

## **Final report:**

### **From the Rubber Boom to Neoliberalism: debt systems and Kukama narratives in the Peruvian Amazon (Preliminary research)**

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The preliminary research for my doctoral proposal took place in one single trip to Peru between June 13th and July 27<sup>th</sup> (45 days total). In that period of time, I visited different communities placed in the town of Nauta (province of Loreto) and other communities located along the Marañón River. The research entailed participant observation and conversations with indigenous and non-indigenous inhabitants of Nauta as well as 11 interviews with people involved in rubber extraction in the past and a direct experience with debt-peonage and other forms of debt, such as state credits. Apart from the investigative activities, the trip also entailed my participation in the XI Sesquiannual Conference of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America held in Lima, Peru.

The trip started in Lima on June 13<sup>th</sup>, where I had a meeting with an archaeologist from the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú in order to have access to campus and meet my local advisor Dr. Oscar Espinosa. At PUCP campus I consulted the library data base and did a bibliographic search on the Kukama people. Through PUCP library I discovered sources difficult to find in the U.S. such as thesis written by PUCP anthropology students. Additionally, in Lima I visited the National Historical Archives in order to start collecting the mandatory official documentation to have access to the documents from the Rubber times. Documentation required for historical archives access and also establishing a formal affiliation with PUCP is in the process of completion.



On June 17<sup>th</sup> I arrived in the city of Iquitos, where I took photographs and registered all the visible signs of the rubber era, such as restaurants' names, street signs, and mural paintings. In Iquitos I started to collect information about a case of credit scamming that affected part of the peasant population few years ago. After arriving in the town of Nauta on June 19<sup>th</sup>, contact was established the same day with Leonardo Tello, the Director of the indigenous radio station "Radio Ucamarca". Tello agreed my petition of joining the radio crew in his fieldwork activities during my stay in town. I also visited two communities outside Nauta along the Marañón River (Santa Cruz y Santo Prado). The fieldwork consisted in a collection of data about different topics connected with my dissertation: the activities of the radio, Kukama identity, memories of the rubber economy and debt-peonage, Kukama narratives, local construction of the past, and the church and movement founded by Francisco Da Cruz.



## **Radio**

First contact with the Kukama was made in Radio Ucamarca in Nauta. In our first meeting we agreed with me joining them for their research in the field. This was the strategy I chose to get to know people and potential collaborators. Radio Ucamarca is an activist radio. One of their main concerns right now is the issue of the pollution due to oil spills in the rivers by Oil companies. Also, one of the goals of radio Ucamarca is to spread the history of the rubber violence in the area. While I was in Nauta I joined the radio crew to collect testimonies and make interviews about the impact of the pollution on the environment, the economic practices, and cultural traditions. I could observe how the radio crew worked and collected data. Also I got valuable information from their interviews. This gave me the opportunity to establish rapport among the people from the radio. I also had meetings with the radio crew and other collaborators in order to discuss the best way to support the radio and their projects. The impact of the music videos produced in Radio Ucamarca was also explored. According to members of the radio, after the

popularity of one of the music videos, some people started to acknowledge their Kukama identity in spite of denying it in the past.



### **Kukama Identity**

I could register information about the issue of the Kukama identity. According to my collaborators of the radio, in Nauta there is a strong sentiment of rejection of their ethnic heritage. The members of the radio crew consider themselves Kukama, but some people questions this assertion because they do not speak the language and live like mestizos. In Nauta, I also could see the schools were the elders teach the Kukama language to the Children (the Ikuari schools).

### **Rubber memories and debt peonage**

Interviews were held with the radio crew's oldest relatives and friends who had experience with the rubber economy (Siringa) during the 1960s and 1970s. The focus of the interview was the involvement with debt-peonage. Significant data was collected about individual experiences in the *habilitación* system and their relationship with bosses. Some of the Kukamas still remember the amount of their debts and the amount of money they had to repay. Through they interviews I could collect names of bosses, amounts of money used for the debt-peonage mechanism, and working methods in the forest. Information was also collected about the discourses and local notions on debt not just with bosses but also with state institutions such as the Agrarian Bank of Peru, and current money lenders in neoliberal times.

### **Kukama narratives**

From the interviews I could get information about the main narratives and local cosmologies in Nauta. In most interviews there are numerous references to cosmological animals, like the black

snake, or demons of the forest in different types of narratives. For example, I could document stories about the people who live in subaquatic cities called the Yacuruna or Karuara.



Furthermore, I documented information about the figure of the “Mothers”, which are non-human subjects with agency and power over humans and nature. For example, the fishermen explained that they must request permission to the mothers of the lakes if they want to be able to fish. The mothers are also entities that can be dangerous for the fishermen. Substances such as petroleum or diseases have mothers too.

Other stories collected about the spiritual world included the Maisangara (an evil spirit associated with white-mestizo power), the pink dolphins (very powerful spirits responsible for stealing and sexually abusing women), the black jaguar (a predatory figure associated with the Rubber violence), and the *Shapshicu* (described in the area as a monkey, gobbling, or a demon of the forest with a big foot and a small foot).

Finally, I could interview people that claim being attacked by the “*pelacaras*” (face peelers), which are described as cosmological “gringos” (a white person) with red faces that steal the organs of indigenous and peasants in the area. When they attack their victims, people can see a really bright light in the dark. Some collaborators say that the *pelacaras* are gringos that are in debt-peonage relations with more powerful gringos.

### **Local construction of the past**

Closely related with the local narratives, I could also obtain information about people’s construction of the past and cultural periodizations of history. It is very common to hear Nauta people talking about the current times as marked by scarcity and the recent past as a state of abundance, where peasants had the support of the state. Of particular importance were the memories associated with the Agrarian Bank, and their conceptualization of those times. There

were also references to the role of Alberto Fujimori in erasing the Agrarian Bank and their memories for the beginnings of neoliberal times in the Amazon.

### **Brethren of the Cross**

Finally, an interview was made with one member of the Brethren of the Cross, the church founded by the Brazilian priest Francisco Da Cruz that led to a millenarian movement in the 1970s. I went to their current church in Nauta and saw one of their masses. Through contact with them I could collect data about personal experiences of people joining the brethren of the cross.

The final phase of the trip took place in Lima at the XI Sesquiannual Conference of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America, and with a previous workshop in the town of Atalaya. I was able to attend these events organized by SALSA, to present a paper and exchange ideas about my project with anthropologists from different academic contexts.