

THE SHUAR AND LARGE-SCALE MINING IN ZAMORA-CHINCHIPE, ECUADOR: A STUDY IN ETHNOPOLITICS AND THE STRUGGLE OVER NATURAL RESOURCES

Consuelo Fernández-Salvador

Abstract

This thesis studies the ways in which the Shuar people confront a large-scale mining project in Zamora Chinchipe, the southernmost province in the Amazon region of Ecuador. The main focus of this work centers on the ways in which the Shuar Federation and its leaders, construct and play out identity discourses and political practices regarding the development of Project Mirador (an open-air copper mine) at different levels of the organization's hierarchy. I also examine if the ethno-politics of the Shuar Federation have been successful in achieving the objectives of their struggles related to mining extraction. This analysis is framed in a wider trans-local political and economic context, understanding that the responses from local communities are in part the result of interactions with a variety of actors, including the state (through different institutions like *Ecuador Estratégico*, a governmental institution which directs local development), the mining company, mestizo populations, and others.

In the thesis, I argue that the practice of ethno-politics is complex and at times contradictory, and that the definition of political strategies based on identity discourses is flexible and, at times, even fragmented. The construction of indigeneity, defined as the process of articulating a group's identity discourse, and the definition of a position vis-à-vis large-scale mining does not necessarily apply to the Shuar as a collectivity, which results in individualized and even isolated efforts. However, rather than applying notions of efficiency and efficacy, this thesis explores a variety of internal and external elements that could play a role in shaping those discourses. After offering a detailed description of the structure, composition, and organization of the Shuar Federation and communities in terms of land and subsistence practices, I analyze various discourses and practices which are interconnected as a part of historical territorial dynamics; I primarily focus on 1.) The re-configuration of the territory and the local communities' changing relationship with it, 2.) The current and evolving composition of the Shuar communities, and 3.) The notions of modernity and ancestrality. Overall, this thesis aims to show that, while from a Western mestizo perspective Shuar ethno-politics might seem inefficient and even lack coherence, forms of des-centralization in discourses and practices can also be used as strategies in a process of re-signification and adaptation to the larger mestizo society and as a part of continuous colonization. In this context, Shuar identities are evidently not the result of a historical continuity but are rather constantly being reshaped in specific political, social, and economic conjunctures.