

# URBAN INDIGENITIES

Being Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century

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## CHAPTER SIX

# The Politics of Ese Eja Indigenous Urbanite Images in Distinct Nation States

## *The Bolivian and Peruvian Amazon*

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### Diverging River: Distinct Nation States

Recent focus on Indigenous urbanization in Lowland South America has rightfully drawn attention to the dangers of strictly rural images for Amazonians (Alexiades and Peluso 2015, 2016; Peluso and Alexiades 2005a, 2005b). This chapter is premised on the importance of understanding Indigenous peoples as diversely participating in rural-urban flows, yet it also pays close attention to the particular complications that urban images pose as many conscientiously uphold them. Such an examination does not question the significance of stressing urbanization in the way that Indigenous peoples are represented, yet it aims to be cognizant that such images are often manipulated by agents with vested interests in divesting rural areas of its inhabitance.

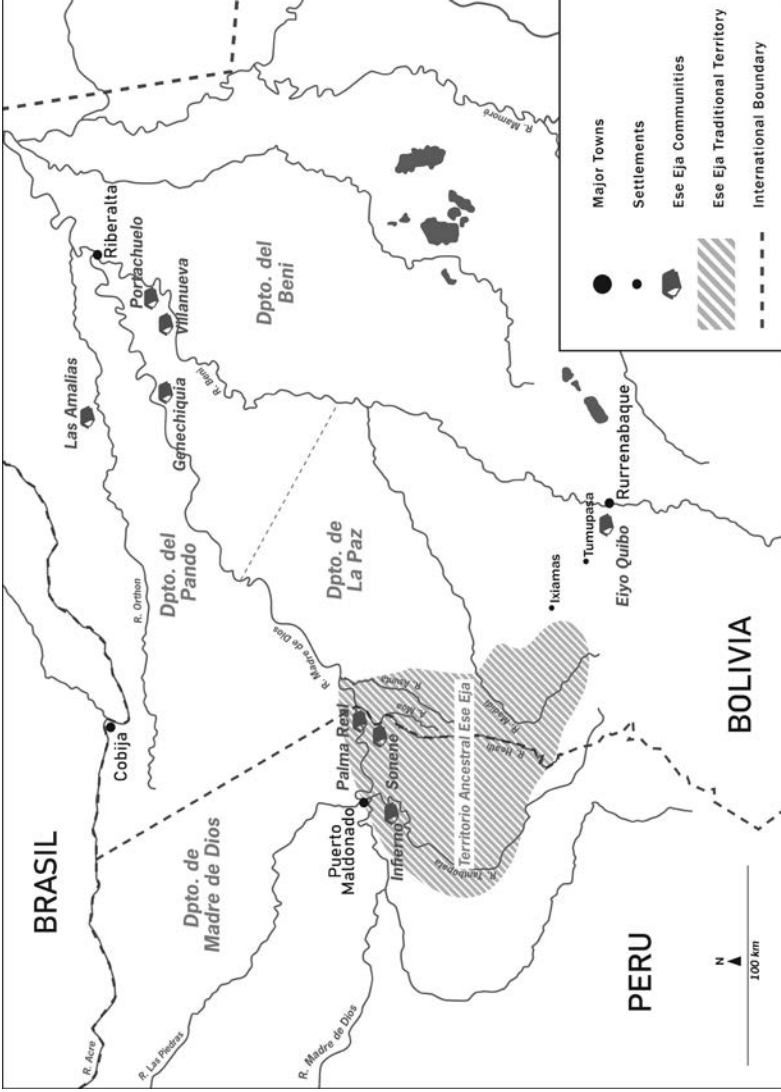
Indigenous people “living at the borders” in Amazonia actually, apart from the symbolic underpinnings of the phrase as intended in this volume, do often tend to live on physical borders and have a long history of rural-urban flows that might not immediately seem apparent. Indeed, archeologists have now verified that pre-Columbian Amazonian settlements were large-scale and urban, centralized, densely populated, and stratified (Denevan 1992; Erickson 2006; Heckenberger et al. 2008) and were thus metropolises in their own right. Such findings expose large and expansive trade networks and challenge deeply rooted misconceptions of Amazonia as an area of pristine wilderness with minimal human impact on the environment and settlements (Fausto and Heckenberger 2007; Alexiades 2009).

Yet in more recent history, the overall human trafficking during the rubber boom alongside the debt peonage systems that preceded and outlasted it resulted in the multidirectional movements of people. Various groups either moved toward the headwaters or the interior to avoid infringements on their freedom, moved downriver toward the commodities and novelties that centers or cities offered, attacked the rubber labor camps, worked for rubber and gold mining barons, or traversed rural and more populated areas (Alexiades 2009; Alexiades and Peluso 2003; Fifer 1970; Peluso 2014). What is noteworthy here is that even if individuals and groups had never been part of the urban milieu, they were importantly responding to the emergence of “the urban” as an impactful space and presence; furthermore, these urban spaces are often territorial areas that many groups may have had historical access or claims to. Hence, Indigenous peoples have not and are not disconnected from urban spaces.

Amazonian Ese Eja settlements and mobility have forged their decisions, like many other groups, around activities that emerge from non-Indigenous dominated spaces, particularly economic and extractive regimes, the establishments of nation states, and the dynamics of populations in urban centers. Ese Eja, a self-denominated ethnonym, are a group of approximately three thousand individuals living in eight communities along the Beni, Madre de Dios, Heath, Orton, and Tambopata Rivers in the Beni, Pando, and La Paz border regions of Bolivia and Madre de Dios, Peru. Most Ese Eja plant swidden horticultural fields, hunt, fish, gather, extract and process forest resources for their own consumption and commercial trade, and variably engage in labor with townfolks, as well as variably circulate and reside between rural and urban centers. They have ongoingly come together and apart across physical and symbolic borders that over time evolved into the distinct nation states that they now inhabit.

Ese Eja origin myths of Bawaja locate their point of origin at the headwaters of the Madidi River (Bolivia), which bifurcated naturally into two opposite downriver directions that ended up eventually spreading Ese Eja (Madidikwinaji, people of the Madidi River) communities over five hundred kilometers apart from each other. As such, their settlements became increasingly separated, and contact and communication between the various resident groupings mostly ceased as it became more difficult and inconvenient to retrace their own steps.

The majority of Ese Eja were created communities that were clearly located within what only later became known as the Bolivian or Peruvian



**FIGURE 6.1** Map of Ese Eja Communities, Bolivia and Peru. Crafted by Miguel Alexiades.

nation states, with the exception of those who live on the Heath (Sonene) River. Roughly twenty years before the separation of the Heath River Ese Eja (Sonenekwinaji, people of the Sonene River) from the rest of the Madidikwinaji, the Bolivian and Peruvian governments, utilizing the expertise of their commissioned explorers and mapmakers and the political and armed maneuverings of their key traders and powerful rubber barons and institutions, vigorously forged toward each other to eventually establish the Peruvian-Bolivian boundary line, which was finalized between 1909 and 1912 (Toppin 1916; Chavez, n.d.; Fifer 1970). Although the Heath River forms a natural boundary of what became known as two separate countries, Bolivia and Peru, at this point, Sonene Ese Eja found themselves to technically, though not yet in practice or performance, have no option other than to subscribe to the citizenship of the land where they found themselves as Peruvian citizens.

Ese Eja still living on the Heath River, which separates Peru and Bolivia in southeastern Amazonia, had long lived on both sides of the river, utilizing both sides equally as one territory. When national documents began to be issued in both countries from the 1940s onward, Ese Eja were forced to choose citizenship, something that they had resisted doing up until that point. Despite identifying themselves as being more related to Ese Eja in the nation state of Bolivia, sharing the same language variant as well as a history of antagonism and recent warfare with Ese Eja groups in Peru, they made their nation state allegiance solely on the basis of where the closest urban center was located—hence the official maintenance of their community on the Peruvian side of the river. This choice was further limited by the Dominican Catholic mission who took it upon themselves to register all Heath River Ese Eja as Peruvian born. Urbanity and its proximity for the sake of bureaucratic ease was the overall guiding principle.

Nationality and citizenship were a matter of convenience. It was indeed their only option, given the kinds of articulation with the nation state that are required by citizenship, such as education, military conscription, and development outreach programs. The Heath River Ese Eja's choice made further logistical sense when one considers that the Bolivian side of the Heath River pertained to the large province of La Paz and did not and still does not have nearby urban settlements. Ixiamas, an Amazonian merchant outpost, would be the closest Bolivian urban center, at a distance of 150 kilometers (if one were to draw a straight line across rainforest terrain). The city of La Paz, capital of the province, is 3,640 meters above sea level and 370 kilometers from

the Heath River, and only has routes that include steep mountainous terrain that is difficult to cross; indeed, the main road from Rurrenbaque remains dubbed as *Ruta de la Muerte* (The Death Route). Even today, if one had no worries about finances, optimal technology, and favorable weather at one's disposal, it would take over a week to travel from the Heath to La Paz. For Ese Eja, such a trip to their regional capital would take months of travel and consume considerable resources, making it an untenable urban destination for the necessary back-and-forth that regional urban capitals often demand from their rural inhabitants.<sup>1</sup>

On the Heath River, for Ese Eja peoples, the national border becomes an urban-Peruvian border facing rural Bolivia. In this sense their choices emphasize an ethno-cultural border, as Brablec refers to (chap. 4, this volume)—one that is geographically, though not culturally, fully moving away from the composition and social relations of the original residential group with whom they still identify. Yet the Heath River is also a symbolic border that reflects living at the margins and living on the edges of society, irrespective of whether or not individuals and families are living in their community or in towns. As individuals circulate across these landscapes, the idea of a definable urban and rural border has long dissolved, if we are ever to accept that they are or were indeed separate. When examining Indigenous urbanization, it is important to be precise about what is meant by this term.

## Indigenous Urbanization Today

In recent work, Miguel Alexiades and I have examined Indigenous urbanization in Amazonia as sets of multidirectional processes that are “often highly contingent and situational not as a simple or a permanent migration to a city, but rather as part of an ongoing circulation of people that connects different communities, towns and multiple-sited dwellings” (Alexiades and Peluso 2015, 1; see also 2016). As such, these urbanization choices can be opportunistic and are inspired by an ever-increasing wide range of reasons such as labor, education, social rifts, exploration, entrepreneurship, political work, and so forth (Peluso 2015). Elsewhere, I have described how urban areas become villages and how villages become urban, but most importantly how ultimately these processes begin in people's minds long before they physically take place, hence this idea that “urbanization begins at home” (Peluso and Alexiades 2005a, 1).

Here I discuss how the sociopolitical stakes and impact entailed in particular forms of representation, outreach, and development trap Indigenous Lowland South American peoples, like Amazonian Ese Eja and their neighbors, into “urban” images that are by default seen as anti-“traditional” or anti-rural, while also paying heed to interactions with respective nation states. By this I mean that images that portray Indigenous peoples as urbanites simultaneously carry the threat of portraying them as people disassociated from their lands and the ongoing practices and transformations of their traditions and as having lost or being in the process of losing their vital claims to Amazonian livelihoods. While there are surely some migrations that might be reflective of such instances, overall, generalized reactions to the urban portrayal of Indigenous peoples serve to individually and/or collectively destabilize them in many instances. Indeed, as Brablec and Canessa (introduction to this volume) state, Indigenous people are “vulnerable to the pressure to conform but also made invisible by dominant societies unwilling to recognize them.”

Geographers such as McSweeney and Jokisch (2015, 14) have persuasively put forward the argument that adverse reactions to urban Indigenous peoples are rife in policy documents that are “generic, inevitable, and ultimately disempowering to natives’ territorial positions” and that, in turn, these policies create their affect. Such positions lean heavily on unsuitable applications of migration push-pull theories about Amazonian populations (Peluso 2015). Policy documents endorse the idea that urbanization entails the abandonment of territories. Yet apart from ethnographic examples used to elucidate migration to cities, permanent or otherwise, there is very scant ethnographic detail on how such misuse of urban images is operationalized, despite its insidious presence in what underlies commonplace perceptions of urban Indigenous peoples and how these viewpoints influence decisions that are made that affect their livelihoods and futures.

The multisited-ness of Amazonian Indigenous urbanization reflects an ongoing refashioning of Indigenous social and political identities, and the coproduction of new forms of territoriality provides a contrast with pre-established notions of urbanization as entailing and generating its opposite: social, cultural, territorial, and political dilution and disenfranchisement. Yet the disjuncture between these emergent and orthodox views of Indigenous urbanization has direct on-the-ground implications. This is particularly the case given that Indigenous claims to rights, resources, and territories are

commonly substantiated through claims to ancestry, emplacement, and tradition, and often directly linked to environmental conservation and to territories that are adjacent to or within natural protected areas (Fisher 1994).

The presence of Lowland South American Indigenous territories has complicated the agendas of the aggressive and expanding neoliberal agro-extractive frontier organized around energy (oil and gas, hydroelectric, bio-fuels), mining, transport, and agro-industrial sectors. The extent to which Indigenous peoples can retain control over vast territories—many of them within or around natural protected areas—is in large part dependent on the kinds of relationships they form with both cities and forests and, most importantly, how these are understood, represented, and communicated. If urbanized Indigenous peoples, as some layperson and media representations contend, are not “really” Indigenous, then their claims to highly contested lands, resources, and rights become problematic. The politics of authenticity and the issue of Indigenous urbanization do not escape the manipulation of external interested actors. For instance, the politically powerful Confederation of Agriculture and Livestock of Brazil used evidence of TV and DVD use as proof of Indigenous peoples’ “urbanization” and, therefore, diminished need for their lands (McSweeney and Jokisch 2015).

As stated earlier, due to a combination of geographical, ecological, historical, and circumstantial factors, Peruvian and Bolivian communities have access to different kinds of resources and affordances for interacting with regional markets (Alexiades 1999; Peluso 2003). In Madre de Dios the outreach teams of extractive industries, such as Petro Peru, specifically target the ambiguous and sometimes tense politics between communities and their more urbanite members. In the Pando, Beni, and La Paz departments of Bolivia, Indigenous mobility can be misrepresented as the abandonment of their territories by land-hungry adjacent ethnic groups and their enabling NGO supporters (Alexiades, Machuqui, and Monje 2009; Alexiades et al. 2009). It is common for oil and gas development companies to employ teams that arrive in the potentially affected communities in advance of the extractive activities in an attempt to get them to buy in to the company’s desired future presence in their communities. These teams are similar to development organizations in that they offer community projects and infrastructural improvements in exchange for extractive activities. In many cases they offer transitory benefits that do not reflect an equitable exchange of resources. As Suzanne Sawyer has stated, “The high social and environmental stakes of oil



operations cannot be exchanged for trinkets—be they pencils or buildings, metal roofing or high school scholarships” (1998, 43).

Some organizations disingenuously label any conversation that they engage in as a “community consultation” even if it is with one person and does not engage with the community’s structure and protocols for representation or consent. This allows organizations to tick off the community consultation box that they need to satisfy in order to proceed with their simulation of consent. In the case of Madre de Dios, it has millions of hectares of land protected as national parks and heavily depends upon natural products and raw materials for its economy. No manufacturing industries are present in this region of cross-border trading. Informal economies are committed to the extraction and exportation of mahogany, gold, oil, and gas (Peluso 2018). The area’s reputation as a lawless land rings true when informal economies here are further linked to invisible drug economies (allegedly as a transit region), continuing debt-peonage systems, and, as in the case of gold extraction, the nearly annual discovery of the mass graves of unidentified children. Regional attitudes toward Ese Eja are highly contingent upon poor Andean migrants in the region (who tend to view them harshly, typically enlisting the culture of poverty explanations for Ese Eja marginality) combined with a more recent migration of middle-class individuals and families from both Cusco and Lima (who view them with a greater degree of sympathy and, at times, idealization).

In Bolivia regional politics toward Indigenous peoples are starkly different in cities such as Riberalta, where people see themselves as being local Amazonians (*campesinos*) even if they are not Indigenous Amazonians. Residents tend not to be recent migrants, or at least have histories that are more rooted in the region when compared to Peruvian counterparts, even if such rootedness began and solidified with the extractive economies that exploited Indigenous peoples. While I am not ignoring that Indigenous Amazonians are often considered to be inferior by their Andean neighbors (Canessa 2007), the appreciation of the Amazon region itself by the people that reside there, as well as their sense of belonging to it, have translated into an overall appreciation of Indigenous activities in some arenas. For instance, townsfolk’s appreciation and consumption of food crops such as plantains (an Ese Eja food staple) and artisanal products have allowed Bolivian Ese Eja to productively expand their local horticultural practices toward income-producing opportunities, whereas the production of plantains in Peru is not an economic activity.

Where they are found, Brazil nuts often constitute the most commercially valuable and coveted, and thus often contested, forest resource. Access to Brazil nuts in the communities of Sonene and Palma Real (Peru) is mostly well regulated and organized through a combination of *de jure* and *de facto* rules. In Bolivia, Brazil nut extraction and trade are more complex and tense, in part because the Ese Eja in four communities (Portachuelo Alto, Portachuelo Bajo, Villanueva, and Genechiquía) are in a multiethnic Indigenous territory, with shared forest usufruct rights with Cavineño and, especially, Tacana, who according to the Ese Eja have managed to secure access to the most productive stands (Alexiades, Machuqui, and Monje 2009; Alexiades et al. 2009). Indeed, as in other parts of Amazonia, unequal access to Brazil nuts constitutes a source of social tension and conflict within and between communities (Ubiali and Alexiades, forthcoming). In the Bolivian Ese Eja case, claims to land, and hence Brazil nut access, hinge upon a rural, nonurban presence that is surveilled by neighboring competing Indigenous leadership and overseen by regional politicians with vested interests.

There are additional geographical resource differences that affect Ese Eja individual and community articulations with urban centers. Bolivian communities are located on the lower reaches of the Beni or Madre de Dios Rivers and have historically and ongoingly had access to much larger stocks of fish. However, through overfishing and contamination with mercury from the increasing alluvial gold mining industries, these resources are increasingly diminishing in importance. While goldmining has been environmentally damaging to the area, it has not produced broader public leveraging of rural versus urban indigeneity by goldmining stakeholders.<sup>2</sup>

## Community-Facing Indigeneity

The posturing, strategizing, misuse, or overuse of rural “Indigenous” Amazonian images by Indigenous leadership as forms of promoting their indigeneity toward outsiders in order to confront the assault of extractive economies and gain allies in environmental service economy is well documented (Turner 1991, 1992; Peluso 1993; Conklin and Graham 1995). Indigenous leaders who need to travel or reside outside of their communities as members of local Indigenous federations or as representatives of their communities have long been commonly critiqued within their home communities for being corrupt or corruptible (Murphy 1974). For instance, most of these

outward-facing roles require literacy, which by default has often excluded elders, and are accompanied by the everyday adoption of the national language and customs (Peluso 1993; Alexiades and Lacaze 1996). However, a new phenomenon that I wish to call attention to is how Indigenous leaders are projecting their indigeneity toward their own community or group as a way of evidencing their dedication and leadership. This is often the outcome or desire to deflect gossip, misinformation, and misunderstandings that are propelled by their residence in urban centers and their ensuing urban lifestyles. In this sense, the community is not only whom Indigenous leaders represent but also, in effect, their audience.

The need for leaders to project indigeneity onto the community indicates that there is an emerging set of challenges to the Indigenous urban image. My example here, while anonymized, should nonetheless be familiar to anyone working with Indigenous groups. In both Bolivia and Peru, Indigenous peoples have rightfully learned to use indigeneity as a resource. This is certainly evidenced by processes of ethnogenesis (Hill 1996; Hornborg 2005; Peluso and Alexiades 2005a, 2005b) and the reindigenization of some Amazonian groups (Jackson and Warren 2005; Chaves and Zambrano 2006; Lopez Pila 2014). Among Ese Eja in Bolivia, community-facing efforts to perform indigeneity are mostly subtle. The 2005–2019 Evo Morales government—in their quest to bring water, roads, and communications to all rural areas—installed telecommunication antennas in all communities and laid the ground for the popularity and use of internet phone apps that allow for communication within and among different Ese Eja communities. For instance, multiple WhatsApp groups formed that allowed for the open and ongoing exchange of information.<sup>3</sup> While the content of WhatsApp mobile phone messages embrace a vast array of topics, from the most silly to the most serious, there is a particular form of communication that has been helpful to Indigenous leadership and the communities they represent. Among Bolivian Ese Eja, there is an unwritten mandate that any document that is intended to be signed by any Ese Eja representative, even if they are employed outside of their community as a government representative, must be posted on WhatsApp. These posts are often followed by texts and audio recordings and can become long conversations between multiple individuals asking questions about the document and the arrangements and implications that it entails. Furthermore, Indigenous leaders send photos of their meetings and their whereabouts when they are away from their communi-

ties, allowing them to remain connected to community members and other leaders.

This is not the case for many Indigenous groups in Madre de Dios, Peru, where leaders tend to live in urban centers and are often isolated from their communities. Internet communication towers have only recently been built in 2021 and have not yet formed such open-access communication among communities. It is not customary for representatives to share actual documents and their daily whereabouts and conversations. Nor is it customary to provide people with an update of activities unless a formal meeting is called. With this in mind, it has therefore always been easier for the development efforts of extractive industries to be able to siphon off a few individuals for either community “consent” or as intermediaries who do not have the full backing of their communities but will oblige. Concurrently, when Indigenous leaders resist development outreach, some outreach officers try to either create new or exacerbate existing rifts between Indigenous people and their leaders, particularly taking advantage of a rural/urban divide. They do this by insinuating that their leaders have tried to negotiate with the organizations one-on-one for their own personal interests but that the officers prefer speaking directly with the community.

I will illustrate this point through the anonymized story of a Peruvian Amazonian leader who I will refer to as Roberto. He works with the local Indigenous federation in his region. Roberto’s presence in the Puerto Maldonado is increasingly typical of someone in a leadership position, and indeed leadership roles are a prominent cause and justification for multisited Indigenous residence and urbanization (Peluso 2015). Roberto still maintains a home in his Native community alongside his home in the city, and he is caught in what has now become a classic predicament of residing outside his community while aiming to defend the rights of his community. He is also someone who has received international recognition for his initiatives, and although twenty years ago he did not don Indigenous attire to emphasize and perform his indigeneity, this is indeed what he routinely and consistently does today. In today’s Indigenous politics, dressing up your indigeneity is commonplace and expected. There is a long history of scholarly work on dressing indigeneity as a resource in Lowland South America (Veber 1992, 1996; Peluso 1993; Conklin and Graham 1995; Conklin 1997; Santos-Granero 2009) that documents and argues that Indigenous dress has been used not as a form of submissiveness or assimilation but rather as a political tool. In

addressing Roberto's Indigenous attire as a form of projecting his indigeneity in his home community, I hope to stress why such a political device has arisen and what its relationship is to Indigenous urbanity.

The need for urban Indigenous leaders to reiterate their indigeneity through dress and other actions toward their own communities has emerged in the last decade. While Indigenous communities have long scrutinized their own leaders and representatives over the proper use of external resources—be it development projects, regional distributions, or rights over natural resources—these had not resulted in their overutilizing indigeneity toward their own communities. Whereas previously indigeneity was an outward-facing exercise, it has increasingly become an inward-facing performance. In Peru this can be understood within the context of an emerging set of external actors from extractive or government agencies that began to recognize and employ ways in which they could swerve the Indigenous urban image toward a narrative of excess and distrust, precisely at the time that this image began to emerge in ways that were meant to unhinge urbanity from its negative stereotype. Such suspicions are not difficult to foster, as there has been much distrust in general toward Indigenous leaders. Indigenous leaders are caught amid a paradoxical set of power relations: they must both represent their communities to the Indigenous federations they are elected to and simultaneously represent the Indigenous federation to the communities they represent (Rubenstein 2001).

In the case of Roberto, the identity politics of indigeneity that began for one set of reasons (projecting to the non-Indigenous world as a political platform) continues for another set of reasons. Roberto dresses in Indigenous attire for all of his meetings, and now also does so when visits his own or other communities. He cannot afford to be an invisible urbanite but instead wishes to continually remind his communities that he is intrinsically Indigenous. He does this by showing that his indigeneity is embedded in his everyday presentation no matter where he is—that it is not something that is put on solely for outside agents and taken off at will but rather that the marking of his Indigenous clothing shapes the making of his person and reflects his commitment to Indigenous communities in all settings.

Outside agents, particularly of natural oil and gas companies, approach Indigenous communities and operationalize their agenda by simultaneously employing two strategies. They create or build upon a rift within and between communities and their leaders over a perceived urban/rural divide

despite Indigenous circulations between communities and towns. Manipulative jokes are made to community members about how their leaders are getting fat, living well while all the while depriving their community members of resources associated with modernity. At the same time and with the same tone, to the larger public they describe how *all* Indigenous peoples have now become fat, Coca-Cola drinking, deterritorialized urbanites. Such agents are extremely skilled and know precisely what they are doing, and do it effectively. Indeed, the lapses in judgment on behalf of community members and townsfolk have been provoked by the disingenuous misuse of the urban image.

The tactics I have described use urbanity against Indigenous peoples precisely as they become more at ease with their urban profiles. Such strategies expose and address existing public and political misuse of Amazonian urban images by portraying them as anti-“traditional.” It is the inverse of the political wielding of “traditional” images as tools to undermine the urban reality of many Indigenous peoples that manipulates public opinion by rejecting either urban aspects of Indigenous lives or the possibility that Indigenous peoples can be both urban and Indigenous. If strategies like those of some of the oil and gas companies have traction, they are intensified when Indigenous peoples are increasingly residing in cities. The need for Indigenous peoples and their allies to readily combat discursive antiurban strategies is urgent. Clearly community dwelling and Indigenous urbanization occur alongside each other and not in opposition. Indigenous urbanization coproduces both city and territory as Indigenous political space (Alexiades and Peluso 2015; McSweeney and Jokisch 2015), and indeed there is much to suggest that this urban—even cosmopolitan—mobility has been critical to Indigenous political resurgence over the past three decades in old and new spaces.

## Conclusion

This chapter has contemplated the complexity of Indigenous urban images among the leaders of the same Amazonian ethnic group across distinct nations states at a moment in time when urbanity is generally more uncritically accepted as being part of Amazonian indigeneity. Yet it has also examined how the emerging surge in urban images and their ensuing urban lifestyles can be repurposed as political tools against Indigenous leaders toward both the public and their own communities. In this discussion, the historical and

contemporary particularities of regional differences among dissimilar nation states have shown how technological infrastructures and advances in Bolivia have served to strengthen Ese Eja community trust in their leaders while Peruvian leaders must cope with the heavy targeting of their communities by outside agents who want to position themselves advantageously so as to serve their own extractivist self-interests. While it is well-documented that Indigenous leaders have strategically positioned their indigeneity as a political resource when dealing with outsiders or building alliances, what I have paid attention to here is how Peruvian Indigenous leaders increasingly use outwardly noticeable Indigenous symbols such as dress when returning to their communities. They do this to emphasize their indigeneity as a public counterpoint to their own urban lifestyles. This approach ensures their public dedication as representatives who are ideally immune to corruption and protects them from the deployment of any “fat cat” image that outside agents might strategically deploy to show them as weak and excessive both to their communities and to the larger regional public. The outward display of their indigeneity toward their own communities promotes them as individuals who maintain an implicit association with Indigenous territories and rights. Both in Bolivia and Peru, Indigenous leaders are surveilled and scrutinized by the many, whether it is by posting documents and photos of their whereabouts on WhatsApp or by navigating city streets or community paths donned in Indigenous symbols. A leader’s awareness of being watched by his community members supports Pierre Clastres’s (1987) assertion that it is difficult for Amazonian leaders to exert their personal will on people. In this way, Amazonian Indigenous leaders cannot separate power from the group even when they are immersed in urban lifestyles; if a leader desires power for him or herself, then he or she is simply ignored and eventually abandoned by the group (Clastres 1994).

Diverse historical and current nation state politics in Peru and Bolivia have led to distinct political and economic relations with Indigenous peoples across urban centers. These dynamics have contributed to shaping who Ese Eja are today in these distinct spaces. Indigenous urbanization is part of the ebb and flow of community and urban center articulations, flows, and circulation. In the case of city-centered Indigenous leadership, it raises ontological challenges for how individuals can continue to live their Ese Eja-ness in ways that keep them connected to their communities. The ongoing iteration

of Ese Eja conviviality, consubstantiality, and commensality are fundamentally associated with being a proper human (Peluso 2003). It is not only how you clothe your body (Gow 1999; Viveiros de Castro 1998; Veber 1996) or how you attain and share your food (Fausto 2007) that constitutes the social person but also how the qualities of these substances and social relations (Vilaça 2002) are pivotal for crafting who you are and thus how you are expected and predicted to act. The risk of losing these habits puts one in the position of potentially becoming Other. In this sense, Indigenous ideas about power relations between leaders and community members amid urban and rural flows also become aspects of self and Other making.

With the increased urbanity of Amazonian leaders in a contentious space as outsiders approach them for favors that can have dire consequences in the rural areas they represent, the projection of traditional images as a form of facing inward toward communities also confronts the danger of transformation from one type of person and leader to another. In doing so, leaders position themselves against the potential rifts that can arise through the portrayal by others of images of urban excess or self-serving political temptations. As McSweeney and Jokisch (2015) have also pointed out, there is a paradox in the political dynamics that ensue from intensified links between Indigenous peoples and urbanization: while the intensified links with urban spaces have opened up spaces for their collaboration in political processes and allowed them to project their agendas, the very same movements can also undermine their own legitimacy in the eyes of certain outsiders with their facile assumptions about what is compatible and not with tradition. Indigenous peoples themselves become caught up in these complex dynamics as on the one hand they draw on powerful tropes as tradition and emplaced territoriality in order to substantiate claims and rights, while on the other hand navigating social realities that are visibly at odds with these simplified representations.

The trend of Indigenous leaders being preoccupied with tradition in their interactions with their own communities is part of the ongoing processes that engage with new interactions and challenges in ever-increasing rural-urban flows. With cities reflecting possibilities for people to traverse ways of being (though new life and leadership styles, dressing, and eating choices) as well as spaces, then it should follow that, in theory, urbanity offers possibilities for transformation that are kept in place by acts that reflect one's desires to be Ese Eja. While this is not usually a troubling aspect of such



ongoing movement and exchange among community members who either temporarily or permanently live in cities, it can be problematic for leaders whose livelihoods are now tied to cities by virtue of being unambiguously Indigenous. Lowland South American Indigenous individuals and groups share cities through proximity and residence, participating in diverse spatial mobility practices that seek to define and appropriate or reappropriate urban space on their terms and for their benefit, all while becoming, maintaining, or transforming how they represent themselves in response to the economic opportunism and inequalities that they both resist and reveal.

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## Notes

1. Within Bolivia it is only the Bolivian side of the Heath River that is part of the province of La Paz. Ese Eja communities in Bolivia are located in the provinces of Pando and the Beni.
2. Another marked resource that shapes differences in urban interactions are the plant resources that Ese Eja women use to craft both functional and artisanal products. In Bolivia the Ese Eja make mats (*esteras*), woven with the dried leaves of the palm *yokise* (*Chelyocarpus sp.*), for which there is a strong demand in the town of Riberalta. While there are other palm fibers that can also be used to weave mats, according to the Ese Eja, none compare in quality and durability to *yokise*, a plant that is not found along the rivers where the Ese Eja in Peru live. This demand articulates Bolivian Ese Eja women with the town more than their Peruvian counterparts. Indeed, Peruvian Ese Eja do not generally weave mats. They do, however, make baskets from *tamishe* (*Heteropsis sp.*), a resource not available in Bolivia. However, the demand for baskets is not significant; they

are sold as specialty items for tourists, and only a fraction of women in each Peruvian community weave these, whereas in Bolivia all Ese Eja women make mats for sale.

3. WhatsApp Messenger is an American freeware, cross-platform, centralized messaging and voice-over-IP service owned by Meta Platforms that is widely used throughout South America.

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