

Gary Van Valen

Indigenous Agency in the Amazon. The Mojos in Liberal and Rubber-Boom Bolivia, 1842–1932. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2013. Pp. xii + 249. Pb, \$55.00.

The experiences of American indigenous peoples during the Republican period are of great interest to those who study the socio-economic conditions imposed by the liberal states. Economic development under the dictates of liberalism and modernization had a profound impact on the Indians, especially those considered *bárbaros*, living on the frontiers of civilization. This work by Gary Van Valen, dealing with the Mojos people of the Bolivian Amazon between 1842 and 1932, reveals the permanence of indigenous agency under the liberal state and the contemporary rubber boom. Interestingly, the legacy of the missionary system introduced in colonial times played a crucial role in the history of the native peoples inhabiting the Llanos de Mojos. The author defines this system as a “viable mission culture, based on agriculture, artisan industry, and cattle raising” (27): a participatory tradition of mission government organized through the *cabildos*, an institution created by the Jesuits for the administration of *temporalidades* (material production of the mission). This indigenous agency, which survived the expulsion of the missionaries and the creation of the Bolivian republic, had an early manifestation in the decision to accept missions as a way of avoiding enslavement by the settlers of Santa Cruz.

The liberal states born in the nineteenth century in the former Spanish colonies regarded autonomous indigenous territories as a barrier to their understandings of progress and civilization. The implementation of liberal reforms in the first half of the nineteenth century, such as the urban transformation of missions, educational change, and the opening of trade and communication routes, did not have the anticipated effect. Despite the reforms, in the mid-nineteenth century the Indians of the former missions of Beni retained the missionary culture. An example is the permanence of the *cabildo* and its indigenous officials, even though we can observe the rivalry between leaders, the weakening of *parcialidades* (ethnic division), subordination to the municipal authority, and the phenomenon of mixed unions between members of *cabildo* elites and whites (*carayanas*), which introduced new ethnic loyalties. However, Van Valen concludes that the loss of certain elements of the missionary legacy was itself an expression of Indian agency: for instance choosing activities through which they could earn a salary.

The invention of the vulcanization process by Goodyear in 1839 produced a strong global demand for rubber in various industries. In the case of Bolivia, it became “a country vulcanized” (58). The rubber industry was promoted by

president José Ballivián and the local elites of Santa Cruz. With respect to the peoples who inhabited the Amazon, this became a decisive factor in the process that gradually led to the disappearance of the former missions. The author highlights the flexibility and adaptability of the Mojos peoples who faced the circumstances created by the rubber boom: for instance, the migration from Llanos habitats to the rainforests of the north and also to Brazil. The abandonment of villages to rubber work was considered by Indians as an opportunity to avoid the tax, tribute, and unpaid labor of the former missions. It is clear that the exploitation of rubber produced significant changes in the indigenous communities of Mojos but, as Van Valen emphasizes, “it is equally true that the Indians were not helpless victims” (103–4), because under the control of the Indian elite, the *cabildo* continued to operate as a guardian of cultural continuity. However, it should be noted that these elites consolidated their power by marriage alliances with white authorities and neighbors in Santa Cruz, while worsening the situation of the mass of indigenous people.

After 1880, rubber exploitation showed its more negative effects: the pressure from the *carayanas* to recruit labor for rubber extraction (*enganches*) and the open breach between commoners and the *cabildo* elites, who had moved closer to the interests of the white population. These circumstances caused the emigration of the Mojos of the village of Trinidad to San Lorenzo, where they reconstituted the *cabildo* and organized a resistance movement (1886–87), in which indigenous traditions mixed with elements of colonial Catholic culture. This movement, which was harshly repressed by the white authorities, is analyzed through valuable sources, including the writings of *carayanas* authorities and the travel stories of three Jesuit missionaries. The author covers in depth the millenarian movement and the emergence of the ventriloquist messiah Andrés Guayocho. This phenomenon deepens our understanding of indigenous responses to colonial rule and later national states: a phenomenon also observed in the twentieth century, in other spaces and with other actors, as part of the native reaction against capitalist exploitation. The Mojos millenarian movement has remarkable similarities with the cult of the “talking cross” (*Cruz Parlante*) in the so-called “caste war” in Yucatán (Mexico), where Mayan communities were affected by the expansion of sugar plantations into the eastern zone of that peninsula. Moreover, in Bolivia there were other important millenarian movements, including the one that arose among the *chiriguano*s of the Andean foothills in 1890, a case studied by Thièrry Saignes.

Van Valen's book also includes an analysis of another Mojo leader, Santos Noco, who led the return to San Lorenzo, which had been abandoned after the 1887 repression. This cacique enjoyed community consensus because, through their actions, they managed to respect the indigenous land, which allowed for

the continuation of traditional cultural practices. At the same time, Noco used “weapons” provided by the liberal discourse of citizenship for the benefit of community interests.

After the experience of Guayochería and Noco’s leadership in San Lorenzo, in the 1888–1930 period the Mojos experienced great changes. Through the study of two villages, San Ignacio and Trinidad, Van Valen exposes the causes that hindered the deployment of indigenous agency: the consolidation of large estates and the loss of land to the advance of haciendas and sugar planting, along with the growth of the white population. In this context, the Mojos tried to keep alive practices inherited from the missionary era, such as the *cabildo*, religious beliefs, and ceremonies. The ability to adapt their cultural habits to new circumstances is reflected perfectly in the *machetero* dancing that occurs on Bolivian Independence Day.

Finally, I would emphasize the words with which the author concludes his acknowledgments (xi-xii), which include thanks “to the Mojos themselves.” I fully agree with the author and his reflections on the meaning of the work of ethno-historians, who spend much time in archives far distant from the subject of their research. Such scholars can at least help reconstruct part of the past for the descendants of those men and women who fought to preserve their culture and identity against external threats. In short, this is a valuable tool that can be used today, in the context of neo-liberal policies and economic globalization.

The book contains plans, maps, tables, and photographs and illustrations of different aspects of Mojos life, especially during the rubber boom. There is also a glossary of local variants, Spanish terms, and toponymic-geographic names, which is a very useful aid when reading this excellent book.

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