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*Published in:*  
Rural Landscapes: Society, Environment, History

*DOI:*  
[10.16993/rl.43](https://doi.org/10.16993/rl.43)

*Publication date:*  
2018

*Document version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Christoffersen, L. (2018). Amazonian erasures: landscape and myth-making in lowland Bolivia. *Rural Landscapes: Society, Environment, History*, 5(1), 1-19. [3]. <https://doi.org/10.16993/rl.43>

## RESEARCH

# Amazonian Erasures: Landscape and Myth-making in Lowland Bolivia

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Radical land-use changes are under way in Bolivia's Beni Department. As a prelude to changes, tales of idle land and premodern peoples have emerged, resembling the Pristine Myth that accompanied the 'discovery' of the Americas. In this article, I revisit the history of this area to show that its landscape and people have been re-narrated over time in ways that resonate with political economic concerns. I describe three dominant historical landscapes of Moxos, and the transformations that took place in between them, and show how material and conceptual landscape changes fed each other and obscured previous systems. In reinforcing loops they thus allowed for the birth or rebirth of myths of empty landscapes and traditional peoples, myths then used to naturalise transformations. I argue that new variants of the myths once again will erase indigenous peoples and their management practices from the landscape, and I stress the importance of investigating history with all its complexity when negotiating development. We must pay particular attention to the dangers of myth; essentialised characterisations of indigenous peoples and their interests risk reducing the available space for them to manoeuvre politically – but also for us to understand the nuanced relationships between history, landscapes, its peoples and the wider world.

**Keywords:** landscape transformations; pristine; premodern; landscape management; development; Moxos; Bolivia

## Introduction

I usually fly up to Trinidad in the Bolivian Amazon on my way to the indigenous territories that are central to my study and had thus already seen the northward expansion of the soy fields from above. Driving through them was overwhelming. Impressive landscapes used to be here: a mosaic of dense forests and grazing land with scattered vegetation and wetlands with an abundance of birds, alligators and capybaras. Now, newly established fields stretched all the way to the horizon. Driving north was like travelling backwards through the landscape transformation taking place: first the endless soy fields and then the bare soil where all the vegetation had recently been removed. Not a single landmark was left to rest my eyes upon – not until several hours later, when huge scattered piles of woody plants awaiting incineration appeared, almost as if someone had built monuments over a bygone era.

Other radical landscape transformations are under way in the Beni Department, formerly known as Moxos. So far, the extraction of natural resources, the main strategy for continued economic growth in Bolivia (Hindery 2013; Pellegrini, Ribera and Marco 2012), has mainly taken place

in the southern lowland departments, but the recent launch of major infrastructure projects are prelude to changes. An example is the resumption of plans to build two large hydro-electric power stations that will alter the ecosystem dynamics of the Madidi National Park, an important biological hotspot and one of the largest protected areas in the world; it will affect close to 20 indigenous communities in the overlapping indigenous territory (Finer and Jenkins 2012). Another example is the expansion of the road-network, part of the Initiative for the Integration of the Regional Infrastructure of South America, IIRSA, comprising more than 500 megaprojects, of these almost 50 in Bolivia, primarily in the Departments Beni and Pando (CAOI 2008). Highways are projected to cut through indigenous territories and protected areas, raising concerns about migration, deforestation and contamination. Moreover, large oil and gas deposits beneath the forests where the Andes descend into the Amazon Basin (Hecht, in Hindery 2013) cause general uncertainty about the future of indigenous territories and protected areas there.

Along with the early signs of coming landscape transformations come tales of places and peoples in need of change. They come from different actors but contain common references to unexploited land and traditional peoples. Such narratives serve to naturalise and justify the preferred development as envisioned by the narrator. The indigenous lowland peoples hold land through collective titles, constituting the forested almost 25%

of the department, which otherwise primarily consists of savannah, *pampa*. They apply a diversified livelihood strategy that, among other practices, includes a varied use of the forested landscape. The Movima and the Mojeño, among whom I conducted fieldwork, were not always forest dwellers. An earlier landscape transformation obscured their previous production patterns and led to the contemporary distribution of land and its use, at the pampa as well as in the forests.

This paper deals with the way myths emerge and are used in the appropriation of both land and development agenda. I present two major transformations of the Moxos landscape. Both are built on myths about the empty, unexploited land, poorly managed by premodern natives that almost accidentally were present here. Today these essentialising myths appear again, legitimising an economic development with drastic ecological and socio-economic changes as a result, and threatening to erase lowland peoples and their management practices from the landscape once again. This is a development that fails to consider potential valuable alternatives close at hand and that excludes the voices of central stakeholders. I tell a history that challenges current myths and show how it is not the first time that people and landscapes are being enrolled in stories that legitimise developments that may not be in their interest. The historical review shows how the Mojeño and the Movima proactively responded to changes and formed the landscape of today but remained invisible as economic, as well as political actors – as collectives with agency.

The aim of this paper is to underline the importance of investigating history with all its complexity in negotiations about development, and of paying particular attention to the dangers of myth. Retelling and reinterpreting history is essential to reflect critically on contemporary narratives. By bringing together archaeological, ethnographic and historical data, I show how landscapes and peoples have been recast under changing political economies and how myths from multiple sources (economic developers, conservationists, politicians, migrants, scholars and local people) come together in a series of transformations leading to the repeated re-narrations of landscapes and peoples. I argue that regional political and economic 'development' has always been deeply entwined with myths of idle landscapes and explain how these myths can still thrive, although research has disproved them over and over again.

### ***Re-narrating Histories – Creating Myths***

The European expansion in search of wealth and the parallel transition to capitalism, accelerating in the course of the industrial revolution, thoroughly founded a perception of nature as resources and commodities, which has come to dominate economic development worldwide. It also inspired a world history that is the history of exactly that development: the history of the developed, modern countries that have reached their climax and encourage the 'still-developing countries' to follow by demanding the adoption of the same path to qualify for assistance (see Mitchell 2011 on 'travelling experts in democracy' for

a contemporary example). In line with Eric Wolf (1982) and his 'people without history', I claim that landscapes, societies and peoples that have been designated *traditional*, or *premodern*, are being denied any significant history of their own. Inspired by Wolf, I am convinced that the history I am about to present must be relational in character, because it is intertwined with distant events, and we therefore must aim to understand the world as a whole instead of as self-contained societies. Wolf used Marx's concept of production to investigate the general processes at work in capitalist development and their effects on micro-populations to include those peoples and societies that have been denied a place in the Eurocentric history. In my approach, the angle from which we observe is that of the lowland indigenous communities in Beni. European and regional development and expansion will be included when relevant to explore linkages that affected Benian political and ecological landscape transformations directly. While the effects of changing modes of production on the lowland indigenous peoples still underlie the analysis, an add-on to Wolf's materialist approach is the investigation of the creation of myths that legitimised a certain development – the 'westernisation' of the economy – and erased the history of whole populations in the meeting between two worlds.

The resilience of the myths owes to the fact that evidence fails to demonstrate their emergence, Sluyter (2003) states. They emerge during a process that materially and conceptually transforms the landscape while it at the same time obscures such transformations. In combination with the objectification of nature and its separation from culture, society and humanity (Descola 2013; Latour 1993; Moore 2017), these blind spots in history block the effective understanding of relationships between landscapes and its peoples, as well as these peoples' interconnectedness with the wider world. This study's investigation of multiple contemporary re-narrations of landscapes and peoples shows the urgent relevance of understanding what myths can do.

Literature on myths in South American contexts usually concerns the way the narratives of indigenous peoples are used to make sense of the world and explain their own place in it (Hugh-Jones 1988) or to come to terms with history (Lévi-Strauss, in Gow 2001). As is apparent by now, the myths that I am concerned with are those that originate in the Western or westernised mind and make sense in the forced implementation of the capitalist order and praxis. This includes Western myths dominating nature conservation with an entrenched assumption of stability, equilibrium and harmony in research and practice (Pierotti 2016). There is one important exception, one indigenous myth, which is the Mojeño myth of Loma Santa, the sacred mound. It narrates how the Mojeño came to settle in the forest, and it depicts their idea of an ideal world.

Hans Renes (2015) describes how ecologists tend to use the 'traditional landscapes' model, suggesting a stable, premodern past versus a dynamic and rapid contemporary landscape change. Recent periods are regarded as more dynamic than more distant ones, and when traditional landscapes are still found, it is due to marginality,

isolation and stability. The premodern landscape changed only in details, slowly and gradually. This belief somehow resembles the Pristine Myth (Denevan 1992, 2011), the idea that the colonial Europeans transformed nature in the Americas, whereas the Indian impact had been benign or non-existent, a belief which was refuted by Denevan, among others. This article presents several 'pristine myths', reflecting how the ideas of 'something pristine' have had different expressions at different times.

Inherent in pristine myths is the conceptual nature–society divide. Nature in the premodern landscape tends to be deemed 'underdeveloped', as are its peoples, who may even be considered as 'cheap nature' (Moore 2017), not quite human, and thus assigned to a domain that allows for exploitation. They must undergo or be used in a modernisation towards a separation of nature and society in order to develop nature into productive landscapes. Also in development practice and research, conceptions of premodern/pristine landscapes continue to occur, promoting the continued dominance of 'expert knowledge' over 'local knowledge', despite numerous studies questioning the advantages of this regime (e.g. Goldman 2005; Neumann 1998). At a global scale, the dichotomy has proven disastrously counterproductive regarding global consequences of natural–social phenomena such as climate change or industrial agriculture, reliant on disappearing fossil fuel and water, and it has generated major social disparity. Realising this, however, seems to be a lot easier than to eliminate the conceptual nature–society dichotomy, manifest in the material world as the continued desire to develop supposedly unexploited land and resources, side by side with the desire to conserve supposedly unspoiled nature (Sluyter 2003).

The assumption of 'traditional landscapes' simplifies the task of landscape conservation by focusing solely on landscapes that avoided recent changes, thus impairing our understanding of landscape history and management. It also indicates the existence of balanced environments, which is highly questioned by contemporary ecological-developmental biologists (Pierotti 2016). By ignoring local history, we risk forgetting that landscape management is always the work of man. Perhaps an understanding of dynamics could help promote human practices and material flows that do not undermine ecological processes and systems, and inspire the efforts of researchers to suggest relations to nature that can oppose the nature–society dichotomy in contemporary conservation debates (e.g. Büscher et al. 2016).

#### ***A Political Ecology of the Moxos Plains***

I developed three levels of analysis: i) a focus on locality and people to foreground livelihoods, interventions and responses to changes; ii) an analysis of material and conceptual landscape transformations to determine the (re)creation of myths; and iii) a profound historical approach to understand how local practices and wider world tendencies have always come together.

- i) Together, locality and people could be called *place* in the sense of Aletta Biersack's (2006)

interpretation: the grounded site of local–global articulation and interaction. The important idea is that local people make changes, interact and actively contribute to determine effects of transformations in a given locality. The local people of my study are the Movima and Mojeño peoples of the Beni Department, also known as the Moxos Plains, or simply Moxos. Their on-the-ground responses to changing conditions, through interaction, articulation and pro-action, play a prominent role in the analysis to disprove essentialised representations.

- ii) The myths of the premodern, the traditional and the un(der)developed landscapes and peoples are resilient. Not only do they continuously legitimise the appropriation of the development agenda by those who develop others, they also help maintain the image of the indigenous peoples as 'victims of progress' (Bodley in Gow, 2001). Hvalkof's (2006) title 'Progress of the victims' points to the problem of what the myths do, namely, obscure successful labour and production patterns that have secured reproduction and maintenance of the indigenous populations. Sluyter (2003) suggests an analysis of material and conceptual landscape transformations to identify the emergence of the Pristine Myth in a specific place. Identification and feedback processes of the transformations provide the basis of a more general falsification of the myths of pristine or premodern landscapes and peoples. I apply this analysis to my case of landscape transformations in the Beni. The loop to current appearances of the myth is an add-on to Sluyter's work. Current representations of the lowland and its peoples from segments relevant to the contemporary and future development of the Beni include those of the government, migrant farmers and foreign and national NGOs. The NGOs have come to play a significant role as part of indigenous communities' relationships with the wider world; they represent indigenous peoples according to their specific interests in the region.
- iii) Historical political ecology can be characterised as 'a field-informed interpretation of society–nature relations in the past, how and why those relations have changed (or not) over time and space, and the significance of those interpretations for improving social justice and nature conservation today' (Offen 2004: 21). The indigenous land tenure systems today are regionally differentiated, moulded by precolonial, colonial, republican and post-republican rule, and marked by the 'bricolage' (Clever 2002) of bits and pieces of different, sometimes overlapping, legalities. Cleaver's argument regarding institutions is that the dichotomies traditional/modern and informal/bureaucratic are false; instead, local resource management is a complex blend of legalities, existing norms and mechanisms

consciously adapted to new purposes or, less consciously, new arrangements conferred with the legitimacy of pre-existing norms and practices. The history of the two ethnic groups, the Movima and the Mojeño, presented in this article, indicate exactly how complex this blend is.

History within political ecology is important to understand the intersection between environmental and political change. In Beni protected areas designated 50 years ago were not really 'managed' until the 1990s (SERNAP 2005), when the lowland peoples raised their voices because of increasing colonisation and related negative environmental impacts. Literature and analysis on lowland indigenous resource management, governance and social mobilisation often begin here. Focus on these relatively recent events, although milestones, somehow discounts earlier efforts of the lowland peoples to maintain influence on their livelihoods while also playing a part in regional politics, organisation and trade. It underestimates the historical significance of their struggle to gain and maintain control over land. I seek to balance this by presenting their rich and turbulent history upon which the more recent struggle builds; as a trade-off, the more recent history will be treated with less detail. Anthropologists and archaeologists investigating the role of humans in shaping the environment dominate historical political ecology (Hellermann 2013). This is true for my study as well. Based on their evidence, I substantiate how the Moxos landscapes too were shaped by humans, and vice versa.

My own empirical research is based on observations when travelling by plane, river, car, foot, motorbike or horse during every season; from talking to people about changes, past and current events and practices; and from participation in daily activities during long-term and return visits to lowland communities. I conducted fieldwork within three territories situated in the south-central part of the Department, TCO<sup>1</sup> Movima, TIM<sup>12</sup> and TIPNIS<sup>3</sup>, and spent time with their territorial leaderships, the Subcentrals, and spiritual leaderships, the *Cabildo Indigenales*, placed in the towns of Santa Ana de Yacuma, San Ignacio de Moxos and Santísima Trinidad, respectively. I base my historical research on a review of secondary literature, interviewees' perceptions of the past and observations of indigenous organisation, custom and celebrations. I had first-hand impressions of land grabs in the 1960s and second-hand narratives from the time just after the rubber-boom ending in 1912. I also learned about the golden time with the Jesuits and how they fought the republican colonists afterwards; the Movima and the Mojeño have long memories. All empirical data collection took place during visits to Beni between 2013 and 2016.

### The Landscapes and the Transformations

In the following I describe three dominant historical landscapes in Moxos and the transformations that took place in between them. I start by giving a brief description, to a large extent based on my own empirical material, of today's landscape. I call it 'the divided landscape' and

suggest it constitutes the third dominant landscape, literally formed in the decade of the 1990s with the creation of indigenous territories. Following that, I present myths about the lowland and lowland peoples, as expressed by different sectors of Bolivian society today. We then start the historical review by returning to precolonial Moxos, the first dominant landscape, and the assumptions about its nature and its peoples prior to the arrival of the Europeans around 1600. The second dominant landscape, the 'mission landscape', began when the Jesuits settled in Moxos in 1668. The history of lowland colonisation has seldom been told with an indigenous peoples' angle, but with his important book, *Mission Culture on the Upper Amazon*, David Block (1994) does exactly that. The description of the mission-period is almost entirely based on his work. It is followed by the transformations that took place subsequent to this important period in the history of Moxos, transformations that take us forth to recent times and close the cycle of the historical recounting.

In each of the three periods, I focus on population, landscape, land use, organisation and institutions. The in-between unstable periods will describe material and conceptual landscape transformations and how they obscured former systems, allowing for the birth of myths. The chosen periods reflect my attempt at a locally centred view of the area's history rather than conventional divisions; independence from Spain, for example, did not affect life in Moxos much, while later republican reforms had serious impacts on land tenure, and particular international market demands affected labour organisation. After the historical review I round off with my own material again; the section 'Retreat and Mobilisation' outlines some important events leading to the organisation of the lowland peoples, and the resulting division of the landscape, now manifest in collectively titled communal land.

### *The contemporary divided landscape*

#### Indigenous territories and the developmental state

The Beni stretches from the Andean foothills north-eastward into the Amazon Basin. Its climate is hot and humid. Some 75% of its 200,000 km<sup>2</sup> are seasonally, sometimes disastrously<sup>4</sup>, flooded plains, with constantly changing waterways; the rest are periphery and gallery forests<sup>5</sup> and forest islands (**Figure 2**). Eighteen indigenous peoples represent around 40% of the population in the Department. The Mojeños, the name deriving from Moxos, are the most numerous, with a population above 43,000, while the Movima count less than 8000 (Ávila 2009). Xavier Albó (1990) has designated the two peoples as '*groups of intense acculturation*' based on the moment, duration and intensity they experienced colonisation and the socio-political order that followed. The Jesuits were the first Europeans to settle in Moxos, and although they were expelled in 1767 after just one hundred years, conversations with both Movima and Mojeños confirmed that they consider this period as basic to their cultural foundation and social and political formation (Albó 1990; Molina 2002).

Land held by indigenous peoples through a collective title constitutes close to 25% of the Department, mainly



forested landscapes. The allocation of communal land was the result of the impressive organisation and mobilisation by and of the lowland peoples in the 1980s, resulting in the months-long protest march to La Paz in 1990 'for Territory and Dignity' (Contreras 1991; Jones 1990; Ströbele-Gregor 1994), led by the lowland organisation Confederation of Indigenous Peoples in Bolivia (CIDOB). Parts of their land claims were overlapping protected areas. The indigenous peoples succeeded in appropriating the social and political space of the protected areas to some extent by organising themselves around the management of this land, which initially had been declared protected without their consent (Mason et al. 2010). Other stories told of tough processes of demarcation of land with unfavourable outcomes, especially where large cattle-ranchers laid counter-claims, but the settlement of boundaries provided relative rest and the peace needed to consolidate the territories. Filling out the political space coming with these has been the major internal challenge ever since (Ávila 2009). While the land held under collective titles is considerable, it does not quite reflect population composition. Many Mojeños and Movimas reside in the urban peripheries, maintaining close relations to the rural areas.

In addition to the 18 peoples, the sparsely populated Department is home to migrants from the highland, clearing forest and settling as small-scale farmers, and large landowners that use the plains for cattle grazing. Moreover, the state has become more active in Beni, interested in exploiting oil and water resources as in the south-eastern Departments, from where the large soy fields are approaching. The government aims to convert 10 mio hectares into farmland over the next decade, which has already put pressure on the forest. While initially contemplated to be advanced through supporting smallholder activities, a new agro-capital–state alliance between the elite of the lowlands and the government since 2010 has implied an emphasis on industrial agriculture (Webber 2017). The Morales government thus continue the extractive economy, nationalised and articulated as 'neo', indicating that progressive extractivism exists. The practice of neo-extractivism consequently becomes a

politically legitimised development strategy (Burchardt and Dietz 2014; Hindery 2013; Pellegrini 2016), repeating, however, the negative environmental and social impacts of the 'old' extractivism (Gudynas 2010). Vice-President Linera has called this economic strategy 'Andean-Amazonian Capitalism' (Lewis 2012), articulated as a necessary step towards socialism (Linera 2012). The Beni has great potential for the envisioned development, and the preparations alone include mega-infrastructures that affect, or will affect, indigenous territories.

In the territories, most communities are located along the rivers that bind them together. The houses are grouped according to family relations. In addition to socialising on a daily basis, these family units constitute working communities (Reyes-Garcia et al. 2010). Trees are accepted in the small *chacos*, cleared for multiple crops that, although seen more sophisticated elsewhere in the western Amazonia (Denevan et al. 1984; Berkes, Colding and Folke 2000; own research<sup>6</sup>), still imitate the natural succession of regrowth. Some parts of the forest are never cleared but contain useful species that are taken care of. Other parts, constituting better cropland, are cleared repeatedly. Surplus meat from hunting is distributed along family lines, in the village, and to neighbouring communities and urban areas (**Figure 1**). Many communities apply a system of 'cattle-modules', a capital stock formed by the herd, 'yielding' as it grows, and 'harvested' from for communal consumption or sale. Some families have their own cattle roaming freely along with the communal herd. Not all communities have access to plains for cattle, but the families maintain access to beef through relatives residing on ranches as wage-labourers. From the forest they occasionally sell planks of hardwood. I observed how permission for this was given at the community meeting. This is where common activities are planned, and decisions made about all that concerns the community, like maintenance of commons or allocation of land to newcomers. This way, control of land and resources is subject to all families of the community. Indeed, local governance structures complicate major changes in land use because of its cumbersome procedures.



**Figure 1:** Left: Movima going hunting, community San Pedro de Apere. Photo by Bo Morten Johansson. Right: An ox provides better transport than a horse when the pampa is flooded, community Montes de Oro, Movima 1. Own photo.



**Figure 2:** River with gallery forest and two water reservoirs at the upper left. Own photo.

While the extended families form the basic units, Movimas and Mojeños elect a *Corregidor* or equivalent representative of the community, along with other authorities and committees (Díez Astete 2011; Reyes-García et al. 2010). They are in charge of ensuring good social relations, appointed with consideration to experience. Many community-members are directly involved in local governance, responsible for presenting issues in the *Cabildo*, the community meeting, and carrying out decisions made there. Decisions concerning the whole territory belong at a kind of general assembly. The Movima-Assembly allows the *Corregidor* plus two men and two women from each of the 27 communities to participate in decision-making; others can participate, but only in discussions. It lasts for days, and important decisions may need to be brought back and authorised in each community. The assemblies appoint leaders for the Subcentrals, the executive leaderships of the territories, whose external role, I was told, is to represent the communities before political authorities, companies and organisations. Internally they must keep communities informed about activities and seek and maintain unity. In reality, many of the Subcentrals are quite weak, depending on inside or outside support for activities and subsistence. The Subcentrals are 'sub' to regional Centrals that are affiliated to national and international indigenous organisations.

These organisations that initiated as grassroots mobilisers have suffered from fragmentation due to government co-optation and exclusion internally (Regalsky 2010; Webber 2017) at all levels, and the pursuit of autonomy within the constitutional framework (Cameron 2013) has not yet resulted in territorial autonomy. TIM1 is the one territory in Beni that has progressed; their process witnesses cumbersome bureaucratic requirements and a legal framework (LMAD 2010) profoundly liberal and

municipal despite the right to exercise autonomy in accordance with the applicants own 'norms and procedures'. While the Morales government, at least initially, continued the process of titling collective land, it has paradoxically restricted the exercise of the rights recognised with that title, such as the right to consultation and indigenous autonomy (Regalsky 2010; Schilling-Vacaflor 2017). These rights were established in the new constitution of 2009, which was demanded publicly by the lowland peoples in 2002 and later adopted as a demand by highland indigenous-peasant organisations during extensive uprisings against privatisation. When Morales and the MAS-party assumed the presidency in 2005, they established a constituent assembly that elaborated the Constitution of the Plurinational State of Bolivia (Regalsky 2010; Schilling-Vacaflor 2011; Paz et al. 2012). Despite power asymmetries within the assembly, the pieced-together constitution is both progressive and ambitious regarding participatory and pluralist democracy, as well as social rights and rights regarding nature. However, the developmentalist and centralist direction of the MAS-government (e.g. Regalsky 2010; Webber 2017) has provoked a series of disputes and has caused a rupture in the relationship between the Morales government and the indigenous organisations that still hold plurinationality as their aspiration.

While the organisational structures built and expanded since the 1980s experience a breakdown and emergence of parallel top-down structures, the *Cabildo Indigenales* in the urban centres that emerged from the Jesuit seventeenth-century complexes continue to be central institutions to both urban and forest dwellers. The festival cycle frequently brings them together, and lately this indigenous church community has resumed significance as a unifying political institution. All indigenous leaders I talked to, young and old, mentioned this institution



as instrumental to their engagement in indigenous political or cultural activities. The indigenous movement emerged from the urban *Cabildos* in the 1980s (e.g. Díez Astete 2011). The *Cabildo* in Trinidad was founded in 1701 and holds a high degree of legitimacy. Apart from celebrations, it is used for activities like adult education and, increasingly, political meetings. It is first and foremost a religious institution, responsible for religious celebrations. This way the *Cabildo* remains indivisible, I was told, and shielded against government intervention. The MAS government encourages cultural diversity in its depoliticised form and thus supports the urban *Cabildos*, famous for their festivals.

With the indigenous territories, the landscape is literally divided, and the lowland peoples live in an almost parallel universe, socioeconomically as well as politically, despite their vast social network comprising urban areas.

#### Contemporary myths

There are a number of divergent perceptions of the lowland indigenous peoples' ability to manage land and resources, none of which really trust them to perform the task. The perceptions are rooted in the way authorities, smallholders and NGOs interpret land, production and conservation, and the accompanying role of the indigenous peoples in this conception. The idea that lowland peoples are sitting on vast tracts of unproductive land is shared by the President and highland colonists alike (Achtenberg 2013; Canessa 2014).

In interviews with officials I was told that the lowland peoples are poor and backward, although rich in culture, in need of development and political education<sup>7</sup>. The government further argues that the lowland leaders are corrupt and tied up in clientelist relationships with foreign organisations, constituting a 'neo-colonialist' and 'eco-imperialist' lowland regime (Linera, 2012). This justified the establishment and support of parallel government-friendly organisations (Christoffersen 2014; Beunder and Kleijn 2014; Lalander 2014) after the irreversible break between the Morales government and the indigenous organisations previously supporting his candidacy. The break was prompted by a violent police intervention in a peaceful protest march in 2011 against a planned highway through the TIPNIS (McNeish 2013). The constitution mandates prior consent from indigenous communities regarding measures that will affect them; however, Evo Morales has proclaimed that 'letting a group of families tell us what to do would mean paralyzing all our work on electrification, hydrocarbons and industries' (Canessa 2014: 164). A new consultation law has been drafted that fundamentally changes the consultation process towards a negotiation about compensation, and which stresses that 'due to their strategic character and public interest, the execution and continuity of extractive activities will be guaranteed' (Schilling-Vacaflor 2017: 1065). With regard to protected areas, Vice-President Linera has stated that Bolivia will not act as park wardens for the North (ERBOL, 2010). In its efforts to expand extractive activities, the government thus frames national parks as the result of 'foreign interests', preventing the people living in the

parks from developing, while simultaneously portraying the lowland indigenous peoples as a couple of backward families.

Another group interested in sharing the land of the lowlanders are the highland migrants in search of farmland. Driven by poverty and encouraged by shifting agricultural reforms and policies, they clear forest for small-scale agriculture. They are, of course, indigenous too, belonging to the group referred to as 'originary indigenous peasants', who along with urban highlanders and coca growers constitute a large group, possibly a majority of the Bolivian population, which Canessa (2014) boldly claims are advantaged with a privileged citizenship under the Morales government. His assertion is based on the facts that the government is keen on celebrating and institutionalising highland values and actively encourages the colonisation of lowland areas by highlanders. In addition to that, highland migrants are invited to actively affect the lowlanders' attitude towards 'development', here in relation to the road through TIPNIS: 'You need to explain, to guide the indigenous compañeros ... young men, you have instructions from the President to seduce (*conquistar*) the Yuracaré women so that they won't oppose the building of the road' (Morales in Canessa 2014: 165). Many highlanders view lowland indigenous groups as the 'new *latifundistas*' (Achtenberg 2013). They generally perceive the lowland indigenous peoples as lazy and ignorant of productive ventures; to them the communities seem disorganised, and the community members never work properly. 'They must always be ordered', I was told. Canessa's description of immigrants' attitude towards the lowlanders echoes this, with statements such as 'we have brought civilisation', 'the people here are very simple' and 'before I came there was nothing here' (2014: 163). The smallholder notion of 'a piece of land to work' inhibits recognition of the landscape management of the lowland peoples and cause conflicts, sometimes violent, which reaffirms the myth of hostile savages – a term often used by this segment (Canessa 2014) and even by a highland peasant leader in the press about marching lowland protesters (McNeish 2013).

The third group I highlight are the NGOs, ranging from indigenous rights advocates, over income-generation-focused organisations, to environmental conservationists and climate-change adaptationists. They all claim to support indigenous peoples<sup>8</sup>; most often, however, they want to change or improve their practices. I made the following observations: 'Indigenous peoples must organise (differently) in a transparent way and meet the requirements of good governance'; 'management plans must be developed and activities monitored'. Some believe 'the use of natural resources should be restricted'. Generally the perceptions seem to be that 'the indigenous peoples are knowledgeable, but unable to transform knowledge into income'; 'have forgotten much of their traditional practices'; or simply that they would benefit from adopting other systems of production. Moreover, they are perceived to be 'weakly organised, and cannot administer funds', so most foreign NGO support is administered by local



partner organisations capable of project implementation, bookkeeping and report-writing. In this regard they are in accordance with certain public institutions, typically municipalities, who keep administration of funds specified for indigenous peoples tight. Finally, some organisations either see indigenous peoples as ‘natural environmentalists’ or as the opposite, as a threat to the ‘natural nature’. Different NGOs thus have different prerequisites for cooperation, while simultaneously basing these demands on a misconception of landscape, management and institutional history, resulting in the continued diffusion of institutions and technologies from the West in development models, and the measuring of success according to Western standards. Does the assumption that native cultures lack the rationality to use their lands effectively lie implicit in this, reaffirming the myth of the premodern?

It is fair to add that certain NGOs have been, and still are, essential partners and supporters of the lowland peoples in their struggle for land, rights and market access, and that they equally suffer repression and limitation of their work under the Morales government. Apart from new, complicated registration procedures and harsh rhetoric against them, the new consultation law directly limits their scope for action regarding support to communities by the prohibition of third parties and advisors to ‘complicate’ consultations (Schilling-Vacaflor 2017: 1064).

To sum up, the lowland populations and their production systems create a material landscape which is easily conceptually determined as idle. The ongoing conceptual transformation is no different from two predecessors in failing to recognise the landscape management of lowland peoples in the articulations of unused land and premodern peoples. Positive feedback loops linking material and conceptual transformations (Sluyter 1999, 2003) did the same twice before.

We return to the contemporary situation of the Movima and the Mojeño after having explored the early landscapes of Moxos and their transformations. We start 500 years ago, when the two groups were far more numerous, and lived on the open plains of Moxos.

### *The precolonial landscape, its transformation and dissolution*

#### *Rearranging landscape and waterways*

Remains from a precolonial culture on the Moxos plains convey important information about a forgotten past. When one flies over, large earthworks reveal themselves. A pilot casually mentioned that ‘those immense ponds you can see everywhere are artificial and ancient’. Many seemed to know: ‘The mounds have been dug out, they found a lot of bones and potsherds’, yet no legends were told, no people mentioned, even though the mounds in cases were built upon continuously and occupied until 500 years ago (Erickson and Balée 2006).

First-hand accounts of precolonial Moxos are few. Around 1600, expeditions entered the upper Amazon in search of a fabulously rich land ruled by the ‘Gran Moxo’. Most expeditions failed before they even reached the plains; some were caught on horseback by annual floods; others starved or were decimated by disease, desertion and indigenous resistance (Block 1994; Denevan 1966; Roca 2001). They uniformly reported dense indigenous populations. The first detailed demographic and geographic descriptions were by the Jesuits, but at their arrival European diseases had already ravaged the indigenous populations, and the capture and removal of many people for slavery had disrupted social structures and productive capacities. Luckily, archaeologists can help shed light on what was here before the Europeans came.

Immense infrastructures (**Figure 3**) that include geoglyphs, canals, causeways, reservoirs, mounds, embankments, fish weirs and raised fields are found on the extensive plains. Large, populous societies systematically transformed and maintained the landscape in order to make marginal land productive, works that indicate that a technically sophisticated civilisation existed here (Balée and Erickson 2006; Denevan 1966; Erickson 2006; Mann 2008; Walker 2008; Walker and Ribeiro 2011). This evidence contradicts prevalent understandings of the Amazon as inapt for larger settlements and agriculture of a more permanent character, limited by the environmental conditions and technical capabilities as reasoned by Betty



**Figure 3:** Left: Raised fields up to 20 × 600 meters. Photo: Clark L. Erickson. Right: Built Pre-Columbian landscape (as interpreted by Daniel Brinkmeier, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago).

Meggers (2003), among others. Erickson (2006) stresses human intentionality in the *building* of landscapes, a sort of 'landscape accumulation' produced by a conscious, indigenous knowledge system operating in a historical context. In Beni alone 10,000 mounds for settlements have been identified, some large, indicating possible urban centres (Mann 2008).

Contemporary archaeological thoughts may bring us closer to the political ecology of the 'earthmovers'. Albó (1990) drew the almost automatic conclusion that because of the sophisticated infrastructures, there must have been a centralised organisation, but remains from hierarchical institutions would expectedly be standardized and repetitive with regard to constructions (Henry and Barrier 2016). Homogeneity would prevail, but the archaeological evidence from Moxos stresses heterogeneity in earthworks. It tells of a complex mosaic of societies linked by networks of communication and trade. Since there is no sign of a central power, communities must have unified to produce the large earthen constructions. Henry and Barrier (2016) studied social bonds in a North American case without evidence of top-down leadership. They argue that kinship was performed and that it required ongoing maintenance of social ties to sustain coalition and consensus. Walker and Ribeiro (2011) suggest that the Arawak<sup>9</sup> built their identity on control of fertile floodplains and trade routes along main waterways, corresponding well to the observation that dominant groups occupied the riverfronts when the Europeans arrived. The Jesuits noted developed patterns of trade and warfare, a surplus agricultural production, and political and religious specialists.

Jesuit eyewitnesses provide us with important information about precolonial organisation (Block 1994): multifamily groups formed the building blocks of economic and social life; they shared daily tasks or formed productive units in the same communal dwelling or used kin to retain access to river resources. Moxo communities had residences and kitchens used by extended families and a central 'drinking-house' (Denevan 1966). The village leader functioned as advisor and harmoniser more than ruler, and his privilege was the respect of the other villagers. He was one among various political and religious specialists.

Why and how has this been erased from history? Or rather, how have contemporary lowland peoples been disconnected from this ancient civilisation?

#### Material transformation: Societal collapse, abandonment and forest colonisation

Part of the explanation must be that people died following the Europeans' arrival. Different estimates indicate a decline in population up to 90%, from 350,000 to 35,000 inhabitants (Block 1994) at the beginning of the Jesuit period around 1668 (for comparison, about 420,000 inhabit the Beni today, according to the 2012 census). The survivors were not able to retain the labour-intensive agricultural practice. Many of the earthworks are found beneath forest cover, indicating that today's western Amazon forest was once considerably smaller. The central argument of Erickson and Balée (2006) is that

the constructions have had a positive impact on landscape vegetation. The contemporary forests are thus the legacy of past human activities and recent time's less intensive human management; there may even be *more* forest today because of human activities.

#### Conceptual transformation and emergence of the myth:

##### Savages and wilderness

Two thesis titles on Jesuit enterprise from different epochs are illustrative of the tropical image handed over through generations: 'A Vanished Arcadia', from 1901, and 'The Lost Paradise', from 1976 (in Block 1994), expressing the fascination of life at the edge of western civilization, close to a pristine nature. Descriptions of the landscape by the Jesuits themselves are, however, quite different; nature is fierce, hostile and not traversable; and the peoples living in its aquatic environment were portrayed as practically amphibious. They must, however, have noticed the fertile mounds and levees, since they introduced both cattle and cash crops.

The first mention of the Movima derives from an expedition in 1621, describing them as 'naked people, vile and addicted to witch-craft' (Denevan 1966: 52). A later Jesuit account states they were 'naked barbarians living in misery and without government' (ibid.). The Mojeño were described in far more moderate terms and considered among the most civilised ethnic groups (Block 1994). Regardless, the Jesuits described the Indians as children to be enlightened. It was the tools and goods they brought, though, and the location and relative protection that the mission complexes offered that convinced the savannah peoples to cooperate. By accepting the Jesuit agenda, and the subsequent merging of institutions and management practices, the indigenous peoples helped obscure the transformation and nourished the myth about the wild being tamed.

#### ***The mission landscape, its transformation and dissolution***

##### Productive mutualism and prosperity 1668–1767

The settlement of the Jesuits secured the reproduction and maintenance of the reduced native populations, but also their recovering in a much broader sense. Under the relative protection from slavery in the mission complexes, the *Reductions*, the indigenous peoples resumed the thoroughly organised, yet altered, agricultural production. European tools and techniques increased the yields, and the division into professional disciplines, education and systematisation generated relatively prosperous communal societies, able to survive and live well in solid houses adapted to the environment around impressive wooden churches that were achievements of Jesuit architecture and indigenous artisans. They had a well-developed river transport system and were able to trade surplus production of food, tools, textiles, carvings, ceramics, boats and wagons to the wonder and envy of the few, destitute, secular Spanish settlements (Block 1994 when no-one else are mentioned).

The landscape changed. The population now gathered in urban centres. Cultivated fields occupied mounds and

river levees, adding new layers of fertile soil to them. Closest to the centres were cotton and citrus, introduced by the Jesuits; then came traditional subsistence crops, then cacao; rice on the seasonally flooded pampa, and farthest away the pastures for the cattle, multiplying in a semi-wild state. Bush-meat and fish continued to be an essential part of the mission diet. Forest products were extracted, which was reported to deplete materials for gathering and to induce usufruct disputes, an indication of competition over land and resources around 1700.

'The nature of the mission period was one of creative tension between Europeans and Native Americans' (ibid: 46). It was also a transitional period, bridging the precolonial heterarchical society and the capitalist epoch. The indigenous neophytes were introduced to the *Cabildo* government. They brought their organisation and their own leaders to the Reductions, where it was expanded, as new professional fields were introduced. Labour organisation shifted from family-based to community-oriented. They organised in two classes, *Familia* and *Pueblo*. *Familia* comprised the indigenous political leadership. The *Pueblo* worked in agriculture, herding, construction and transport, and composed the mission defence forces. Well-developed intra-family networks crosscutting and linking *Pueblo* and *Familia* provided easy access to the ruling class. The mission Indians shaped European tradition to local realities in the formation of a new amalgam.

In 1767 the decree stating that the Jesuits were to be suppressed in all Spanish-held land as part of the Bourbon Reforms, aiming to strengthen the Spanish crown and stimulate mercantilism (Mahoney 2010), ended their century-long presence in Moxos. The mission institutions, however, survived for another hundred years. Eyewitnesses described vibrant, model cities with shops, artisans, sugar-mills and public kitchens. David Block is not alone in portraying the Jesuit period as an almost golden age; to both Movima and Mojeño the period has had an immense impact on the way they organise and how they define themselves (Albó 1990; Díez Astete 2011). To them, this is where history begins; this is who they are and what they have lost.

#### Intensification and commercialisation (1768–1870)

The initial change was slow. Although mission Indians lost the influx of European products, they were left at the most attractive locations with a new production system, in addition to understanding Spanish and the European economic system. By the time of the expulsion of the Jesuits, 50,000 heads of cattle and 20,000 horses pertained to the missions, and indigenous handicrafts were priced outside Moxos. From accounts and inventories, it is clear that the missions produced more than subsistence (Block 1994: 69). A new bureaucracy emerged, mirroring mercantilist economic theories and administrative centralisation that prevailed in Europe. Intensification of mission activities should increase revenues from the colonies. Cash-crop fields were enlarged at the expense of subsistence crops. Cattle were concentrated into larger herds, and mission artists produced huge amounts of high-quality handicrafts.

Independence in 1825 did not change the order. Although a 'New Plan' marked an economic transformation towards commercialisation, 'mission Indians' successfully resisted its enforcement; they skilfully used the petition system and exploited the gap between governors and *curas*, a new class of cleric authorities. The missing imports concerned them, as did the shift towards cash crops, and changes to mission culture. At one point they achieved authorisation to re-establish food crops on export-crops land; at another, a governor was forcefully driven from Moxos, accused of having failed to observe custom.

Moxos became its own governorship, the Beni, in 1842, and a series of reforms introduced categories that initiated a conceptual landscape transformation. The indigenous peoples and settlements were perceived as hindering development with their corporate approach to property. Individual property rights were put forth to include all land and houses in the region, taxes put on such holdings, and mission-buildings offered for sale along with their communal gardens, chocolate groves and cane fields (Jones 1990). The idea of private property and consequent policies undermined the existing conception of property rights. It opened the possibility for those with the ability to take advantage of the new legal set-up to take over the important geographical hubs and good land in exchange for the payment of annual taxes. Instead of subsistence use and exchange of surplus production for European goods, mercantilism and central administration changed the way merchants, new bureaucrats and settlers perceived the Moxos landscape: a source of wealth to be channelled out of the savannah (Block 1994).

Although slowly, land changed hands and the new government buildings overshadowed the churches in both architecture and political activities. Moreover, mission economy was increasingly under pressure as an influx of cheap fabrics undercut craft production.

#### Landscape transformations (1870–1980): Rushes and ranching

The industrial development in the Old World raised a demand on rubber. In Beni, a region of scarce labour, the mission settlements provided workers, attracted or forced, to the rubber zones, seriously affecting the population and its ability to reproduce itself. Consequently, mission settlements now existed only as scattered villages along the rivers (Block 1994). Many mission Indians sought refuge in the forests<sup>10</sup>; Mojeños now living in TIPNIS are descendants of rubber-boom refugees (Jones 1990; Canedo 2011).

By the end of the rubber boom in 1912, a relatively stable socioeconomic order began, but the decline for the indigenous peoples continued. Some worked for white patrons in a debt-servitude system (Assies 2006), while the remainder worked their own land at a small scale and traded, unfortunately always to their detriment. Soon they exchanged their possessions and labour too. Characteristics of merchant capitalism include trade for profit, wage-labour and competing markets, all of which, as we have seen, gradually changed the material landscape, including its institutions. Competing markets ended the



local processing of goods, and the rush for commodities categorised former craftsmen as wage-labourers or slaves. Central events pushed this disastrous development further for the indigenous peoples: the commercialisation of cattle and faunal furs and an agrarian reform in 1953.

In the 1940s, commercial ranching was recommended by an American commission (Jones 1997; Webber 2017), and by the end of the decade, fresh beef was flown out of Beni in surplus airplanes from World War II. The national government considered the 'semi-wild' cattle theirs to administer and issued letters of credit on large cattle herds (Jones 1990). The older generation of Movima and Mojeño remembers this well, especially the goods that came flying in. Initially, many of them took part in the business. Meanwhile, a new political party, Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR), came into power in 1952. They initiated a period of nationalist reform. A large agrarian reform gave the highlanders land (back), but parcelled and privatized into small plots, *minifundios*; the indigenous landholders were designated campesinos and organised in unions. The MNR government recognised the indivisible indigenous land but did not prioritise this form of tenure. Agricultural properties depended on local circumstances; thus, in the lowland, cattle farms could extend to 50,000 ha (Assies 2006), *latifundios*. In Beni, land titling took off as the value of beef rose, especially after 1965. The land rush ended in 1979, when the 'ranching frontier had closed' (Jones 1990: 3). Cattle were everywhere, but the indigenous peoples had lost access to their long-accustomed beef and dairy products. Importantly, they had lost the plains with the higher ground for their gardens; now cattle occupied these during flooding (Jones 1997).

The concepts of commodification and privatisation thus escalated with the rise in beef-price and easy transport, and the agrarian reform privatised all of the grazing

plains. The indigenous peoples lost that race and were left landless. Increasingly impoverished, they withdrew to the forests and became invisible but continued their system of collective property and *Cabildo* government. Without beef they relied on bush-meat. The only way left for them to pursue the goods they were used to was to hunt for the fur-traders. They got caught in a debt-grip; moreover, in the 1980s, logging companies put additional pressure on their last strongholds. Then they started to organise: this is where the incredible story of mobilisation begins (Contreras 1990; Ströbele-Gregor 1994), initiating a new epoch for the lowland peoples.

**Sum-up: The material-conceptual transformation cycle**

While the first transformation established a feasible and acceptable substitute for the precolonial lifestyle with the mission-culture amalgam, the new vision of the relationship between land-use and tenure in the second transformation prevented the recovery of the indigenous peoples. Mercantilism replaced trade and craftsmanship; bureaucracy marginalised indigenous leadership in the urban hubs that were simultaneously depopulated by labour extraction to commodify natural goods, or by escape and death. Later, because of the commercialisation of beef and the agrarian reform, immigrant ranchers occupied the pampa and took over the cattle. The agricultural land increasingly became pasture; the cattle now belonged to others and slept and fed on the high ground most suited for cultivation (**Figure 4**). The categorisation of the savannah as grazing land obscured the indigenous labour that had created those higher grounds and fertile patches of agricultural land that could have provided the legal bases to avoid dispossession. Instead, the savannah peoples withdrew to the forests, thus positively stimulating conceptions of the landscape as unexploited,



**Figure 4:** Cattle occupying raised land during flooding in 2014. Photo by David Mercado/Reuters.



which resulted in an accelerating material transformation into a depopulated landscape of cattle ranches.

### Retreat and Mobilisation

The retreat to the forest was never described as such by those I talked to. What brought them here was the search for Loma Santa (Riester 1976; Lehm 1999), the Sacred Mound. Doña M (TIM1) was a child then:

I was born near San Ignacio, but when I was nine we moved to Monte Grande. It was in the time of 'Loma Santa'. When the news about Loma Santa came, the families started to leave. The news told about a clean, beautiful virgin land, with animals – cattle – and a church. God had blessed the animals. We left everything, and started to walk. We settled here, built Cabildo, school, everything. This was in 1987. It wasn't Loma Santa, but we settled because they hadn't found it, and they were tired of walking. They never found Loma Santa but they settled there, in the Chimáne forest.

The description of Loma Santa is quite persistent. Not all agreed they should have just given up everything. Doña P (TIPNIS) was loudly annoyed about how her family had 'just left the cattle' and some good, fertile higher ground near San Lorenzo at the pampa. She did not, however, question Loma Santa; she knew about a pilot who once landed there, and her son almost reached it while hunting up-river. Another informant was more pragmatic about the paradisiacal nature of the mound: 'This is our Loma Santa. TIPNIS is our Loma Santa'. He thereby expressed what many fellow residents and lowland peoples feel they are struggling for these years. Lehm (1999) suggests the Loma Santa migration was an act of re-colonisation.

Both Mojeños and Movimas narrated how they got collective titles to the land. They had different reasons for mobilising in the three territories I visited, but they were all related to outside pressure. The penetration of small-scale coca farmers in the south of the TIPNIS was one incident that provoked protests from the peoples living here. Debt-servitude was another, as Don M (Trinidad) related:

When I came back in 1981, my parents had walked away. I found them in Puerto [TIPNIS] and settled there. The community members almost acted and talked like slaves. They were indebted from the commercial furs trade, they didn't know how much they owed, and they didn't understand the accounting or the value of a pelt. A block of salt costed 1 boliviano; they bought it for a load of maize or a pelt.

They pooled their labour on the initiative of Don M, and with a joint employment contract to clear some forest, 50 men and women were able to free the community of its debts in a week. He later became a significant mobiliser in the lowland peoples' movement, and the community has been, and still is, known as a protagonist in the efforts to maintain and extend the rights acquired.

Farther north, the Movima struggled with powerful cattle farmers to access resources at all. Don J told:

I saw the lives of the humble indigenous brothers, they worked unpaid; the women only earned their food. The suffering was from injustice, everything was private and the cattle ranchers prohibited us, the humble people, to go to the forest and cut wood for a canoe, and if we did, we had to work one or two days.

In the Chimáne forest, mobilisation was provoked by intruding timber companies. Doña M recalled: 'Same year [1988] entered the timber company. This is what started the mobilisation. Since 1986 companies took out resources and didn't even consider the communities that were there.' The penetration of the companies into the Chimáne forest was the specific occasion for marching in 1990, but mobilisation had begun simultaneously elsewhere in Beni for a range of different reasons. They gave up searching for Loma Santa; the land was no longer free and endless. What they primarily sought was recognition, rather than representation; they marched, not to overthrow, but to be counted in (**Figure 5**).

They succeeded beyond expectation. The timing was perfect. The granting of areas for nature conservation to indigenous peoples in the 1990s was not uncommon, often based on the assertion (myth) that native peoples' views of nature and ways of using natural resources were consistent with Western conservationist principles (Conklin and Graham 1995). In Bolivia, the expansion of the protected area service occurred simultaneously with growing demands of recognition of indigenous peoples' rights, and co-management arrangements were made between the National Service of Protected Areas (SERNAP), and the indigenous peoples in overlapping areas (SERNAP 2005; Mason et al. 2010); Anthias and Radcliffe (2015) argue that such arrangements were an 'ethno-environmental fix', not explicitly governed by neoliberal policy, but nonetheless formed in relation to the wider, neoliberal project prevailing in the decade, and actively promoted by World Bank, as a safeguard to protect vulnerable populations and valuable nature from the destructive effects of the market. An attempt, probably, to ensure the institution's legitimacy at a time when the privatisation of hydrocarbons and mining industries was promoted by the World Bank itself in numerous developing countries.

When withdrawing to the forests between the 1870s and 1980s, the Mojeño and the Movima found a degree of autonomy from the dominant culture(s). It was a retreat, not isolation; they joined the groups that never entered the Reductions, and they kept contact with relatives elsewhere and with markets to some degree, while preserving autonomy, language and custom (see also Van Valen 2013). They own land now, forest, and they feel strongly connected to this land, the Loma Santa, which they searched for and (almost) found here. By emphasising their deep connection with the land and their will to protect it from interventions, they help



**Figure 5:** The 1990 march to La Paz 'For Territory and Dignity' that initiated the process towards indigenous territories and other collective rights (Source: Global research 2011, <http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/b540.jpg>).

obscure the history of oppression and relocation, and feed the myth of the original forest dwellers and indigenous peoples as nature preservationists.

### Re-narrating Landscapes and Indigenous Peoples in Moxos

By retelling and reconstructing the history of the peoples of Moxos, the myths in colonial and postcolonial development were falsified. The analysis treated landscape transformations as simultaneously material and conceptual, fulfilling the criteria that Sluyter (1999: 395) set for falsifying myths.

First, westernisation did not *materially* transform a precolonial, pristine landscape into a productive landscape. Neither the Jesuit nor the commercial cattle farmers did that. Diseases killed entire populations of indigenous peoples, and the intensively cultivated precolonial land was invaded by forest and water. Thereafter, a Jesuit–Indigenous amalgam society materially transformed the landscape. Later, the abandoned mission-land was privatised and 'put to work' (Moore 2017) with the cattle industry, while in fact the land did not live up to its potential to sustain a much larger local population, as it had done before the arrival of the Europeans, as well as in the mission-landscape era.

Secondly, westernisation has *conceptually* transformed a non-pristine precolonial landscape into a pristine precolonial landscape. Twice: first when the Jesuit fathers, around 1650, discovered the naked people in the impassable environment, and again when mission fields, groves and cattle were deemed idle after commodity rushes around 1900 had depopulated the Moxos plains again.

Finally, the material-conceptual transformations of the Moxos landscape have themselves obscured the transformations, through positive feedback processes.

These include re-categorisation of former agricultural land as wasteland. Depopulation, old-field succession or forest invasion along with free-roaming cattle visually validated a myth of pristine or unused land. Policies to privatise and tax land prevented the recovery of the indigenous population. They withdrew to the forests, further validating the myth visually, and contributing to the material transformation into the divided landscape of today, with vast, depopulated plains, and forests inhabited by former savannah peoples like the Mojeño and the Movima.

That the economic and demographic development in Moxos has been inseparable from the myths of the idle and the premodern is comprehensible, but how can we understand the role of 'western' myths in relation to conservation? By replacing 'myth' with 'deep-seated assumption', Raymond Pierotti (2016) was able to investigate the emergence of 'equilibrium thinking', which has dominated ecological research and work for more than a century. Apart from tracing the first assumed existence of a balanced nature without any quantitative underpinning, he found that terms in ecology disciplines derived directly from economic models, for example, 'producers and consumers', and the very idea of competitive relationships. These metaphors travel with environmental NGOs and intergovernmental institutions; they are, however, not useful, he says, if not in fact directly misleading. A more sophisticated and complex understanding of how environments and organisms interact is emerging as a field within modern ecological and evolutionary thinking, focusing instead on interaction and cooperative relationships. The myth of a natural state of balance combined with the reluctance to think of human organisations as part of nature (Moore 2017) obscures the relationships between land and people and the fact that man is always involved with landscape management; instead it promotes the idea of separating nature from man in nature conservation. Another myth deriving

from equilibrium thinking, and related to the idea of a premodern, stable past, is the assumption of indigenous peoples living in harmony with nature, which obscures the struggle of everyday livelihood and the fact that they have been, as stated by Pierotti, 'attuned to thinking about variability rather than stability in the environment' (2016: 9).

The role of indigenous peoples as nature preservationists was first assumed during the previously mentioned allocation of land to native groups in the 1990s, but it was not merely imposed on them from outside. In Beni the indigenous peoples had already proactively appropriated the space of the protected areas (Ávila 2009). A strong interest in maintaining control over their land, the asset to their development aspirations, and to keep settlers out, stimulated cooperation with the SERNAP, who in turn would have faced considerable difficulties in protecting parks from the onrushing agricultural and migrant frontiers without indigenous groups leading those efforts (Mason et al. 2010). Through decades trust was built between the protected areas' co-managing parties, enabling both park-control and gradually also the expansion of local economic benefits of the areas. An attempt in 2006 to transfer greater control with parks to the military, fire SERNAP-managers and allow settlements, resulted in the indigenous communities' occupation of SERNAP-offices, demanding the conservation of the areas and recognition of their role as co-managers. They succeeded and even had an indigenous leader named the new SERNAP-director (ibid: 429).

Today, the SERNAP has been centralised and the director replaced by a MAS-member, according to the former President of Subcentral TIPNIS. This had caused major distrust and uncertainty, not only in the leadership but generally in the TIPNIS-communities, where SERNAP was no longer present in the period of my studies. Meanwhile, the interpretation of what activities are rendered legal has narrowed substantially (Anthias and Radcliffe 2015) to put pressure on the inhabitants to give up the protected status of the park and allow for 'development'. In the development vision of the government, however, the lowland peoples see no role for themselves to play; instead they expressed fears relating to migrant farmers and state extractivism, and frustration that they have been divided, excluded and co-opted by the government. They are aware of the dominating discourses but know they cannot be entirely ignored. Indigenous peoples own land collectively now, and they work within the constitutional frame to obtain autonomy (Cameron 2013). They insist on being part of the plurinational state, but on their own conditions, and they demand democratic inclusion in regional development by invoking rights to prior consultations (Schilling-Vacaflor 2017). In their pursuit of autonomy and self-determination, they point to a local, collective model of resource governance and landscape management (e.g. Díez Astete 2011) that with its corporate approach to property constitutes an alternative to the government's envisioned development. However, the lowland peoples' own voices were largely absent during the years of my study, silenced by the profound dissolution of indigenous organisations. This is part of the

'invisibilisation' they suffer currently; it is the narratives of other sectors that dominate public spaces.

The roles of lowland peoples collectives have become more reactive, though, and their alternative management model obscured by the contemporary conceptual landscape transformation of the Beni. From being part of the indigenous state-building project, they find themselves excluded, internally divided, but mostly in opposition to the government. Initial steps towards economic benefits from the protected areas stopped with the rupture between the MAS-government and the indigenous organisations and the subsequent centralisation of park management. This rupture contributed to the internal division that I experienced in the TIPNIS, where some blame the indigenous leaders for the economic and political situation while others blame the government. Processing and trading goods were always central, but now there is no outlet. The withdrawal to the forests secured the property and governance systems of the Mojeño and the Movima, but they lost their economic role. Today, their land is coveted, while they have become redundant, but play the role of 'watchdogs' regarding activities in protected areas, and raise awareness of livelihood conditions in lowland territories.

Maybe the only obvious stage left at the moment is the 'nature preservation' one. This will, at least initially, imply a continued close relationship with environmental NGOs and intergovernmental institutions, with the diverse approaches and requirements such cooperation induces. Assuming the role of preservationists is perhaps not far-fetched (Chhatre and Agrawal 2009; Mason et al. 2010; Porter-Bolland et al. 2012). The forest retreats still exist as forests, and when deforestation occurs, it is primarily due to external parties: smallholders, agribusinesses, infrastructure or expanding cattle farmers (Müller et al. 2012). Common property regulation in the territories is one explanation; their production system, where the dichotomy forest/farmland does not really apply, is another. Nature perception is moreover involved. I found relations to nonhuman societies when interviewees explained how an animal has its bird, whose presence will tell the hunter that prey is around, or how creatures of the forest can transform and act in some parallel time, a challenge when watching over the crops all night without seeing intruders, but still finding the field raided in the morning. Their universe seems socialised, without the concept of nature as external to the social reality. Nondualist worldviews like this have been found among Arawak-speaking (Descola 2013; Hvalkof 2006) and other Amazonian peoples (Descola 2013), as well as among Amerindians on both continents (Pierotti 2016).

Hvalkof (2006) helps us understand the implication of this. The smallholder colonists, for instance, generally adhere to the conventional modernist progress ideology, and see themselves as agents of civilisation placed at the margin of society. They operate within the nature–society dichotomy space. Placed at the periphery of civilisation, their manifest challenge and destiny is subduing and civilising nature. Opposite to them, the lowland collectives find themselves at the centre, surrounded by a sphere of social relations. Within this sphere are other



ethnic groups, colonists, whites, plants, and animals, each group with its own logic and sphere of social relations. They keep relating to groups within their relevant world, which indeed can be wide, and continue to add layers to their identity. Seeking 'relations of relevance' among climate change mitigators and biodiversity protectors seems obvious, except that those organisations at the moment face similar repression and hostile discourse from the MAS-government (Achtenberg 2015; Ellerbeck 2015; Gustafson 2013).

In search of more advanced 'management of change' (Renes 2015: 2), should we look to indigenous practices instead? Or even myths? Pierotti (2016) suggests so, because contemporary ecological-developmental biology shares important thematic elements with defining myths of indigenous thinking, such as connectedness and relatedness. Indigenous metaphors originate from a tradition that derives knowledge from observation of relationships, and they can thus be understood as descriptions of important ecological relationships that may have helped them navigate changes effectively, he says. The mission period literally forms the basis of the Loma Santa myth. The search for Loma Santa describes the mission Indians' loss and adds a strong spiritual and moral layer to their struggle of defending the territories today. It describes in detail a landscape of abundance that they will strive to maintain and, importantly, a church, thus pointing to an institution, the *Cabildo Indigenal* that still holds profound legitimacy among both Movima and Mojeños. While I note that listening carefully to the narratives about Loma Santa could have provided a considerable shortcut in my own research regarding institutions, I will not dig further into Moxos myths or human–nonhuman relations, but will confine myself to pointing out a possible direction for those who aim to suggest relations to nature opposing the dichotomies. After all, capitalism and modernity separated nature from people; we need a different logic to bring them together again.

The historical review revealed rather stable continuities regarding social organisation. Although both Mojeño and Movima hold the Jesuit-cabildo as their model organisation, the mission-amalgam suggests the indigenous peoples contributed with some of their existing norms and mechanisms. While existence and livelihoods have been challenged and changing, the continuity of institutions has proved to manage change. The study of the complex blend of legalities, norms and mechanisms that form the Mojeño and Movima institutions remain understudied, but they may represent a great potential as an ingredient in a future alternative development in Moxos.

## Conclusion

Throughout the Moxos history, economic development was intertwined with the myths of the pristine and the premodern. Re-narrations legitimised and naturalised the appropriation of land and the exploitation of nature; whether less-valued human natures, land, or extractable natural resources. Ever since the first slave raids and the later commodity rushes, the purpose was to put nature to work in order to generate surplus for whoever was able to make, or take advantage of, new legal set-ups and put

the power behind to implement them. Simultaneously, the myths obscured existing property and production patterns. Traces of local peoples' plight and work on the landscape during pre-colonial and mission period were erased.

With the contemporary developmentalist agenda, we can sense how lowlanders and their domesticated landscapes can be erased again. There are various signs of imminent new material landscape transformations: The government's grand economic lowland project, the continued downhill migration, the approaching soy fields, the limiting of rights, the amendment of laws, and the restrictions on civil society and foreign NGOs. A simultaneous degrading discourse on lowland peoples *conceptually* transforms recognised ethnic groups into 'a few families', protected areas into 'neo-colonialized parks', and managed forested landscapes into 'unproductive land'. The patronising attitude of the government, followed by manifest legislation impairing the rights of the lowland indigenous collectives, disclose a perspective – the contestation of their rights vis-à-vis the interest of 'all Bolivians' – that is facilitated by the erasure of the process that led the lowland peoples to the territories, and the following struggle to obtain collective titling. The complex systems of tenure, production, distribution, and governance applied by lowland peoples, covering the Department like an invisible web and supporting a large population, become obscured. Like earlier, the measure that determines land use is not productive capacity, but to what extent the production can enter the dominant economy. The highland migrants, the large-scale agribusinesses, and the extractive industry offer tangible contributions to the Andean-Amazonian Capitalist project of the government. Most likely, the landscape will transform again.

The Movima and the Mojeño proactively managed change, making a virtue of necessity when material and conceptual transformations erased their former societies. They maintained advantageous locations and positions by accepting the Jesuit Reductions. They appropriated the space of the protected areas when they had lost their land and animals at the pampa, with the tangible expression in the creation of territories. They linked up with environmental and rights-based movements while keeping decisions on how to use the land within their own structures. They still make attractive partners for a broad range of NGOs and do need supporters to maintain their Loma Santa and make visible their corporate development alternative. If the lowland peoples fail to justify their existence as self-determining entities, the contemporary divided landscape may prove to be a parenthesis, to the utter detriment of the lowland indigenous peoples.

With this paper I have pointed to the importance of investigating history with all its complexity when negotiating development, paying particular attention to the dangers of myth. Essentialised characterisations of indigenous peoples and their interests risk reducing the available space for them to manoeuvre politically and economically – and for us to understand the nuanced relationships among history, landscapes, its peoples, and the wider world.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> TCO: Tierra Comunitaria de Origen, most often translated as Native Community Land.
- <sup>2</sup> Territorio Indígena Multiétnico 1.
- <sup>3</sup> Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro-Sécure.
- <sup>4</sup> The latest was in 2014, when both Movima and TIPNIS communities were flooded for months.
- <sup>5</sup> These are forests that form corridors along rivers or wetlands and project into otherwise sparsely wooded landscapes.
- <sup>6</sup> Bachelor thesis (1997) on Kichwa swidden-fallow system based on 11 months of fieldwork in the Ecuadorian Amazon.
- <sup>7</sup> The need for political education was expressed by two observers of the consultation in TIPNIS about the status of the territory and a proposed highway through it. They work in the SIFDE (Intercultural Service for Democratic Strengthening under the Plurinational Electoral Organ). The assertion about the backward people in need of development was expressed by a consultant contracted by the Ministries of Public Works, Services & Housing, and Natural Environment and Water to conduct the TIPNIS-consultation. The observers also said that 'a political position to promote acceptance of the road was prevailing' (Christoffersen 2014).
- <sup>8</sup> The statements derive from development management plans, cooperation agreements, evaluations, my previous experience as consultant, and to a lesser extent from working within an NGO and its partner-organisation in Bolivia.
- <sup>9</sup> The Arawak is a main linguistic group, to which cluster the Mojeño belong. That the Arawak were the landscape-builders has been commonly agreed, but findings in the Movima area suggest that their role perhaps has been overemphasized and that the region has a much more multi-ethnic history (Walker 2008).
- <sup>10</sup> For a detailed account of lowland indigenous migration patterns and resistance during the rubber boom, see Frederic Vallvé 2010, Gary Van Valen 2013, and Anna Guiteras Mombiola 2010.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mattias Borg Rasmussen, Jens Friis Lund and Christian Pilegaard Hansen for their helpful comments and suggestions on this paper. Additionally, I am thankful to the three peer-reviewers whose detailed comments helped me elaborate a much better version of the initial manuscript.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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**How to cite this article:** Christoffersen, L. (2018). Amazonian Erasures: Landscape and Myth-making in Lowland Bolivia. *Rural Landscapes: Society, Environment, History*, 5(1): 3, 1–19, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/rl.43>

**Submitted:** 26 July 2017    **Accepted:** 21 March 2018    **Published:** 03 May 2018

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*Rural Landscapes: Society, Environment, History* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Stockholm University Press.

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