

# THE CONTRADICTORY LANGUAGES OF FISHING AND GOLD PANNING IN THE PERUVIAN AMAZON

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines multiple and changing development discourses and communicative practices of the Arakmbut, a fishing, hunting and gold panning people in the Southeast Peruvian Amazon. It does this through an investigation of their self-development or ‘life project’ as it has unfolded over a period of thirty years in co-existence and contestation with multiple and changing development practices. Taking three moments of change or ‘scenarios’ focused on the river Pukiri, a major source of fish and mineral resources, the paper investigates the discourses and practices of resource exploitation, indigenous rights and biodiversity conservation and the languages, literacies and oracies embedded in them. It asks what these development discourses and their associated communicative practices mean for the Arakmbut and their fishing in terms of their vision and strategies for defining and managing their future.

## **Introduction**

Over a period of thirty years the indigenous Arakmbut fishing, hunting and horticultural community of San Jose have experienced turmoil and devastation in their social and physical environment through different development agendas. This article traces the changing lives of the Arakmbut people and investigates what this has meant in terms of changing communicative practices -- oral and literate and in the indigenous language, Harakmbut, and the official national language Spanish. It illustrates the nature of change through three scenarios, three moments in the 'life project' of the Arakmbut people. It examines these scenarios and asks what they mean in terms of different 'languages of development' and consequent communicative and discursive repertoires needed by the Arakmbut to be able to manage their interactions and determine their futures according to their values and priorities. The scenarios are set around the river Pukiri, an important source of fishing for the Arakmbut from the community of San Jose, and trace changes in the river and its aquatic and mineral resources as a result of different development practices.

The Arakmbut are the largest of the seven Harakmbut-speaking peoples of the region of Madre de Dios who total some 2,000 people. Linguistic research indicates that Harakmbut, an oral language, is unrelated to neighbouring indigenous languages (Helberg 1996) and each of the Harakmbut peoples speaks a distinct dialect (Pozzi-Escot 1998). The Arakmbut community of San Jose number some 200 people who live by rivers Pukiri and Karene, engaged in fishing, hunting, small-scale agriculture and artisanal gold mining. Their first sustained contact with representatives of Peruvian

national society and with the Spanish language was in the 1950s through efforts of Dominican missionaries to gather them into the mission of Shintuya. However, they fled the mission in the late 1960s and established the community of San Jose on their ancestral lands on the banks of the River Karene where they had intermittent contact with settlers (*colonos*) scattered along the riverbanks (Aikman 1999).

The river Pukiri is used here as a physical and symbolic site for the investigation of Arakmbut ways of knowing and relating to their territory and its resources. This allows for an exploration of different aspects of indigenous agency and the interaction between local, national and global dimensions of their lives. Drawing on the work of Villegas et al. (2008) the article investigates the Pukiri as a ‘site of struggle’ -- between contradictory languages and practices of development; a ‘site of strength’ -- where Arakmbut have fought against what they perceive as destructive development practices; and a ‘site of survivance’. The term survivance, these authors note, is not the same as survival but evokes ‘relationships between the past, present and future through themes of remembrance, regeneration and envisioning’ (2008:209).

The Pukiri river scenarios also reveal a site where ‘local modernities’, that is a plurality or heterogeneity of modernities or ‘developments’ exist together in time and space, and in dynamic interaction with each other over time (Arce and Long 2000). These different developments intersect in the shared space of the Pukiri River through interactions between the Arakmbut and a diversity of actors, such as settlers and migrant labourers (*colonos*), traders, local and national government officials, biodiversity conservationists, multinational companies, and international and national NGOs. Different developments have distinct localised power configurations, knowledge

interfaces, and communicative practices which are examined here in terms of their 'languages of development' (Arce and Long 2000; Arce 2000).

Over the last thirty years the Arakmbut have been selecting, blending and juxtaposing elements of the different developments with which they interact according to how meaningful and purposeful they find them, or aspects of them. This has included accommodating and utilising different oral genres and different literacies in both Harakmbut and Spanish languages as they have engaged in a struggle for decision making control over their lives and their resources. The Arakmbut have no word for development in their language, but when asked what a man and woman wants out of life for themselves and their children, people express this in terms of the health of the community and opportunities for sustaining or recuperating the quality of their lives (Gray 1997).

The term 'life projects' is used by Blaser to distinguish visions of the world and the future, akin to those of the Arakmbut, which are distinct from those 'embodied by projects promoted by state and markets' (Blaser 2004:26). He explains that life projects diverge from 'development' in their attention to the uniqueness of people's experiences of place and self and their rejection of visions that claim to be universal'. Barras, an indigenous Yshiro leader in Paraguay, expresses his people's life project as being 'about the possibility of their defining the direction they want to take in life, on the basis of their awareness and knowledge of their own place in the world' (cited in Blaser 2004:30). For the Arakmbut a life project is based on stability, sufficiency and a relationship with the environment which encapsulates not only economic factors but all dimensions of indigenous life – social, cultural and political (Gray 1996).

The 'life project', or 'self-development' of the Arakmbut community of San Jose, too, is about defining the direction they want to take in life, having control over access to their resources and having consent over what happens on their territories. But decades of violent change and destructive extraction of their resources in the name of different 'developments' have demonstrated to the Arakmbut the importance of expanding their linguistic and communicative resources repertoires and of using the languages and discourse of different developments strategically for the defence of their emergent life project. The oral context of their lives has undergone dramatic changes over the past thirty years and today they interact and intersect with agents in contexts dominated by the Spanish language. The kinds of literacy and oracy used, however, vary according to their interlocutors and their languages of development -- be they migrant or trader, local government official or government representative at the UN, international journalist or oil company chief executive. Oracies and literacies are situated practices, rooted in particular sets of social, cultural, economic and/or ideological relationships which give them meaning. The ability of the Arakmbut to use particular combinations of oral and literate Spanish for their 'life project' and self-development is contingent on understanding and managing the associated norms and accepted rules of behaviour. Power and control lie in understanding different discourses and using different communicative repertoires to achieve desired ends (Heath 1999; Street 1999). The following scenarios investigate the discourses, languages and communicative practices of different developments, the challenges these present for the Arakmbut and what they mean for the realisation of the Arakmbut's life project.

The first scenario illustrates a collective fishing excursion to the river Pukiri by the Arakmbut community of San Jose across whose ancestral land two major rivers flow: the Pukiri and the Karene. It describes a 'language of the spirits' which defines Arakmbut people's social, cultural, economic and spiritual relationships with the river and its resources. The second scenario describes the river Pukiri and the effects of a 'gold rush' and its accompanying language of exploitation which has transformed the river Pukiri into a toxic channel sustaining little or no fish and jeopardising the language of the spirits. As the third scenario illustrates, the Arakmbut have also developed a 'language of rights' through their regional organisation, FENAMAD, the Native Federation of the Madre de Dios and Tributaries (1). Linked by different routes to national, regional and global indigenous and non-indigenous organisations FENAMD has been mounting legal challenges against environmentally destructive state development policies, abusive practices of transnational companies and relentless violations by illegal settlers. Over the last two decades, FENAMAD and the Arakmbut have also been engaging with the 'language of biodiversity conservation' which has emerged centre stage in their communicative lexicon and political struggle for their survivance. For the Arakmbut this means their ability to self-determine the direction they want to take in life, a direction informed by their relationships with the past, the present and the future and a meaningfulness informed by their relationships with the river spirits through their fishing.

These scenarios draw on published and unpublished data from ethnographic research and informal interviews I have carried out at different periods over thirty years with the Arakmbut of San Jose (Aikman 1999, 2001) and work with anthropologist Andrew Gray (Gray 1986, 1996, 1997). The first scenario is drawn from field notes from

1980-1982, the second scenario from field notes over a period of field visits between 1985, 1987, 1999, and the third is an extract from Gray (1997) documenting a process which took place over several years in the 1990s.

### **Fishing and the Language of the Spirits**

According to Arakmbut mythology, the Pukiri riverbed was gouged by a giant ant and the water was deposited by a dragonfly during the period of creation when the giant tree, Wanamey, saved the Arakmbut from a fiery flood. After the cataclysmic flood had abated, the Arakmbut founded their settlements on the banks of the rivers (Gray 1997). The Arakmbut territory is a source of fish and animals on which their physical and spiritual wellbeing depends. The river provides an entry into the underwater spirit world, *serowe* and is inhabited by river spirits, *waweri*. The *waweri* control Arakmbut access to the river's resources, such as its fish, turtles and their eggs, and the Arakmbut communicate with the spirits through dreaming. Gray (1996) states that Arakmbut spirituality is crucial for understanding their attachment to their territory and their sense of responsibility over how the river should be treated. All phenomena are animated through soul-matter and the Pukiri River lives because it reflects the state of the *waweri* river spirits who reside in its depths.

#### *Scenario 1 Fishing in the River Pukiri*

*One day towards the end of the dry season of 1980 the wayorokeri (shaman or dreamer) informed the villagers that the waweri had revealed to him in a dream that there would be fish in the River Pukiri the next day. So at dawn the next morning the villagers made preparations to go fishing. I accompanied the women and we left for their gardens in the high forest lands to collect kumo (barbasco) a plant whose roots they use for fishing. With their machetes they dug out the long stringy roots and with their bags of roots returned to join their families and load up their canoes. The flotilla of canoes were punted down the Karene River and poled up into the Pukiri. There they set up an overnight camp on a sandy beach, and then continued several bends further up the wide river. On a pebbly beach the women emptied their bags and began pounding the roots between large stones. Once the milky sap began to ooze the roots were packed back into large string bags and they were ready for catching the fish. The women began to wade back and forth across the river trailing the bags behind so that the white milk oozed out and was gently carried downstream by the current, slowly de-oxygenating the water.*

*The men and boys watched from the high banks along the fast bends of the river with their bows and arrows at the ready. The milky poison slowly filtered downstream and took effect. At first small fish poked their mouths above the water in the shallows, gasping for air. This was a signal for the young girls and children to tiptoe through the shallows with kitchen knives or machetes poised to stun the fish. Two young brothers watched nervously from the bank, their faces spotted with red plant dye to protect them from the waweri. The archers waited for the larger fish to begin to surface and the women cautiously half swam and half waded through deep pools with machetes aloft.*



*By the late afternoon we had all waded or swum downstream as far as the camp and the last of the fish had been caught. The catch was divided among kin and clan members and the women boiled fish, manioc and plantains in huge cauldrons on open fires in the shade by the river. Extra fish was packed into hollow bamboos and smoked for taking back to the main village.*

Throughout, this fishing trip was informed by collective and individual relationships with the water spirits -- the *waweri* -- which control the supply of fish. The spirit world can be dangerous and so fishing activities are regulated according to age, sex and clan membership. Babies and young children are most vulnerable to sickness caused by the *waweri* and stayed close to their mothers while children or adults with a fever or cold were protected against the *waweri* by spots of red dye dotted on their faces and body and they kept a distance from the river altogether. Adult men, strong enough in both body and spirit to protect themselves against attack from *waweri*, fished with bow and arrows. And only senior women had the strength and knowledge necessary to sing to the barbasco (*kumo*) as it grew in their gardens so that it would be strong and juicy enough to tempt the *waweri* to yield up fish. After this expedition to the Pukiri, the Arakmbut would not fish again for several days because should they fish too much, the spirits from *serowe*, the underworld, might lure them down under the river and keep them there (Aikman1999).

Fishing for the Arakmbut is, then, about the application of knowledge to serve the practical end of food-production and to uphold harmonious relations with the *waweri* spirits which control the supply of fish. The visible world of the river and the forest, as well as the invisible world of the spirits, are a source of knowledge for the Arakmbut who are constantly re-elaborating their world-view and creating and re-creating their

knowledge and society on the basis of changing relationships between the visible and invisible worlds (Aikman 1999). Fishing in the Pukiri is an example of the 'vibrant relationships between the people, their ecosystems, and the other living beings and spirits that share their lands' (Battiste 2002, cited in Villegas et al. 2008). Relationships established through verbal, visual and non-verbal communication in the course of the fishing activity are renewed and given meaning through interactions which are spiritual, cultural, and social. Language is used in accordance with relationships between Arakmbut and between Arakmbut and spirits, relationships that vary and shift according to age, clan, gender and place. For the Arakmbut, using knowledge and language is premised on their 'uniquely woven threads of landscapes, memories, expectations and desires' (Blaser 2004:26).

#### *Learning the Language of the Spirits*

The relationship between fish and humans is created and re-created throughout an Arakmbut's person's lifetime. Knowledge of fish habitats, fish species, and where and when to find different types of fish in the rivers and waterways in and around the Pukiri comes with a familiarity with the Arakmbut land and riverscapes. A young Arakmbut develops their knowledge of their physical and spiritual environment through contact with it in meaningful and purposeful contexts and activities, such as fishing. The transmission of knowledge, aptitudes and attitudes come about through participation but in the company and under the guidance of a more experienced adult who ensures that a task is performed successfully. The responsibility for the final product or the learning rests as much with the community as with the individual learner (Lave and Wenger 1991)

and access to skills and knowledge are restricted by age. In this way, a young boy is not permitted to use a bow and arrow for fishing until he is old enough to be taught how to talk to the *waweri* in his dreams thus ensuring that he is able to negotiate with the *waweri* to give him the fish, rather than steal it without their permission. In these ways the learner's interaction with the spirit world keeps apace with their knowledge about it and ability to control it.

As their knowledge grows, young Arakmbut develop a language with which to communicate with the spirits: through direct experience (through fishing first in the company of their parents then with peers and then alone with the spirits), through dreaming when the dreamer's soul leaves the body and enters the invisible world free from the constraints of time and place; and through the elders who are repositories of mythological and practical knowledge. They develop their knowledge to construct their own curing chants and become oral performers with a repertoire of songs about fish, animals, birds and their habitats, their preferences and their characteristics which they can use to sing to the spirits of animals and fish and elicit their support for fishing (Aikman 1999).

Unlike texts and knowledge stored in books, access to which is, at least in theory, not restricted by age or gender, knowledge in Arakmbut society is specific to members of different age groups, genders and clans and to individuals. A mature man and woman learn different specialised vocabularies and registers over time through their fishing, gardening and hunting, and through their dreaming and contact with the spirit world. With these different vocabularies and registers they communicate with the spirits in their dreams and use their knowledge for curing and guiding the community (Aikman 1999).

A successful fishing expedition is dependent on the way that the Arakmbut use their different kinds of knowledge together for the benefit of the community drawing on relationships established in the past to ensure they have enough fish to eat for the present and the future.

The river Pukiri is, therefore, a place that embodies practices that shape identities (as described by Gupta and Ferguson 1997) and communicative practices. Arakmbut are linked to their land through their history and their communications with and between the souls of visible and invisible spirit worlds. As Gray states (1997:120) ‘the Arakmbut do not pick up the soil and talk about “mother earth” as do some indigenous peoples. Their territory belongs to the spirits of those ancestors who are dead and those Arakmbut who are living, and provides the potential life for those who are yet to come’.

### **The Language of Gold**

At the time of the fishing expedition in the river Pukiri the Arakmbut had also begun to engage in artisanal gold panning. They lived in clan groups in temporary camps on the banks of the Pukiri and returned from time to time to the village to tend their gardens and participate in collective hunts. Their gold work was not a separate activity but was carried out according to the rhythm of other community activities. A rise in the price of gold in 1978 made the hot, heavy work of extracting gold dust from the alluvial sand on the river’s beaches into an important seasonal source of income for the few settlers (*colonos*) who had been living in the area since the 1960s. These families of Quechua provenance

began to expand their influence, bringing increasingly larger numbers of Quechua labourers down from the Andes by lorry. Unlike the *colonos*, however, the Arakmbut, at that time, worked gold in clan groups and were not involved in contracting peon-labour like the settler families or 'patrons' (Gray 1997; Moore 2008).

Gold panning is a gruelling activity involving filling wheelbarrows with pebble and shale by the mosquito-infested riverside and emptying them into large metal sieves mounted on wooden washboards and lined with sacking. At the end of each day's work the silt trapped in the sacking was mixed with mercury, put into a panning board and the silt was washed off in the shallow of the river Pukiri leaving the mercury together with the fine grains of gold. The mercury was burned off in a crude crucible on an open fire leaving an impure blob of gold. This mining process is still used by the many migrant artisan miners (*pequenos mineros*) but in the Pukiri buckets were soon superseded by small motor pumps which allowed excavation deep into the river banks as well as alluvial deposits inland.

In 1974 the Peruvian government approved the 'Law of Native Communities' which resulted in a process of mapping of the lands of the Arakmbut of San Jose in 1979. In 1986 the Arakmbut of San Jose were finally granted title to an area of 23,604 hectares which included the lower Pukiri. Patrons in the area, some of who had been living there since the 1960s, had developed lucrative gold panning businesses with labour from impoverished Quechua peasants (*campesinos*). They were given the option of accepting the legal existence of the community and living within the area with permission of the Arakmbut, or leaving. Two patrons stayed insisting on their exclusive rights to their haciendas and the gold bearing beaches.

*Scenario 2: The Death of the River Pukiri*

*In 1985 I visited an indigenous gold camp on the boundary of Arakmbut titled lands on the Pukiri river. It was identified by a notice which said 'Welcome to the Territory of San Jose del Karene'. The Arakmbut had constructed small leaf-thatched huts and fished, hunted, and tended a few gardens where they grew manioc, and plantains. They also panned for gold. They had found some gold dust in the river sediment some ten metres from the main riverbed and had cleared the topsoil to reach it. With a water pump bought on a hire-purchase agreement from traders they pumped water from the river to wash the stones and pebbles they laboriously dug and carried in wheelbarrows to the washing board. But there had been friction with one of the patrons on the Pukiri who claimed the beach for himself and eventually they were forced off at gunpoint. The Arakmbut had remonstrated but finally withdrew in the face of greater force and the violent reputation of the patron, his sons and their peons.*

*Then in 1987 a young Arakmbut from my adoptive family, Jose Quique Kameno, was shot and killed by a miner after an argument outside a canteen. No-one was ever investigated or brought to justice for his murder. The river Pukiri with its burgeoning population of illegal gold miners, rumours of illegal graves and evidence of child labour was becoming a place the Arakmbut feared to venture. By my visit in 1991 the lower bends of the Pukiri River, an area coinciding with Arakmbut legal territory, were under the control of the sons of the violent patron. Two young Arakmbut and a gold worker were persuaded to make the trip up the Pukiri so that we could assess the numbers of colonists working and living there. On entering the red silt-laden waters of the river*

*Pukiri it was clear that gold work had extended on all sides. The high banks of the river had been excavated and the thick forest vegetation stripped away. On broad pebble beaches of the wide river bends young boys of no more than twelve or thirteen years of age were working in teams with motor pumps and hosepipes. The Arakmbut sign had been replaced by a notice that stated 'Welcome to the Rural Settlement of Bajo Pukiri' (Gray 1997).*

*This was now a mining settlement of some three dozen huts with torn plastic roofs and ragged plank walls, some of them two storeys tall, and interspersed by bars and shacks selling sacks of half rotting carrots and cabbages from the Andes and leathery slabs of salt fish from the northern Amazon. We stopped briefly to talk to the shopkeepers and some of the drunks hanging around the bar but the situation was tense. They said there were few fish in the river and occasionally fished its tributaries with nets or sticks of dynamite. They blamed the Arakmbut for having overfished the river with barbasco. We later heard that our lives would be at risk if we ventured up the river Pukiri asking questions again.*

*In 1999 I did make another trip up the Pukiri River with the aim of reaching the Arakmbut community of Barranco Chico in the upper reaches of the river. The slum settlement of Bajo Pukiri was still there, now surrounded by barren land and some pasture for cattle and we heard that the patrons were diversifying into (illegal) logging. The gold rush might have been over but the people were there to stay. Fishing was an activity of the past and the river itself was devoid of life; on the contrary, its sickly yellow water burned the skin on contact.*

*The river Pukiri was not only a victim of uncontrolled artisanal gold panning and semi-mechanised work gangs but it also suffered from a toxic discharge from its tributary, the river Huaypetue, where through the 1980s and 1990s there has been intensive commercial gold dredging with front loaders, dump trucks and large platforms for drainage and separation. Our canoe grounded time and time again in this flat bottomed unnatural river. It was well into the night before we reached the high cliffs of Barranco Chico. Over the next two days heavy rain in the Andean foothills transformed the Pukiri into a raging angry channel with rolling yellow waves that threatened to swamp the canoe on the journey downstream.*

#### *Learning the Language of Gold*

Arakmbut contact with the *colonos* along the Pukiri River in the 1970s and 1980s was the beginning of a direct relationship with the wider Peruvian socio-economic formation (Gray 1996). Some of the patrons, peons and traders were themselves indigenous but from communities in the Andes where the land was poor quality and offered few opportunities to shape their own futures. Others were Mestizos from urban slums and shanty towns seeking a new life. As Hvalkof notes, ‘by redefining themselves as *colonos*, they join the historical category of national pioneers and civilising heroes...making an ascent in the social and ethno-racial hierarchy of Peruvian national society’ (Hvalkof 2008:266). These *colonos* saw themselves as bold Peruvian nationals arriving in the rainforest to bring development and progress, and positioning themselves in opposition to the indigenous Arakmbut who were the ‘objects of the civilizing project’ (Hvalkof 2008:266).



Communication was mostly oral and always in Spanish, though often for Quechua migrants, it was also a second language. Contact between *colonos* and Arakmbut was often through aggressive encounters on beaches, harassment by patrons over access to oxbow lakes, through negotiations and barter with traders who plied the rivers bringing foodstuffs, beer and spirits and hardware for mining activities and who did business directly in gold. Encounters and communication had hostile and racist overtones and negotiations were characterised by corruption and manipulation of the Arakmbut (Moore 2006; Urteaga 2006; Gray 1997). Over the years the Arakmbut entered into relationships of *compadrazgo* ('godparenthood') with *colonos* which brought responsibilities and commitments not always clear to the Arakmbut. When the patrons or gold miners subsequently encroached on Arakmbut titled land to work gold they claimed impunity through *compadrazgo* with a member of the community which at times led to internal conflict between Arakmbut families (Aikman 1999; Urteaga 2006).

For many of the peons working gold in the Pukiri, their aim was to make money to take back to their families in the Andes and use it to improve their lives and their opportunities there. Patrons who have lived for decades on the banks of the Pukiri and the Karene still send their children to school in Cusco and some retain houses in the sierra. But over the 1980 and 1990s there was an incessant increase in young settlers -- landless migrants and single men or couples from the urban slums of Lima -- intent on forging a new life for themselves in what they believed was a vast green emptiness. As a group they supported the construction of a road linking Puno in the Andes with the banks of the Pukiri in order to 'bring in goods at cheaper prices and take out the resources at a cheaper

rate, thereby generating wealth and developing in the whole area' (Settler testimony cited in Gray 1997:262).

By the early 1980s all Arakmbut children from the community of San Jose were attending community-based Dominican Spanish language school in the village. Their middle class mestizo teachers were effective in teaching them the formal institutionalised literacy of the school. Over the 1980s increasing numbers of primary school graduates went on to boarding schools -- state or Dominican-run -- in the regional capital, Puerto Maldonado. Schooling fomented a demand only for more schooling but it poorly prepared the Arakmbut for their daily communicative encounters in oral Spanish with the *colonos*. The school was an isolated outpost of urban middle class values, discourses and communicative practices with little of direct relevance for the life project of the Arakmbut (Aikman 1999).

For the Arakmbut the gold rush has meant neither growth nor progress. They seek external benefits to supplement the lack of certain resources within the community. As fish became scarce and the Pukiri ceased to provide food the Arakmbut came to rely more on gold to be able to purchase foodstuffs, radios, school uniforms and medicines. The widespread exploitation of the resources of the river Pukiri has been at their expense. Subsistence is becoming ever harder for the Arakmbut as their ability to survive on the fish which still exist in streams within the community dwindles (2). Since the early 1990s the Arakmbut have been facing increasing hardship and nutritional levels among many of the households have been falling with scarcities of fish and meat and a growing reliance on decreasing gold resources to buy tinned fish to supplement a diet of manioc and plantains (Gray 1997).

Gold panning and exploitation in the river Pukiri has been and continues to be predicated in a set of relationships that are exploitative, discriminatory and environmentally destructive and the Arakmbut are in a permanent struggle with the miners, loggers and settlers for access to dwindling resources. The language of gold is oral and Spanish. For the Arakmbut, this is it learned through direct confrontation and interaction with patrons, miners and traders, mostly at the trading post, on the gold panning beaches and in canteens and bars. It is a language with a limited vocabulary and restricted grammar and its speakers have little schooling or formal education. It is an oral Spanish learned informally and for many a second language. Along the banks of the river Pukiri, it is a language of pioneers bringing ‘development’ to the fringes of national society where the institutions and services of the state have yet to reach and the rule of law is the gun. The discourse of gold is of forging new frontiers, of natural resource exploitation and extraction, and of immediate economic rewards (Aikman 2004). For the Arakmbut, gold panning has become part of their life project for the access it provides to the money economy. But the intensity of gold exploitation means that the river Pukiri has become a site of struggle to maintain their self-sufficiency and retain their relationship with the river and its water spirits, the *waweri*. As the young driver of our canoe in 1999 said, ‘The river is sick. It is dying. The *waweri* have abandoned it’.

### **The language of indigenous rights**

With legal recognition and titles to a mapped and formalised territory, the Arakmbut of San Jose became a 'native community', defined as a socio-political unit. However, as the last scenario demonstrated, it has become increasingly hard for them to define the direction they want to take through exercising their legal right to self-determination over their territory and its resources. Despite their legal title to the territory, the Arakmbut have no power to expel the intruders from the Pukiri. Peru has a weak state, historically alienated from its people and compounded by the extremely centralised and authoritarian regime of Alberto Fujimori from 1990-2000. While successive governments have implemented far-sighted legislation protecting rights, it has also been unable, or unwilling to protect these rights in practice which has contributed to widespread corruption and abuses of human rights (Arellano-Yanguas 2008). The region of Madre de Dios is characterised by weak and toothless democratic institutions and the situation today along the river Pukiri is one of lawless squalor for landless *colonos* who pit themselves against the increasingly impoverished Arakmbut.

As early as 1980, growing tensions with gold miners on the River Pukiri persuaded some Arakmbut to make the long trip to Lima for the first time to make contact with the indigenous organisation AIDASEP (Inter-ethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Amazon) which had been founded in 1978. On their return they organised a meeting with other indigenous communities in the region and in January 1982 the Native Federation of Madre de Dios and its Tributaries, FENAMAD, was established. This organisation brings together the Harakmbut, Shipibo, Piro and Ese-Eja communities in Madre de Dios.

### *Scenario 3: Legal Labyrinths and Court Cases*

*FENAMAD has worked closely with the Arakmbut of San Jose over the regulation of mining concessions in the River Pukiri. Over the 1990s there was a conflict between a settler, Mateus Bejar, and a company, CARISA (Compania Aurifera del Rio Inambari), which had taken over mining concessions throughout the Pukiri from a previous company. Bejar and CARISA both appealed to the Ministry of Engineering and Mines for the legal mining rights and FENAMAD actively followed the case and lobbied in favour of the community of San Jose. However, no sooner had CARISA won, than the company announced that they would sell the concessions in the Pukiri. But the community could not afford to buy them and feared that the Bejar family would do so instead. The Bejar family had been controlling the Pukiri for years at gunpoint and the Arakmbut had been powerless to do anything about it. The unending court cases stretch the capacity of FENAMAD and its limited financial and human resources through lobbying government officials in diverse ministries from mining and agriculture to health and social welfare, and engaging lawyers to advise and produce legal briefs and strategies (after Gray 1997).*

### *Learning the Language of Rights*

The work of FENAMAD is multi-faceted and requires management and coordination of a small secretariat and communication and negotiation with national and regional indigenous organisations. It requires working with technical specialists in areas such as territorial and mining laws. The Arakmbut have come to understand that state legislation in the form of written Spanish language documents are themselves ambiguous and

contradictory. While the Law of Native Communities recognised the lands (surface rights) of the lower Pukiri as belonging in perpetuity to the Arakmbut of San Jose, miners were able to apply for and be granted gold panning concessions (lots) which gave them rights to exploit subsoil resources. Additionally there were many illegal miners on Arakmbut lands who took resources with impunity. In 1992 the Fujimori government passed legislation which undermined indigenous peoples' inalienable territorial rights as set out in the Law of Native Communities and openly promoted the sale of parcels of community titled lands. Meanwhile, Fujimori also passed Legislative Decree 708 which promoted private investment into mining activity and gold concessions on indigenous territory and protected areas (Gray 1997).

The leadership of FENAMAD is elected by and from member communities, including San Jose, and many of the office bearers have only primary schooling, though they often attend adult evening classes to complete the secondary cycle. Schooling, as noted earlier, offers a particular 'schooled literacy' embedded in hierarchical and authoritarian institutionalised practices (Street 1999). So, while schooling offers certain communicative competencies these are far removed from the competencies and oral and literate practices embedded in the language of rights which the members of FENAMAD need to successfully engage in their struggle. The organisation has worked for many years with different groups of advisors and support organisations, such as the Centro Eori, which offered capacity building in organisational and project planning and management, legal and technical support (Garcia Altamirano 2003). Denouncing illegal gold mining on Arakmbut land to the Ministry of Energy and Mines, drawing up legal challenges to new mining concessions granted by the authorities to patrons, lobbying for

finalisation of land titling, petitioning for police protection on beaches were among some of the ongoing demands on FENAMAD. Responding to these demands required specialist knowledge of technical legal documents and procedures for lodging formal complaints and lobbying for recognition of rights. Alongside such specialised legal and bureaucratic literacies were demanding encounters with traders and commercial salesmen, with mining company representatives offering bribes of health centres and schools.

Over the past decade the leadership of FENAMAD has been intent on lobbying for a new modality of schooling laid down in Peruvian education legislation -- intercultural bilingual education. The Dominican-run state teacher training college in Puerto Maldonado has, together with collaboration from FENAMAD, implemented a training programme for intercultural bilingual education teachers resulting in 'intercultural bilingual schools' in some Harakmbut communities with indigenous teachers. Nevertheless this has been happening at a time of increasing demand for Spanish language education as the Spanish language increasingly colonises spaces and practices which were formerly oral and in Harakmbut. Among the Arakmbut, communities as a result intensified social relations and intermarriage with non-Arakmbut, many children are growing up with Spanish as their mother-tongue and a limited ability in Harakmbut (Aikman 2001). Thus, there has been a distinct shift in language use over the past thirty years and a question over the ability of formal education, with an emphasis on a schooled form of Harakmbut literacy, to have any discernable impact on this trend. Today the Arakmbut have no use for Harakmbut literacy outside of the school walls

while, on the contrary, they have an increasingly urgent need to manage and use a wide range of oral and literate forms of and practices in Spanish.

Through the 1990s FENAMAD has taken its struggle for indigenous rights to national and international forums where the language of rights involves specialised discourses and literate practices. Its leadership has been active in the drafting process of the UN Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and in making formal denunciations of rights violations in the river Pukiri to the UN Working Group on Indigenous Rights in Geneva. It also involves working as active members of alliances (for example the Indigenous Coordination of the Amazon Basin), with specialist support organisations (such as the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs) and with UN strategists and indigenous lawyers (for example Cree lawyers from Canada or Aboriginal lawyers from Australia) (see e.g. IWGIA 2007; 2008, FENAMAD 2007). Such advocacy and struggle at the national and global levels implies a new engagement with electronic means of communication used to build and maintain alliances and develop and take forward lobby positions. At the UN Working Group UN on Indigenous Populations, FENAMAD leaders have engaged in the decade long process of negotiating and drafting the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, a labyrinthine process of developing rights drawn directly from evidence of abuses of rights taking place in, among other places, the Pukiri River.

However, while Arakmbut leaders have honed their communication skills in multiple contexts using different oral genres and literacies in Spanish with increasing political astuteness and effectiveness, their legitimacy remains intimately bound with their ability to maintain their communication with the invisible work of the spirits. It is



not only political regulation which is needed to ensure the continuation of Arakmbut social life and beneficial change in their environment but regulation of their spiritual life through dreaming and in many different activities such as fishing and hunting. It is this communication with the spirits which provides their sense of responsibility for their rivers and lands and its resources.

Through work on many levels, from the banks of the Pukiri River, local government offices in the town, national government agencies for land regulation to international forums such as the United Nations, FENAMAD has forged new sites of strength for nurturing the Arakmbut life project. This struggle involves individuals in a wide array of activities and diverse and continually evolving literacies, oral genres and languages of development. The next section examines a language of development with which the Arakmbut and FENAMAD have had increasing engagement over the past twenty years.

### **The Language of Biodiversity Conservation**

In 1991, following negotiations with the Subregional Office of Agriculture, FENAMAD signed an agreement prepare a technical dossier of ecological and sociological studies for the creation of a communal reserve. This was an indigenous initiative designed to gain territorial recognition for a large tract of traditional territory and protect it from predation by gold miners, illegal hunting and timber extraction. The Amaraeri Communal Reserve (3) covering 403,000 hectares was finally approved in 2002 after many years of

preparation, lobby and a long delay as the final documents sat on the President of Peru's desk waiting for his signature.

Despite a process of decentralisation set in motion after the deposition of Fujimori by Alejandro Toledo's government in 2000 there has still been little transfer of political power to the sub-national level and, in the case of mining and national parks and reserves, all authority for regulation remains at the national level (Arellano-Yanguas 2008). Policies aimed at opening up the Amazon's resources to transnational capital have multiplied as have regulations aimed at limiting the rights of indigenous peoples. The current president, Alan Garcia, published articles in national daily newspapers in 2008 with a theme of a 'dog in a manger', who neither wants to eat nor allow others to eat – a blatant attack on the rights of indigenous peoples, despite the government's adoption of ILO Convention 169 and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Chirif and Garcia Hierro 2008).

President Alan Garcia's discourse of development is one of confidence in big business backed with capital and technology to create employment and wealth (Chirif and Garcia Hierro 2008: 44). Under the guise of new laws designed to bring the Free Trade Agreement between Peru and the US into effect, the President passed two laws which would have allowed the break up and sale of communal lands held by indigenous communities. This provoked an outcry and indigenous demonstrations and blockades against the move. The government was forced to repeal the two laws. As Chirif and Garcia Hierro state, 'Never before has there been such unbridled aggression against indigenous peoples...and never before has it taken place in such an artful way' (2008:44).

In Madre de Dios and the Amaraeri Communal Reserve the abuses continue. The ink was barely dry on the decree authorising the Reserve when the Ministry of Energy and Mines granted a permit to Hunt Oil for exploration work and the regional government developed plans for a road through the Reserve to facilitate the extraction of wood (Galvin and Thorndahl 2005). In September, 2009 FENAMAD began legal action against Hunt Oil which it says are putting the rivers in the Reserve at great risk (FENAMAD 2009). Meanwhile the *colonos* and miners from the Pukiri area denounce the Reserve as exclusionary and a means of trying to halt their access to its resources. They encroach the Reserve nevertheless. In 2003 it was classified as vulnerable and at high risk of failing to protect and maintain biological diversity in the medium-term (Parkswatch 2003).

The Reserve is set up with a regulation that indicates it should be co-managed by state agents and the 'beneficiaries' through participatory processes, decentralised management and local decision-making. But as Alvarez et al. (2008) opine, its management is complex, with no on-site administration or master plan and the state has no real intention to decentralise power. The model of management is in the hands of technical experts with little experience of participatory processes in the fields of management, policy or indigenous advocacy (Alvarez et al. 2008). Currently, management by FENAMAD and the Ministry of Agriculture (through its representative organisation INRENA) has been supported by the Global Environment Facility/UNDP through a project entitled 'Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biological Diversity in the Amaraeri Communal Reserve (Alvarez et al. 2008).

The language of biodiversity conservation in the context of the Reserve is a language of international alliances, cooperation and collaboration between high profile global actors such as the WWF, IUCN and UNDP. Their involvement in the Reserve focuses on establishing governance structures and biodiversity management plans and there have been discussions about the potential for the scientific community to carry out large-scale multiple researcher programmes. They have also provided training in legal accounting and administration for local indigenous Arakmbut individuals so they can be employed as park wardens. Their concerns are framed within a discourse and language of wellbeing of the biosphere to which the conservation of the biodiversity of the Amarakaeri Communal Reserve contributes. For the Arakmbut, however, working with the language of biodiversity conservation in Madre de Dios a strategy for the long term sustainability of their indigenous territory and its ecosystem which they want to protect and manage for their indigenous families and communities. For the Arakmbut and FENAMAD, the Amarakeri Communal Reserve is a means of ensuring their survivance.

Galvin and Thorndahl (2005) recognise that FENAMAD's engagement with the language of biodiversity conservation is a strategy for its own political purposes. They suggest, however, that the indigenous case was developed around a discourse of 'noble savage' and indeed, that for some of the communities surrounding the Reserve, such as those of the Arakmbut in the gold panning areas of the rivers Karene and Pukiri, today's Reserve management supposes modern knowledge and know-how far from what the Arakmbut can immediately offer. This language of biodiversity conservation leads to a questioning of whether the users of customary resources in the past, such as the Arakmbut, can be entrusted with management of these same resources today (Berkes and

Turner 2006). Moreover, ‘based only on their socio-cultural regulations, their practices today are not sustainable, mixed as they are with gold extraction’ (Alvarez et al. 2008). This, then, suggests that the Arakambut of San Jose may be in a ‘Catch 22 of conservation’ (Holt 2005) wherein their reliance on gold mining today and the destructive heritage of gold mining on the region’s rivers sets them at odds with the language of biodiversity conservation and the preservation of the flora and fauna of the forest and the rivers.

### **Multiple Languages for Strength, Struggle and Survivance**

The changes in the physical and symbolic meaning and purpose of the river Pukiri for the Arakambut of San Jose over the past three decades have been dramatic. Their vision of the world and future has been shaped over this period by the uniqueness of their interaction with the river Pukiri. Their ‘life project’ or ‘self-development’ has been played out in the context of the changing environment of this river. This life project is based on an Arakambut ‘awareness and knowledge of their own place in the world’ (Barras, cited in Blaser 2004:30), an awareness embedded in their spiritual relationship with the river and its resources. But this awareness and knowledge is also shaped by the nature of their encounters with agents of local, national and global society, much of which has been characterised by inequalities and the abuse of their rights as indigenous peoples and Peruvian citizens.

The Pukiri river scenarios have illustrated some of the diversity of ‘modernities’ or developments existing together in time and space and in dynamic interaction with each other. They have also illustrated ways in which the Arakmbut have selected, blended and juxtaposed elements from different developments to support their struggle to realise their vision for their future. The first scenario offered a glimpse of the Pukiri as a site of strength where Arakmbut fishing activities were part of a process of creating and re-creating purpose and power (Villegas et al. 2008) through shared action, meaning and Harakmbut language. Their communicative repertoire and practices were oral. They were shaping their life project in co-existence with a small number of *colonos* whose activities did not impinge on their freedoms and infrequent communication was mediated through and by a few mission-education Arakmbut Spanish speakers.

Scenario two paints a picture of the river Pukiri as a site for struggle to recreate purpose and power in a violent and destructive context. Here, the struggle is for access and control of resources as well as the ability to expand their knowledge through themselves engaging in artisanal gold panning as an important means of obtaining goods and services, such as medicines for malaria and tuberculosis and access to schooling. With a dramatic loss of fish and other river resources, the Arakmbut turned to gold panning and adopted elements of the Spanish language of development in order to ensure their self-sufficiency. While gold panning on the beaches and interaction in the canteens of the Pukiri river required an oral Spanish language of communication, it also heralded the beginning of a need for new oral genres and literacies with which to advocate, petition and demand that their legal rights be upheld.

The third scenario is of complex arenas of rights. Now the river Pukiri no longer provides a sense of purpose and power for the Arakmbut and they are engaged, through their representative organisation FENAMAD, in a diversity of arenas of struggle for their vision and their life project in the knowledge that the Peruvian state has not had the moral authority to ensure their legal rights are respected and their rivers protected. The Arakmbut representative organisation, FENAMAD, has with time and experience been able to adopt and utilise different literate and oral practices from different languages of rights and use these arenas -- local, national and global -- as sites of struggle. The formal recognition of the Amarakaeri Communal Reserve is a demonstration of the strength of their struggle.

For the Arakmbut of San Jose, then, their interaction with the languages and practices of gold, rights and biodiversity conservation in and around the river Pukiri has shaped their vision and life project. It is a vision created and re-created through their shared Harakmbut language but also through their use of Spanish oracies and literacies. The Amarakaeri Communal Reserve was fought for and envisioned as a site of survivance for the Harakmbut peoples some twenty years ago, that is, a place where they can create 'spaces of synthesis and renewal' (Vizenor cited in Villegas et al. 2008). But knowledge and experience from the river Pukiri tells the Arakmbut of San Jose that the Reserve may not provide them with fish to sustain their self-sufficiency. It warns them that gold miners, oil and timber companies and corporations will continue to exploit its resources with or without permission of the Peruvian government. For the Arakmbut, today, a site of survivance is a place and space of multiple languages, literacies and oracies that they themselves can call upon to ensure their economic self-sufficiency,

control over their resources and their social, cultural and spiritual assertiveness. Today this means a place where they can not only fish in the rivers where the *waweri* reside but also pan for gold. But this life project sets them at odds with many different languages of development and their struggle will continue, drawing its strength from their ability to use well different oral genres and literacies in both Harakmbut and Spanish.



## Notes

1. FENAMAD is a multi-ethnic federation representing indigenous peoples of the Madre de Dios region where the Harakmbut peoples are the largest indigenous group.
2. The gold rush also contributed to the depletion of sources of hunted meat such as tapir, wild pig, birds and turtles and turtle eggs.
3. Amarakaeri was the name the Harakmbut used for themselves prior to a meeting they held in 1992 (see Gray 1997:205).

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