

## THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF ETHNIC GROUPS AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE SOUTHEASTERN PERUVIAN AMAZONIA<sup>1</sup>

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In 2000, an assembly was carried out in the Kotsimba native community in Madre de Dios. A Harakbut leader and bilingual teacher had come to the community to introduce the Bilingual Intercultural Education Program (*Programa de Educación Bilingüe Intercultural - EBIMAD*)<sup>2</sup>. Once there, not only did she realize that only 10% of the communal population was made up of Indians or people of Indian-*mestizo* descent, but furthermore, this unbalance between Indians and *mestizos* continuously led to internal conflicts. This quickly became evident during the assembly. A discussion emerged on the dynamics between Indians and *mestizos*, in which ILO Covenant 169 for native and tribal peoples was brought up. The leader said: "we are not natives, a native is anyone who was born someplace. We are Indigenous peoples". She then authoritatively pointed out that she had taken part in the UNO assembly where the covenant had been passed, and that in said assembly

[...] the terms indigenous and tribal were used, and this goes for the *colonos*, as indigenous peoples usually means *indigenous peoples of the rainforest*. You, the *colonos*, have to comply with the decisions of our brethren. (Marcia Tijé, personal communication, 2000, my translation).

This event reveals several dimensions of usage of terms such as indigenous peoples, one of which is that they do not take shape in a vacuum but are construed in particular contexts. In this section I wish to show how categories such as ethnic

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groups and indigenous peoples have been used to frame two questions: who the Amazonian Indians are and what they are like. Thus, the analysis takes place within a wider discussion of indigenous identity. How indigenous identity has been analytically conceived and how it is used are the two key axes of this section. By analyzing the historical formation of this terminology in Peru I attempt to reveal the context within which these terms emerge and are replaced by others, how they are used by scholars and activists, as well as indigenous groups and individuals. In order to do so, I use the concept of ethnicity as an analytical category that comprehends the constructions of indigenous groups that allow them to identify and distinguish themselves from others.

### **The construction of ethnicity in Peru**

For Barth (1969) an ethnic group exist inasmuch it distinguishes itself from others and is distinguished by others based on certain arbitrarily chosen indicators. Thus, members of the ethnic group must know the rules of the game. These criteria/rules differ in each case, but they always fulfill the role of including or excluding individuals from certain groups<sup>3</sup>. Essentialist theories on ethnicity, which enjoyed their heyday in the 1950s and 1960s, stated that it was based on ascribed objective aspects. Currently, defenders of both approaches concur in pointing out that ethnicity is a group feeling of unity and distinctiveness, a notion of their own essence and difference “based on a sense of common history, usually combined with other characteristics such as sharing the same race, religion, language or culture” (Maybury-Lewis 1997:59), and consciously ascribed to the people of these groups by themselves, by others, or both (*Ibid.*). The ascribed character of ethnicity is based on beliefs, values, habits, customs and rules, behavioral patterns, but can also be a self-designation, a common ancestor, group solidarity, etc.

In Peru, the 1960s marked the beginning of an academic discussion on the terms to be used to refer to the peoples of the

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<sup>3</sup> Some possible indicators are language, kinship, territory, and culture.

Amazon<sup>4</sup>. Terms, such as ‘tribal societies’, ‘ethnolinguistic groups’, ‘ethnic minorities’, were put forward (Camino 1985). The 1970s were paradigmatic as parameters of identity were sought out in order to distinguish these groups. Stefano Varese (1972, 1974) chose the term ‘ethnolinguistic group’

[...] which in linguistic terms has dialectal areas, and in social, cultural and economic terms can be subdivided into sectors regarding, above all, the degree of interaction that each sector has [...] with national society (1974:27, my translation).

Being aware of the variety that characterizes those defined as ethnic group, Varese created a term that projected the idea of unity in particularity,

[...] there are *campas* groups that own motorboats and have a pre-cooperative farming organization and other *campas* still wear bark tunics; both extremes are located within the same ethnolinguistic group (Ibid., my translation).

In the 1970s and part of the 1980s the peoples of the Amazon themselves began to use the term ‘ethnic group’ to define themselves, but handled it so that it would pick up the differences they chose to perpetuate. During the 1980s in Colombia, the peoples of the North East Amazon called their ancient clans “ethnic groups” (Shwartz and Salomon 1999). Some scholars overlooked the evidence that indicated that these processes are partly encouraged by state policy, which compels social groups to use categories created by the state in order to access certain rights. During the 1970s, in Peru the word ‘native’ was included in state and academic terminology to refer to Amazonian peoples. In a study on the Amazonian peoples of Peru, Wise (1983) calls them ethnic or native groups<sup>5</sup>. The term ethnic group has an important place in

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<sup>4</sup> An interesting fact is that at the Pan-American Conference in Lima in early 1938, the governments of the states of the Americas established —almost by decree— that no “ethnic minorities” existed in the Americas, thus justifying the non-adoption of any protection system for this social sector.

<sup>5</sup> Based on these criteria, the author finds that there are dialectal differences with a common linguistic root (e.g., the huitoto) within the same ethnic group. However, she also finds that there are subtle “dialectal differences between the *achuar* and the *jíbaro* (of the Corrientes river), but they appear as separate groups because they consider themselves sociologically different” (Wise 1983: footnote 1, p. 834, my translation).

Peruvian Amazonian Anthropology, together with concepts such as 'ethnic territories' and 'ethnic peoples' (Camino 1985). Amazonian indigenous peoples were classified based on this terminology<sup>6</sup>.

The context in which this terminology is created is crucial to understanding processes of social construction of ethnicity. Anthropologists realized that the social structures of the Amazonian Indian peoples were rapidly falling apart and thus believed —the activists above all— in the need to halt or at least slow down this process, alleging a common identity and linking this to class interests<sup>7</sup>. They simultaneously received the influence of essentialist trends on the nature of ethnicity that emerged from American Anthropology and adapted them to the political agenda of Peruvian anthropologist-activists of the time. Although some realized that any attempt to capture reality with a concept fails when confronted with social diversity, Western scientific requirements as well as their own political agendas led many anthropologists to put forward a term that embraced the entire Amazonian social mosaic<sup>8</sup>. Thus, the term 'ethnic group' became natural and research during this period simply assumed it as such.

Despite the ethnographic data supporting the idea that identity is a social construct<sup>9</sup>, in the 1980s the essentialist conception of identity was still present in Peruvian Anthropology<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> See Ribeiro 1971, in Wise 1983: footnote 3, p. 834.

<sup>7</sup> Barclay's research (1980) is an exception; based on her experience with the *Amuesha*, she puts forward the idea that Amazonian Indian groups redefine their identity constantly, mainly due to their constant relationship with non-amazonian society. Although the author does not renounce the term 'ethnic group', she defines ethnic groups as social groups in constant redefinition due to their gradual integration to national society.

<sup>8</sup> Smith (1984:7) holds that "a key to understanding the question of indigenous identity is a recognition that their world is not homogeneous".

<sup>9</sup> There are few studies that conceive Indian identity as a dynamic phenomenon. Barclay 1980, Chaumeil 1984, Stocks 1981, Bellier 1983 and Rosengren 1987 are among them.

<sup>10</sup> Basically, ethnic identity was conceived in opposition to other forms of identity. See Regan, 1988.

Although it was acknowledged that more research on Indian identity was needed within the context in which they lived during the time, it was generally understood that ethnic identity included elements such as kinship, territory and nature, biological knowledge, mythology and rituals, social organization, shamanism and religion. That is, all aspects of culture<sup>11</sup>.

Anthropological definitions of ethnicity went from a set of ascribed attributes shared by members of a group to the use of alleged cultural and physical attributes as “social limits that locate people in different groups within a wider world of social interaction” (Stern 1987:16). These limits are created and used not only by the social groups themselves, but by governments and other social groups as part of a wider policy of exclusion<sup>12</sup>. In this approach, identity is no longer located in a social group, but is observed in the politics of governments and other agencies<sup>13</sup>.

Rosengren (2003) points out that Western thought acritically assumed a link between people, language and culture. Based on this tacit assumption, a list of tribes or ethnic groups was drawn up in order to differentiate the peoples of certain areas of the Amazon. The fact that some Indians use or have used these categories to distinguish themselves<sup>14</sup> does not eliminate

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<sup>11</sup> Other, more eclectic concepts exist, such as Hettne's (1996), which combines the essentialist conception with the constructivist conception. This author agrees with Stavenhagen (1990) in that an ethnic group is defined by objective as well as subjective factors. Among the former he mentions language, religion, territory, social organization, culture, race and common origin; while among the latter he believes that the group can choose any combination in order to assert its identity and use it towards certain goals. Also see Tambiah (1989).

<sup>12</sup> In these cases, ethnicity is understood as an ideology built upon inequality, which, in turn, construes reality in this fashion (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Ethnic identity is the result of complex social processes. States seek to mold the identity of social groups, which creates resistance on their part, thus reinforcing their own construction of identity: “the seemingly ascribed character of ethnic identity is repeatedly confirmed; so, also, is the conception of ethnic groups as bounded units... despite the reality that membership in them is frequently the subject of social management (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 63).

<sup>14</sup> To understand the reasons that explain these processes, see Rosengren 2003 and Jackson 1994.

the problems that this categorization system poses, which masks not only the history of the group but also the relations that link these groups through more inclusive emic categories.

Fredrik Barth criticizes —as Dan Rosengren (2003) does— the limits traced from without to differentiate groups based on an ‘etic’ conception of ethnicity:

[...] people's own experience of a cultural contrast to members of other groups is schematized by drawing an ethnic boundary, imposing a false conceptual order on a field of much more broadly distributed cultural variation (Barth 2000:30).

He points out that each group experiences their differentiation from and identification with others in a certain way and that, based on their interactive experience with others, construe different forms of self-identification and ways to identify others. Different models of recognizing similarity or difference can even be found within the same group<sup>15</sup>.

With the Matsigenka, Rosengren (2003:25) discovered that while the members of Matsigenka ethno-political organizations upheld a model according to which the world was made up of closed ethnic units that “share a common interest in the defense and maintenance of their own unit”, for other Matsigenka groups “distinctions are more fluid and [...] group interest may be something that pertains to local groups but not to such abstract and arbitrarily defined groups as those that share culture and language.” A similar phenomenon was found by Jackson among the Tukano,

[...] we have seen that Tukanoans who are influenced by the national Indian Rights movement are hearing and incorporating several notions foreign to their traditional understandings of themselves and their society into their self-image (1994:397).

Rather than using categories like ‘spurious’ and ‘genuine’ to understand Indian identity, historical analysis can be of use to show how these definitions were actually formed. Shwartz and Salomon (1999) analyze how European explorers usually described social organization using inappropriate terms such as

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<sup>15</sup> See Rosengren (2003), for the Matsigenka case.

fraternities, clans, alliances, etc. Many terms created by the Spaniards, such as *mestizo* and *indio* were used in social interaction by colonial authorities, as well as the people themselves, with different meanings that changed through time<sup>16</sup>.

Politicization of ethnic identity and the process of ethnic consciousness that emerged among the leaders of indigenous groups the world over during the 1960s and 1970s<sup>17</sup>, led them to adopt the term ‘indigenous peoples’. In Peru, the name change took place during a meeting of indigenous leaders of the Amazonian countries of the Americas held in Lima in 1984, mostly at the behest of the United Nations Working group on Indigenous Peoples.

In Peru, *nativos* [natives], *comunidad nativa* [native community] and *grupos étnicos* [ethnic groups] were commonly used terms... [but, the United Nations] Working group [on Indigenous Peoples] forced delegates gathered in Lima to confront some fundamental matters: What are we in terms of a socio-political entity? How do we want to identify ourselves? (Smith 1996:107, my translation).

At first, the delegates did not wish to accept the term

[...] but after a visiting expert reviewed the historical and political content of each form of identity, consensus emerged around the use of ‘indigenous peoples’ as the term that best reflected their identities and aspirations of a territorial base and the right of self-determination. (Smith 1996:108, my translation and underline).

Fundamentally, it was upheld that an indigenous people as such “has a clearly defined population, its own identity as a people, a specific tongue and live in a territory recognized as theirs” (Chirif *et al.* 1991:19, my translation)<sup>18</sup>. Subsequently,

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<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note how the term *mestizo* was created by Spanish Colonial canon as a derogatory term to designate impure (non-Castilian) Spaniards, nowadays is used by the Indians to differentiate and exclude non-Indians.

<sup>17</sup> See Varese 1988, Guidieri, et. al. 1988, Comaroff & Comaroff 1992, Smith 1984, Brysk 1994, Lee Van Cott 1994.

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly enough, this term includes elements that defined an ethnic group: territorial space, kinship-based social organization, basic economic activities, mythology and rituals, etc. However, two aspects make it different: self-determination and the notion of territory.

the *Coordina-dora de Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica* (COICA) [Coordinating committee of indigenous organizations of the Amazonian Basin], created in 1984, took care of making the new concept known among its member organizations, which, in turn, reproduced the message throughout the Amazon<sup>19</sup>. In Peru, indigenous leaders appropriated this term in their own discourses, thus replacing the older term ‘ethnic groups.’ At the local level, some Amazonian leaders replaced outside designations with terms of their own<sup>20</sup>.

In the Madre de Dios area, dynamics of self identification are not very different. Mostly Indian leaders have adopted the term ‘indigenous peoples’. This is partly due to the history of the region’s indigenous groups. The consequences of processes such as rubber exploitation among the Madre de Dios Indians were of such magnitude that many groups were completely depleted. Location in native communities reinforced their social destructuration. Therefore, the term ‘indigenous peoples’ somehow reconstrues at the discursive level a general Indian identity. The vindictive connotation of the term ‘indigenous people’ granted its appropriation by indigenous leadership<sup>21</sup>.

Under the umbrella of this new identity some ethnic indicators are negotiated<sup>22</sup>. Differentiation is clearer and more opposable between Indians and *mestizos* than between Indians from different groups, clans or communities, mainly due to the common interests of the latter. For instance, in communities like Shintuya and Puerto Luz, made up mostly by self-called

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<sup>19</sup> Smith, 1997.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, those previously known as Aguaruna now call themselves Awajun.

<sup>21</sup> The leaders define themselves and other Indians as members of indigenous peoples but they refuse to be defined by others at a more specific level (See Wahl 1987). This political posture is largely due to how oil, logging and mining companies and other non-indigenous groups or individuals use these definitions to deny or negotiate their rights.

<sup>22</sup> A Shipibo leader told me that in order to prevent the loss of his language some of his community’s members had pondered having their children take lessons in their native language.

Arakmbut Indians, Indian women who marry *mestizos* are ostracized<sup>23</sup>. Women from other groups are considered witches, while men of other groups are identified as enemies. Collective memory of differences between Harakmbut groups is updated under some circumstances, but obliterated in others, such as those involving common struggles. Some Indians believe that the leaders with power and money distance themselves from an Indian way of life. Thus, *feeling* Indian-ness also becomes an everyday *habit* of sharing a common situation, specifically, the socio-economic conditions that affect all members of the group.

Indigenous groups have always distinguished amongst themselves. The Harakmbut used a denomination system based on toponymy that differentiated themselves from enemy and friendly groups. Ways to preserve and defend their identity from non-indigenous people by withholding their self-denomination existed as well; in their worldview they could become victims of witchcraft if they did not conceal it. The idea Indians had of themselves and the rest may have been clearer in the past but as their self-perception changes, so does the understanding they may have had of themselves and others in certain stages of their history<sup>24</sup>. Several forms of self-denomination and identification are currently found among the Indians of Madre de Dios. Based on different elements they choose to emphasize the history of their relationship with others. For instance, organized Indians in Madre de Dios identify this social conglomerate with the term 'indigenous peoples', which condenses their own political demands and their future aspirations<sup>25</sup>.

Ethnicity is not understood here as an essential membership,

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<sup>23</sup> See Del Alcázar 2003.

<sup>24</sup> See Jackson 1994:383.

<sup>25</sup> Something similar occurs with territory. The idea of territory held by the Indians is modified as their identity is modified. Territory conceived as an unlimited space is now vindicated as having concrete limits, possessed and appropriated by the Indians by means of practices within the framework of historical processes involving the interaction with other Indian and non-Indian groups.

nor as an array of objective attributes ascribed to certain peoples. It is, instead, an analytical category that refers to the similarities and differences construed by indigenous groups or individuals that acquire different shapes, textures and contents according to the experiences the group has had along different stages of history.

Denomination and identification are basically political and contingent acts. Thus, it is not a matter of assuming the term ‘indigenous peoples’ as a ‘scientific’ concept<sup>26</sup> but of understanding how the term emerges and is used in a determined historic stage by particular individuals or organized groups. Inasmuch as this study focuses mainly on two indigenous actors, the *Federación Nativa del río Madre de Dios y Afluentes* (FENAMAD) [Native Federation of the Madre de Dios River and Tributaries] and the indigenous communities, I mention the terms they use to identify themselves. In a like manner, I refer to the people as Indians or indigenous peoples.

### **Indigenous peoples in the Madre de Dios region**

The Madre de Dios department in the Peru’s southeastern rainforest, located between the right bank of the E’ori (or Madre de Dios) river, the Arasa (or Inambari) river and the Andes (Helberg 1996), is home to a considerable number of indigenous peoples.

The human component of the region is made up of a noticeable cultural and social mosaic. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, different indigenous peoples, originally with dispersed settlement patterns and tense interethnic relations, increased their social mobility as commercial and other exchanges took place among the peoples that inhabited the area. Serious clashes that reduced the indigenous population and/or modified their original

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<sup>26</sup> Betielle (1998:190) problematizes the use of the term ‘indigenous population’ by American Anthropologists. His concern basically stems from the construction of this idea on the ancestral territorial possession, which is not necessarily in accordance with reality, “the problem arises when they [indigenous peoples] become dispersed over large areas within, and sometimes across, national frontiers”. For him, the term ‘indigenous peoples’ does not give intellectual clarity and, instead, like the term ‘tribe’, annuls the true understanding of the problem’s origin.

pattern occurred as well (See Gray 1996, 1997a, Califano 1982).

Besides these intra and interethnic factors, exogenous factors made the mosaic even more complex. Socioeconomic processes, such as the exploitation of rubber and other natural resources, as well as religious proselytism established centers of operations in this area turning its inhabitants into unwitting subjects of their policies. As a result, many peoples, such as the Toieri and Arasaeri were almost wiped out, while others have survived, albeit bearing the scars of these encounters. This affected both the area's original population and those Indians who arrived as a result of forced migrations caused by the exploitation of wood, rubber or *shiringa*, missionary activity, etc. (García 1995).

The indigenous peoples of the Amazon do not hold a legally recognized territory; instead, due to the laws<sup>27</sup> passed during the military regimes of Juan Velasco Alvarado (1968-1975) and Francisco Morales Bermúdez (1975-1980), they had to become native communities so each community's lands could attain legal status<sup>28</sup>. As a consequence of this *state-led identity creation*, current legislation acknowledges native communities instead of indigenous peoples<sup>29</sup>, so each people has one or several native communities allotted a certain amount of hectares which have been or should be recognized, but which do not match the original territory held before contact<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Decree-Law 20653 "Law of Native Communities and Promotion of Agriculture and Livestock Breeding in the Lower and Upper Rainforest Regions" of 1974 and Decree-Law 22175 "Law of Native Communities and Agrarian Development in the Lower and Upper Rainforest", passed on May the 10<sup>th</sup>, 1978, which superseded the former.

<sup>28</sup> In order to understand this process, see Camino 1985, Ludescher 1986, Urteaga 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Although Peru subscribed ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, which is in force in Peru by means of Legislative Bill 26253, there is no internal legal mechanism that acknowledges Peru's indigenous peoples. Only native communities can be registered.

<sup>30</sup> For a critique of this policy, see FENAMAD 1999c.

Ethnic composition within communities is not necessarily homogeneous, as multiethnic settlements were set up mainly as the result of two influential processes: rubber exploitation and religious missions. As a result of the legislation, Harakbut groups<sup>31</sup>, set up communities mostly made up of families of the same group or groups, with some kind of affinity amongst themselves and within which a still influential clan classification existed<sup>32</sup>. Another factor determining how communities were constructed was the attitude of some officials in charge of juridical recognition of native communities, who imposed extra-legal criteria not included in Law 22175, neither in other rules, pertaining to the minimum number of inhabitants that a native community needed in order to be acknowledged as such. As a result, many Indians who did not qualify for community status under this a-legal requirement considered non-Indian (*mestizos*) as part of the community, which has led to many problems<sup>33</sup>. The various factors that influenced the formation of native communities in Madre de Dios partially explain their heterogeneous relation with national society, and this is in turn a key factor to understanding their current dynamic and problems<sup>34</sup>.

The Harakbut —a generic term that covers the Arasaeri, Arakbut or Amarakaeri, Karena, Kisambaeri, Manchinari, Pukirieri, Sapiteri, Sirineri, Toyeri, Toyoeri, Huachipaeri or Wachipaeri— currently live in the basins of the Madre de Dios, Pukiri, Inambari, Shintuya and Manu Rivers. They are spread among several groups or ‘partialities’<sup>35</sup>, distributed among the following communities: *Shintuya, Puerto Luz, San José del Karena, Barranco Chico, Boca Inambari, Villa Santiago, Kotsimba, Boca Ishiriwe*. The presence of a multiplicity of

<sup>31</sup> Harakbut population is estimated at 1 000 individuals (FENAMAD 1992a, Helberg 1996) who generally live in native communities, most of which hold land deeds given by the State (García 1995).

<sup>32</sup> See Gray 1997b.

<sup>33</sup> For instance, in the Harakbut communities like *Kotsimba*, and Ese'eja communities like *Infierno*.

<sup>34</sup> See García, 1995.

<sup>35</sup> See Califano, 1982.

indigenous groups, the relations among them, their dispersed settlement patterns, their pre-contact and post-contact history, hardly trustworthy historical descriptions<sup>36</sup> and their current situation are all factors that make understanding the indigenous population of this region all the more complex. I begin to unravel the complexity by dealing with the history of contact.

### ***On ethnography and the Harakmbut***

*"Who cares about what I eat, drink or speak...?"*<sup>37</sup>

A key element in early ethnography on Harakmbut groups is the way they are identified as a unit, thus stressing their affinities over their differences and subordinating the importance of each group's specific identity<sup>38</sup>. Among the first to put forward this unity was Califano (1982), who held that the "mashco" were a grouping of linguistically and culturally linked "partialities"<sup>39</sup>. Rumrill (1984) stated that the Harakmbut were ethnicities that "share the same tongue with dialectal variants" (p. 305, my translation), while Helberg (1982) pointed out that the term Harakmbut designated a distinct socio-cultural entity based on a similar kinship system, languages and customs. However, noticeable cultural differences "make it difficult to speak of 'racial, cultural and linguistic' unity" (Helberg 1982:2, my translation). Lissi Wahl points out that

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<sup>36</sup> See Fernández Moro, 1951.

<sup>37</sup> Thus spoke a Matsigenka Indian called Luishi to a priest in 1906 (Fernández 1951, my translation).

<sup>38</sup> See Califano (1982). This is partly explained by the tendency within Amazonian Anthropology to underscore the idea that Amazonian Indians share economic, social and ideological patterns that make them part of a social model distinct from other peoples, such as the Andean, etc.; despite acknowledgement of the obvious differences among Amazonian populations.

<sup>39</sup> According to him, there were five traditional partialities that made up the "mashco" group: Arasaeri, Amaracaire, Huachipaeri, Toyeri and Zapiteri. Of these, the Amaracaire evidenced "more archaic characteristics in certain aspects of their culture... due to their enclosure in the Zapite hill and the utterly defensive and hostile attitude shown towards strangers" (Califano 1982:135, my translation).

[...] although... the Harakbut can be unified by the criteria of a common tongue and the volume of shared myths [...] each Harakbut group exhibits not only dialectal differences but also a number of variants in the shared myth collection" (1987:132-3, my translation).

A study carried out by FENAMAD contendsthat "subcultural units or partialities function as endogamic units... but some partialities ally with others, as described by Patricia Lyon with the Oatipaeri/Sapiteri" <sup>40</sup>. The most marked differences among the groups were linguistic, as each spoke their own dialect, but they also had their own body paint, ornaments and clothing, their own symbolic universe, as evidenced in their myths and certain customs (FENAMAD 1992a).

With the Roman Catholic Church's arrival in the region, the term 'Mashcos'<sup>41</sup>, commonly used among the Missionaries, promoted the idea that the diverse Harakbut groups made up a single socio-cultural conglomerate. Subsequent discovery of linguistic similarities among them led some anthropologists to group them as the Harakbut Haté linguistic family (Lyon 1976). Thus, the previously called Mashcos became the new self-denominated Harakbut or Xarangbut.

The second relevant fact about ethnographies of the Harakbut groups is related to their history. Their own characteristics<sup>42</sup>, as well as global processes, increased their mobility. The resulting destructureing and turmoil of their world and population hinders social archeology's task of identifying what groups once existed and where<sup>43</sup>. I return to this point later.

A third fact derives from the political character of current

<sup>40</sup> "las unidades subculturales o parcialidades funcionaban como unidades endógamas... pero algunas parcialidades hacían alianzas con otras, como lo refiere Patricia Lyon para los Oatipaeri/Sapiteri" (FENAMAD 1992:60).

<sup>41</sup> There are differing versions on the origin of the term Mashco. Califano (1982) and some missionaries ascribe it to the rubber merchants; while Gray (1996) ascribes it to a 17<sup>th</sup> century author.

<sup>42</sup> Seasonal migrations and interethnic wars, for instance.

<sup>43</sup> Gray (1996), however, includes a map with these groups' ancestral locations and subsequent migrations.

ethnographic representations, many of which are torn between the ‘authentic’ past (Califano 1982; Gray 1997a) and an imposed and ‘foreign’ present (Gray 1997b, Wahl 1987, Moore 1985, Helberg 1996). Ethnographic representations move between two poles. On one hand, they are based on the assumption that these peoples *still are Indians*, but while locating them in history they highlight the assimilation and extermination processes that have dramatically modified many of their customs and have even reached ethnocide status<sup>44</sup>. Some ethnographers have made a stand against assimilation (Gray 1986, 1997b; Moore 1985; Wahl 1987; Rummenhoeller, et al. 1991).

The severity of the impact of these processes may give the image of the Harakbut as mere victims, who showed no resistance in their encounters with the ‘others’. To avoid this interpretation, some observers have emphasized that despite the destructive force of cultural and social extermination processes, they have been unable to eliminate certain ‘essential’ characteristics that define the Harakbut (Gray 1997a, Califano 1982). García (1995:5, my translation) refers to “the silent resistance that these peoples put up from their own values, notions and criteria against external pressure.”

Conversely, others believe that the Indians have been ‘assimilated’ into national society and that no traces are left of their pre-contact identity to identify them as such, and refer to the naïveté of a belief

[...] that Harakbut culture could assimilate this battering and survive this ‘encounter’ between both economies [referring to the gold market and Harakbut economic systems]. The fact that money obtained from gold extraction is spent... following traditional guidelines of *sharing...* and *prestige gaining...* through the expenditure of surpluses does not mean that the communities have incorporated gold into their cultural life without ‘contaminating’ or transforming themselves. That is actually celestial music in tune with the desires and ideals of some anthropologists. The truth is that gold has permeated all of Harakbut

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<sup>44</sup> On this point, Wahl points out that “among the diverse Harakbut groups — that is, among the Wachipaeri, Amarakaeri, Sapiteri, Arasaeri, Kisambaeri, Toyeri y Pukirieri— only one, the Amarakeri, can still reproduce itself as a group. The rest have to establish links with other Harakbut or Amazonian groups —particularly the Machiguenga and Ese’ejá— or with colonists from the highlands in order to survive.” (1987:133).

culture, bringing with it substantial changes in their world view and... destroying the communities' primary links of cohesion and identity. (Jaramillo 1999:25, my translation).

Jaramillo calls for a 'reconstruction' of the traditional culture and economy to strengthen a new position of these groups vis-à-vis the non-Harakmbut society and economy.

I do not propose to enter this debate about the existence or absence of indigenous identity in cultural and/or social, subjective and/or material aspects. Rather, I propose a different approach to the identity of the indigenous peoples. I see identity not as an entity suspended in a determined time that slowly fall apart on contact with other individuals but a dynamic phenomenon located in time and space, which must be understood in terms of social relations. An Indian *feels* that he is such when in contact with 'others' who are Indians in a different way or are not. Thus, the '*politics of feeling*' of being an Indian, which is the subjective aspect of their self-definition, is asserted individually or collectively, but always contrasted collectively.

The dynamic, relational and often ambiguous character of indigenous identity is crucial to understanding why in cases such as the Cocama-Cocamilla, Indians do not acknowledge themselves as such (Stocks 1981), while other Indians invent themselves in different ways, as is the case of the Tukano in Colombia (Jackson 1994). Identity is similar to culture in that 'culture' can constantly be, and in fact is, socially transformed. This perspective, informed by symbolic interactionism and anthropological approaches that stress agency and process over essence and structure, can be used to understand phenomena related to ethnicity.

After this brief description of the historical and anthropological visions on indigenous peoples, I shall describe their current situation. I am interested in underscoring the identity of these peoples during different moments in history. My aim is to understand how this identity changes, locating historically both the indigenous peoples as well as their non-indigenous counterparts with which they related during specific periods.

In the late 20th century the Harakmbut groups were known as the Amarakaeri, Oatipaeri, Sapiteri, Toieri, Pokirieri and

Kisambaeri (FENAMAD 1992a). Etymologically, these names match the places they originally inhabited<sup>45</sup> and were, and still are, used for self-denomination. Harakbut population currently fluctuates between 900 and 1000<sup>46</sup>. Others estimate that currently they reach 2 000 people (Gray 1997b). This amounts to only 10% or 15% of the original population in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was gradually decimated<sup>47</sup>.

### ***As they were in the past...***

Although their societies were known as profoundly egalitarian, their political organizations were fundamentally hierarchical. The military chief that led in battle and was ready to rally his people in case of attack was called *Oantopa* (Helberg 1996). Since their contact with Missionaries and other outsiders, the diverse Harakbut groups have left this organization behind. Some anthropologists believed they resisted Inca pressure and the rubber boom due to some sort of warrior *ethos* (Califano 1990, Helberg 1996). It is disputable, however, whether they could resist these clashes in cultural, social and even demographic terms<sup>48</sup>.

They are linked today by a few dialectal expressions, while in the past they were also linked by a sophisticated system of matrimonial exchange that helped maintain political alliances and ethnic unity. Seven exogamic patrilineages exchanged sisters among themselves. Parents arranged wedding alliances before the couple was born. After marriage the newlyweds lived patrilocally. Currently, this practice is considered ideal but impossible to put into practice. Exposure to non-indigenous culture has led to a couple deciding themselves about their

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<sup>45</sup> On the identity of indigenous peoples with rivers and other natural elements, see Ludescher (1986).

<sup>46</sup> See Fernández Moro 1951, Helberg 1982, 1996, Moore 1985, Gray 1996, FENAMAD 1992<sup>a</sup>, Califano 1990).

<sup>47</sup> Wahl 1987; Gray n/d, 1997b; FENAMAD 1992a.

<sup>48</sup> See Wahl (1987) and Gray (n/d). One of the high points of anthropological and political debates is related to this issue.

union (Helberg 1996).

In order to adapt to their complex environment the Harakbut had to diversify subsistence activities. Division of labor followed gender lines. Females usually controlled agriculture, although they usually needed male labor to prepare their fields with slash and burn techniques, while males supplied meat through hunting and fishing. Harakbut males devoted themselves to hunting, activity they did not consider nor toil nor labor. Females never took part in the hunt but fished and gathered<sup>49</sup>. From an ecological perspective, Helberg (1996) argues that the same principle that regulated matrimonial exchange was applied to hunting, as the relationship between the Harakbut and nature was normatively one of 'balanced reciprocity' (Sahlins 1968). Gray (1984) stresses that the relationship between man and nature is explained by the existence of two precautionary spirits, one of which, known as *toto* lives in the forest and punishes those that exceed the normal hunting, fishing and even working limits. They are known as excess regulators. The Harakbut also carried out mining activities introduced by outsiders as an economic activity in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Pacuri and Moore 1992).

### ***As they are now...***

*"with few exceptions, members of a tribe anywhere are in touch with outsiders... and this intercultural relationship influences tribal organizations"*<sup>50</sup>

### **Gold economics and the Harakbut**

It is paradoxical that the territory in which the Harakbut have lived for decades or perhaps centuries, and which has supplied them with shelter, enough animals and a wide array of natural resources necessary for their reproduction, is now a threat to their survival. This is exactly what happened with the arrival of the gold economy.

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<sup>49</sup> This activity was crucial because it both added proteins and vitamins to their diet, and represented a specific neutral space for males and females.

<sup>50</sup> Sahlins 1968:44.

Gold arrived in Madre de Dios from the Andes, from where it descended and built up deposits in the rivers of the Amazonian southeast (Gray 1986:34). The intensity of gold mining has led the Harakbut to plunder their own rivers and forests to prevent colonists from forestalling them. Although they do not harm the environment as much as colonists do, gold exploitation has gradually intensified, eventually altering the ecosystem.

There is a conflict between the traditional viewpoint of balance and preservation of natural resources with current needs of educating offspring and paying for their expenses (García, A. personal communication, 1997, *my translation*).

Since the 1930s, gold has guided many immigrants from the Peruvian Andes towards Harakbut territory (see Jassauí n/d). The State was a great promoter of Madre de Dios' auriferous economy, commissioning scientific expeditions to draw up reports on these resources and their location since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1950s, gold extraction was not very incisive due to the drop of international prices, but two decades later miners burst into the Harakbut's daily lives. In 1973 the Peruvian State responded to international gold demand by creating the *Banco Minero del Perú* [Mining Bank of Peru] and giving it the duty of overseeing gold extraction. The State promoted this activity through the *Banco Minero* by subsidizing miners and supplying them with machinery and social services in exchange for a percentage of the extracted gold. Thus, it was granted a monopolistic role in the acquisition of gold (monopsony). Despite the location of areas with gold deposits within Harakbut territory, the government used the legal fabrication of "The State's special rights" to grant extraction authorizations to miners (Pacuri and Moore 1992).

The Harakbut found this constant pressure hard to understand, and even harder to endure. By superimposing individuals' gold rights over Harakbut territorial rights, the State created an unmanageable scenario for these peoples. They were strangers in their own land, whose surface was legally granted to third parties: "In 1983 there were 34 grants in process, which encompassed 12,265 hectares, that is, 55.6% of communal territory" (FENAMAD 1992a: 74, *my translation*). The presence of the miners has had a lasting negative impact

on the ecological, social and cultural domains. Currently, prestige among the Harakbut no longer stems from community-shared hunting, it is instead the result of the Indian's entrepreneurial ability to exploit resources: gold, timber, tourism, etc.

In most cases, the Harakbut have faced the invasion of their lands proactively. Due to experience with gold-related conflicts, the Harakbut have learned how the Peruvian legal and police system work. Conflicts between legal and illegal miners and the Harakbut people have led to deaths and brutal interventions by the police and the invaders, to which the Indians have responded collectively by 'evicting' the invading miners. On the other hand, gold extraction is aimed at satisfying Harakbut's subsistence needs and obtaining Western goods but also makes them more dependent on this type of economy and drives them away from their own (Gray 1986). Modernization has also reached the communities, shortening the distances between cities and indigenous settlements.

Their traditional migration patterns that allowed them to obtain food from the forest and to search for better lands have been affected due to gold and timber extraction. It has also led to marriages that would previously have been considered incestuous and, in some cases, the forsaking of their language in favor of Spanish. Furthermore, the concentration of several groups in a single location has given the impression that they have abandoned their original lands, whetting colonists' appetite for them (FENAMAD 1992a). All these processes have bound the Harakbut in a subordinate and definitive way to the worldwide economic system.

### **FENAMAD and the indigenous political agenda**

Basic to an understanding of the situation of indigenous peoples is the development of representative organizations with their own political agendas. This phenomenon is not recent. It goes back to the 1960s and gradually developed in different latitudes<sup>51</sup>. In 1999 the indigenous organization of the Madre

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<sup>51</sup> Brysk 1994, Varese 1988, Brown 1993.

de Dios region was affiliated to a national organization called the *Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana* - AIDESEP – (Interethnic Association of Development of the Peruvian Rainforest), composed of 42 Amazonian indigenous federations that were grouped according to regions, basins or specific indigenous identity. AIDESEP was, in turn, affiliated to the *Coordinadora de Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica* - COICA – (Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin), an international indigenous organization. Concurrently, the *Confederación de Nacionalidades Amazónicas del Perú* - CONAP – (Confederation of Amazonian Nationalities of Peru), another national indigenous organization, groups other indigenous federations of the Amazon.

Organization proposals also emerge in the Amazonian southeast, where material conditions of domination acquire distinct characteristics:

[...] gradual insertion of the native population into the market economy, growing encroachment on indigenous territory —mostly since the seventies— and the need to have title deeds over their lands, the adoption of a communal-level organization model (communal assemblies, boards of directors) promoted by Law 22175, the need to channel the communities' demands into solutions for their basic problems (health, education, identity documents, commerce, etc.) are all part of the context in which the southeastern indigenous movement emerged (Rummenhoeller et al. 1991:390, my translation).

But holding that indigenous resistance in the Madre de Dios area is recent would disavow other ways in which they have faced the economic and political processes affecting them. In general, resistance is part of the history of the Madre de Dios indigenous populations since their first encounters and quarrels with other social actors<sup>52</sup>.

Surprisingly enough, the State was one of the main actors in

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<sup>52</sup> A former FENAMAD president told the story of his emerging as the leader of his people when he was 16 years old in the midst of a conflict with timber merchants who had invaded their territory. With the support of his relatives and other community member and facing the loggers' death threats, he rallied the Indians of San José del Kárene and allied with six mining families from Arequipa who were extracting gold from their territory and drove out the timber merchants with bows and arrows (Antonio Iviche, personal communication, 2000).

the unionization or institutionalization process the indigenous peoples went through. The process was most evident during the 1970s when the military administration was adamant about the unionization of indigenous peoples, establishing models like the “native community” which transformed them politically by inserting them in a previously unknown category<sup>53</sup>. In the 1980s, the surging political rhetoric of democracy, which accompanied the incipient setting up of Neoliberal economies emphasized dialogue between ‘civil society’ and the State, which involved the institutionalization of social or grassroots organizations. After a long dictatorship of eleven years, non-governmental organizations shared this rhetoric and understood the public space as an arena for struggle in which social organizations should participate. This partaking, however, demanded certain formal requirements that would ‘institutionalize’ social organizations. The dire need for political participation and the constriction of political space prompted them to use strategic juridical resources to institutionalize themselves and, with the aid of several NGOs, they fulfilled the legal formalities in order to take part of the political arena<sup>54</sup>.

During the 1970s and 1980s, it was considered that so-called ‘traditional’ local resistance tactics were inefficient or insufficient and that a more organized political action was required “due to which the indigenous populations had to seek out mechanisms to assume a stronger role in shaping their own destiny” (Rummenhoeller *et al.* 1991:390, my translation). These mechanisms necessarily included the adoption of pre-established juridical formulas from national legislation (i.e., civil associations) in order legally to become valid interlocutors for the State. In 1986, FENAMAD was legally recognized and registered as a “non-profit civil association.” In other words, they became legally visible to the State.

Some believe that while this legal formula allows them to have a state-recognized organic political presence, it is contradictory vis-à-vis the very objectives of the organization, which are the

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<sup>53</sup> See Ludescher 1986, Camino 1985, Urteaga 2004.

<sup>54</sup> See Fenamad 1999<sup>a</sup>.

defense of their culture<sup>55</sup>. This level of organization would certainly not have been reached if the Indians had not had any contact with the national society (Wahl 1987). But arguing that the State legal formulas are contradictory with the aims of indigenous organizations such as FENAMAD is to disregard the history of indigenous peoples, and the restrictions that colonial and postcolonial processes imposed on them (Álvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998). On the one hand, this belief reveals a Western and essentialist vision of what an Indian is considered to be, and on the other hand, it does not consider that Indians give cultural and political contents to the legal formulas they strategically use to uphold their demands.

These changes do not involve an automatic ‘disindianization’. On the contrary, the indigenous agenda, which includes raising consciousness, takes on a political complexion that is shaped in politically non-indigenous ways but generally with distinct cultural contents. The relationship between non-indigenous political forms and the culture of indigenous peoples is the same as the relationship between economic strategies that emerged in non-indigenous contexts and those practiced by indigenous populations before contact. Historically, these apparently opposite strategies have merged. Indians’ use of Western formulae to claim for their rights does not deprive them of their cultural identity. This assertion reveals an essentialist idea of what an Indian should be. Indigenous organizations seek out and strategically use certain political formulas to illustrate and/or denounce to non-Indian audiences the power relations between Indians and others. *Indianization* thus acquires a political character in accordance to the public cannon on politics, but it ultimately embraces and respects indigenous demands.

The impact of imposed neoliberal politics in Latin America has exacted conditions on marginal groups such as indigenous peoples, but it has also led to the emergence of social movements to challenge them. Power structures restrict the potential for social agency but also prompt social actors to reinvent new forms of political activism. Upholding a single dimension of these processes denies the multidimensional

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<sup>55</sup> Sitton 2000.

character of historical conditions and indigenous responses to power.

FENAMAD was created partly due to the “marginalization [the Indians] were subjected to by the ‘whites’ [*mestizos*] and their authorities; racial and ethnic marginalization which, although in decline, still remains in a class society such as ours.” (FENAMAD 1999<sup>a</sup>). This self-explanation of the emergence of an indigenous political agenda proves that resistance is formed in the midst of conflict and struggle, that is, within the very conflict that relations of domination generate.

The Native Federation of the Madre de Dios River and Tributaries was set up in 1982. In January the same year, the first Congress of indigenous populations of Madre de Dios took place in the San José del Karene community, previously known as Boca del Karene. In the first congress, which was advised by the NGO Eori, only the then-called Shintuya, Diamante, Puerto Luz, San José Boca del Karene or San José del Karene, Boca del Inambari and Shiringayoc communities of the Harakbut indigenous groups took part. After long deliberations on the problems they faced and after assessing testimonies of other indigenous federations that had already gone through that process, the congress reached the conclusion that the organization had to be focused on defending the territory, economy, history, culture and language of the indigenous peoples that took part.

During its existence, FENAMAD has forged a collective memory that includes its history and the recognition of leaders who initially paved the way for this political experience, such as the leaders of Puerto Luz, San José, Shintuya, Diamante, Boca del Inambari, Shiringayoc, Pukiri and Boca del Karene. Once they were organized, the first point of their agenda was the recognition of indigenous lands<sup>56</sup>. FENAMAD leaders gathered with regional and national authorities to express their territorial claims.

Due to the size of the Madre de Dios territory, FENAMAD decided to create a sub-federation or ‘Intermediate Council’

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<sup>56</sup> See Moore, 1983.

grouping indigenous peoples located from the upper Madre de Dios to Boca del Colorado, in the western area of the Department<sup>57</sup>. This organization was called Coharyima, and represents the Harakbut, Yine and Matsiguenga populations. It has a board of Directors and coordinates its actions with FENAMAD. Today, FENAMAD, groups 27 native communities with a total of 325 943 hectares of titled land. During its existence, FENAMAD has assumed the defense of the rights of indigenous peoples before state institutions. This defense has been particularly relevant when dealing with gold miners in their territory<sup>58</sup>.

FENAMAD has used diverse strategies when dealing with the State and individuals that affect their rights, from the submittal of reports and complaints to State institutions to rallies and conflict resolution *in situ*.

#### ***FENAMAD's trans-border activism***

FENAMAD's political practice changed over time. Initially based in Madre de Dios, it has now transcended the local arena. One of the reasons that prompted FENAMAD to look for international audiences was the State's indifference towards the problems of the indigenous peoples of Madre de Dios. While exchanging experiences with indigenous peoples from other countries, the Indians understood that the only way to make the State listen to their demands was to appeal to broader audiences<sup>59</sup>.

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<sup>57</sup> Another factor that made creating this Council necessary was the pressure from an NGO that works with the Matsiguenga of the Urubamba River. In 1993, FENAMAD leaders found out that this NGO was trying to persuade the Matsiguenga to join a Cuzco-based federation and to withdraw from FENAMAD.

<sup>58</sup> See Moore 1985, Gray 1986, Pacuri and Moore 1992, Urteaga 2003.

<sup>59</sup> For instance, in 2000 FENAMAD's president traveled to Washington to have a series of meetings with representatives from several NGOs and cooperation agencies, denouncing the State's attitude of prioritizing the interests of timber merchants over those of the isolated Indians. FENAMAD's international campaign in defense of the rights of isolated indigenous peoples soon had results. In light of international pressure, the INRENA [National Institute of Natural Resources] Director of Forest and Fauna wrote a letter to FENAMAD reassuring them that he did take indigenous populations into account.

Their presence would not have been possible without support from allied cooperation agencies and NGOs. For instance, it was with their support that in 1992 FENAMAD leaders went to Geneva, where the Assembly of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations was taking place, to explain the situation of the indigenous territories affected by gold miners. A similar experience occurred in 1996, when FENAMAD was invited to take part in a radio program in BBC London to state their position regarding the conflict with Mobil (Kaethe Meentzen, personal communication, 1999). Non-governmental organizations promoted FENAMAD's participation in decision making processes regarding issues that concerned them, such as the use of the Tambopata Candamo Reserved Zone, within which several indigenous communities were located.

These alliances enable FENAMAD to have a larger presence within its own sphere of action through development projects aimed at improving the conditions of the Madre de Dios native communities. The most pressing concern for the communities has always been related to territory. FENAMAD decided to face it by drawing up a *Project of territorial consolidation*, which involved the creation of a Reserve between the Karene or Colorado River and Pukiri towards western Madre de Dios (Alfredo García, personal communication, 1997). Subsequently FENAMAD's main project was drawn up. The *Plan Karene* was initially created to protect the territory of the Harakbut indigenous populations. In this project, the elders had political power inasmuch they were consulted on the more important decisions regarding it. The Karene Plan has gradually incorporated other indigenous peoples of Madre de Dios besides the Harakbut.

The Karene Plan included the Territorial Defense of the indigenous peoples expressed in the following activities: evaluation of communal territories, relocation of *colonos*, border demarcation, widening and titling of communal territories (FENAMAD, 1999a). These activities were carried out, in addition to acquiring mining rights for native communities, covering legal defense of the communities, reinforcing communal organization, consolidating the proposal for the creation of the Amarakaeri Communal Reserve and elaborating bills regarding exclusive use of natural resources for the

indigenous peoples of Madre de Dios (*Ibid.*).

Although the alliance between the Madre de Dios indigenous peoples, NGOs and international cooperation agencies allowed the former to organize around a common political agenda, many problems regarding the inner workings of the indigenous organization remained unsolved. Firstly, there was the matter of maintaining unity among peoples who had previously been enemies and were not part of FENAMAD. Secondly, along with the consolidation of the organization, the dilemma of hierarchy between Indian leaders and those who live in the villages arose. There was discomfort about the economic and social status attained by the leaders due to their functions. There were also discussions related to the preeminence of Harakbut peoples over others who were not initially part of the project.

Accusations of witchcraft spewed forth among the leaders, as well as conflicts between the leaders' original communities<sup>60</sup>. Some leaders were publicly accused of defending Indians from communities that used to be their enemies. In general, community members who are victims of increasing pauperization perceive the signs of 'well-being' of some leaders and their families as indicators of their lack of 'solidarity' with the rest, leading to distrust, disinterest, lack of participation and not infrequently, to opposition towards FENAMAD's policies and proposals (Efraín Jaramillo, personal communication, 1999). Communities are more autonomous than the organization, so the latter does not have a direct influence within them (Lily La Torre, personal communication, 1999). The leaders respect the communal autonomy and usually avoid interfering in the communities' internal politics unless requested.

Thirdly, the relationship with the cooperation agencies that financially support FENAMAD's work somehow influences the decisions that the leaders make. Differences regarding one or more projects, or even showboating regarding the activities supported have led to tensions usually related to the relative

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<sup>60</sup> In some cases Indians who studied outside their community tried to integrate themselves to non-Indian society but were discriminated against and, in the process, lost their self-esteem. At the same time, their choosing another culture involved rejecting their own, with which they excluded themselves from and were excluded by their own communities.

autonomy that the organization has in practice. In fourth place, the relationship between technical teams hired by the organization and its leadership has often been tinged by racial prejudice. Although some technicians who usually were non-Indian, racially discriminated against the Indians and their leaders, this was skillfully used by some leaders who opposed having outsiders assess their work.

The magnitude of ongoing discrimination against Indians -as well as the economic side of this discrimination- was proved in several events organized by FENAMAD. Non-Indians' main interest was identified as centered on having the communities' natural resources at their disposal, due to which the Indians were seen as obstacles. FENAMAD leadership's claim of their ancestral rights to the territory and its resources was rebutted in turn by accusing the Indians of holding back the economic progress of the region. In this hegemonic rhetoric, Indians were identified with backwardness and/or were seen as people who had to be told what to do<sup>61</sup>.

This racism tinged with economic interests takes the shape of a hegemonic practice that favors *colonos* or other institutions instead of indigenous populations. The racist rhetoric becomes an embedded practice that subordinates the rights of indigenous peoples to those of non-indigenous people. The economic aspect of such racist politics has serious implications for indigenous control and use of natural resources, but also for their political participation. The organized Indians are not naïve. They know that in some communities there is "a process of deterioration of ethno-cultural identities. Native communities are forced to integrate into Western civilization." (Ibañez, Luna and Ventura 1998: 20). The main reason to form FENAMAD was precisely to fight back this racism against the Indians of Madre de Dios, but first and foremost to demand that the indigenous peoples' rights be respected in a process that gradually force them to integrate into the Western society.

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<sup>61</sup> Gray (1981) and Wahl (1987) took note of the same phenomenon in their ethnographic studies.

## **Concluding remarks**

This paper shows how Amazonian Indians' identity has been constructed in Peru through political processes that include both global and local actors. In Peruvian academic spaces as within indigenous movements global processes have influenced the adoption and use of categories such as ethnic groups and indigenous peoples, which were subsequently appropriated by Indian leaders to put forward their own political agendas.

The construction of indigenous identity in the Madre de Dios region, where the Harakbut live, is historically linked to the multiple and overlapping extractive economic processes that have taken place in the area from early colonial times to the present. It is in the midst of these generally conflictive processes that indigenous peoples have defined themselves and others in particular ways that express the power imbalance between Indians and non-Indians and even among Indian groups or individuals.

The fact that identity is an eminent political practice is demonstrated particularly through the ethnographic representations of Harakbut Indians. Basically, they express the tension that characterizes the debates on ethnicity during the 70s and 80s, whereby Indians are described either as sharing an array of fixed ascribed characters or as 'aculturated' individuals. This, however, rarely contributes to understand the fluid and porous character of identity, the conditions that led to the politicization of indigenous movements throughout the Amazon region, or the political character of indigenous identity at the local level.

To understand the nuances of the different processes of indigenous identity formation it is necessary to look at the history of the group, the power relations among Indian groups, between Indians and non-Indians, and between Indians and the state, etc. These relations do not take place in a vacuum but in the midst of socio-political processes where Indian people are usually discriminated against and confined to a subordinate position. The local crafting of indigenous identity is not only historically contingent, but also influenced by global forces that contribute to define its particular shapes, textures and contents.

In this sense, to define ethnicity as the particular similarities and differences construed by indigenous groups or individuals as the historical result of power relations with others can be of help to comprehend the complexity of Indian identity formation in the Amazon.

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