

Juliet S. Erazo, *Governing Indigenous Territories: Enacting Sovereignty in the Ecuadorian Amazon*. Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2013. 264 pages. Kindle \$13.49, Hardcover \$69.88 and Paperback \$21.19. ISBN-10: 0822354543. ISBN-13: 978-082235454

Juliet Erazo's *Governing Indigenous Territories* (2013) consists of five chapters that analyze quotidian practice of indigenous sovereignty beyond territorial rights in the region of Rukullakta. The author offers an insightful study of indigenous sovereignty enactment in the Ecuadorian Amazon as an exercise of continuous cultural and societal negotiation. Moreover, Erazo's conceptual and historiographical context maps the evolution of the Kichwa's administration of communal lands, since "its founding as a ranching cooperative in the early 1970s, through its current status as a self-governing, semiautonomous indigenous territory" (xvii). Consequently, the progression of the chapters reveals a rather complex reality that challenges the, so often romanticized, "utopic" indigenous life style in the role of the perpetual subaltern, yet in perfect synchrony with nature and harmonious coexistence. Instead, Erazo surpasses the rhetoric of Orientalism by extending the conceptualization of sovereignty over Rukullakta territory to its residents. She also addresses the challenges that tailored the politics during the initial attempts to create a cooperative, and the subsequent development of a reciprocal dynamic between leaders and members of the community. Finally, Erazo remarks the Kichwa's outstanding ability to navigate through Ecuador's economical and political shift towards neoliberalism and globalization.

Erazo's main concern is the conceptualization of sovereignty as a process that reconfigures the conjecture of indigenous entities uninterrupted subalternity. Henceforth, the Kichwa are portrait with agency, a premise that originates from Erazo's initial reflections about her first encounters with the natives, and remains present throughout this work. In fact, the author includes several anecdotes that evidence her own reaction when she comes to the realization that, even when unwillingly, she was also perpetuating the naturalization of western normativity to comprehend indigenous social order and identity.

In a forthright narration, Erazo explains that during her second visit to Rukullakta, she wrote a short version of her historiographical documentation of the process of reappropriation of ancient Kichwa land. Her intention was to distribute this document amongst the residents. However, the manuscript didn't have a title just then. Subsequently, she assumed that a slogan often found in the cooperative minutes—which she had been working with—would be adequate. To her surprise, the indigenous leader immediately discarded the slogan "only united will we overcome." At first Erazo cannot understand how such a revolutionary (western) mantra could be rejected. Moreover, she demands an immediate explanation or at least a suggestion for an alternative title. At this moment, Erazo becomes aware of the fact that her frustration and impatience results from a lack of a non-western scheme to understand indigenous reasoning. It is not until later that she recognizes the semiotic burden of such a slogan in the indigenous imaginary. That is because unity implies a coercion that evokes historical marginalization, since the Kichwa are not a united, nor a homogenous group of individuals. Consequently, forcing a union, that being ideological or in praxis, would only sever their ancestral ideological sovereignty.

Erazo was unknowingly reproducing the problematic interaction between the Kichwa and "foreigners and officials from Ecuador's government, who expect indigenous authorities to come to decisions quickly and decisively on behalf of their territory's population" (xviii), because indigenous people are perceived as a homogenous group. Consequently, it is presumed that their collective order is a rather less "sophisticated" replica of patriarchal vertical society. Under this assumption, is it understandable that leaders are

expected to decide arbitrary over the future of others. However, after reframing her previous misconceptions, Erazo continuously points out that Rukullakta communal organization is a coalition of heterogeneous individuals as opposed to a single-minded collectivity, thus surpassing canonic anthropological and ethnographic theoretical frameworks. Actually, Erazo's scope on heterogeneity, while developing this study, becomes a significant guideline that sheds clarity on the subsequent issues discussed in this book: the advantageous and puzzling implications of communal property and the constant negotiation of identity, while keeping sovereignty.

Rukullakta communal property emerges in the 70s as an attempt to preserve the Kichwa's ancient way of life. In fact, "[...] collective territorial ownership was a legal process in which Rukullakta's members participated because they believed it was the best way—possibly the only way—to defend their access to ancestrally claimed territory subsequent to the agrarian reforms of 1964 and 1973" (129). This is the main reason why the Kichwa had to reformulate their ancestral tradition of self-sufficiency and non-governance into what Erazo defines as "territorial citizenship." A process that results in the centralization of power and resources, where, allegedly, fulfilling responsibilities in benefit of the community is translated into rights for the Rukullakta resident. Even when this form of government emerges as an alternative to Latin American modern-state paternalistic ruling, it also raises the question of fairness in the distribution of benefits and efficient leadership, from people whose identity is defined by the rejection of authority.

Consequently, Erazo's concept of "territorial citizenship" must also be understood as a constant negotiation. Otherwise, it borderlines the representation of indigenous enactment of government as a facsimile of the Ecuadorian Estate Government. Especially, because as part of the efforts to consolidate the communal right over Rukullakta territory, the emergent leaders reshaped ancient traditions in order to compel residents to contribute to the new form of governance. Nonetheless, these actions reconfigured indigenous enactment of governance into a pyramidal organization, where sovereignty ceases to conform identity in order to become a privilege.

Such is the case of the *Minga*, which Erazo describes as an ancient practice of collaboration between the Kichwas. Mingas "[...] served to reaffirm and strengthen social ties, or to weaken them when assistance was withheld or judged to be half-hearted." The meaning of this tradition changed with the conformation of the first cooperative ranches. For "the term often refers to collective work days, when members are called to work together to improve a school or a road, for example. Imposing fines on those who did not comply became yet another task for Rukullakta's emerging bureaucracy" (66). The current situation of the Rukullakta region doesn't required as much time and labor to be donated in benefit of the community. However, there is still little room for sovereignty. "Leaders increasingly try to connect members' important life decisions—such as where to send their children to school, whether to report a crime to the police or to community leaders, and how to vote in an election—to their identities as indigenous persons and Rukullaktan citizens" (196). Consequently, there is the issue of sovereignty being substituted by authority. And if this is the case, Erazo's notion of "territorial citizens" is challenged.

Still, there is an effort to maintain a certain degree of autonomy in the dynamics of government. Erazo explains Kichwa governance as a symbiotic process, where residents mold their leaders and leaders reinvent governing processes and spaces to retain communal property rights. Nevertheless, Erazo includes an example of inequity in land distribution that questions the feasibility of the latter dynamic of government. The author points out that there is a resident in the community that continues to claim a large extension of land as his

own, even when the property is located within the limits of Rukullakta's communal territory. He claims that a powerful shaman gave the land to his father. When Erazo questioned some of the cooperative leaders, they provided a somewhat ludicrous answer: "he has the face of a shaman." Erazo concludes that "[a]lthough the latter remark is meant as a joke, there is a clear, underlying connection between personal power and the ability to defend land, even within an organization that has had state-backed authorities to redistribute it [the land] for over thirty years." (105). As a result, the symbiotic interaction between residents and leaders becomes a noble attempt, far from perfect, but still an effort to perpetuate autonomous indigenous identity.

Such an attempt is better understood as Erazo lays out the final two chapters of the book, where she describes a series of negotiations to manage a more complex reality. As time and modernization progresses, the Kichwa must find the resources to maintain their autonomy in the middle of a globalized Ecuadorian nation-state, the private sector, as well as their own need to perpetuate their identity. Because the Amazon remain relatively isolated, there are challenges for those who seek to satisfy basic needs, particularly when new environmental laws prohibit the traditional use of available natural resources. Those who suffer from penury may be reluctant to resist development projects sponsored by governments and rich private corporations, suggesting the urgent need to reinvent sustainability practices. At the same time, it is also imperative to search alliances that can benefit their community. Subsequently, new processes of culture and sovereignty negotiation are set in motion.

Erazo explains that the effective negotiation of sovereignty results in positive results for both parties. The Kichwa are able to obtain resources that allow them to support their living and keep their rights over the land and their and corporations and governmental instances are "willing to incorporate some indigenous priorities into their projects rather than pursue fortress conservation, even as they actively work to shape international, national and local social imaginaries regarding the Ecuadorian Amazonian region, thereby making 'the real world conform to the imagined one'" (169). The imagined world, being naturalized western assumptions that Erazo points out at the beginning of this work.

However, the conceptualization of an imagined world could also become a resource that contributes to the Kichwa's survival. Erazo explains that the Kichwa have opted for two different methods to continue to perform sovereignty. On one hand, the Kichwa constantly search opportunities to display their ancient traditions. This is an effective form to improve public relations because they educate the public in regards to the need of cultural preservation and, simultaneously they keep their traditions current in the imaginary of younger generations of Kichwa. On the other hand, they find new forms to "engaging with opportunities provided by the state" (59). For example, the indigenous cooperatives "are looking toward relatively sustainable economic pursuits, such as ecotourism and cocoa production, rather than agricultural pursuits that environmentalists have criticized, including *narajilla* and raising cattle" (168).

Erazo concludes this work stating: "Throughout this book, I have shown how subalterns in general and indigenous peoples in particular (usually seen as only the objects of governmental action) can also be the agents of governmentality" (197). There is enough evidence to support this statement. However, it also raises questions in regards Erazo's initial conceptualization of sovereignty as the result of heterogeneity. That is because Kichwa enactment of government progresses towards resembling modern-state models of government. Yet, negotiation of autonomy and cultural identity cannot be avoided. Actually, it stands as the most viable solution to the conciliation of modernity and tradition. On the

other hand, as much as preserving cultures as closely similar to the oldest archives available, it is also worthwhile to reflect on what parts of the culture are impossible to convene with current societal order, that being indigenous, mestizo or a globalized one. For instance, Erazo's work wasn't conceived under a gender studies scope, hence there is limited mention of women's role evolution in Kichwa society. At some point Erazo mentions their contribute to the cooperative. However, in view of the efforts to modify governance practice in order to preserve cultural sovereignty, an ancient conception of female passivity as an identitarian value would result in a detriment of the cooperative's efforts to prevail in a modern dominant Ecuadorian society. A lack of renovation in a practice like the above not only wouldn't preserve culture, but also would propitiate the loss of such.

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