

“Negotiating Modernity, Nature and Gender in the Peruvian Amazon”

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Abstract

This article explores how local people in the Amazon negotiate different and conflicting rationalities, how they appropriate meanings and negotiate discourses on nature, gender and modernity. Ethnicity is used here to explore different temporalities and different forms of modernity at the “margins”. This article contextualizes this process of negotiation within the historic process of subordination and commoditization of nature and the subordination and control of indigenous populations in the Amazonian región of Loreto, where cultural hybridization is part of hybrid livelihoods that reflect and challenge the structural limits defined by the political ecology of Loreto and the contradictory nature of modernity in the Third World. This article use ethnographic data to unveil the ambiguous ethnicity of ribereños and the unfinished and multidirectional process of assimilation of indigenous peoples in the Amazon.

Key Words: Ethnic identities – political ecology and gender in the Amazon – negotiating modernity- indigenous peoples

Looking at Jesus, it was hard to believe his story. He moved back and forward in the speed boat to fix the engine; sometimes it was about cleaning weeds from the Ucayali River, other times about cleaning the spark plugs; he was always able to fix the boat engine. He knew it well. His movements were agile, precise and confident; his age not an easy guess. He was wearing green and yellow soccer uniform-like shorts and t-shirt that were common among “mestizos” in the Loreto region. Nobody dared to ask him if he had worked before as a boat driver, he was not a man of many words. Born in the community he migrated to Iquitos at a young age, like many others. He later spent some time in the army, worked in the oil exploration operations, and finally returned to the village to raise his family. He looked, talked and conducted himself as a “mestizo”. He was well appreciated by the staff of the conservation project. Being the driver of their speed boat gave him a special status in the community and beyond. And still, he refused to perform his job for several months until his wife delivered his baby, for fear that the baby would be “cutipado” by the boat engine. “Stop driving that boat”, everybody kept telling him, “el motor te va a cutipar y tu hijo va a nacer renegrado y con pujos, como el motor” [the engine will ‘cutipar’ you and your baby will be born like the engine, all blackened and with stomach pain and diarrhea]. For several months he did not drive that boat, despite several requests and even a potential raise offered by the project to have him back. All the weight of his beliefs, the hidden power of indigenous spirituality expressed in the “cutipado” were still strong in him, despite his “assimilation”. Was he an Indian after all these years of living as a “mestizo”? Was he not really a mestizo after all? Perhaps he was both, an Indian able to experience and manipulate modernity; someone like Jesus cannot fit into categories like indigenous or “mestizo” the way they have been constructed. Perhaps there are negotiations and redefinitions in the daily life of “mestizos” like Jesus, who are already contesting these constructions in their own ways.

“My child had fever and diarrhea. I took him to the project’s nurse since I could not afford the medicine women. The nurse gave me free medicine for my child. But after a couple of days I could no longer give it to my child because I learned I was pregnant. Everybody knew that until delivery I could not give anyone medicine since I was impure. It was pointless, it was not allowed. Everybody knew that in the village but the nurse or the people working for the project. In her next visit the nurse got really mad once she learned why I had not completed the treatment. She depicted me for being ignorant and for not caring enough about my child. She screamed to me in anger. My sister later overheard her making fun of my story, which was circulated among the project staff as an example of how stupid women are in these villages. No wonder they never talk to us, only to men, as if we were not here.

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As if our work did not count, as if we were not people. Just because they have other ideas and because they have their project their jobs their boat... that does not mean that our views are not worthy. It is sad that in our poverty we have to depend on their medicine, their support and in exchange we have to suffer our humiliation in silence. It is sad that in our own house [the village] we have become nobody, just for being women, just for being us". (Marcela L., 44)

"I was one of them, a naked Aguaruna child running free, dirty and happy. But the missionaries thought I was smart and they made sure I learned Spanish and went to school, even to college. They supported me all the way and of course, after graduation I work for them. I was helping them to "civilize" other natives, bringing them to Christianity, teaching them to speak Spanish, to dress decently, to form villages, to have schools and to hunt and fish more for sell. So the natives stopped hanging more with their children and families and started working more and more. All these years I thought I was doing something good for them, bringing progress to them. I don't see them better-off now despite they work longer hours. They have to go further to fish and hunt since resources are less abundant. So, who is winning with this progress thing? Not them for sure [the "civilized" natives]. Now that I am old I know better; I want to pull out my hairs in despair and I ask myself: 'What have you done Moises?' Now I try to repair the damage by supporting bilingual programs that teach native languages to children of families who have lost their native languages in their aims to assimilate –like Cocama in this area. Most people here never learned Cocama because their parents only spoke to them in Spanish. It is a great loss that we have experienced here in this part of the Amazon: when a language is gone so is the memory of your ancestors, their wisdom, their pride, their ways of living, a way of understanding and making sense of the world, your own roots, part of who you are. But it is not easy to be an Indian in a country that does not accept Indians. After all you have to look for your family, make a living, find a way out of poverty and hope for a better future for your children. When I was a child, poverty did not exist: people had enough to eat and lived a simple life; they need little or no cash. Now money is everything and there is no place to escape when you are poor. Markets, churches, schools, even projects, all make native ashamed for being native, that is why they hide their beliefs, they pretend to be assimilated but deep inside they don't want to completely let go, they resist and wait" (Moises, 75 Bilingual Teacher and Advisor).

This article presents an exploration of the ambiguities found in the way members of two ribereño [riparian] communities in the Northeastern Peruvian Amazon relate with outsiders, understanding this as part of a process of negotiation, resistance and adaptation local people engage as part of their subordinated role within local and national economies and societies. Special emphasis is given to discuss indigeneity in the context of assimilation and mestizaje and to the blurred borders that characterize ethnic identities. Structural and subjective ambiguities are explored as they unveil the political constructiveness of modernity, conservation, indigeneity and gender. This paper invites a discussion of these topics across disciplinary borders; it combines critical cultural analysis with a political economy approach to understand the *hybrid livelihoods* of "mestizos" as part of what Escobar (1995) refers as "ambiguous engagements with modernity", a modernity that is per se ambiguous.

This piece uses results generated by field research conducted in two protected areas of the north Eastern Peruvian Amazon: the National Reserve Pacaya Samiria and the Communal Reserve Tamshiyacu-Tahuayo (See Figure 1). Field work included 74 surveys applied separately to men and women of the same households of a randomly selected sample of 37 households (50% of the universe of study). Ethnographic methods like mapping, focus groups, structured and unstructured interviews and participant observation were used in the communities of San Martin del Tipishca and Buenavista. The aim of the study was to understand the political ecology of gender and social hierarchies in regard to wildlife use and natural resources management and to formulate recommendations for conservation projects and programs working in this region. Results were analyzed in Espinosa (1998)ⁱ and published in Espinosa (2009b and 2010). An exploration of the relation between ethnic spirituality and health was presented in Espinosa (2009a). This article revisits this research from another perspective less focused on structures and hierarchies and more interested in the ways these hierarchies are negotiated and in the role culture plays mediating subordination and negotiation. There was a part of my field research that could not properly fit within the manuscripts I published and that kept calling for some attention. The main thrust of this paper is to link cultural processes with the political economy of gender and local livelihoods and to contextualize the relation riparian people have with the outsiders (state, NGOs) within the historic domination and subordination of the Amazon region started with colonialism and reinforced by post-colonial national assimilationist policies.

Finally, I want to break the common impression among certain circles that any discussion around modernity is an academic exercise that has no relevance for practical purposes or that is unrelated to the daily struggles of exploited and marginalized people. The evidence I present here clearly indicate that this discussion is pretty much at the core of the dilemmas subordinated and exploited people face every day and at the core of their suffering.

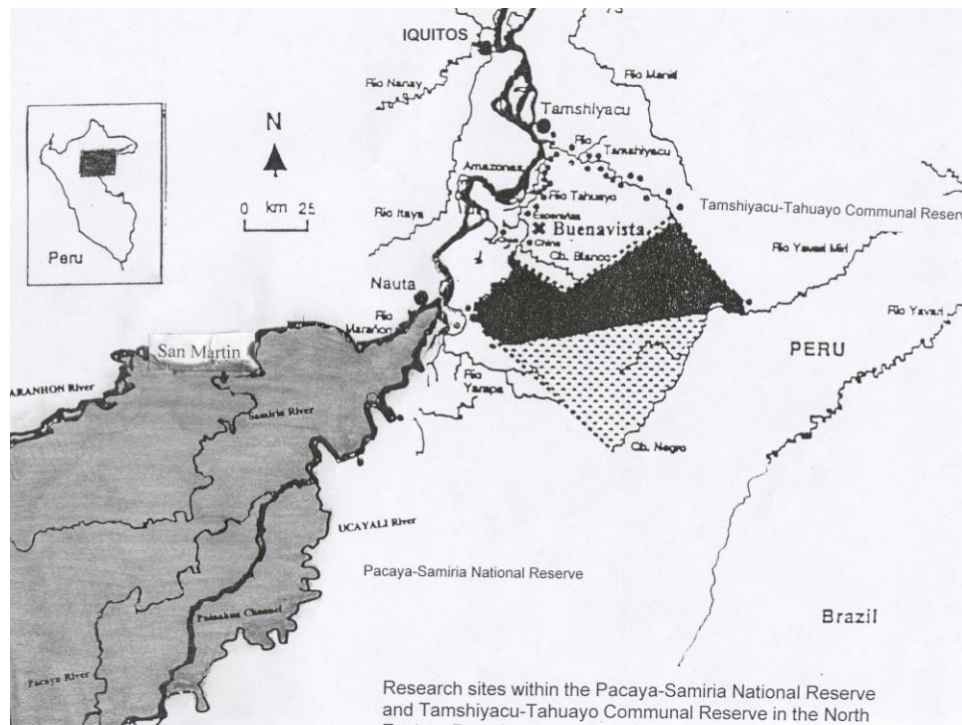


Figure 1. Research sites within the Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve and the Communal Reserve Tamshiyacu-Tahuayo in Loreto, North Eastern Peruvian Amazon.

Culture(s) is understood here as systems of meaning that organize reality and legitimate/de-legitimate what is accepted, possible or worthy, who has the power and entitlements. Culture is therefore a field of contention, a contested domain in which negotiations between individuals and social sectors of the same ethnic group and between the latter and external dominant society constantly occur (Varesse, 1996).

Political ecology recognizes that political, social and economic processes and institutions mediate the interactions between people and nature, defining the use of natural resources as a political process in which conflicting groups compete in asymmetric conditions (Bryant, 1992; Pelusso, 1992, Schmink 1997). Asymmetric power, resistance and competition are key features of the context in which social actors relate to each other and to natural resources in a process of bargaining, resistance, alliance building and competition. Within this approach, the identification at the local level of specific social actors, their interests and links to larger hierarchies and structures are important elements for identifying political alternatives and alliances leading to a process that can renegotiate power relations shaping use of natural resources and local livelihoods. The focus includes the different ways in which local actors battle over resources, meanings & institutional legitimacy & control; “contested frontiers” refers here to alternative definitions of what resources to be appropriated, by whom and how (Schmink & Wood, 1987). However, since this approach is not deterministic, it includes agency as the capacity of individuals to process social experience & devise ways of coping & transforming social life & structures. As pointed by Long (2001), there are different individual responses to similar structures, social relations and structures.

There is a multidirectional process of mediation, transformation and negotiations as well as social struggles between different actors. Agrawal (2001) addresses multiple rationalities that are culturally variable and that need to be understood within the larger contexts that explain the local experience and its links with broader contexts. Marginalized groups appropriate and redefine environmental ideologies and decision making through alliances they build and through their daily practice.

Gender has been defined as a social construction that within specific cultures and societies shapes the interactions between men and women according to specific hierarchies, roles and discourses that convert biological differences into social hierarchies (Poats et al., 1998; Feldstein and Poats, 1990). In this sense, gender interfaces with other social hierarchies, such as class, age and ethnicity to shape the relationship people establishes with nature and the way they use natural resources (Kabeer, 1994, Poats, Schmink and Spring, 1988). The institutionalization of gender analysis within development agencies (GAD) has limited its critical capacity to review the regional and global political processes affecting development, gender and other hierarchies (Braidotti et al., 1995:78-87) and the whole set of power relations affecting development institutions and the relation between gender researchers, trainers, planners and “beneficiaries” (Kabeer, 1994).

The paper calls attention to the unfinished and multidirectional nature of cultural assimilation and to the ignored ethnicity of the so called “ribereños” of the Northeastern Peruvian Amazon, who represent the majority of the rural population of Loreto in the Amazonian lowlands. This group has been labeled mestizo, referring to mixed blood and/or assimilated Indians who combine subsistence and market-oriented agriculture, and who are integrated into the national State through school and local public authorities (Altarama, 1992; Hiraoka, 1985). Even though this group is quite diverse and the results presented here cannot be generalized, they suggest there are important cultural dimensions that are been ignored, specially the role of culture shaping constructions of nature, gender, modernity and indigeneity and the on-going and ambivalent process of negotiation of these discourses.

This article hopes to generate discussion that can further clarify the topic; it has been guided by the following questions:

- How indigenous spirituality shapes ideologies on gender and nature and interacts with modernity in the context of mestizaje and assimilation?
- How constructions on gender & ethnicity reinforce invisibilities and social exclusion within the discourse and practice of conservation?

The issues I present here are quite relevant for current research and development agendas. The World Bank recently released a study commissioned on the links between indigenous peoples, poverty and development (Hall and Patrinos, 2010); the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights and the Organization of American States have released reports and declarations on indigenous rights as human rights (OEA 2009; ACHPR, 2005); all these documents coincide with indigenous leaders, researchers and advocates in their way of understanding indigeneity and ethnicity (Nash 2001; Safa, 2005; Dela Cadena 1991, De la Cadena and Starn. 2007; Dean and Jerome, 2003; Varese, 1996; Maybury-Lewis, 2002; IWGIA, 2010; Assies, der Haar and Hockema 2000; Warren 1998 and Grueso, Rosero and Escobar, 1998), moving away from rigid borders, linear unidirectional processes and limiting dichotomies to embrace the complexities and the political nature of claiming and granting ethnic identities.

While the term indigenous and indigenous peoples was coined by Europeans to justify the domination of the populations they encountered and to justify the policies of extermination or assimilation imposed to them, the terms have been redeployed in recent decades to create a robust global indigenous movement that has achieved some better conditions to organize and fight locally and within their national states for their rights. While recognizing the diversity of situations and meanings associated with the notion of indigenous peoples, researchers and the above-mentioned institutions agree on four basic criteria or guiding principles (which do not have to be all present in any given situation): the occupation and use of a specific territory, the voluntary perpetuation of cultural distinctiveness (language, social organization, religion and spiritual values, modes of production and laws and institutions), self-identification as a distinct collectivity and an experience of subjugation, marginalization, dispossession, exclusion or discrimination (UN Human Rights Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, 1982), which have been adopted by the 1989 ILO Convention 169 Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, emphasizing the self-determination as indigenous or tribal to be considered as the fundamental criterion. The World Bank in its operational manual (World Bank 2001) uses these criteria and adds the presence of economic systems primarily oriented to subsistence production. This article aims to link the process of cultural difference, resistance and negotiation with the structural limits faced by local livelihoods in order to better understand the multiple and connected levels of domination imposed on indigenous and local people in the so called Third World.

Modernity and subordination in Loreto

The Northeastern Peruvian Amazon is separated from the rest of the country by the Andes and more easily connects to Brazil and even Colombia, through the Amazon and other navigable rivers, than to the rest of the country. This part of the Peruvian Amazon experienced an early penetration of Europeans when Spanish expeditions in search of *El Dorado* started colonization of this region in the first part of the 16th century. However, the rate of integration and development of this region into national and global economies has been comparatively slow, due to ecological constraintsⁱ and to the limits of the Peruvian State. By the 1990s, the economy of this region remained based on natural resource extraction done mainly at small scale by local people and sold in Iquitos, commercial and service center for the region. Lack of industrialization, low returns and prices and high transaction costs for agricultural and wildlife products explain stagnation and spread poverty prevalent in this region. What is important to understand is that this pattern has historical roots that have not been challenged.

In 1536 the Spanish explorers, *conquistadores* and missionaries began to penetrate the Northeastern Peruvian Amazon, changing the landscape use made by indigenous tribes and imposing new patterns to benefit the distant crown and the local dominant groups who served and profited from the colonial power structure. During colonial domination, the Spanish established *encomiendas*, *reducciones*,² and new towns to reduce indigenous populations into a system of domination oriented to extraction of natural resources such as turtle eggs, waxes, honey, vanilla and medicinal plants, as tributes to the Spanish crown (Coomes, 1995:110). Indigenous peoples had also to provide unpaid labor for mission construction and maintenance, as guides and canoe men for soldiers, and for agricultural production, transportation and trading. Relocation of indigenous peoples from the upland forest toward the river banks, and their concentration into villages was imposed by the Spanish in order to facilitate their control (San Roman, 1975:35-52; Stocks, 1981:6). It has to be said that working for the missions protected indigenous people from the *bandeirantes*³ and from the *encomienda* system that had a more devastating effects on indigenous peoples. The success of missionaries in attracting Indians has partially been attributed to their possession of steel tools (axes and machetes), which totally altered the relationship of Indians with their forest. However, missionaries had the support of armed expeditions called *entradas* to recruit those natives unwilling to join the missions. This period was characterized by forced recruitment, indigenous flights into more distant territories and rebellions until 1680 when rebellions were finally crushed (Stocks, 1981:8). Indian mortality was high, due mainly to their exposure to new diseases, to exploitative conditions and to the disruption of their social organization. For example, between 1644 and 1652, fifty percent of the Cocama population "reduced" or recruited into the mission system, was reported dead (Regan 1983:49).

Missions were productive units that aimed to be self-sufficient. Indians could farm their own land and raise domestic animals. They also had to farm community land, oriented to support priests and children attending schools. Their periodic duties also included hunting, fishing and searching for turtle eggs (San Roman, 1975:51-67). The Church monopoly over natural resources extraction and trade was broken with the expulsion of the Jesuits and Franciscans in 1768. Power passed to civilian and military sectors and the linkages with Quito were replaced by linkages to Brazil, through the presence of Brazilian traders. In this period, the aim was to maintain native populations concentrated and dominated to support the growing white-mestizo local groups. Debt-peonage, *encomienda*, *mita*⁴ and forced military service were the institutions used to maintain this subordination, under the local power of governors and *encomenderos* supported by military troops.

ⁱThe Spanish created several institutions to reorganize native populations. *Reducciones*: were the first political, administrative and territorial units created by the Spanish in order to *reduce* natives at three levels: geographically, from their dispersed settlements in the forest into spatially concentrated units; religiously, through their conversion into Christian faith; and socially, by destroying their own culture, religion and social organization, as subordinated labor. *Reducciones* took the form of missions until the expulsion of Jesuits and Franciscans. The *encomienda* replaced the *reducciones* and they were temporary concessions of territory and Indians given to a private person, who was in charge of collecting taxes for the Spanish crown, having the right to free Indian labor. This system of *encomiendas* set no limits to protect native population from the ambition of *encomenderos* who sought to increase their profit at any cost.

²Expeditions coming from Brazil to capture Indians as slaves. Portugal allowed slavery within its colonies, while the Spanish did not.

³*Mita* was the mandatory service that citizens of the Inca Empire provided to the state. Spanish established *mita* as regular obligations that the indigenous population had to provide to the Spanish crown. *Mita* is the word to refer to the service, *mitayo* refers to the product of this service (in this region, the species hunted or collected) and *mitayero* is the person who does the service.

Indians had to work to pay a never-ending debt, to provide *mitayo* on a daily basis instead of the rotating system established by the missions and to serve military dutiesⁱⁱⁱ. This extraction of cash and goods from native populations was reinforced by the development of local and regional markets. Petty river traders came from Brazil, exchanging manufactured goods such as steel, porcelain and clothing for salted fish, wood resins and barks, balsams and wax. The *regatones*⁵ and *habilitadores*⁶ engaged native people in an unequal and abusive system of exchange. This commercial penetration was enhanced by the introduction of steamships in 1853. Native languages and customs were prohibited and the initial strategy of Indians was to escape to the deep forests or to periodically rebel; however most were later assimilated into markets, villages and schools (San Roman, 1975:93-105; Stocks, 1981:93-105; Chibnik, 1994:28-34; Coomes, 1995:110).

The new Peruvian republic, born in 1821, created in 1865 in Loreto the first regional government in the Peruvian Amazon, to encourage agricultural production and establishing a duty-free zone for twenty years. The first economic boom of the Peruvian Amazon was the export of Panama hats produced in the eastern highlands and traded through Yurimaguas and Nauta on the Maranhon river, to Iquitos and then via the Amazon river to Brazil. To consolidate territorial sovereignty, the national government supported transport and trade in the Amazon, creating a naval base at Iquitos in 1862. This support was interrupted by the debt crisis of the 1870s (Coomes, 1995:110).

The new national government created laws to protect indigenous people, recognized as Peruvian citizens. Their land rights were acknowledged and the practice of forced labor was prohibited. However, these laws were never enforced at the local level, since Indian labor was required for trading and governors were the main merchants of the region. After the introduction of steamships in 1853, the Peruvian government subsidized nationals and foreigners willing to settle in the Amazon region, reinforced the military presence and provided some basic services; as a result, colonists began to establish in the region (Chibnik 1994:34-36; San Roman, 1975:119).

The debt peonage system that characterized labor relations in the region in this period started during the colonial times, after the expulsion of the Jesuits. Merchants taking advantage of the Indian need for tools and other basic goods, offered them credit in exchange for fish, game meat and forest products. Due to uneven terms of exchange, Indians ended up with exorbitant debts that were transferred to their families after their death. For example, in this period an Indian usually worked a whole month to pay for an axe (Raimondi, 1862 as cited in Chibnik, 1994:37). When these mercantilistic relationships expanded, *regatones* appeared as middle men for urban traders, who provided them with merchandise to exchange to indigenous peoples for forest products (Chibnik, 1994:37). These trade networks increased the pressure on natural resources, due to the low prices for forest products and the coercive nature of the contract. Products sold to Indians were imported from Brazil: iron objects, wheat flour, alcoholic beverages, woolen and cotton goods, clothing and munitions. The most important exports at that time were: sarsaparilla, *copal*,⁷ Panama hats, salted fish and wax, as well as balsam, turtle eggs and fat, hammocks, tobacco and quinine. These exports were causing significant depletion of natural resources in the Peruvian Amazon, as suggested by Regan (1983:76). In 1859, the local government established rules first limiting the production of sarsaparilla and later banning its export, but these laws were ignored due to the attractive price and demand for this product in Brazil (San Roman, 1975:101-105; Chibnik, 1994:36-37). Iquitos, a center of artisan production and trade formed after independence, remained a small village until the rubber boom that changed the social structure and political ecology of the region. Even though rubber had been used by indigenous people since pre-Columbian times (San Roman, 1975:126), its commercial "discovery" and demand in the late 1800s dramatically changed the social landscape of the Peruvian Amazon.

It attracted large waves of fortune-seekers, from diverse origins (Europeans, Brazilians, Colombians, Peruvians from the highlands and the coast) that displaced native access to land and created estates (*fundos*) that remained after the rubber boom collapsed, all based on native labor. The importance of rubber was great, since it became Peru's second major export between 1902 and 1906.

⁴*Regatones* were small traders usually recruited and funded by large traders in Iquitos, who traveled to the small villages, offering urban goods in exchange for game meat, fish and other forest and river products.

⁵*Habilitadores* were people who financed hunting and/or collecting expeditions, setting the price for the products obtained in the expedition.

⁷Sassparilla or sarsaparilla is a viny plant used as a flavoring, for example in the preparation of root-beer; *copal* is a natural resin extracted from the bark of different tropical trees, that is used as sealant, especially in boat construction,

In 1910 Loreto exported 4,500,000 kilograms as compared to 2,088 kilograms exported in 1862 (San Roman, 1975:130-131; Chibnik, 1994:39). The system of exploitation was collection of rubber from scattered natural trees existing in the rainforests. This system was different from the plantation system developed in British Asian colonies that would later displace Amazonian rubber (San Roman:1975:131-132).

The rubber estates required a labor force familiar with tropical forests and with dispersed settlements: they recruited natives displaced and dispossessed from their own land. The same exchange system was used to recreate debt-peonage into forms that resembled slavery. The debt was not only transferred to their families in case of death, but in-debt workers were sold as part of the land when a patron decided to sell his property. The other system of labor recruitment, called *correrias* used force to move entire indigenous tribes living in the inter-fluvial zones into the rubber exploitation system, under the same debt-peonage system. Due to the inhumane working conditions, mortality was high, and some voices of protest made this situation known internationally. This scandal coincided with the decline of the rubber boom in 1912, due to the competition first of rubber plantations in British Asian colonies and later of synthetic rubber (Chibnik, 1994:38-42). The city of Iquitos, with 150 inhabitants in 1847, grew to 14,000 habitants by the end of the rubber boom. Connected to the main markets of Liverpool and New York through oceangoing steamers, it was the second most active port in Peru and had resident consuls from ten foreign countries (Chibnik, 1994:43).

The impact of the rubber boom was tremendous, since it changed the ethnic, social and demographic structure of the region, leading to further tribal disruption, *mestizaje* and ethnicide and consolidation of white-mestizo dominant groups. It also allowed penetration of capitalism beyond the sphere of exchange, into the land tenure system and social relations of production. Besides the rubber estates, a large number of estates were raising cattle, producing sugar cane and *aguardiente*.⁸ After the rubber boom, most *fundos* or small estates moved to other extractive activities, extending the depletion of resources. For the case of the Tahuayo basin, Coomes (1995:112) reconstructs a century of resource depletion consisting of the collection and export of vegetable ivory or *tagua*, a latex called *balata*, timber, fuelwood for steamers and tannin of *pashaco* trees, through the same system imposed by the patrones of these *fundos*. As they depleted one resource, they moved into the next. While major fortunes created by the rubber boom fled from Iquitos after the rubber boom declined, many enterprises remained, establishing networks to obtain and export forest products, such as timber, gums, resins, essential oils, natural insecticides, medicinal plants, *barbasco*⁹ and ornamental fishes. The construction of a saw mill in Iquitos in 1918 promoted the export of cedar and mahogany. Between 1925 and 1940 Loreto exported from six to ten thousand metric tons of precious wood (San Roman, 1975:172). The environmental impact of these activities was significant and they also maintained the social structure of dominance over indigenous and poor mestizo groups, trapped in the system of debt-peonage.

In the 1940s a new geopolitical consideration influenced the Peruvian state policy toward the Amazon after 1941: when an undeclared war with Ecuador led to a peace protocol warranted that vindicated Peruvian territorial rights to this region. It became necessary to integrate this territory into the Peruvian economy and society in order to secure military sovereignty. In addition to increased military presence, the state increased representation of the principal national ministries at the regional level, expanded primary rural schools and basic public health services, and promoted higher education and research by creating UNAP (National University of the Peruvian Amazon) and the IIAP (Research Institute of the Peruvian Amazon), and Education has been extremely important for the consolidation of Spanish as the language of domination and the white-mestizo culture as the dominant one. The discourse of national integration hid the real process of subordination^{iv} of Loreto into the national society, and the subordination and assimilation of native populations and cultures to the hegemonic national culture, predominantly white-mestizo, urban and Western. Some indigenous peoples tired of the experience of subordination and marginalization—for instance the Cocamas also called "invisible natives" (Stocks, 1981)--decided to erase their external ethnic markers: they stopped speaking their language to their children, formed villages, requested schools and no longer identified themselves as Cocamas.

This process of assimilation was a response to the anti-indigenous policies and practices of discrimination and it was facilitated by the increasing expansion of markets, schools and the media (small battery radios connect isolated villages to Iquitos and other cities of Peru, Colombia and Brazil).

⁹ *Aguardiente* is the alcohol distilled from the sugar cane juice,

¹⁰ *Barbasco* is a natural poison used by local people to fish, and was used as an input to make industrial pesticides.

At the national level, between 1943 and 1960 there was a tremendous effort to connect the Northern, Central and Southern Amazon with the highlands and the coast through roads and airports, aimed at redirecting the flow of products sent to Brazil toward the Peruvian coast. While the upper Amazon became more integrated to the highlands and the coast, the lower Amazon (Loreto) did not, starting a process of economic and demographic differentiation between the upper and lower Amazon (Rodriguez, 1991:110).

The productive patterns of the Loreto region did not change significantly, depending mainly on the extraction of forest in a context of economic stagnation. The commoditization of natural resources was not accompanied by the development of processing industries or the development of secondary markets that could promote manufacture or small business to dynamize the region and provide sources of employment for a growing urban population. Rosewood oil generated a new fever of extraction during the 1950s but it did not last. Later, in 1954, the export of ornamental fishes experienced a peak but it did not last either (Coomes, 1995).

Aimed at modernization, the national State tried to promote capitalist development for the region, as part of a new geopolitical approach to the Amazon borders, focused on populating and civilizing the region rather than just reinforcing the military presence (Barclay et al., 1991:47-55). The state directly promoted colonization and immigration through the military colonies created in 1946 and the settlement of the road workers. In 1951 the Technical Colonization Units were created to stimulate professionals to settle in the region. However, the main stream of colonist migration was spontaneously generated by highland landless peasants who followed the new connecting roads (*carreteras de penetracion*). Colonization policies were aimed at alleviating the land conflicts in the coast and highlands as much as developing the Amazon region, especially the upper Amazon (Rodriguez, 1991:109-116). Another important goal of colonization was to increase food production in order to reduce food imports and to redistribute the national population, highly concentrated in the coast and the highlands and not in the Amazon (Barclay, 1991:61-62).

The Amazon region in general and Loreto in particular have experienced a different demographic pattern as compared to the rest of the country. The Amazon region comprises 60% of the Peruvian territory. Its population in 1862 represented only 5.6% of national population and in 1940 only 8% of the national population (CICRED, 1974:142-144; INE, 1981:35; Valcarcel, 1991:163). It has exhibited a slower growth rate and lesser density per square kilometer: 0.5 inhabitant per square kilometer in 1940 to 2.5 in 1980, as compared to higher and increasing density at the national level: from 4.8 inhabitant per square kilometer in 1940 to 13.8 in 1980 (INE, 1981:29). The region's low density has been in part due to the omission of its indigenous population, which was not properly registered due to their mobile use of territory or their isolation, which were neither understood nor acknowledged.

Because of this relatively sparse and invisible population, since the 1940s the official discourse has represented this region as underpopulated and as a socially empty space, filled with abundant and easy-to-exploit natural resources, and available to redistribute the highly and growing population concentrated in the highlands and the coast (Prado, 1941; Bustamante and Rivero, 1945; as cited in Valcarcel, 1991:167). The myth of *El Dorado* was underlying many programs designed to convert this region into the national *despensa* or food supplier, ignoring its fragile ecology and the territorial rights of indigenous peoples.

The State goal in this period was to integrate Amazon resources into the process of capitalist expansion occurring at the national level. The Corporacion Peruana del Amazonas was created in 1942, basically to supply rubber for a subsidiary of the Goodyear Company producing tires in Lima. The Compañia Petrolera El Oriente, the Empresa Petrolera Fiscal and later in the 1960s foreign corporations such as Mobil Oil were established in the region. The importance of these oil companies was not too large, since they contributed only 2.3% of national oil production for the period 1950-59 (Barclay et al., 1991:59). The Industrial Development Law was issued in 1959 to promote industrialization in the Amazon using tax exemptions as incentives to promote regional industrial development. At this time the region was targeted for national security, not only in terms of external threats, but solving internal conflicts (Barclay et al., 1991:65-67). Besides the growth of administrative public structures and services, national policies promoting agriculture in the lowlands started in the 1950s and 1960s, restricted to some short cycle cash-crops such as rice and maize, and later jute, grown primarily on the mudflats of the lowlands. However, the land tenure systems and social relations affecting labor, as well as the transaction costs (due to the high price of transportation, distance and isolation) frustrated these initiatives. Many laborers left the *fundos* and moved further into the interior to start independent villages, expanding the frontier and combining subsistence and commercial agriculture, fishing, hunting and collection of other forest products (Chibnik, 1994:49-50).

Even though national policies could not promote capitalist industrial development and did not change the productive pattern of the region, they had an impact on the social relations and over the rural landscapes. Intensification of river transportation and commerce eroded the monopoly of *patrones* and *regatones* and the control they had over local labor, and favored the free exchange of goods and labor (Padoch, 1988; Barclay et al., 1991:71). Local people could escape from the patronage system, but they could not escape from the market dynamic, since they already needed cash to buy goods that had become part of their basic needs (kerosene, salt, oil, sugar, batteries, munitions, health and educational expenses). And since the prices for their products were low, they needed to supplement their income with wage labor (Chibnik, 1994:50) and with more extraction of natural resources.

Between 1940 and 1961 the Amazon population experienced an annual growth rate of 3.56%, well above the national average rate of 2.25%. For the same period, the migration rate for the region went from 3.0 to 6.1. Mobility toward the region and within the region doubled (Rodriguez, 1991:113-114). This demographic growth and the trend toward urbanization would become stronger in the next decades. As we have seen, the history of Loreto and of the Amazon shows the disruption of the natural economy and of indigenous social organization and the commoditization of nature and indigenous labor while imposing policies of extermination and/or assimilation. These patterns were initiated by the Spanish colonizers but continued after independence, keeping domination over the Amazonian landscapes and over its people.

Modernity and livelihoods in Loreto

The incorporation of indigenous populations into market economy and *mestizo* society has been justified by a discourse reinforcing the superiority of Whites against Indians, of Catholicism¹⁰ against animism; of modern civilization against tribal culture and societies and of Spanish over native languages. The messages from the Church, the state (school system, military, and law enforcement) the economy and the media have been consistent addressing modernity and development as inexorable linear processes that monopolize any opportunity to enhance livelihoods and living conditions. On the other hand, there have been objective limits impeding the full incorporation of local peoples within market economy and modernity. The lack of economic growth and demand for labor in Iquitos and other cities of the region cannot transform rural migrants into proletarians. For this reason migrants remain as “floating” informal labor that either sink into lumpen-proletariat or return to their villages later in life. The livelihoods of *ribereños* rely on a combination of subsistence and market oriented activities, mainly of extractive nature (i.e., fishing, hunting and to a lesser extent agriculture¹¹). The broad supply of these products that concentrate mainly in Iquitos and the relatively limited demand for these products keep their prices low. In a context where there are no alternative sources of income local people turn into extractive activities to obtain the cash they need to survive. Prices for natural resources remain excessively low, which benefits traders and final consumers, but not the local people or the environment.

Ribereño livelihoods are characterized by poverty and very limited access to cash. Migration to Iquitos or other town is common; not only to continue education but to find any income and to release the pressure on their families of origin at least one member of the household leaves home when old enough to take care of him/herself. But there are not many opportunities in the city to make a decent living and for that reason many migrants return to their villages to raise a family, unable to “make it” in the city. Despite their exposure to modernity they have to rely on “traditional” ways to build their houses, crop, fish, hunt, and cook to be able to survive with very little cash. On the other hand, “traditional” or ethnic views are quite prevalent in the village, adding to the ambivalence or hybrid experience of *ribereños*.

Indigenous spirituality, nature and modernity

Perhaps the most surprising finding for me is the pervasive presence of indigenous spirituality in daily life of “mestizos”, shaping discourses and social interactions in terms of gender and nature. Tangible practices, taboos and beliefs unveiled the complex ethnicity of “mestizos”. These elements of indigeneity are lived in the midst of a subordinated engagement with modernity and ambiguous claims in terms of ethnic identities.

¹⁰ Since the 1960s the strong presence of Christian missionaries especially focused on native groups in the Amazon has broken the monopoly of Catholicism in this area—and later in the Andes as well.

¹¹ Until 1990 there were public programs promoting “cash crops” like jute, maize and rice in the area, but they were suspended as part of the Structural Adjustment Program started in 1990. Local peoples had to rely more on extractive activities like fishing, hunting, making charcoal, extracting more *aguaje* palm and other resources from the forests.

There were strong and dialectical tensions between the private/public, insider/outsider; indigenous/assimilated, traditional/modern that suggest these categories are not discrete but dialectical dimensions of unifying processes that are uneven in rhythm and non-linear in direction. I found structural as well as subjective ambiguities in regard to culture and identity that could only be understood if constructions of indigeneity and assimilation are re-categorized to accommodate the different ways Indians and “mestizos” experience and negotiate their engagement with modernity

The very notion of what is nature is part of these tensions. Precisely the role of culture and discursive power is to present as natural what is socially constructed. Nature is also a social construction, as shaped by particular cultural and social relations and Cosmo-visions. Nazarea (1999) remind us that ethno-ecologies are situated knowledge, since visions of nature are part of cultural relations that vary for specific ethnic groups. Visions of nature are not neutral or “objective” but are framed within historic asymmetries of class, gender, and ethnicity. The process of knowing is linked to the process of decision-making and action. Therefore, in order to understand behavior and attitudes towards conservation in the Amazon, we need to understand what constructions of nature are in place and what legitimacies and entitlements spread out of these different visions, since they provide the foundation for the process of decision-making in regard to use of natural resources.

Escobar (2001) challenges the modern ideology of naturalism that conceives nature outside of history and of human context, proposing an anti-essentialist theory of nature that understands the manifold forms in which nature is culturally constructed and socially produced, although recognizing the biophysical basis of nature. Escobar (2001) identifies three non-linear “regimes of nature”: Capitalist Nature (that coincides with a focus on production and modernity; an Organic Nature (focused on culture and local knowledge) and a “Techno-nature” (expressing artificiality and virtual reality). Hybridization of nature is referred by Escobar (2001) as the process through which social groups incorporate multiple constructions of nature in order to negotiate with trans-local forces while maintaining certain autonomy & cultural cohesion. I found particularly useful Escobar description of capitalist and organic natures, to describe the tensions between two major constructions of nature in the area of study (presented in Figure 2), constructions that are perceived and acted by individuals differently according to gender or age groups.

Considering the conflicting views on nature and their different rationales it is clear that the logic of “protecting nature” does not make much sense among people who are constantly seeking “protection from nature”, which is powerful in its spiritual powers (animism) and in its physical destructive power, for instance through floods. On the other hand, the goal of conserving and protecting nature becomes highly contested when local communities are excluded from decision making and harassed when using natural resources (their catch being seized by park guards unless bribes are paid). People ask: conservation for whom, whose nature, who controls this protection? These questions challenge the legitimacy of conservation interventions carried out by the state or NGOs. However, since indigenous views on nature are considered backwards, residual of pre-modern, these views do not give legitimacy to *riberenos* to be considered partners in conservation and to be included in the decision-making affecting their resources, their livelihoods. Resistance or challenges to nature conservation are perceived as selfish anti-environmentalist, short-term behavior driven by poverty and ignorance. The fact that there are different rationalities or ethno-ecologies and different legitimacies for entitlements rooted in alternative ways to relate with nature is not considered. That is why it is necessary to unveil the cultural constructions behind behavior, attitudes, identities and actions.

As mentioned by Schmink and Woods (1992) contested frontiers in the Amazon do not refer only to the physical frontiers but to alternative definitions of what resources to be appropriated, by whom and how. Local actors battle for control of resources and over meanings and institutional legitimacy; in this process different hegemonies and levels of subordination allow a process of negotiation in a context of subordination.

This process of negotiation occurs in a context of structural subordination at the material and the symbolic, reinforcing ethnic, class and gender hierarchies. For instance local communities have no entitlements within Protected Areas like the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve. This lack of entitlements reflects the way national states defined citizenship, pushing assimilation as the only path for indigenous peoples to be recognized as citizens. This lack of recognition of indigenous peoples’ territorial rights has been part of the way the Amazon space was historically constructed as an empty space ready to be occupied and colonized (Barclay et al., 1991).

This context of subordination also reflects the economic limits of peripheral capitalism, of modernity without modernization in Latin America (Garcia Canclini, 1995; Escobar, 1995) where development means development of imperfect markets for rural labor and goods. Poverty and stagnation maintain “traditional” practices functional to support livelihoods of the poor. For instance traditional housing, diet, cropping, fishing and so on are reproduced because they do not require cash that is so scarce and difficult to obtain.

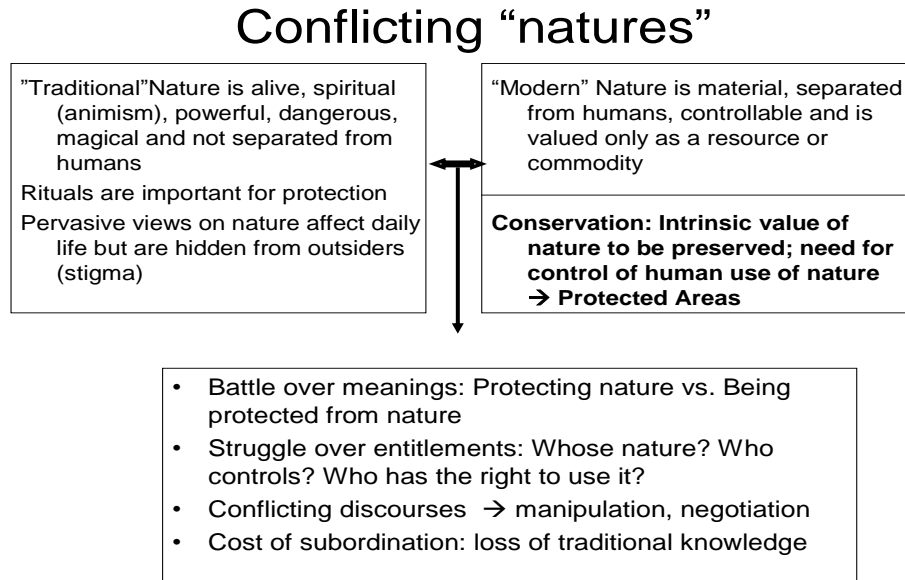


Figure 2. Different ethno-ecologies in conflict in the Amazon

In this context community organizations are crucial to negotiate on behalf of families. Communities have learned to manipulate different discourses, including the discourse of conservation and development to obtain certain services and support for territorial rights claims. For example in San Martin del Tipishca the community made agreements on wildlife use: they formed fishing committees and obtained boats and better fishing nets in exchange for observing fishing close seasons, endangered species and so on; they also obtained technical assistance for reforestation of precious timber trees, technical assistance for certain crops, health services and a bilingual education program that reintroduces Cocama language in high school.

Ethnic spirituality, nature and gender

What we refer here as indigenous view of nature is what percolates from interviews and observations in the community of San Martin and to a lesser extent Buenavista. Nature is perceived as material and spiritual at the same time, without clear borders between these two dimensions^v. Nature is perceived as being alive and full of spirits that interact with humans, blurring the borders we have between reality and magic. Animism attributes to all being (plants, animals, water bodies, rocks) an individual spirit and a collective or mother spirit, for instance the mother of all deer. What is interesting is that while the collective or mother spirit is feminine, the spirits of certain strong animals like the “boa” (large snake), frogs or dolphins are masculine. These spirits can impregnate women, being one of the reasons why women are prohibited from entering alone forests and rivers, especially at certain moments of their reproductive cycle. The study collected testimonies referring to babies born with certain abnormalities attributed to being fathered by some of these spirits. Nature spirits, being either masculine or feminine, are able to engage in sexual intercourse with humans. These beliefs are part of a view of nature that is not separated from humans. Since women and children are considered weaker than men, there are a series of taboos and regulations that prevent women from dwelling alone in forests and rivers. This sexual nature then becomes segregated by gender.

Forests, rivers and lagoons become “masculine” spaces in that women are not allowed to go unless as part of larger parties; for instance some families do periodical trips to harvest the fruit of certain palms like “chonta”. Men hunt in small parties that do not include women^{vi}. The plots nearby the village and the village become then “feminine” spaces even though these spaces are shared with men. However, the power and presence of nature and its spirits are everywhere, even in the village.

This power is referred as “*cutipar*”: “*Cutipar*” has no translation to English since it is not a Spanish word. It refers to the capacity of plants, animals or bodies of water, namely anything that has spirit, to capture your body and energy and impose its characteristics upon you, causing problems and disease. For example, eating too much of fruits that are liquid will give you diarrhea. Taboos are in place to prevent people from being “*cutipado*” by most powerful or known spirits.

Taboos are enforced to protect men and women against the “*cutipado*” but are more associated with female sexuality, especially pregnancy and menstruation. In this regard, taboos reinforce the subordination of women, even though they are not restricted to women. Taboos are specially focused on certain stages of the feminine reproductive cycle, like pregnancy and menstruation. There is a long list of prohibitions affecting what a woman in these circumstances may eat or not, where she can go or not, what she can do or not. For instance, pregnant women should not eat the meat of certain animals who live in holes, to prevent having problems at the moment of delivery, as the baby could not come out and die. However, taboos are not limited to women, since what men eat or do can also affect their babies and their birth.

This article opens with the story of Jesus who quitted his job driving the speed boat until his baby was born, fearing that the boat engine would “*cutipar*” his baby. What is interesting in this story is that men are also affected by the restrictions associated with “*cutipar*”. But what is most remarkable is that the power of “*cutipar*” has been transferred from nature to elements of modernity such as the speed boat engine. *Ex*; “*el motor te va a cutipar*”. The power of “*cutipar*” given to be boat engine reflects how elements of modernity, elements of the exterior world are reinterpreted by the cultural local frameworks that in this case are dominated by indigenous spiritual views of the world.

Gender ideologies are responsible for important asymmetries within ribereño communities in the Amazon: men and women do not have the same entitlements in regard to decision-making, access and control of resources and opportunities, visibility and representation. It is important however to address that gender relations are multi-dimensional, including subordination, inter-dependence and collaboration, which gives women variable bargaining power.

As presented in Espinosa (1998, 2010) women’s labor, knowledge and decision-making play an important role securing the livelihoods of these families. However, gender ideologies explain that the real amount of labor allocated by men and women do not coincide with the perceived roles of men and women; for instance agriculture is presented by men and women as being a male activity even though women’s labor account for almost 50% of the total labor in cropping and for 80% of total labor in domestic husbandry. Women’s labor is particularly important during certain months of the year, when fishing and cropping place competing demands for male labor, or when flooding comes early and harvesting before flooding takes a dramatic twist.

While men and women coincide to identify which are the main activities for food and for cash, men tend to give more importance to hunting than women do, for both food and cash. This is associated with the lesser female control on income resulting from hunting.

Gender ideologies are embedded in ethnic discourses dominated by spiritual views of the world, as already mentioned. Nature is not neutral but sexual in its interactions with people; natural spaces are segregated by gender as well. What men and women can do or not is related to this view of nature as being alive, powerful and sexual. An important distinction was observed between gender relations at the public and at the private levels. For instance, women do not attend communal meetings unless for replacing their husbands; in these cases women sit apart and do not speak out. This reinforces women’s invisibility. However in the privacy of their homes, most men and women share information, discuss issues and make joint decisions. Decisions related to how much of the catch remains for consumption and how much goes for sale were shared by men and women in both communities. However control over the cash resulting from wildlife sale (fishing or hunting) was variable: 60% of households in San Martín and 45% in Buenavista have husbands deciding and making use of this money without wives’ participation. The fact that around half of the households interviewed had male-dominated decisions on the use of money generated through the extraction of wildlife has critical implications for these families’ well-being, in terms of their access to food, health and education since men not always made the best use of the money obtained from selling their products in Iquitos, wasting money in alcohol or buying non-basic items^{vii}

In a context of poverty and vulnerability, local livelihoods rely on economic interdependence and collaboration between men and women, which provides some base for bargaining and negotiating. However, women have different bargaining power for making decisions. The more access women have to cash, education or training, or the more involved they are in community affairs or with the Club de Madres, the more bargaining power they have within the marriage; on the opposite, older women with less access to formal education who are more socially isolated or who belong to extended families where kinship structures have more weight seems to have less bargaining power. We also found different relations with the forests and rivers across gender. Even though segregation of natural spaces by gender is the norm, based on the perceived vulnerability of women, not all men or women relate to these spaces in the same way. For instance, in the communities under study most men do not hunt regularly. Men and women coincided to identify between six and ten dedicated hunters per community, which coincided with data obtained from the surveys^{viii}. However, women tended to associate hunting with economic determinants –such as getting money faster, lack of alternative sources of cash, while men focused more on having or not the skills to hunt and on their preference or reluctance to stay in the open forest away from their homes. Some men expressed their preference for agriculture, fishing and being at home as opposed to being in the forest for long periods; other men frankly expressed they got lost once or had some accident with the fire gun; most men also addressed that being away prevents hunters from cropping, becoming more dependent on purchased food, which explained why hunters were not among the better-off in these villages.

Even though women do not hunt directly, some women finance hunters and gain control of their catch. Medicine women have to go deep into the forests to collect medicinal plants, which is part of their spiritual rituals and tasks. They have the spiritual knowledge and power to negotiate nature and its spirits in a way that other cannot. Women and men negotiate their way through ideologies and hierarchies of gender, ethnicity and class. Women don't have all the same economic status within these communities: some women have better access to cash than other women or even than many men. While most women can obtain little cash sporadically by selling some domestic animals, other women have a more substantial and sustained access to cash. For instance some women receive widow pensions when they had been married to a policeman or a rural teacher, others provide rooming and boarding for the school teacher or cook for the project staff. Some women are able to finance hunters ("habilitar") who cannot afford the rising cost of supplies for expeditions that last an average of 10 days. By financing these expeditions women control the catch and make a profit from male hunters' hard work.

To illustrate how ethnicity can lead to different outputs in terms of gender and in terms of economic status, we can compare hunters and shamans who are among the more "traditional" or indigenous in these communities: hunters are not among the better-off while shamans are. Even though hunters make fast cash they also spend fast since they rely on local shop for food supplies. The shamans are among the better-off in each community, perhaps because they are not many of them, which keeps them fully booked. On the other hand, there is no gender restriction for being a shaman while there is a taboo for women to hunt. It is important to highlight that all hunters perform rituals for protection before and at the beginning of the hunting expedition, for instance they ask permission to the "mother" spirit of the animals they want to hunt. They "diet"^{ix} before going on the hunting expedition and their ritual in the forests includes smoking a special tobacco called "mapacho" to keep evil spirits away at night. Hunters are perhaps the last repositories of indigenous knowledge of the forests, rivers and wildlife in these communities. All hunters interviewed listed their preference for being in the open forest as the main reason to engage in these expeditions. While they mentioned the high economic return obtained from these expeditions, they addressed how the money they made was quickly spent buying food they could not produce and paying the loan from "habilitadores".

Gender relationships are shaped by the limits of particular livelihoods. In a context of poverty and lack of access to cash, reproductive tasks are conducted in precarious conditions, demanding longer hours and more intensive labor. For instance washing clothes and dishes is done in the river's shore since houses have no running water or sewage, and using ashes instead of detergent. Gender ideologies and hierarchies hide the relevance of women in "male" domains like wildlife use and conservation of nature. Because women do not hunt or fish for sale, women remain invisible. However, women's knowledge, decision-making and perspectives are important to be taken into account. Even though women do not hunt, 96% of women interviewed could map and name at least two of the four locations used by most husbands to fish and/or hunt, what animals and species and the amount catch (Espinosa, 1998; 2011). This knowledge reflects the access women have to knowledge about wildlife use even they are not direct users of these resources.

Communication among spouses gives women access to this knowledge. It shows the need to consider complementarity and inter-dependence as well as subordination when addressing gender relations in this area. The study shows that women's labor in agriculture, domestic livestock and reproductive tasks is crucial to secure livelihoods in a context of extreme poverty and vulnerability. However, gender hierarchies show asymmetries in the way men and women interact. Subordination of women is reflected in longer working hours, domestic violence, lack of autonomy to decide on the use of contraceptives, lesser access to food, education and cash. The resilience of these households to survive in conditions of extreme poverty and vulnerability has a cost that is unevenly distributed within the households in terms of gender.

There are different gendered perceptions on nature and the situation of environmental degradation. Women were focused on the next generations not having enough resources to make a living, while men were more focused on the present challenges to make a living. Women reported more specific causes of resource depletion, such as having better fishing nets, growing human population in the area and increasing market demand. Men were more elusive reporting specific causes of resource depletion. In everyday life women seemed to be more afraid about forests and rivers and were making constant reference to abovementioned taboos. There are also differences in terms of generation: youth find nature and life in the village more oppressive and are looking for a way out; by contrast older people are more tuned with nature and more accepting with life in the village despite poverty. As already mentioned, families in the communities have a different view of nature than projects do but they have learned to use the discourse of conservation and development to negotiate support to their claims to secure territorial rights or to obtain health services and productive support.

Gender and modernity

The study found that the gendered division of roles is related to a formal separation between public and private spheres. Men are usually in charge of selling household production and purchasing food and basic good supplies outside the community. Women are in general more confined to the village and have fewer exchanges with the outside world. Men interact more with the outside world and adopt elements of modernity, like urban language or modern dress codes. For instance men use the soccer-uniform-like shorts and t-shirts made of lycra; or jeans, polo t-shirt and sneakers. Men also have learnt to manipulate discourses of development, conservation and indigeneity to negotiate with projects, state authorities or politicians and obtain this way services or resources for the village and/or support for their territorial claims. I found women were not engaged in or familiar with these forms of negotiation and discourse manipulations. On the other hand, the same men who were adopting elements of modernity to better negotiate outside interactions were enforcing at home traditional gender roles and ethnic views: observing taboos and traditional roles that reinforce women subordination; for instance women needed to ask these husbands permission to attend a meeting of the Club de Madres and only after all domestic duties were performed. Therefore, the fact that men look more modern does not mean that they are less traditional or indigenous or that they are more open to redefine gender relations to reduce women subordination. Does this mean that women who are less exposed to modernity are more indigenous?

It seems that men have a broader repertoire of meanings, roles and identities to perform, than women do. Men can play as mestizos when in the city of Iquitos, Mazan or Nauta or in the steam boat and still enforce traditional gender roles and indigenous beliefs when at home. Women have more or less the same traditional/indigenous role at home and in the village^x. However, this does not mean that the village is a close world or that women don't experience modernity in the village or in the limited exchanges with the outside world. The school the project staff or the radio are some of the elements of modernity women interact with on a regular base. On the other hand, we need to avoid falling into dichotomic views of "traditional" or "modern". Following Escobar (1995) we found that modernity in this area includes premodern or amodern modalities, what we usually refer to as "traditional" only for descriptive purposes.

Are attitudes towards modernity differentiated by gender? We can use some "proxies" to answer this question. For instance, in one of the communities under study there is a bilingual education program that has redefined high school curricula to include Cocama language and traditional knowledge. The reaction of parents to this initiative is quite mixed: some are proud to have their children learning about their roots and recovering knowledge that might be otherwise lost while other parents perceive this initiative as going backwards. These parents were upset that they were making so many sacrifices to send their children to school only for them to learn what their grandparents already knew, a knowledge that kept them poor and marginalized.

In this mixed reaction there was no clear polarization of opinions in terms of gender. Furthermore, all men and women interviewed wanted their children to be educated and able to get a job outside the village. They said they wanted: “our children to become something” (“*ser algo*”) reflecting that they perceive themselves as non-valued by the outside world. This was a prevalent opinion shared by men and women. Finally, both men and women presented themselves to outsiders as peasants [*campesinos*], not as native or indigenous. A common expression used to clarify this point was “we are civilized” [*somos civilizados*]. The use of the same wording used to justify their indoctrination by churches and schools (aimed at civilizing natives) reflects that this discourse has been somehow internalized by natives, who clearly understand that to be accepted as citizens with full rights they need to be perceived as assimilated, civilized, that is, as mestizos.

Even though there is no clear gender differentiation in the attitudes towards modernity, there is a difference in the way modernity is experienced and negotiated by men and women. In other words, there is a tension between the need to assimilate and the strength of spiritual and “traditional” beliefs in daily life, and this tension is experienced differently by men and women. Women are somehow trapped at the center of this contradiction, because of their key role in family reproduction and the lack of adequate resources they have to fulfill this role. We have the example of Marcela, who could not afford traditional medicine, had to depend of modern medicine provided by the project but could not administer all the prescribed medicine to her sick child because her pregnancy made her impure to do so, according to ethnic beliefs^{xi}. There is not much space to negotiate here, where traditional/indigenous beliefs clash with modern/Western views that clearly disregard indigenous views as ignorance, irrationality and irresponsibility. As a result, women become further marginalized by health providers and project staff.

Ethnicity & Modernity

What we learn from this exploration is that local people experience “tradition” and “modernity” not as discrete dimensions or separate worlds. Even though “traditional” or indigenous views and ways of organizing life in this region has been subordinated by modern views of nature and society that were shaped by Western colonial powers since the 16th century, this process has not occurred without resistance. Pressures towards assimilation and subordination were initially conducted by the colonial militia who forced natives to settle within Missions that were units of production, natural resource exploitation and religious indoctrination. The penetration of churches was broadened when Christian-based organizations broke the monopoly of Catholic Church in this region, indoctrinating natives in their own languages. Later the school system became also an element of assimilation, even though schools were not only imposed by the state but also requested by local people. Markets for natural resources and some limited agricultural products have been an important element expanding assimilation and mestizaje as a socioeconomic and cultural phenomena. Projects are the last form of intervention that consolidate the role of market economy, control of natural resources and the acceptance of modernist view of development and progress^{xiii}

The Peruvian state, like most Latin American new republics defined a citizenship that excludes ethnic identity. You cannot be Peruvian and Cocama at the same time, or Peruvian and Quechua. Assimilation and not integration has defined the political process of incorporating indigenous populations into the national state. Therefore, indigenous views and forms of organization could only exist in a relation of subordination to hegemonic modernist views, discourses and forms of organization. In this context many natives like the Cocamas in the area of study choose modernity when tried to erase ethnic markers like language and dressing in order to assimilate (Stocks, 1981). What needs to be understood is that the only “choice” for natives was to assimilate if they wanted to avoid or reduce discrimination and poverty. However, this process of assimilation in Loreto has faced structural limits: market economy cannot absorb the labor and products produced by ribereños, therefore there is the need to keep subsistence economy and traditional forms of organization coexisting with market economy and society. Modernity cannot or does not want to integrate assimilated native and mestizos. Market’s failure to absorb their production and labor is reflected in the structure of relative prices, the structure of demand and supply and in the lack of development of secondary markets. Prices for most rural products are highly volatile and sometimes so low that they do not cover the cost of transporting the product to the market, not to mention the cost of labor and other inputs. That is the main reason why wildlife exploitation is an alternative source of income: even though prices are also low these goods have minimal costs in terms of labor and inputs, as compared with agriculture (Coomes 1992; Espinosa, 1998; Penn, 1999.). Emigration to Iquitos, Nauta or Tamshiyacu is high, explaining the demographic expansion of urban centers in this region.

However, as non-skilled labor migrants remain marginal urban settlers with low-paid informal unstable jobs; usually they return to their villages when they are in their 40s to raise their families since life in the villages is more affordable than life in the cities. Those who return to their villages hope their children would break the cycle of poverty and for that reason they put so much effort in improving schools in their villages (Espinosa, 1991, 1994 and 1998).

The abovementioned limitations are characteristic of peripheral capitalism (Bulmer-Thomas, 1994 and Stein and Stein 1970). This pattern of development explains the coexistence of different forms of production and organization that correspond to different cultural systems of meanings. This coexistence generates a structural ambiguity that reinforces vulnerability and poverty but also creates favorable conditions for the process of cultural resistance, adaptation and recreation. The fact that indigenous and poor “mestizos” remain at the margins of modernity, subordinated as producers, workers and citizens is an important element to understand their livelihoods, their culture, their identities, behavior and perceptions. The fact that after 500 years of subordination indigenous spirituality is so pervasive in the daily life of ribereños reveals a process of resistance that deserves further attention. This process of resistance should not be understood as the persistence of pure indigenous views, beliefs or forms of social organization. On the contrary, it is somehow futile to assert what is “truly” native or indigenous since indigeneity could only be experienced as a subordinated reality; furthermore the notion of indigeneity is itself created by colonialism to “othering” and homogenizing the quite complex and diverse original population living in the Americas at the times of conquest (Varesse, 1996)^{xiii}.

This negotiation occurs within a tension generated by the conflicting, uneven and ambivalent ways in which modernity unfolds at the “margins” of Third world economies and societies. Escobar’s (1995) analysis of modernity and development discourses provides a way to overcome dualism between “traditional” and “modern” cultures and to understand the ambivalence found among ribereños under study. Escobar points out the coexistence of different cultural temporalities: premodern, modern, antimodern and amodern; challenging the linearity that is at the core of the development discourse. Cultural hybridity as presented by Escobar (1995) refers to a process of dialectical interactions between different forms of modernity that are not discrete or dichotomist “. Hybridization in cultural terms should not be understood same way it is used to refer to biological processes, since it is not a combination of discrete elements but a process of cultural recreation that appropriate and recreate elements of modernity in ways that challenge and reinforce contradictions, and oppositions. “Traditional” and “modern” are not external oppositions that can be understood as a dichotomy between the local and the external. On the contrary, the tensions between these different forms of modernity are internal to these livelihoods, internal to the individual experience, internal to the ways families negotiate their relationships among their members and with the external world. These oppositions are also part of the larger context in which these livelihoods operate and adapt to secure the material, social and cultural reproduction of their members. Hybridization is experienced and negotiated at the individual and social level, through the hierarchies and structures operating from the local to the global levels. Since individuals have multiple positions in these hierarchies they can negotiate in different capacities, bringing into this negotiation their own perceptions, choices and personal and family histories.

Modernity in Latin America generates hybridization, which opens opportunities for subaltern discourses and practices that challenge the linearity and fundamentalism of development discourses (Garcia Canclini, 1995; Escobar 1995). In this regard, cultural hybridization provides an adequate concept to describe the multiple and ambiguous ways in which cultural actors transform their practices in the face of modernity’s contradictions. This process provides opportunities for cultural differences and by producing multiple subjectivities it can displace the normal strategies of modernity. Cultural resistance occurs in this context of cultural hybridization and multiple subjectivities and shares both its power of contestation and its ambiguities since it occurs in a context of hegemonic modernity, in a context of political, cultural and economic subordination. These concepts can help us to understand how different men and women experience and negotiate gender, modernity and nature, in a context of tension between “modernity” and “tradition” (which are actually different forms of modernity “at the margins”). Are hybrid livelihoods expressing an “ambiguous engagement with modernity” (Escobar, 1995) or is modernity per se ambiguous? The emphasis of Garcia Canclini (1995) in the unfinished modernization to explain hybridization is an important element to explain the unfinished and ambivalent process of assimilation of ribereños in Loreto, a region that has been subordinated through mercantilist capitalist relations but that never experienced modernization through industrial capitalism.

The point I want to make here is that cultural hybridity is part of a broader socio- economic or structural hybridity, reflecting the limits of capitalist modernist development as well as the fluidity of cultural processes that are anchored, influenced and influencing the material and social processes. The hybrid experience includes local livelihoods and cuts across gender, class and ethnic hierarchies, at the domestic and public spheres, influencing the interactions inside the village and with the outside world; the hybrid experience includes how modernity is interpreted by indigenous views and beliefs. The hybrid experience of ribereños challenges binary views of modernity, and the way we define what is to be indigenous and to be mestizo.

I propose the term “hybrid livelihoods” to address the fact that tensions and contradictions experienced by modernity at the symbolic level are experienced at the material level and that the negotiation of meanings and identities at the individual level also connect with negotiations within families, households, communities and beyond as part of gender, class or ethnic groups. Hybrid livelihoods refers to tensions between different forms of modernity as experienced “at the margins”, and to processes that redefine what is “traditional” and what is “modern”. “Traditional” is another form of modernity in the Third World that has evolved in a context of subordination. For instance, “traditional” knowledge, housing and so on are functional in keeping *ribereños*’ reproduction at the margins of modernity. On the other hand, “traditional” embodies the way local people appropriate modernity (“*el motor te va a cutipar*”) and perceive themselves within modern society (“*somos civilizados*”).

Structural ambiguities and contradictions refer to the structural limits of modernity, however since asymmetries are multiple and not bi-polar there are spaces for individual and social negotiation. The battle over meanings and entitlements presented here reveals the existence of multiple rationalities on nature, development and conservation, which open spaces for negotiation in a context of subordination.

Identities and representation are constructed and used in very fluid ways. The repertoire of ethnic identities vary according to gender and to the type of interactions: men have more flexibility to negotiate their ethnic identity within households and outside the community since they can access a wider repertoire of ethnic identities. However, attitudes toward modernity are quite similar among men and women and reveal a clear and painful awareness of the tensions between “traditional” and “modern” in terms of their class and ethnic subordination (“*queremos que nuestros hijos sean algo*”) We found subordination and willingness to assimilate (“*somos civilizados*”) that coexisted with a process of cultural resistance, expressed in the persistence of pervasive indigenous spiritual views affecting the daily life of men and women; we also found cultural appropriation of elements of modernity, like the boat engine that was treated as any other powerful element of their spiritual world (“*el motor te va a cutipar*”).

The notion of the “invisible natives” was coined by Stocks (1981) to highlight the hidden indigenity of Cocamas-Cocamillas who became renegade Indians, forming villages, adopting Spanish language at home and creating schools for their children, in times when the only way to break discrimination was to deny indigenity. Later Chibnik (1991) propose ribereños to be considered a “quasi ethnic group” portraying them as the Amazon version of the “cholos” or migrants from the highlands that were analyzed by Quijano for the case of Peru in the 1970s. Chibnik’s concept of “quasi- ethnic groups” was challenged by Mora (1995) who observed that the conditions of social mobility and occupational change that defined the “cholo” identity were not present for the case of the ribereños. Mora coincided with Garcia (1994) in that ethnic identities are fluid and not static, presenting several elements pointing towards a process of ethnic revival in the Amazon; even if ethnic identity is used instrumentally to secure territorial rights, it could mean that ethnic identities in this region are in a process of transition^{xiv}.

The fluid and contested nature of ethnic identities is reflected in the fact that indigenous identities are constructed from bellow and/or as part of “identity politics”, resulting usually in contradictory meanings. Identity politics is defined by Hill and Wilson (2003) as “top-down processes whereby various political, economic and other social entities attempt to mold collective identities”. The tensions between bottom-up identity and identity politics is expressed in paradoxical situations where Indians do not want to be labeled as such while intellectuals, the state and NGOs advocate for the preservation of indigenous culture and identities. Martinez Novo (2006) presented the case of Northern Mexico where third generation migrants claimed indigenous identity after having lost use of their indigenous language, Dombrowski (2001) for Native Americans in Alaska and Stocks (1991) for the case of Cocamas in the Peruvian Amazon present indigenous peoples choosing “anti-ethnic” and “anti-cultural” identities.

When being indigenous is a stigma that hinders socioeconomic mobility, and assimilation and “mestizaje” are the only paths towards citizenship and better livelihoods –as is the case of Latin American countries (Martinez-Echebal, 1998; Jelin and Hershberg, 1996), then Indians choose—at least for the public spheres, “anti-cultural” and “anti-ethnic” identities and assimilation. To be identified as non-indigenous might be instrumental in contexts where survival is at risk and/or overcoming poverty and discrimination are legitimate aims even though not in sync with identity politics of conservationists, tourism groups or intellectuals (Martinez Novo, 2006). Stronza (2006) presented the case of mestizos within communities in Tambopata, Cusco who that started adopting elements of Eseja indigenous identity, in the context of a tourism conservation project. We have then all the possible scenarios: Indians who don’t want to be labeled as such, Indians who re-claim their ethnic identity after being defined as non-Indians and non-Indians who want to behave or become Indians.

Recent literature has moved away from the notion of ethnicity as belonging to certain groups that have defined borders towards an understanding of ethnicity as multi-situated and fluid process of building and negotiating identities. As stated by Stephen (1996: 17):

“Anthropological theorists today consider ethnicity a subjective, dynamic concept through which groups of people determine their own distinct identities by creating boundaries between themselves and other groups through interaction (Barth, 1969; Jackson, 1989; Stephen, 1991)”

In that sense we don’t use ethnicity as “belonging” to specific ethnic groups of natives that are opposed to *mestizos*. We use ethnicity to address the unfinished, contradictory and ambiguous process of assimilation and resistance experienced by indigenous and *mestizos*. Ethnic identities are fluid and permeable, and assimilation as crossing ethnic boundaries is not uni but multidirectional, a process where individuals go back and forth, defining and redefining, renouncing and claiming, adapting and resisting. There is no “expiration date” to claim or reclaim ethnic identities. There is a non-linear social continuum between Indians and non-Indians who are part of a process that is dialectic. The trend to dichotomize this social continuum ignores the fluidity, multi-directionality and non-linearity of the process of crossing ethnic boundaries and redefining identities. Ethnicity, cultural identity and the struggle for self-determination can be better understood in terms of flexible horizons rather than in terms of rigid boundaries, as addressed by Varese (1996) who remind us that Indian ethnicity is socially constructed and reconstructed in a permanent process of dialectical negotiation.

These studies challenge indigeneity and mestizaje as discrete categories that cannot capture the fluidity, ambiguities and contested nature of the process of defining/redefining ethnic identities among local populations that have been incorporated into market economy and society in a position of subordination and social exclusion. Self-denial and assimilation might not be in sync with identity politics of conservationists, tourism groups or intellectuals. This process needs to be contextualized within hierarchies of exclusion, exploitation and discrimination and accept that indigenous identify is a heavy burden for those it was meant to define, exclude, exploit and discriminate. Hybridization explains ambiguities and conflicts. It also reflects opportunities for challenging fundamentalist discourses of development and modernity, which unveil and justify environmental unsustainability and social subordinations. Cultural hybridization and subaltern discourses and practices of local people have this potential.

Under the label or appearance of a mestizo might be an Indian in the process of defining/redefining his own identity while he/she is negotiating his/her placement in the local, regional and national hierarchies of gender, class and ethnicity. Understanding the multiple subordinations that men and women in the Amazon deal with and the ways they negotiate nature, gender and ethnicity can help conservation and development interventions in this region to overcome gender and ethnic blindness and understand the importance of culture to reinforce and/or challenge power structures. This way these initiatives could become spaces for social transformation instead of reinforcing social exclusion and ethnocentrism.

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Notes

ⁱ The study was conducted in San Martin del Tipishca (SMT) and in Buenavista (BV), at the border of the National Reserve Pacaya Samiria (NRPS) and the Communal Reserve Tamshiyacu-Tahuayo (CRTT), respectively. The Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve was created in 1991 without the participation of local communities. The Tamshiyacu-Tahuayo Communal Reserve, created in 1993 by a grassroots initiative, includes local communities in its management. Public services in rural Loreto declined after the structural adjustment program of 1990, while international cooperation has increased operations in the region. San Martin and Buenavista share common elements and reflect *ribereño* heterogeneity (Posey and Balee, 1989), associated with uneven access to natural resources (State or Communal Reserve), marketplaces (physical distance, access to boat or river taxi), *restingas* or *barrales*, employment or trade opportunities offered by tourist lodges and/or presence of projects in the area, and social characteristics like ethnicity, kinship, and family structure, among others. SMT, on the Samiria River, is more distant and isolated (50 miles from the Marañón River mouth that is 20 hours from Iquitos in a steam boat), while Buenavista, on the Quebrada Rio Blanco, is closer to Iquitos (100 miles by river taxi). SMT was created as an independent village in 1942, while Buenavista was an estate until the 1970s. In 1997 SMT filed a petition to be recognized as a Native Community and is affiliated to AIDSESEP, while Buenavista, recognized as a Peasant Community in 1974, has never claimed indigenous status. SMT is larger with more extended families: In 1997, 67 families lived in SMT in 49 households while 35 families lived in 30 households in Buenavista. More diversified livelihoods in Buenavista included permanent agriculture in *restingas*; fishing, hunting, and collecting turtle eggs; and handicrafts made and traded by women in the nearby tourist lodge.

ⁱⁱ The region of Loreto is mainly lowland forest that flood every year for several months

ⁱⁱⁱ Fresh game meat and hunting are still today called *mitayo*

^{iv} Assimilation is the process of subordination of one group into a larger one that remains dominant, while the new group is expected to be dissolved in it, losing its own ethnic identity. By contrast, true integration is a process of reciprocal adaptation and co-existence of populations that are ethnically different (Darcy, 1971).

^v This is evident for example in the power of medicinal plants, which is not in the chemical components but in their spiritual force; specific rituals are involved in their harvesting to keep that force: the person collecting the plant needs to "diet" the day before, the plant needs to be in places that are isolated from people's traffic, the harvest has to be done facing certain direction, after asked permission of the mother spirit of the plant, etc.

^{vi} Unlike other parts of the Amazon where women hunt alone or within hunting parties (Suasnabar (1995) for the case of Ayore of Bolivia, Towesend (1996) for the Siriono of Bolivia and Minzenberg (2005) for the caboclos of Brazil

^{vii} An upset woman threaten her husband to feed him on 'bike's soup' for the whole month, in response for him buying a bike instead of the regular food supplies (Espinosa, 1998).

^{viii} Total households in San Martin were 47 and in Buenavista 30 (Espinosa, 1998)

^{ix} Dieting includes not having sex, not eating salted and spicy food or drinking alcohol.

^x This situation differs from others where indigenous peasant women are in charge of selling their products outside the community, and develop a repertoire of ethnic identities they play to their advantage in different situations, as reported by Paulson (1996) for Bolivian women.

^{xi} The power of medicine according to ethnic views relies on its spiritual force, therefore there are strict rituals to harvest medicinal plants and to administer them. Any impurity in the collection or administration of medicine neutralizes its healing power; this is radically different view of medicine as compared to Western views. Therefore being pregnant or menstruating—which makes a woman impure according to these ethnic views means that a woman cannot administer the medicine, even if it is modern medicine provided by the project, as was the case of Marcela. For a further exploration of the links between ethnic spirituality and health, see Espinosa (2009)

^{xii} See Coomes (1995), San Roman (1975) and Villarejo (1979) for a detailed history and analysis of the political economy of Loreto region.

^{xiii} I found for instance narrative of Cocama myths of origin that include references to Jesus Christ (Caritinari, 1996 in Espinosa, 1998).

^{xiv} It is interesting to note that towards the end of my field work, community leaders had asked Moises (a repented civilizer, educator and a native himself) to teach them the Cocama ways of leading, their traditions and knowledge.