004: 167) that 'exploits and separates things from what they can do' (Ruddick, 2010: 25). However, such an understanding of biopolitics is incomplete, since *constituted* power materialized in State institutions can never completely absorb the *constituent* forms of power that emerge from social life itself. This form of *biopower from below* (or *biopotenza*) emerges from the productive character of life in common: the capacity of affecting and being affected by others (Singh, 2013).

A critical point in this dual notion of biopolitics deals with the possible mediations between *biopotenza* and *biopotere*. Negri has argued that 'there is no possible mediation' between these two forms of biopolitics, and that the only possible relation between the two is one of 'capture and domination' in which 'power takes away power from life' (Casarino and Negri, 2004: 168). By the same token, Hardt and Negri (2006) have claimed that 'Empire [the emergent global form of sovereignty] and multitude [the biopower emerging from global life in common] are not symmetrical: whereas Empire is constantly dependent on the multitude and its social productivity, the multitude is potentially autonomous and has the capacity to create society on its own' (225). In both statements, the state's forms of authority are presented as constitutively external to the productive character of life in common. As I show, the case of Ampiyacu provides important ethnographic insights for considering how the state as an

evocation is constantly being apprehended, transformed and interiorized in these collective political experiments, where important mediations between the two forms of biopolitics are constantly being produced in paradoxical and innovative ways.

### **Ampiyacu basin: economic trajectories and the emergence of a regulatory project**

Ampiyacu basin is located at the left margin of the Amazon River, approximately 93 miles from Iquitos city, the capital of the Loreto region. The river begins out of a watershed with the Algodon River to the North, and from that point runs across 115 miles until its estuary at the Amazon River. The Ampiyacu is not connected to main roads or pathways, and the only way of entering and going through the basin is by means of stream navigation. Owing to its ecological richness, which includes a large variety of hardwood species, the area has been included as one of the prioritized areas for environmental conservation in the Peruvian state's official work plans (SERNANP, 2009: 96). However, given its proximity to commercial centres such as Iquitos, the Ampiyacu basin has constantly been targeted by timber companies and *mestizo* businessmen who seek to take advantage of its valuable resources.

The basin's demographic composition is largely dominated by *Bora*, *Huitoto* and *Ocaina* indigenous populations. With the exception of Pebas, a small town located at the estuary of the Ampiyacu river, the basin's population is composed of approximately a thousand indigenous households distributed in 16 native communities<sup>1</sup> across the low and middle sections of the river's course (*Instituto del Bien Comun*, 2010). Indigenous household economies are based on a complex combination of self-consumption and market-oriented activities. Everyday diets are supported mostly on the basis of regular fishing, hunting, foraging and swidden horticulture. However, indigenous households are at the same time deeply engaged with market flows in several different ways. Market products such as salt, sugar and vegetable oil are an important part of

people's normal diet, whereas manufactured goods such as machetes, mosquito nets and boat motors (*peque-peque*) have turned into essential commodities of their everyday lives. Therefore, numerous market products are important parts of, and circulate within different domains of indigenous household economies including transportation, children's education, diet, health care and leisure.

A large part of indigenous interaction with markets is mediated by an extended and very old non-wage economic institution called *habilitación*. The *Habilitación* system consists of a verbal agreement that binds mestizo businessmen with indigenous workers. By means of *habilitación*, mestizo businessmen extend credit to indigenous inhabitants in exchange for resources located in remote areas of the forest. This initial credit can be composed of manufactured goods, money or both. Once the final load of resources is delivered to the businessman, both parties engage in a shared (and often disputed) process of calculation over the total monetary value of all transacted resources, and the businessman pays off the remaining value of the given load to the indigenous worker.

Earlier testimonies about *habilitación* date from the nineteenth century rubber boom, which had its peak in the Amazon rainforest from 1870 through 1914 (Coomes and Barham, 1994; Barclay and Santos Granero, 2002). However, with the progressive decline of the rubber economy in the early twentieth century, *habilitación* relations continued to bind indigenous labour and extractive capital throughout the several cycles of demand for forest products that have taken place in the region ever since. This includes the gradual emergence of a regional logging economy around the early 1970s, a process whose intensification during the following years precipitated several forms of territorial conflict between indigenous peoples and timber businessmen in several parts of Amazonia. In this context, a group of Ampiyacu leaders started to promote the creation of a local organization as a way of dealing with the increasing external pressures on the basin's timber resources.

### Introducing state's evocations in FECONA's authoritative claims

In 1987, a long series of meetings among representatives from different indigenous communities crystallized in the creation of the Federation of Native Communities of Ampiyacu Basin (FECONA). Right after its creation, FECONA's leaders rapidly proposed a set of surveillance procedures aimed at prohibiting foreign trespassing into the basin's upstream forests. However, it was soon clear that this measure was not enough: while *mestizo* were prohibited of trespassing upstream, *habilitación* relations allowed them to gain access to valuable hardwood species through the use of verbal agreements with local indigenous men. This consideration rapidly led to the instalment of additional measures aimed at self-regulating the logging activity of local indigenous households.

The new measures adopted by FECONA included a series of procedures for requesting logging permits, as well as counting devices for registering such requests. According to one of FECONA's founding leaders, the adoption of such measures 'provided the organization a way of promoting proper indigenous self-government'. Such a view seems to relate the federation's governmental capacity with the usage of documentary formats with specific features. The stylistic rules for the elaboration of permit requests include a series of elements with clear evocations of the State's rhetoric (See Figure 1). The permit requests make use of a letterhead format that indicates the 'official year name' decreed by the Peruvian State at that time (for instance, *Año de la Unión Nacional de la Crisis Externa* [sic]), and that later indicates the emitter and the subject of the request. The common body text is structured in classical bureaucratic jargon, which combines the use of overly gentle expressions with the enunciation of the request's purpose. Finally, the emitter signs the permit request and in some cases even stamps it with the seal of his native community or his own.

Such general formatting has structured hundreds of documents now stored in different dusty drawers of the FECONA's main office. Documents date from different periods between the early 1990s and 2010, and they narrate the multiples

regulatory transactions that FECONA has carried out over the last 20 years. Even though their conservation is limited and a large portion of documentation has been lost or destroyed, the level of homogeneity and formality embodied in the remaining documents is considerable. Along with the storage of permit requests, some charts summarize the volumes and kinds of the logs extracted by multiple local requesters, which results in a general picture of the overall timber volume extracted in a given year (See Figure 2). Hence, despite the fact that written Spanish is a relatively obscure domain for most of Ampiyacu's population, the production of documents with such a clear bureaucratic spirit reveals how the state is constantly evoked in order to achieve the 'proper government' of the federation.

Despite the fact that the state is systematically evoked in order to secure legitimacy and governmental capacity; FECONA's rules and regulations are formally incompatible with the state's legal orthodoxy. From the perspective of the State agents in charge of regulating logging activity in the Ampiyacu area, FECONA does not hold the legal right of issuing logging permits or detaining foreign loggers. However, local State agents have coexisted with the governmental practices of FECONA and have eventually supported them. According to the testimony of the former chief of the forestry programme in Pebas, even whereas these were illegal actions, state agents have occasionally supported FECONA's officials in their detaining interventions. In this way, even when acknowledging FECONA's illegality from the standpoint of legal orthodoxy, state local authorities usually recognize the complementary and competing role of FECONA's regulatory activities.

However, it is important to consider that while documents play an important role in charging FECONA's claims with authority and legitimacy, they do not work in the same way the state bureaucratic apparatus would. First, even when documents are accumulated and stored, their conservation has not been a goal of any of FECONA's administration. Several former leaders of FECONA claim that after leaving office

DE LA UNION NACIONAL DE LA CRISIS EXTERNA?  
FEDERACION DE COMUNIDADES NATIVAS DEL RIO AMPESACU (FECONA)

Señor. Rojer Vazquez Presidente de fecona,

ASUNTO: SOLICITO: CONVALIDACION Y APROVACION DEL ACTA  
DE ASAMBLEA PARA EXTRAER MADERA.

Para el señor, [REDACTED],  
[REDACTED], Como Natural de la Comunidad, nativa de  
Santa Lucia de pro, Indentificado con: D.N.I: [REDACTED] -  
[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] en el distri-  
to de Pevas Provincia de mariscal Ramon Castilla.

Ante usted con el debido Respeto que se merese me  
Presento & expongo: que el acta de asamblea del 1 de  
noviembre del 2009 que aprobaron mi solicitud para la  
tal de maderas; para satisfacer mis necesidades familiares  
ya que es la unica fuente de Ingreso Economico, para mi  
familia yo como Interesado me comprometo en cum plir.  
Con todos los acuerdos de la Comunidad & como la de la  
Organizacion, por lo cual se dispone lo conveniente a fin,  
que se accede a mi solicitud.

Para mayor Informacion & credibilidad adjunto a la soli-  
citud en el acta de asamblea & una copia del acta de aprobacion  
de la comunidad; ¡POR LOS EXPUESTO! Ruego a usted. Señor Presidente  
de (fecona) Acceder a mi petiçion por ser de justicia que espero  
alcanzar. ¡MENTAMENTE!

[Signature]  
VICE P. Z. de la Comunidad.

[Circular Stamp: Presidente]  
[Signature]  
SECRETARIO DE LA COMUNIDAD:

Figure 1: Logging permit request (FECONA's archive)

**FECONA**  
 FEDERACION DE COMUNIDADES NATIVAS DEL AMPIYACU  
 Registrador: Beto Rubio Churay  
 CONTROL DE MADERA - 2008  
 Mes: mayo 2008

Dia	Datos del extractor		Nº de Trozas por especie						Total	Otros datos Lugar de donde extrae
	Comunero	Comunidad	Cedro	Cumala	Marupa	Lupuna	Tornillo	Otra		
25/5/08 Hircola 2	[redacted]	S. José de Pini	-	100	-	-	-	-	100	Ampiyacu
26/5/08 Hircola 3	[redacted]	-	6	-	-	6	-	-	166	Ampiyacu
27/5/08	[redacted]	R. Nuevo	20	115	75	-	-	-	750	Shungo
28/5/08	[redacted]	Shimilba	-	20	-	-	-	-	20	Shimilba
29/5/08	[redacted]	-	45	-	-	-	-	-	45	Amaro
30/5/08	[redacted]	N. peri	-	60	-	30	-	-	90	Anamu
31/5/08	[redacted]	Antea colonia	-	45	-	17	-	-	62	Shungo
1/6/08	[redacted]	Antea colonia	-	23	-	-	-	-	-	Semin-Juano
2/6/08	[redacted]	Tusco	-	-	-	14	-	-	14	Yanayaco
3/6/08	[redacted]	Shimilba	12	-	-	-	-	-	12	Caimito

Figure 2: Chart summarizing local loggers and log volumes for May 2008 (FECONA's archive)

they did not really know what to do with the documents, and some of them just took them to their houses and eventually lost them or destroyed them along with garbage. Furthermore, FECONA's internal norms do not state any particular procedure for defining the ultimate destiny of the documents, or for assigning them any utilitarian purpose whatsoever. In this sense, the production of documents does not aim to produce an *intelligible* representation of reality in order to render governmental practices possible (Scott, 1998). As documents are dispersed, lost or simply consumed by fungus and dust, the existence of a centralized form of management and information also fades away. Therefore, rather than fulfilling a *functional* role in government, this production of documents can be seen as fulfilling an *evocative* role, to the extent that it incorporates the state's forms of authority into the regulatory claims of FECONA's governmental project.

**Documents, sociality and subsistence in FECONA's governmental project**

In his study of governmental practices on forests in Kumaon, India, Agrawal (2005) examined the making of regulatory communities and environmental subjects in the region by exploring how liberal governmentality articulates with everyday life within communities. In order to do so, the author formulates the concept of *intimate government* as a way of both expanding and differentiating the work of liberal institutions within regulatory communities. In contrast to what the author calls *government at a distance*, which is based on centralized loci of information and calculation, constant surveillance and an inflexible normativity, *intimate government* unfolds through the very contingent and everyday forms of interaction that inform a given community. According to Agrawal (2005), intimate government 'works by dispersing rule and scattering involvement in

government more widely' (278). In such a theoretical model, 'practice and sociality rather than expertise' form the basis of regulatory practices and 'the ability of regulation to make itself felt in the realm of everyday practice is dependent upon channeling existing flows of power within (...) communities' (Agrawal, 2005: 278). Dependence upon contingent everyday relations renders regulatory practices highly patchy and unpredictable, which makes them very distant from the liberal ideal of an universal and rigid normativity. In addition, the scattered nature of intimate government, to the extent that it resides on multiple and uncoordinated personal interactions, makes such regulatory practices relatively autonomous from any centralized attempt of calculation, surveillance and decision-making.

Agrawal's notion of *intimate government* is useful for thinking about the relation between FECONA's rules and regulations and the behaviour of indigenous peoples of Ampiyacu. Since FECONA does not collect taxes nor possess significant financial or logistical goods, its enforcement capacity resides directly on peoples' own time (and even material) investments on such enforcement endeavours. Testimonies of Ampiyacu dwellers are crowded by anecdotes and episodes where rules enforcement was possible only to the extent that a FECONA leader got to convince her fellow dwellers of the *fairness* of a given intervention.

'Once we've stopped a log raft coming downstream right here, in Pucaurquillo [an indigenous community situated at the lower course of Ampiyacu]. It happened on 2008. A man from Pebas, a foreign guy, he came with a timber load of over two hundred logs during the night, around 1:00am. That time we had been warned by radio and we all agreed in doing something. When the log raft passed through our port, people started to play the Manguaré [a traditional drum made out of a voided log], and all of the community, men, women, ladies, run into the river in order to detain the raft. Once the raft was detained, we waited for dawn at our port' (Dweller from Pucaurquillo Bora, a Bora native community).

Given the contingency upon which such agreements are built, rules and regulations need to be constantly negotiated among people, and any collective decision needs to be revisited each time

that a certain intervention is pursued. Such flexibility is related to Agrawal's notions of 'dispersed rule' and 'scattered involvement': by sustaining itself upon the partial agreements and ephemeral understandings achieved among dwellers and between dwellers and FECONA's representatives, consensus has to be constantly rebuilt, and no authoritative claim can be pursued without previous negotiation. Here, it is possible to appreciate the important role of affects in the making of FECONA's regulatory project. Since regulatory practices are dependent on the mutual relations of recognition, reciprocity and conflict that inform the community, rules and regulations are applied in a very flexible and unequal manner, and the role of affects plays a fundamental part in shaping how such norms are finally materialized. An examination of FECONA's available documentation shows that indigenous loggers are very often allowed to extract volumes of timber that are larger than the formally agreed individual quotas set by FECONA (see Figure 2). Despite the parameters of formal normativity, both FECONA leaders and dwellers tend to agree that the application of rules and regulations is contingent upon peoples' needs and peoples' attitudes and kindness.

'There are some people who let us (the Federation) know that they are going to extract a little bit more than fifty logs (formal individual quota at some point in time) because they need to. When that happens we do not take any measures as a way of rewarding the logger, but when we find a logger trying to violate the rules (encontrarlo con las manos en la masa), we apply the law (le aplicamos la Ley)' (FECONA's representative).

The recognition of kindness, aggressiveness and peoples' needs and desires in shaping how rules are implemented reveals the important role of affects in FECONA's governmental project. As Agrawal (2005) states for the case of Kumaon, communitarian projects of government depend on 'the joint production of interests' that are based on 'multiple, daily interactions within the community' (279). A key component in such joint production of interests is the mutual recognition (or more exactly, negotiation) about what constitutes peoples' needs and desires. The idea of subsistence plays a fundamental role in this process of

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joint production. The terms *subsistencia*, *sostenimiento* and *necesidad* are present in almost every permit request that I examined (see Figure 1 for an example), and they are used as an argumentative device in order to justify why a certain household needs to extract timber and exchange it with local *habilitadores*. The term *subsistencia* is not only inscribed in permit requests, but also circulates in debates about the *fairness* of a given extraction campaign and the pertinence of intervening a log raft. The debates on the proper limits of subsistence shape what it is to be considered a morally or pertinent amount of extracted timber, and therefore makes an intervention a justifiable act or not.

By fulfilling such a strategic role in local household economies, and at the same time being a relatively accessible way of getting significant amounts of monetary and market goods, what is to be considered a fair and adequate amount of logging for *subsistence* is a constantly contested issue. Such debates are at the very core of how FECONA's regulatory practices are pursued, and peoples' engagement in their implementation depends on how affective interpersonal relations and ideas about fairness and adequacy regarding subsistence are collectively agreed.

In sum, FECONA's governmental project depends on the productive combination of two complementary forms of biopolitics. On the one hand, FECONA's rules and regulations recur to the *evocative* power of a series of documents and procedures that introduce state's authority in their own regulatory claims. On the other hand, the actual application of such rules and regulations directly depends on the permanent making of partial consensus and negotiations within communities, among dwellers, and between dwellers and FECONA's representatives. The complex connections emerging between these two forms of biopolitics makes it possible to consider new ways of interrelating affect, desires and state authority in the margins of the Peruvian state.

### Alternative governmental projects at the margins of the state

As Krupa (2010) has pointed out, 'conditions of fragmented, competitive statecraft might be better

understood not as deviant exceptions to otherwise centralized political systems but, rather, as the way that government is actually experienced in much of the world today' (319). Such a claim makes it possible to consider the ways in which competitive governmental projects can flourish in the contested and porous margins of the state. In acknowledging margins as a necessary condition of the states that produce them (Das and Poole, 2004), scholars can examine the complex liaisons between such governmental projects and state's political authority. Ampiyacu's case exemplifies the complexity of such liaisons, and provides elements for thinking about how such projects both evoke and transform liberal democratic institutions.

The *evocative role* that state's rhetoric plays in indigenous regulatory projects challenges some common ideas about the 'absence' or 'lack' of state in contemporary Amazonian landscapes. The production of documents, charts and procedures with a clear bureaucratic spirit, and the adoption of authoritative forms of argumentation based on 'the application of the law', clearly shows that the state's forms of authority need to be constantly evoked in order to legitimize FECONA's regulatory claims. Hence, despite the elusive character that written Spanish has among most of the population, or the lack of material presence of the majority of state institutions within the basin, state's forms of authority are a powerful motif within Ampiyacu's everyday politics. This line of thought makes possible to consider the active role of the Peruvian state in partially informing the political life of its margins.

However, state evocations are not meant to produce intelligible regulatory realities, or support structures of government based on centralized forms of calculation, surveillance and decision-making. Even if FECONA seeks to 'talk' like a state, it directly depends on the uncoordinated actions and partial agreements it achieves with the dwellers it seeks to represent. This apparent paradox reveals the hybrid forms of government that indigenous regulatory projects might entail. While any form of regulation depends on the contingent social life of the community, such regulations continuously produce innovative ways of

interpreting the state's forms of authority and experimenting (with) liberal democratic institutions. In this sense, FECONA's rules and regulations generate forms of government that are at the same time alternative to and closely related with liberal democratic institutions.

The experimental nature of FECONA's governmental project also throws light on some possible mediations between Hardt and Negri's two conceptions of biopolitics. Rather than instituting a dominion over life or depending entirely on the commonality of the social, FECONA's project is interwoven in the dialectical relation between the authoritative claims of state evocations and the contingency of affects. This does not mean that

state's authority is necessary to imagine life in common; rather, I have shown that state's forms of authority occupy a fundamental place in the political imagination of FECONA and other contemporary margins of the Peruvian state. In this sense, describing alternative governmental projects such as that of FECONA requires a consideration of how state authority is evoked, appropriated, transformed and disputed in the contingent flow of life in common. For better or worse, state evocations are a central component of contemporary political thought, and ethnographic attentiveness to the practice of such evocations can lead us to better understand emergent political projects in the margins of the state.

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### Note

1 According to Peruvian legislation, the *native community* is the legal device for the acknowledgement of indigenous lands in Peru.

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