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Citation for published version

Peluso, Daniela M. (2018) Traversing the margins of corruption amidst informal economies in Amazonia. *Culture, Theory and Critique*. ISSN 1473-5776.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2018.1499433>

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Traversing the margins of corruption amidst informal economies in Amazonia

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Abstract

This article focuses on local idioms of extra-legal economic activity among indigenous Amazonians in eastern Peru, and its overall argument is that these idioms are part of a broader context in which indigenous people are compelled by a variety of factors to act in a seemingly corrupt manner. I further suggest that within such a context these idioms are not confined to the informal economy but are also used to refer to activities that fall within the formal economy, supporting Hart's (2009) claim that the informal economy is a way of imagining the orthodox economy. I argue that corruption within Amazonian economies is commonly perceived by non-indigenous people as contrasting with the workings of the orthodox economy without proper consideration of the economic conditions and bureaucratic structures that give rise to it. Lastly, I argue that, here, corruption can contravene bureaucracy by restoring the humanity that Herzfeld (1993) claims bureaucracy rejects through its acts of indifference toward individuals.

Key words: corruption, bribery, informal economy, bureaucracy, Amazonia, Latin America

The Informal Economy in Amazonia

It is well established that informal economies – economic activities and processes that are unregulated or unprotected by the state – are increasing in Latin America (Maiguashca 2016; Salazar-Xirinachs 2017).¹ Currently the value of these activities in Latin America exceeds estimates of those for Africa and elsewhere (Economist 2017), and the activities are linked to corruption, mostly in the form of bribery (De Soto 1986). A precise definition of what an informal economy consists of parallels the

¹ Based on readings of Castells and Portes (1989) and Hart (2009), my definition of 'informal economy' modifies and extends the one used by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (Chen 2005).

challenges that face its quantification. Quantifying informal economic activities is difficult both from theoretical and practical perspectives, given that such activities are defined variably in the public sphere and across disciplines, and they can encompass a wide range of legal and illegal activities. Furthermore, gathering information about corrupt activities is challenging (Hernandez 2009), particularly in Amazonia. As indigenous Amazonian peoples' economic activity is based on subsistence activities and casual labour, most of which exist outside the cash economy, this activity is often regarded as too informal to be included in discussions of informal economies, as evidenced by its omission (Adams *et al.* 2008; ILO 2016). This omission happens, in part, because economists often dismiss indigenous Amazonian economies as being homogeneously patron–client or kinship based, and therefore simple (Cleary 1993). Furthermore, Latin American governments take advantage of popular misconceptions of Amazonia as existing in economic isolation (Da Cunha *et al.* 2007), using these as justifications for promoting politico-economic agendas based on extractive economies, such as oil and natural gas exploitation (Finer *et al.* 2008; Orta-Martínez & Finer 2010), an industry itself strongly associated with corruption (Gaviria 2002; Philip 1982; Weyland 1998).

This article, based on over 60 months of multi-sited anthropological fieldwork in Amazonian communities and towns, examines how indigenous Amazonians in the Madre de Dios administrative region of Peru participate in a variety of activities that could be labelled 'corrupt', and how these practices reflect indigenous responses to broader practices of corruption and complicity.² Here, I am less preoccupied with corrupt activities themselves, and instead focus on the vernacular idioms surrounding them, drawing attention to how words that express corruption are not exclusively used to refer to activities within the informal economy but have a broader range of usage covering areas of the formal economy. The view of corruption within Lowland South American informal economies presupposes that indigenous Amazonians and their non-indigenous facilitators are inherently 'corrupt' without considering local

² My fieldwork in Amazonia spans across three decades and is based on participant observation, events and bureaucratic processes. In this article I have chosen to not name the indigenous Amazonian groups I draw my material from. This choice to anonymize is due to the sensitive discussions of alleged corruption. The use of the term 'indigenous' here refers to Amerindian peoples who see ethnic identity in Amazonia predate European colonization, and whose ethnic identity and takes into account its the contested conceptual history of indigeneity (Kuper 2003; Canessa 2007).

logistical, infrastructural and economic conditions that give rise to incidents of 'corruption'. The ethnographic vernacular idioms I draw on emphasize a clash between bureaucratic notions of corruption and indigenous moral cosmoeconomics – an 'interface between cosmology, economics, and human relatedness' (da Col 2012: 1), hence the interface of phenomenological and livelihood experiences – reflecting the pervasive social and economic inequality so commonplace in Latin America's frontier zones.³ I suggest that a particular cosmoeconomics, decisions that reflect local ontologies and beliefs, is evidenced through the quotidian use of vernacular idioms of corruption (Ledeneva 2014, Henig and Makovicky 2017).

It is important at this point to review several geographical and economic specifics with regard to what is commonly referred to as Amazonia, beginning with an overview of the region and refining this discussion to the particular area of which situates indigenous people amidst seemingly corrupt practices. The Amazon basin covers over 5.5 million square kilometres of rainforest, contains three major drainage systems (the Orinoco, Amazon and Paraná basins) as well as parts of the high Andes and coastal regions, and covers 40 per cent of the South American continent. It includes parts of eight South American countries and one European department. Amazonia also contains many large cities with industrial centres, such as Manaus (which is a Free Trade Zone) and Belém in Brazil. The populations of both these cities exceed 2 million, and they boast skyscrapers that rival those of New York and London. Smaller cities, such as Iquitos in Peru and Santarem in Brazil, have populations in the hundred thousands. Indeed, the majority of Amazonians live in cities, including an increasing number of indigenous people, who often circulate between rural and urban centres (Alexiades & Peluso 2015, 2016). As a result, Amazonia has intersecting informal and formal economic sectors,⁴ which exist in a symbiotic relationship. Informal sectors, which globally compose at least 50 per cent of economic activity (Mörtenböck & Moosehammer 2015), respond to the socio-political and economic conditions established by the formal sector. Whether in urban or rural areas, openly or

³ My use of the term 'moral economy' is derived from Thompson (1971) and Scott (1976); see also Fassin (2005).

⁴ The Amazon is known for its strong cattle and agricultural economies (including large-scale soya production), timber, forest products, gold, oil and gas, and the cocaine trade (Veiga et. al. 2002). There are regional differences in the importance of these economic activities (Bunker 2003).

in secret, formal sectors are dependent upon informal, at times illegal, labourers (Carr & Chen 2002), who are subject to dominant economic systems (Roy 2010).

Furthermore, informal and formal economic sectors are increasingly vulnerable to corruption, both in Amazonia and elsewhere in Latin America.

About 13 per cent of Amazonia lies within Peru, the geographical focus of this study. The Peruvian economy is as varied as its geography, which includes lowland coastal regions, the central high sierra of the Andes and dense high and lowland tropical forests. The Peruvian economy has grown at an average rate of 6.4 per cent per year since 2002 (Bulmer 2015). Growth has been partly due to a leap in private investment, especially in the extractive sector, which accounts for more than 60 per cent of Peru's total exports. Yet despite this growth, 23 per cent of the population lives below the poverty level, and the average monthly wage is \$550 USD per month (CIA 2014). The export of natural resources, begun in the nineteenth century, has markedly shaped the economic and political realities of Latin America today (Bulmer-Thomas 2003). Until 1996, Peru was the world's largest coca leaf producer; it is now the world's second-largest producer, and the second-largest producer of cocaine. Peru was estimated to have supplied 380 metric tonnes of pure cocaine to the international drug market in 2015 alone (CIA 2015). The drug is both produced and smuggled in Peru's lowland forest regions (Costa 2010; Van Dun 2016).

These figures, and the economic activity that underlies them, begin to hint at the extent of Peru's informal economy. For instance, I suggest that the 'currency demand' approach – which supposes that the 'hidden economy' is a response to changes in tax burdens or government regulations, thus resulting in the disproportionate use of cash in the economy – is an inadequate means of analysing the informal economy in Peru. The suggestion that the informal economy fluctuates at around 50 per cent of Peru's total GDP (Hernandez 2009), a figure which excludes the production of coca and cocaine, falls short of accurately capturing the scale of informal economic activity. And it is undoubtedly the case that the legal formal economy is dependent on invisible informal sectors.

It is worth noting that in what is arguably the most influential study of the informal economy in Peru, Hernando de Soto (1986) discusses how excessive state regulations in Peruvian (and other Latin American) economies have forced a large part

of the formal sector into informality and thus prevented economic development.⁵ Indeed, the present article is theoretically sympathetic to the idea that the formal economy is defined by its very relationship with informal economies and is further dictated by international trade, yet neoliberal economic policies have contributed towards the increase of informalisation (Heintz and Pollin 2003), particularly in the way that they more easily exploit labour (Kus 2014) while decreasing social welfare provision (Ferguson 2007). In effect, for businesses and industries to strategically produce and export goods so as to maximise their market share, they tend to thrive while informality and its potential for corruption remain in place. Indeed, corruption is often key to the success of various entrepreneurial enterprises that, in turn, are integral to broad political-economic processes of power and wealth formation in modern industrial environments (Sanchez 2016).

If one is to consider what is at stake in recognizing the importance of informal economic activity in people's lives and the impositions placed on marginal peoples, then it is worth considering, as Drinot points out, that 'economic expansion hinges on a differentiation between populations subject to sovereign power and populations subject to governmentality' (Drinot 2011: 185). The 2009 massacre in Bagua province in the Peruvian Amazon, where at least fifty indigenous protesters from several provinces were murdered, and hundreds more were reported missing, was an exercise of sovereign power. The deaths resulted from a protest over a free trade agreement signed with the United States and designed to increase natural resource extraction in the Amazon, thus threatening indigenous livelihoods. The then president, Alan García, had added to the tensions by publicly accusing Peru's indigenous Amazonian peoples of 'laziness and indolence' and of 'orchard-dog syndrome' (*el perro del hortelano*), an insult implying a position of 'if I can't do it, nobody can' (García Pérez 2007:3). This forcefully stated insult promotes the image of an underutilized informal Amazonia, one that does not fully exploit its extractive economies and, through its intent, equates indigenous peoples with anti-nationalism and corruption.

The Madre de Dios region of eastern Peru lies within the Amazon basin and is bordered to the east by Brazil and Bolivia. The region is representative of many others

⁵ De Soto's work is also available in English translation (de Soto 1989) and has also been widely criticized, see, for instance Manders (2005).

in lowland South America: it is a heavily forested province in which millions of hectares have been designated as national parks or reserves, and is rich in both bio- and cultural diversity. With its frontier towns and border regions, Madre de Dios is also an interesting place in which to study individual, family and community employment and its intertwining with multinational and transnational economies. Here, informal economies emerge, transform and take on new guises over time in ways that satisfy various needs as people go about procuring their everyday livelihoods. There is no manufacturing of significance, and instead the local economy relies on the extraction of raw materials (such as mahogany, gold, oil and gas), activities which depend on the informality of labour. This informality leads to a situation in which debt-peonage (Wolf 1966) continues to thrive in the area of brazil nut extraction; meanwhile, in the case of gold extraction, children are employed as a casual labour force far from their homelands, and there are nearly annual discoveries of their mass graves, their unaccounted deaths due to malnutrition and illness. As a border region, Madre de Dios also has a reputation as a 'lawless land' where invisible drug economies exist, its location making it an ideal transit point for cross-border trafficking. Whether it is brazil nuts, timber, gold or cocaine, the products at the heart of the formal and informal economy here are all destined for international export.

This brief sketch of the geo-economic situation indicates that indigenous and rural Amazonians in Madre de Dios inhabit a region where informal economic activity is rife and linked to broader formal and international economies. Indeed the informal economy, while serving as 'the' economy is as inextricable from the formal economy as Hart (2009) suggests. Indigenous Amazonians⁶ tend to follow a diverse range of economic practices to ensure their livelihoods as they circulate between rural and urban centres (Peluso 2015a). Typically, indigenous people plant swiddens, hunt and fish, and gather, extract and process forest resources for their own consumption and commercial trade. Indigenous Amazonians' links with the cash economy are multi-faceted, dynamic and diverse. They range from employment as day labourers in the agricultural or gold-mining sectors and working as tourist guides to selling forest products (for example, thatching materials, brazil nuts, game and fish) and agricultural

⁶ Hereafter, when speaking of 'indigenous Amazonians' I am referring to indigenous ethnic populations of the Madre de Dios region.

produce. A small number of them have taken up paid jobs in local indigenous or governmental and non-governmental organizations, while jobs in urban centres are often in construction or security. Women, and occasionally men, in some communities are heavily involved in the local handicraft industry making brooms, mats and jewellery. Many of these economic activities are cyclical, seasonal and/or opportunistic.

As the Peruvian government's bureaucratic tentacles expand further into the rural areas of Madre de Dios, indigenous Amazonians have found themselves needing to deal with state infrastructures that they experience as inhibiting. In response to this increasing bureaucracy, they engage in acts of corruption, such as bribery, that they themselves do not view as corrupt. Here the concept of 'moral economy' is a useful way of understanding how corruption thrives in a situation in which people must deal with what they see as onerous state demands, allowing them to effectively overcome what they see as unfair predicaments.

To illustrate this situation, although anonymised, in the following sections I will focus on a close network of communities and analyse the local uses and the social, political and economic contexts of colloquial idioms, expressions and euphemisms concerning corruption – *coima*, *aumento*, *apagando el motor*, *contrabando* and *parillada* – and the indigenous moral economies that define what is legitimate and what is not (Webb 2009). Whereas anthropological studies of corruption have focused on how the language of corruption is used to frame communications and rhetoric (Muir 2016; Muir and Gupta 2018; Tidey 2018), the actual and often intimate vernacular that reflects corruption (Ledeneva 1998) and normalizes local resistance to bureaucracy is overlooked. These vernacular idioms are indicators of the degree of integration of corruption into Amazonian societies and people's everyday lives (Gupta 1995; Makovicky & Henig 2018a, 2018b). They provide examples of Latin American idioms of corruption and reveal some of the ways that indigenous peoples construct the state (Gupta & Ferguson 1992).

Coima

Coima is the most generic term for what one might consider a bribe. The word comes from the Latin *calvor*, 'to deceive' (de Vaan 2008), and has spread through Latin America via Portuguese. The term likely reached the viceroyalty of Peru in the seventeenth century, and it originally referred to, and was synonymous with, *el pago del carretero*, which literally means 'to pay the man who wheels the cart'. It developed into a general expression for 'gratifying the person who can facilitate a transaction', while maintaining an indirect reference to European peasant cart drivers who had false compartments in their carts for smuggling contraband (Bridenthal 2013).⁷ Today, indigenous Amazonians and Peruvians use the word most explicitly when discussing state organisations and services.

In order to circumvent the bureaucracy that increasingly impinges on their interactions in towns and marketplaces, indigenous Amazonians have found it necessary to pay a *coima* to achieve particular aims. For example, only a decade and a half ago, many indigenous people were able to travel by canoe on their own terms. Canoes are used for local and more long-distance travel, and for such things as fishing, collecting turtle eggs and taking produce to sell in town. Indigenous people have long navigated the rivers of Madre de Dios without the surveillance of local authorities. When visiting a town they would generally leave their canoes at a landing place where they likely had an amicable relationship with a dockworker. The relationship might entail them giving the worker some of their produce or taking requests for particular items to be delivered at a future date.

The ease of river travel for indigenous Amazonians changed in the late 1990s when the Ministry of Transport and the Peruvian Navy decided to enforce strict rules regarding riverine transport. Some of these regulations had already been made law but not enforced, while others were newly introduced because of the emergence of the environmental service economy. Madre de Dios is a designated biodiversity 'hot spot' with several national reserves and parks that form a 'mega corridor' with other protected areas that lie across national borders (Bennett 2004), and it relies heavily on ecotourism revenue (Kirkby et al. 2011). Neoliberal economic regimes often support

⁷ See Andrien (1984) for a discussion of rampant corruption and inefficiency in the seventeenth-century viceroyalty of Peru.

high-income activities in protected areas with the aim of integrating them into the market so that they can bear the cost of conservation (Mosedale 2016). It is for this reason that Madre de Dios receives increased government attention. Whereas the Ministry of Transport had formerly ignored indigenous Amazonians and instead focused on commercial boat operators, in the late 1990s they began to apply the newly passed legislation to everyone travelling by river.

For indigenous Amazonians who use canoes, the enforcement of these regulations now means that they need to have a boat registration number and operator's licence, a certificate of safety and a municipal tax statement, alongside various items the government deems necessary for 'proper' river navigation. In order to obtain an operator's licence, a person must file several forms and reports, including a doctor's note stating that they are in good health. Operators must ensure that their papers are in order, that they acquire various sums of bank cheques from the national bank where they do not hold accounts, and have various forms stamped so as to obtain what is effectively a canoe license in exchange for the equivalent of about two month's wages. The process involves visits to various government offices, inspections and the purchase of items such as life jackets (one for each individual on board), a pole, medical kit, torch and fire extinguisher. Without the appropriate licences and documentation, indigenous people are fined at landing points and risk their canoes being confiscated.

Indigenous Amazonians often find the skills required for navigating bureaucracy challenging as these skills are not part of their typical daily lives and experience. Furthermore, they are often not as versed in 'written culture' (García Bonet 2018) as non-indigenous peoples and, as such, their ability to navigate bureaucratic systems can also be hampered by a lack of awareness of the required bodily techniques (Penfield 2016). Also, the cash required by bureaucratic systems is not a readily available resource. There are certain times of year when cash is more easily obtainable, such as during Brazil nut season or following logging activities. It is at such sporadic times that people try to appease bureaucratic demands. Yet even in such cases, the systems set in place are not straightforward and involve a great deal of meandering between various state organizations and officials.

Government bureaucratic requirements, in their quest to monopolise information so as to perpetuate their indispensability (Weber 1978), are at odds with indigenous cosmo-moral-economic views about livelihoods and ways of being. For example, the idea of visiting a doctor, commonly associated with illness and (possibly) death, and paying them the equivalent of a month's wages, is considered to be an extreme undertaking. Furthermore, indigenous and state notions of safety are somewhat incompatible. Wearing a life jacket or carrying a fire extinguisher on the river does not appeal to indigenous Amazonians. Also, the paraphernalia required by the regulations mean that there are many items that need to be stored away from children, a challenge given that even in people's homes there are no areas that are cordoned off from children (Peluso 2015b).

For all these reasons, indigenous Amazonians often find it practical to 'to pay the man who wheels the cart' (*pagar el carrito*), or pay a *coima* to a broker, to gather the necessary documentation, since formal bureaucratic procedures are costly, time-consuming and disruptive, requiring applicants to reside in town for long periods of time. This economic niche – offering services to those who struggle with bureaucracy – is occupied by a small set of entrepreneurs who readily act as mediators between cumbersome, hard-to-understand bureaucratic processes and indigenous common sense. The services that these entrepreneurs offer are quite legitimate since they provide actual (not fraudulent) stamps and reports signed by real and appropriate persons. By paying *coimas* to 'the cart man', indigenous people save about half the cost of securing the necessary paperwork, and obtain it in a fraction of the time. From their perspective, paying the 'cart man' makes economic sense, for without the documentation that the broker obtains for them, people would stand the risk of having to pay heavy fines. Once the *coima* is paid, all one has to do is get in line for the final stamp.

Indigenous Amazonians tend not to see a *coima* as a bribe. Rather, they insist that it is a 'tip' (*propina*) that the broker receives for their services. Indeed, paying a *coima* is not itself corrupt my broader argument suggests, as an idiom, it suggests how people are compelled to act in a seemingly corrupt manner; instead, indigenous Amazonians view bureaucracy as corrupt. The state provides the infrastructure that permits entrepreneurs to charge *coimas* because the bureaucracy makes it impossible

for indigenous people to achieve their goals and instead imposes on them a set of rules and needs. *Coimas* are appreciated not criticised or resented. As such, when the possibility of paying a *coima* arises, people are grateful and consider it to be compatible with how social relations should be.

Indeed, *coimas* become a means by which people overcome the indifference that bureaucrats project on to them through their dismissive attitude and unwillingness to listen. As such, indigenous peoples creatively combat the structural impositions placed upon them by engaging with *coimas*. In doing so, they reverse one of bureaucracies' intents as put forth by Herzfeld (1993): dehumanisation. Herzfeld argues that bureaucratic indifference is the "rejection of common humanity" and the "denial of ... selfhood" (Herzfeld 1993:1). *Coimas* and other types of corruption reverse the inhumanity of the system of which they must take part. Indeed, people say that the state's very act of requiring them to have such 'nuisance' documents is itself corrupt and impinges in their free will and expertise. For the indigenous peoples in this study, bureaucracy is a way for the state and its agents 'to take advantage' (*aprovechar*) of those who live in poverty, imposing costs on them for things that matter not in their lives. In their view, changes in transport legislation do not add anything of value to indigenous lifestyles, and nor do they seem justified. *Coimas* allow them to maintain their dignity by allowing them to traverse what they consider to be corrupt requirements.

Aumento

When they need to make a cash payment in excess of what is normally required in order to complete a task, the indigenous Amazonians in this study refer to it as an *umento*. Though derived from *augmentar*, 'to increase, augment or expand', in indigenous usage *umento* is best translated as 'a little more', 'something extra', a 'top up'. Apart from a payment, *umento* is most widely used to establish or maintain social relations, a preferred and more amicable way of interacting or 'doing business'. For instance, in city markets where one can purchase fresh tropical juice, it is common for the vendor to offer 'a little bit more' than a full glass. Thus, upon finishing one's glass, the vendor will generally smile and say, '¿*Aumento?*' This simple act is geared

towards building a mutually beneficial relationship of long-term loyalty – a little bit extra that goes a long way. On the other hand, it is significant when a ‘little bit extra’ is not offered. By not offering a ‘little bit extra’, the vendor effectively declares that they do not care whether one returns or not.⁸

It is noteworthy how indigenous Amazonians use *umento* to describe what happens to timber that is ‘illegally’ logged in their forests. When indigenous people take timber to border cross-border towns to sell, by law they must stop at a border post, where they are subject to inspections by both naval officers and the national police. At the border they pay a *coima* that is a fraction of the cost of the permit or management plan required for legal logging, again viewing it as a service fee rather than a bribe – a payment that is required to bypass the complex forestry regulations, paperwork and fees that would otherwise render most small-scale logging impossible.

According to indigenous people, the wood belongs to them and they have historically sold wood at various points in time, depending on their needs. However, because of current policies requiring management plans and logging permits – which, in turn, require hiring forestry engineers and involve various bureaucratic procedures – they often feel that their best option is to take the wood out illegally.

Indigenous people refer to the timber that they deliver to the sawmill of a logging company as an *umento* to their income in recognition of its illegal status. There, at the sawmill, the wood is spoken of by all parties as being ‘a little bit extra’ as it augments standard practice. Indigenous people are aware that these companies claim to follow sustainable practices and are recognized as doing so by international NGOs, and that the forest products they sell are certified as having been harvested sustainably.

Indigenous people are also aware that, despite their credentials, logging companies are eager to acquire additional wood, even if it lacks the ‘correct’ papers, and that they are also prepared to help people deliver it. For example, companies commonly arrange for deliveries to happen at night at remote locations. Indigenous Amazonians say that ‘the loggers want their *umento*’ or ‘we are providing their

⁸ Although declining to give a ‘top up’ may appear to be bad business practice, it is most common when a seller has minimal competition.

aumento'. Like the *coimistas*, the logging companies are perceived to be helping indigenous people avoid unnecessary bureaucracy and thus a lower rate of payment is accepted for the illegal wood, 'extra' money they would otherwise not have. Here, conceptually, indigenous people have paid 'extra' so as to provide someone else with their 'extra'. For the sawmill, this illegal timber is 'extra' to the legally sourced timber they deal in and outside legitimate paths of commerce. This symmetry in language reflects the moral cosmoeconomics of positive social relations and exchange, to compensate for what both indigenous individuals and timber workers consider to be unfair regulation and surveillance by the state. While such arrangements continue an ongoing historical legacy of exploitative trade practices toward indigenous Amazonians, individuals are confident that by circumventing the rules, they have a net gain in what is otherwise an unlevel playing field.

What might be seen as corruption, as expressed through the idiom of 'aumento', is thus viewed locally as an exchange of favours (Ledeneva 1998, 2014) and has parallels in colonial and postcolonial debt systems and related patronage arrangements (Quiroz 2008).⁹ Whereas the analysis of debt peonage as exploitative is well established, there is also a growing literature that emphasises the mutually beneficial possibilities of the practice (Bauer 1979; Eisenstad and Roniger 1984; Killick 2011; Walker 2012). Extractive economies in Amazonia that have rested upon indigenous knowledge and labour, particularly during and immediately following the first rubber boom of 1879-1912, have been built on the exchange of housing and credit for work and debt, as well as facilitating lenders' access to the forest and labourers' access to the cities. Even now, patronage continues to be important in Amazonia, particularly in frontier areas, which are distant from urban centres and where NGO outreach initiatives, cooperatives and credit-lending institutions are mostly absent.¹⁰

The logging industry is one arena in which patron–client relations continue to thrive. Companies may put up a convincing façade on an international website that proclaims their corporate values and social responsibility mission statement, but locally, in places like Madre de Dios, they thrive on underpaid informal labour involving

⁹ Peonage is also known as *habilitación* in Spanish and *aviamento* in Portuguese. An examination of corruption within colonial patronage systems is beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁰ Brazil-nut cooperatives are an example.

various forms of contemporary patronage. The role of the patron was and continues to be largely based on advancing loans, in goods and/or cash, in exchange for the guaranteed provision of forest products. The debts that local people incur often exceed what they earn. In fact the word for retrieving one's payment is *cobrar*, 'to cover or recover payment' (used throughout Latin America and Spain and reflective of its colonial usage). People use *cobrar* the way one might use 'getting paid', although, especially in the case of loggers, it means 'to go and ask for payment'. Upon being paid, a labourer is faced with a balance sheet where what they are owed amounts to less than they owe, the debt obliging them to continue their engagement with the enterprise.

These patron–client relationships are also intertwined with wider networks of exchange, such as *compadrazgo* (Gudeman 1975). *Compadre* or 'god-parent' relationships are often formed between indigenous people and key agents in the informal economy such as with miners whom then become "*invitados*", guests of individuals in the community (Pinedo 2013:36) alongside border and national park guards and state inspectors who may also acquire similar visiting privileges. For instance, *compadres* may sometimes house an indigenous child who wants to attend secondary school in a town, which the *compadre* does in exchange for access to the products of small-scale logging on the child's parents' community land. The individuals in this study welcome such relationships particularly in how they serve to align with local cosmoeconomics. These networks are seen as a positive part of indigenous moral economies, whereby social relations inform and are formed through a long-term series of exchange and are understood as a necessary part of economic sustainability that endures any short-term hardships. Participation in such relations is what constitutes moral personhood in Amazonia (Londoño Sulkin 2005). Simultaneous to moral economic exchange, *aumentos* help to restore the moral selfhood, individually and collectively, that dehumanising bureaucracies otherwise negatively impact.

Apagando el motor

When national parks began to require entry permits, restrict hunting and other extractive activities, and monitor access to areas that had until recently been under

exclusive indigenous jurisdiction, indigenous peoples were forced to come to terms with the fact that what was once considered legal became illegal. Yet what are now considered 'illegal' acts are justified and legitimated. Indeed, moral economies establish what is legitimate (Webb *et al.* 2009). But when indigenous people take surplus game to market – hunted on land that they unequivocally regard as their own, land which is part of their communities rather than 'adjacent to' them as the state and NGOs define it – selling it is commonly seen by non-indigenous others as a 'corrupt' practice. Town people will say that 'the indigenous people are destroying their own forests', and national park guards will say 'we are here to protect indigenous people from themselves'. This shift in public perception away from the 'ecologically noble savage', who was once considered a natural steward of their environment (Raymond 2007; Conklin and Graham 1995), towards the image of corrupt indigenous individuals is in part caused by state regulations that alienate ethnic groups from their ancestral lands and propel them towards cities which in turn further marginalises them (Peluso and Alexiades 2005).

Now unable to hunt on their ancestral territories as openly as was once permissible or possible, indigenous people in this study have come to enact the role of 'the criminal' that the state imposes upon them. In this role, they see themselves as 'smuggling' hunted game, bringing *contrabando* into their own homes. Whereas hunters safely consumed, dried and shared the game they caught, even selling some of it, hunting has now become a 'risky' enterprise that must produce high rewards for it to be worth the risk. Following this logic, and looped with a greater reliance on cash for purchased food, hunting is often done on a larger scale than in the past, though it still has minimal impact in Madre de Dios. Nonetheless, the environmental service economies (national parks and ecotourism) have demonized many extractive activities yet the one closest to heart, that individuals become most emotional about, is hunting.

The following story (*ibid.*) demonstrates the complexity of indigenous moral cosmoeconomies with regard to hunting. Upon discovering that a capybara had been shot, a violation of the terms of agreement that had been made with a nearby ecotourist lodge, its representative scolded community leaders and members: 'Who killed that capybara? ... Don't you know that is stealing? That capybara was worth money and it belonged to everyone ... By killing the capybara, one person has stolen

from everybody else! If you kill the animals, what will the tourists come to see?' The powerful interplay of the demonization of the hunt and the commoditization of the hunted is illustrated by the representative's reprimand. For many indigenous people, capybaras are a non-human other with whom there are various potential cosmoeconomic exchanges.¹¹ The ecotourism lodge undermines this view by imposing a competing idea of value on hunted animals, and by reducing the different values traditionally associated with game and hunting — aesthetic, moral and epistemological — into a materialist one.

Similarly in another community, an anthropologist with strong ties to ecotourism paradoxically stated that, 'despite the importance of Harpy Eagles and Giant Otters among biologists, conservationists, and tourists, neither species hold special economic significance to people ... at least not before tourism' (as cited in *ibid.*: 7) implying that their only value lies in their preservation for tourism. This is ironic as these specific animals play a salient role in many local oral traditions, in which they are powerful symbolic referents of supra-human custodial beings, and thus part of the ontological complex of predation that underlies intimate interrelationships between human and non-human beings. Peluso and Alexiades (*ibid.*) show that harpy eagle feathers do not only have symbolic value but also contribute to indigenous livelihoods. It is precisely by understanding indigenous beliefs about the regenerative, creative and healing aspects of activities such as hunting that one moves away from hunter-prey models towards those of predation-consumption-reciprocity. Scholarly accounts that conceal the 'economic' value of animals separate the 'symbolic' from the 'economic', thus subverting — and reinventing — indigenous perceptions of value. By defining 'economic' only as that which takes place in the context of market transactions, this kind of rhetoric creates the object of its own discourse: the commoditization of ecological and social relations and the primacy of the market as a measure of value (*ibid.*). It is in terms of such limited definitions of economy that indigenous peoples, as hunters, come to be seen as corrupt subjects.

¹¹ Human/non-human relationships are complex and assume shifting positions of predators prey and allies, and therefore need to be treated with care (Peluso 2007).

Indeed, because of similar assumptions, fuelled by conservation and ecotourism business enterprises, indigenous peoples' hunting is seen, at best, as unethical, and even as criminal. Although indigenous people do not view themselves as corrupt, they are aware that they may need to act *like* criminals in order to obtain what they see as rightfully theirs. One vernacular idiom that refers to how they enact justice for themselves in such contexts is the phrase *vamos pagando*. While meaning 'we go paying', the phrase also plays on *apagando el motor*, 'turning off the motor', which people need to do in order to sneak by control posts in their canoes at night.¹² Thus people are '*a-pagando*' ('turning off') their motor so that they are not spotted and caught by the national park guards, who would then fine them and confiscate their game. In fact, when I earlier mentioned there were ways to avoid logging controls, I was referring to *vamos pagando* as a method in addition to paying a *coima* to avoid what indigenous people perceive as unjust surveillance and control by bureaucratic apparatuses. By saying *vamos pagando* ('we go paying'), indigenous Amazonians are humorously paying exactly what they think they owe: nothing. Although it seems that they are referring to their own corruption, as with other cases, people's turn of phrase reflects their sense that they are exercising their legitimate rights in the face of what they view as state corruption. *Vamos Pagando* places indigenous peoples on the moral high ground vis-à-vis bureaucratic injustice.

Contrabando

Earlier I used the word *contrabando*, a term that often refers to illegal goods smuggled across borders. In Madre de Dios, use of the word *contrabando* does not necessarily imply that the item itself is illegal, only that it has been smuggled. Yet an examination of indigenous usage of words like *contrabando* provides us with a nuanced perspective on informal economies and permits us a glimpse of how such concepts and the informal economy are interpreted within moral economies.

For indigenous people, *contrabando* can be used to refer to anything that is enacted in secrecy and that undermines the ideal of the moral economy. In some

¹² This play on words uses two words with the same origin: *pagando* and *apagando* both derive from the Latin *pacare*, meaning 'to calm or alleviate'.

indigenous languages, people use a phrase meaning ‘conceived in secret’ as a euphemism for the Spanish word *contrabando*. For instance, among many Amazonian groups, paternity can be attributed to more than one of a woman’s sexual partners (Beckerman and Valentine 2002). Thus a child is believed to be formed from the accumulation of semen in the uterus from successive acts of copulation between one pregnancy and the next, meaning that children often have more than one father. Those who are not ‘birth fathers’ (a woman’s partner) are referred to as ‘contraband fathers’, and recognized as secondary fathers (Peluso and Boster 2002). Furthermore, it is mostly women who assert the relationship between children and their multiple fathers by revealing the ‘smuggling’ of a ‘contraband child’. This idiom reflects the illicit and secretive quality of sexual affairs, and the notion that another man’s child has been smuggled into a household.

Given how notions of parent–child relationships are central to individual constructions of identity and thus lie at the very core of personhood, the idea that ‘smuggling’ is connected to the very concept of what constitutes the self is significant. Identities are continuously regenerated through relationships forged around children, and the recognition of alternative paternities legitimates an unlawful act by making it legitimate. This sense of legitimating what was brought about by ‘illegal’ means does not imply that all illegal activities are legitimate. However, it does imply that when the result of illegal activities produces ‘real persons’ with contradictory choices about how one needs to comport themselves to be fully human (be it recognising one’s father, being able to move about the rivers in a canoe or hunt food that is brought to you through both human and non-human exchanges) then the indigenous Amazonians in this study, deem these activities as being legitimate. What moral cosmoeconomics render as legitimate cannot, as this paper argues, be seen as corrupt.

Parillada

While indigenous language use reveals indigenous peoples’ recognition of the fact that they themselves sometimes act in a manner that might be seen as corrupt, they also use language to speak of the corruption of others. Indigenous people use the word *parillada* (‘barbecue’) in a way that captures the manner in which other people

sometimes try to bribe them. The term is most often used in reference to the NGOs who arrive in their communities and attempt to persuade them to approve their projects by offering them a range of goods and service. NGOs routinely make a splash of generosity upon arrival, endeavouring to create obligations towards themselves while they ask locals to ‘cooperate’ with their projects. I have witnessed several of these *parilladas*, but the largest was when an adventure ecotourism company hosted such an event and had the community sign an agreement with them while pigs were still roasting on a spit. The people concerned now have a world-renowned tourist lodge – one which is often written about for its exceptional relationship with local peoples – in one of their communities. The NGO was adroit in its legal use of bribery, and soon imposed restrictions and expectations on community members that have curtailed their extractive activities. People often joke, ‘we gave up tapir for a mestizo’s pig!’¹³ In such self-evaluations, individuals are acknowledging their own short-sightedness in the face of inequality while referencing the forfeiture of their own cosmoeconomics (a tapir which is a valued ‘non-human other’ is procured as a source of nourishment on their own terms) for a momentary temptation of an inferior meat belonging to people whom they strongly associated with exploitation. The joke serves as a reminder of their improvident exchange.

Conclusions

Anthropology can push us to consider not only what our fieldwork tells us about others but also about ourselves. Indigenous Amazonians engage in various informal economic activities, I have demonstrated how some of them are illegal and seemingly corrupt from the perspective of the state. But these practices are only marginally different from certain activities in our own formal economies or ‘corruption that does not break the law’ (Pardo 2018:S000). The use of vernacular idioms of corruption in relation to informality – *coima*, *pago del carrito*, *aumento*, *vamos pagando*, *contraband* and *parillada* – convey and reflect the challenges that indigenous people and others face in manoeuvring through cumbersome and imposing bureaucratic systems. Their choices

¹³ The meat of domesticated pigs is typically seen as unhealthy.

of action reflect their need to deal with bureaucracy as quickly and efficiently as possible while restoring their own sense of humanity by addressing these on their own cosmo-economic terms. In the context of Peru, Nugent (2018:528) describes how “corruption may be regarded as an attempt to tighten boundaries that have become dangerously relaxed—and in the process, to clarify distinctions between the legitimate and the illegitimate.” Yet Amazonians’ usage of vernacular conveying extra-legal activities shows that seemingly corrupt activities, propelled by the inconsistencies that bureaucracies impose, instead relax regulations by treating them as illegitimate.

The choices indigenous people make to lessen the burden of bureaucracy in everyday life are similar to those that elsewhere can easily be taken for granted. For example, the use of brokers and facilitators for expediting necessary documents is not a phenomenon confined to canoe-owners in Madre de Dios. In the UK one can pay for a service when applying for a passport, allowing someone else to do a job that saves the applicant time and grief, while also ensuring that the application is properly submitted; one can also pay extra to have one’s application ‘fast tracked’ – effectively jumping the queue. These and other similar services can be had for ‘a little extra’, ‘a little extra’ that places some individuals at an advantage over others.

This article has suggested that corruption in Latin America’s indigenous Amazonian societies is relational and often, as elsewhere, a response to state or state-like bureaucracy. The examination of idioms of corruption shows how indigenous peoples frame the state (Gupta & Ferguson 1992) while resisting becoming docile subjects of bureaucratic practices. In this way, they reject the inhumanity of bureaucracy even so far as to invert what some scholars of Latin America corruption (Seligson 2006) have assumed to be a correlation between high corruption and low interpersonal trust; this is clearly not so in the stories told here whereby indigenous individuals routinely generate amicable bonds with the brokers that facilitate their mutual corruption. Indeed it is the absurdity of state regulations that mean bureaucracies require things that are nonsensical or ‘stupid’ (Graber 2012: 105). Yet this perspective does not in and of itself help indigenous peoples. The massacre at Bagua, mentioned earlier, shows that structural and bureaucratically sanctioned violence are visited on ‘those who insist upon alternative schema[s] and interpretation[s]’ (ibid.: 121) and who resist the state’s ‘self-sustaining web’ of

violence, bureaucracy and globalisation aimed at creating desperate labourers (Graeber 2015: 42).

Indigenous peoples do what is necessary to maintain their own lives, and the lives of those whom they care for and look after, by engaging in a variety of ways in informal economies. In doing so they are often faced by bureaucratic injustices imposed upon them by laws, regulations and governance that do not take their social and economic realities into consideration. While Herzfeld (1993) has argued that bureaucracy has sought to dehumanise its participants, indigenous peoples have used moral-economic practices – seemingly corrupt activities - to recover the humanity that such bureaucracy attacks. The analysis of local idioms of extra-legal economic activity as linked to moral cosmoeconomies proposed here is not intended to offer judgement of peoples actions as crooked or righteous in any way. Rather, the analysis is aimed at exploring vernacular idioms of informal economic activities, the intersection between those activities and the formal economy, and the manner in which corruption is a moral rather than a legal issue.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to all of the individuals I interviewed and to all of the communities that have welcomed me in the Peruvian Amazon. I would especially like to thank Miguel Alexiades for his comments. This article benefitted from the inspiration and feedback received at the Languages of Informality Workshop organised by David Henig, University of Kent, and Nicolette Makovicky, University of Oxford and the Centre for European Language Based Area Studies (CEELBAS) in 2013. Various grants have supported the long term fieldwork that spans the timeframe covered by this chapter: the British Academy Small Research Grant, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Social Science Research Council, Fulbright and American Women in Science. I would also like to thank the FENAMAD and the editors of this volume.

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