

Article

Institutional Change on a Conservationist Frontier: Local Responses to a Grabbing Process in the Name of Environmental Protection

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Abstract: In a wave of global conservationism, Ecuador established two large protected areas in its Amazon region in 1979. One of these is the Reserva de Producción Faunística Cuyabeno (RPFC), located in the northeastern corner of the country. Given that this land was previously managed as commons by local indigenous groups, the establishment of protected areas has had numerous consequences for these people. The research conducted comprised three months' fieldwork in three of the affected Siona communities, primarily through the use of participant observation. Based on the framework developed by Ensminger, this paper demonstrates how institutional change has occurred in the last few centuries with the arrival of various frontiers overriding the region. This has led to the almost total eradication of traditional institutions and the introduction of a new ideology, namely conservationism. In order to legitimize their existence in the Reserve, indigenous groups are compelled to argue in a conservationist discourse if they want to stay in their ancestral territory. The article discusses tourism as one key impact on the lives of the local Siona, alongside their response to the grabbing process, which takes the form of a re-creation of their identity, including institution shopping from below. This article contributes to the debate on commons grabbing from the perspective of local actors by arguing that institution shopping from below does not necessarily mean a loss of authenticity, considering different ontological perspectives in the process of identity construction.

Keywords: conservationism; identity; commons grabbing; protected areas; institution shopping; institutional change; Ecuador

1. Introduction

In 1979, in the northeastern corner of the Ecuadorian Amazon region, the Reserva de Producción Faunística del Cuyabeno (RPFC) was created with the purpose of protecting flora and fauna, as well as the indigenous groups of the region [1]. The author places the Reserve's establishment within the broad wave of conservationism, a recent ideology in this region, but one that is spreading across the world. Its principal goal is the protection of the natural environment. Given that conservationism is based on a naturalistic ontology that divides nature from culture, the creation of protected areas has a fundamental influence on local inhabitants [2,3].

This article will first address the question of institutional change and how this has led to institutional pluralism in the region. Subsequently, the perceptions and responses of local commoners to the grabbing process will be analyzed in order to show how institution shopping from below serves as a strategy to regain institutional control. In this context, questions of identity become important, as a balance between one's own and foreign values needs to be achieved.

As a review on the literature on the region and the Siona specifically (which remains very limited) shows, the Siona are an indigenous group who belong to the language group of the Western Tukanos living in the Amazon region of Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. Their history has been traced back to

their contact with European conquerors and Jesuit missionaries at the beginning of the 17th century [4]. Whereas throughout the 19th century missionary action declined and the indigenous groups of the region were mostly left to themselves, the 20th century brought three new frontier waves: the rubber boom, the reactivation of the missions, and finally, the petroleum boom [4]. This last boom, which has continued until the present day, has contributed to increased rates of deforestation and environmental pollution [5].

However, at stake is not just pure nature but a cultural landscape that has been used by the Siona as their commons for centuries. It is, therefore, important to understand the institutional setting prior to the arrival of the various frontiers and how the forest resources were managed as common property, notably via specific local knowledge and perceptions of the environment, including a spiritual world. As Berkes has shown in his reflections on traditional knowledge and management systems [6], institutions are embedded in an overlying ideology. In the case of the Siona, their ideology concerns a knowledge system centered on the *yagé* plant. *Yagé* (*Banisteriopsis caapis*), better known as Ayahuasca in other parts of Amazonia, forms the medium through which a shaman acquires knowledge and power. It provides a means by which communication with supernatural spirits is rendered possible and mundane conditions can be influenced [4]. Through the ingestion of *yagé* as part of a special ceremony, the shaman is able to enter the world of the spirit masters and negotiate with them so that they will send their animals close to the village and allow them to be hunted. As each animal species has a different master, various rituals are required.

In his Siona-Secoya ethnography, Vickers argues that the perception of the natural order and the forces of the universe influence people's behavior [4]. In this sense, the *yagé* ceremony can be considered part of Siona ideology, which may itself be located in the broader ontology of animism, as Descola has noted [7]. Siona people are embedded in a web of social relationships that link human and non-human societies in the forest. The way in which they differentiate between human and non-humans is different from a naturalist ontology, where lines are drawn along interior qualities, such as the ability to think morally and having a soul [7]. Instead of assuming that numerous cultures exist in one nature [4], the Siona perceive their environment as comprising one culture shared by all living beings, who differentiate themselves through physical appearance. In this way, the Siona regard animals as having the same culture as themselves, each holding a human perspective of living in thatched houses, eating cooked meat, and drinking manioc beer [8]. Plants, especially trees, are said to be the houses of the spirit masters, who are the owners¹ of animal species. Hence, *yagé* ideology is intrinsically connected and inseparable from the tropical rainforest, with any notion of Nature as being separate from humans simply nonexistent.

However, with the arrival of outside contact and the establishment of the different frontiers, the institutional setting was prone to change.

This article shows how the ecological boom, as Albert [9] has perceptively recognized, has stimulated indigenous peoples to legitimize their territorial claims in terms of an 'ecological ethnicity'. This special form of self-identification combines their own cosmological references with idioms borrowed from outside in order to achieve necessary political recognition. In this process, indigeneity is used as a powerful label to be taken seriously by conservationist actors.

The author's research has shown that, although when individual members of Siona communities are considered, they appear to be far from a homogeneous group, where four communities inside the RPFC have formally united, presenting themselves as the Siona of Cuyabeno. The author argues that the reason for their union is a common apocalyptic feeling related to the Anthropocene, an epoch in which resource extractivism and climate change foster a feeling of urgency to save living space not only, but especially, among indigenous peoples. Various factors are creating conflict inside, as well as

¹ In Spanish, *dueños*. Spirit masters are said to have a master-pet relationship with their animal species.

across the four communities. Indeed, the presence of petroleum extraction, tourism, and the Christian religion have led the Siona to strive for the legalization of their land titles.

Currently, they count with usufruct rights and a management plan for their ancestral territory, which according to the law belongs to the state because it lies inside a protected area. Property titles are treated as a source of power with which to exert control over their living space.

This article will highlight the implications of institutional change and associated conservationism as a new (Western) introduced ideology. First, through this ideology, the nature reserve is created and then tourism is introduced to the region. Second, together with other factors, the expanded new frontier leading to commons grabbing is perceived by local indigenous groups as an approaching apocalypse of their way of life, reducing their resilience and chances of survival. This subsequently triggers their response to the grabbing process as a form of institution shopping in a pluralistic setting, balancing externally imposed views of themselves as primitive destructors versus noble savages with means of self-determination. Thus, a re-creation of identity is taking place in line with the requirements of the United Nations (UN) definition of indigenous peoples.

2. Theoretical Perspective

This article explains the relationship between ideology and legitimacy in a conservationist discourse and its consequences at a local level. It seeks to shed light on local responses to a pluralistic institutional setting wherein grabbing processes are at work.

In order to grasp the extent and importance of institutions for the governance of natural resources, New Institutionalism provides a valuable framework in this article. This theoretical approach discusses the way in which management regimes evolve, as well as their influence on the economic strategies of individuals or groups. Following Jean Ensminger, New Institutionalism can be defined as “the study of how institutions affect the behavior of individuals and how individual behavior affects the evolution of institutions” [10] (p. 774). In her book about the Orma in Kenya, Ensminger demonstrates how changes in political, economic and social institutions through the introduction of the market economy affect the strategies of individuals and families [11]. According to Ensminger, by considering the individual motivations of different actors, including the social conditions and incentives that affect their decisions, it is possible to analyze (economic) change. She further asserts that economic activities are directly influenced by ideologies, institutions, organizations, and bargaining power [11]. Whereas bargaining power delineates the ability of actors to obtain what they want based on either their economic wealth or social position, an ideology refers to the beliefs and values of a group [11]. It is a framework for orientation and provides symbolic meaning and justification for actions [2]. Organizations in this context are groups formed by people in order to realize their goals (e.g., of changing an institutional structure or even the ideology of a whole society) [11]. Finally, institutions are defined by North as the ‘rules of the game’ [12]. In addition to these internal factors are external factors (environmental conditions, sociopolitical situation, demography, and technology), which are influenced by relative prices (the value of a certain good in comparison to other goods) [11]. Once relative prices change, they modify economic incentives, again inducing institutional change as a result. This change is directed by the actor with the most bargaining power, as well as the ideologies used to legitimize certain institutional settings. Figure 1 shows how different parts of Ensminger’s model influence one another.

While the framework of New Institutionalism has proved useful in studying the institutional change of the resource governance of pastures and fisheries [11,13], Wartmann et al. have also demonstrated its value in understanding institutional change in the context of protected areas [14]. They argue that institutional change can lead to the geographical overlap of different institutions, in their case protected areas and indigenous territories [14].

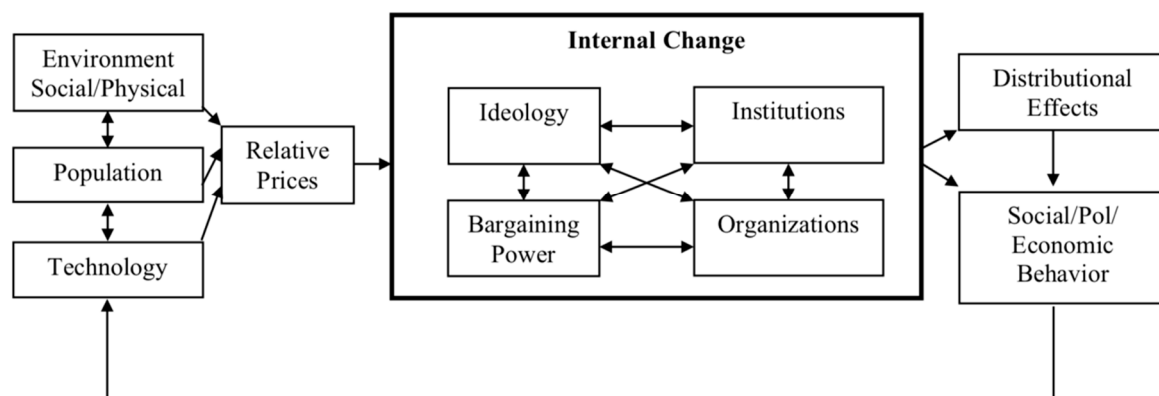


Figure 1. Modeling change according to Ensminger 1992.

This same process, which they term ‘institutional pluralism’ [14], is occurring in the Cuyabeno area. Akin to the notion of ‘forum shopping’ under legal pluralism, institution shopping means that actors may choose the best institution for claiming natural resources according to their power and knowledge [14]. What is important to note here is that ideologies change and are used strategically. Galvin et al. have widened the New Institutional approach in the sense that they claim that not only relative prices but also bargaining power and ideologies influence institutions and institutional change [2]. This means that when powerful actors manage to justify and legitimize their actions through ideologies, they gain acceptance and reduce transaction costs [2]. Consequently, Galvin et al. argue, local actors are sometimes able to boost their bargaining power by using certain identities based on ideologies, which legitimize their rightful ownership and access to resources [2]. Indeed, they use discourses (meaning a certain way of rationalizing issues in a logical way) and narratives to explain their perception of the state of things [2]. Ideology, discourses and narratives, therefore, form a pool of legitimacy, aimed at increasing one’s bargaining power, while simultaneously reducing that of others. As a result, allies and outside support can be found and power and financial resources are mobilized [2]. Combining this theoretical approach with Rasmussen et al.’s findings concerning territorialization in frontier spaces [15], this article shows how any claims to the natural resources in the Cuyabeno region must be formed following the conservationist ideology, which has only become established as the dominant ideology through institutional change in the last 50 years.

Paul E. Little defines frontiers as generally poorly populated geographic regions at the periphery that undergo accelerated demographic, agricultural, and technological changes [5]. In this way, the frontier is not only a geographical but also a temporal space. Geiger adds to this definition the characteristics of economic potential for exploitation and unequal power relations [16]. Frontiers work by delegitimizing existing institutional settings. Rasmussen and Lund argue that whereas non-native private actors in pursuit of newly discovered resources influence the formation of new institutions, civil administration generally has sparse coverage in frontier regions [15]. As a contact zone, the frontier is considered by Tsing as a site of encounter between different knowledge practices, jurisdictions, and visions of progress and development [17,18]. In this convergence of different worldviews or ontologies, new institutions are formed, always influenced by the actor with the most bargaining power. With state control lacking and racism against indigenous people flourishing even today in Ecuador, the Siona more often than not find themselves in a less powerful position.

Rasmussen et al. argue that “the frontier moment is a reconfiguration of the conditions of possibility” [15] (p. 391). In this way, land and resources are abstracted from their former owners and hence freed for new forms of appropriation [15].

The transitional character of the frontier explains its connection with the need for territorialization [15]. Indeed, if existing social orders have been dissolved, new ones have to be established. Hence, the eradication of existing orders and the establishment of new institutions threaten

the Siona's ideology and puts the group in a vulnerable position, which I deem one explanation for their urgency in obtaining land titles to their territory.

These frontier waves cannot simply be understood as an expansion of 'civilization', but must, according to Cleary, be seen as a capitalist frontier [19], engendering the expansion of resource commodification and new property regimes [20,21]. The commodification of the environment can be seen in the tourist crowds arriving at Puente del Cuyabeno every day, paying large amounts of money to see the preserved nature inside the Reserve. Thus, the creation of the Reserve has facilitated the commodification of nature. Robertson and Tsing that commodification is accompanied by enclosure and privatization [20,21]. Certainly, even though the Reserve is owned by the state, enclosure has definitely happened. New institutions have been created to determine how the resources are to be managed inside the Reserve, but the Siona have had little say in this process.

However, as Rasmussen et al. note, the destruction of previous institutions does not necessarily imply the complete erasure of repertoires of legitimation [15]. In fact, if old institutions are legitimized and adapted to the new situation, they might form the building blocks for assembling a new institutional setting [15]. As we have seen, unequal power relations and considerable interest in the area's resources allow for the dissolution of old institutions and present possibilities for the creation of new ones. In this process of re-territorialization, the creation of the RPFC can be seen as a form of territorial claims and an attempt by the state to control the region.

3. Methodology

The research project was undertaken in the Reserva de Producción Faunística Cuyabeno (RPFC), located in the northeastern part of the Ecuadorian Amazon in three Siona communities, namely Puerto Bolívar, San Victoriano, and Sëoqueya. All three lie in close proximity to each other on the shores of the Cuyabeno River, about two hours by motorized canoe upstream from the confluence of the Cuyabeno and the Aguarico rivers. The three villages are located in the heart of the RPFC, which is marked green on the map in Figure 2. The only way to access the communities is by boat.

Fieldwork comprised three months of data collection between July and October 2018. As a qualitative research project, the research primarily relied on participant observation, combined with informal and unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews, and two focus group discussions, separately with a group of shamans and young people. Participant observation can be defined as the foundation method for ethnographic research, where the researcher observes and takes part in the activities of the people being studied, explicitly recording events and analyzing the gathered information [22]. As the name suggests, this method requires the researcher to balance proximity and distance. Indeed, whereas participation means proximity (attempting to act as someone who belongs to the setting), observation means distance (maintaining the perception of an outsider) [23]. Participant observation serves specially to understand daily processes, social interactions and the behaviors of people at work, within the family or at public meetings [23]. Furthermore, it allows the researcher to witness unpredictable events and presents opportunities to talk to people outside of a planned and somehow artificially created interview situation. In this way, I was able to observe some people acting in ways that contradicted what was claimed in interviews, enabling them to be understood within their specific contexts. In order to put observations on record, a fieldwork diary was kept with daily entries about the events alongside some initial analytical thoughts.

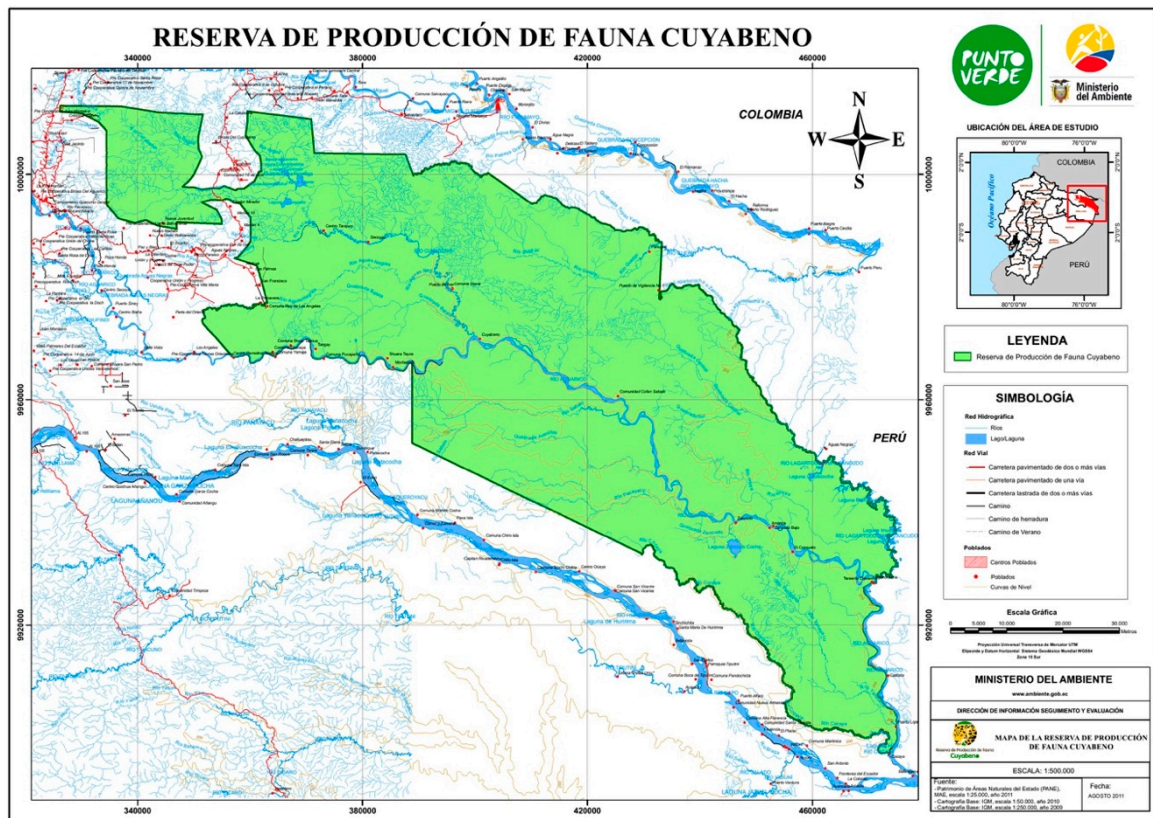


Figure 2. Official map of the Reserva de Producción Faunística Cuyabeno (RPFC). See <http://www.cuyabenolodge.com/national-parks/reserva-de-produccion-de-fauna-cuyabeno/reserva-de-produccion-de-fauna-cuyabeno.jpg>; accessed on 1 September 2019.

Informal and unstructured interviews afford interviewees a degree of freedom to stray from a specific topic. This can facilitate the detection of important research topics and provide a further step towards a deeper understanding of the emic perspective [24]. Such interviews helped me to understand issues of importance to the local population. On the other hand, semi-structured interviews proved useful in gathering information on specific topics, while still allowing the respondent to add important aspects that were not otherwise being asked [24]. Finally, group discussions offered insights into group dynamics, competing individual views, and broader structures inside and across the villages [25]. During fieldwork, a total of 24 interviews were conducted with people from three of the four Siona communities located inside the RPFC. Most of the interviews were semi-structured, although three were biographical and two were focus group discussions. Most interviews were recorded and later transcribed. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, as my familiarity with the local language Baicoca is very limited. All of the interviewees were fluent in Spanish, most being even more fluent than in Baicoca. In order to analyze the data, the methods of coding and memoing were applied to systematically read the field notes as a data set [25,26]. First, different themes and ideas are identified with open coding, which then serve as analytical categories [26]. Departing from those codes, themes were selected according to what would best answer the research questions but also leaving space for new topics to emerge that seemed more important to the research partners. In a further step, the selected topics were distinguished in sub-themes and subtopics with focused coding, and related to each other by integrative memos [26]. Finally, relevant parts were marked with theoretical memos in order to connect them to matching theories [25]. This process is described as ‘triangulation’ by Fetterman, where different patterns are contrasted and compared. He argues that when testing these sources against each other, ethnographic validity can be increased [27].

My access to the field was facilitated by my husband. Already in December 2017, it was agreed with the leaders of Puerto Bolívar that I would be able to conduct fieldwork there; the conditions were that a document had to be developed that the leaders could later use in the process of land legalization. This profoundly influenced the research, as constraints were placed on how the resulting material could be used. As Kirsch argues, it may not be sufficient to sustain alternative interpretations [28]. This could also be seen with regard to the fact that this research was conducted during a relatively short period of time, which was not otherwise possible in the thesis format. Therefore, it may be too much dependent on reported speech [28]. Due to time and economic restrictions, I was unable to conduct interviews with other actors like the Ecuadorian Ministry of Environment (MAE), international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or tourist agencies. However, I consulted all of the documents issued by the MAE that I could access.

Nonetheless, Kirsch argues that short-term, engaged research can provide valuable insights into how certain political claims are formulated from a very specific position [28]. Indeed, what can be learned is how people in a very specific context mobilize their culture, history, and identities in response to political challenges and ambitions [28]. Hence, the anthropological contribution of this article lies in providing insights into how the Siona in this specific context mobilize certain narratives and discourses around their culture and identity.

In May 2018, permission was requested from the MAE to conduct fieldwork inside the RPFC. However, it was not until mid-July and only with considerable pressure and perseverance on my part that this permission was obtained. Once access was provided, my husband and I lived in a guest house at the edge of the village. This made it possible to conduct research on largely neutral ground that was not linked to any particular group or person. Important to consider here was the presence and influence of my husband on the research. Having worked as a tourist guide in the RPFC, he knew the majority of people in Puerto Bolívar, albeit from a very specific position. Moreover, as an indigenous Kichwa, he identified with the Siona in terms of sharing a common indigenous identity. However, his role as a tourist guide also provided a certain distance, as relationships between the people of Puerto Bolívar and such workers are not always positive. Regardless, he acted as my gatekeeper, introducing me to the leaders of the village and rendering fieldwork in Puerto Bolívar possible in the first place. At a later stage, he was also present in some of the interviews, occasionally even participating, lending the interviews a new dynamic. On the one hand, I somehow felt that I was able to access insights into indigenous thinking²—and especially with male members of the community—that were otherwise impossible for a white European woman in such a context. On the other hand, my husband's presence and involvement also had negative impacts on the scientific research, as I was unable to establish individual relationships on the same basis as if I had been on my own. Furthermore, my husband's political action and articulation of his opinions occasionally compromised my position as a researcher. It must be acknowledged that no researcher is (or should be) neutral or without a position [28–30]. However, sometimes a more diplomatic position might have allowed for more differentiated answers. In general, I agree with Kirsch [28] that using one's skills and knowledge to support one's informants' political goals actually contributes to anthropology, a discipline based on reciprocity. Furthermore, as Schepers-Hughes [29] has noted, anthropologists who deny themselves the power to identify an ill are collaborating with the relations of power that allow the destruction or inequalities to continue.

Although, due to transportation issues, I was unable to talk to people from one of the communities, I managed to at least interview the presidents of both San Victoriano and Sëoquëya. Nevertheless, most interviews were conducted in Puerto Bolívar.

² With this, the author refers to indigenous world views, in this case, Siona yagé ideology.

4. Results

In order to understand how institution shopping from below is possible in this case, the pluralistic setting has to be understood. As described in the introduction, the Cuyabeno region is marked by various frontiers.

The introduction of nation-state borders and the increasing colonization of the area have altered the demographic composition of the Amazon region, while applying greater pressure on both resources and land (see ‘Environment’ and ‘Population’ in Figure 1). The Siona people have been forced to live in smaller territories due to external pressure, as well as by missionaries who have encouraged them to settle in village centers along the rivers in the past [31]. Furthermore, the intensified demand of global markets and the decreasing availability of animal hides and furs have resulted in rises in relative prices (see Figure 1). Consequently, congruent with other Amazonian regions [5], hunters from other areas have been attracted to Cuyabeno by prospects of profit, putting them in competition with local hunters who already struggle to make even a small income. This has led to the near extinction of animals, such as the anaconda, giant otter, manatee, and jaguar.

In addition, the discovery of oil in the region in the 1960s stimulated a dramatic increase in infrastructure in the so-called Oriente [5]. Roads to new cities in the Amazon region were constructed to reduce transportation costs for oil (see ‘Technology’ in Ensminger’s model in Figure 1). Petroleum production is one of Ecuador’s most important export products, currently accounting for around 30% [32]. Indeed, oil concessions can be sold at the southwest coast of the country, as well as across the Amazon region. In the Cuyabeno area, there are two oil companies with concessions: Petroamazonas (Ecuadorian) and Andes Petroleum Ecuador (Chinese) [33]. Throughout the entire country, only two intangible zones exist where oil extraction is prohibited. Both zones lie inside the two largest national parks: Yasuní and Cuyabeno. However, the legal situation inside protected areas in Ecuador is somehow double-edged. Technically, inside a reserve absolutely no extractivist activities are allowed [34]; however, given that the president is able to circumvent this law, it can be subject to political arbitrariness. Furthermore, protected areas legally belong to the state. This is why even though there is a right to collective rights in Ecuador, it does not apply inside the Reserve. Finally, Ecuador has declared itself a plurinational state and even recognizes the rights of Nature in its constitution [35]. While the implementation of these laws does not always seem particularly environmentally friendly in reality, the country presents itself through an explicitly conservationist discourse by proclaiming the protection of the natural environment, a result of the global extractive boom. Although Western conservationists have perceived this as a loss of pristine nature, for indigenous people it has meant an unanticipated loss of wildlife and forest commons. Furthermore, the aforementioned changes in external factors have resulted in changing institutions (internal change in Figure 1) for wildlife and forestry, manifesting themselves in the creation of the RPFC in the Cuyabeno area.

The Cuyabeno Faunistic Reserve (RPFC) was established in 1979 as a protected area located in the far northeast of the Ecuadorian Amazon, which, according to the MAE, contains unique ecosystems representative of the Amazon region [1]. It currently comprises approximately 590,112 ha³ [1].

The first page of the management plan of the Reserve states that the RPFC is the biggest lacustrine system in the country, characterized by high indices of globally recognized biodiversity and regarded as a sanctuary of forest life [1]. These introductory words exemplify the MAE’s conservationist interest in the area and relate to its ideology (Figure 1). Such conservationism depicts indigenous people as noble savages, or as part of nature. The subjects deemed most worthy of protection are, in this exact

³ There have been significant discussions about the size of the Reserve, which more than doubled in 1991, only to then be reduced again due to colonist pressure. Furthermore, acceptance of the limits has always been ambiguous owing to landholdings in the area prior to the establishment of the Reserve, as well as the lacking coincidence of limits established in the official register and on the ground.

order: aquatic mammals (Amazon river dolphin, Amazonian manatee, giant otter); Cuyabeno and Lagartococha river sheds and lagoons; indigenous communities inside the Reserve; and the jaguar [1].

There are five different indigenous ethnic groups living inside the Reserve (Cofán, Kichwa, Secoya, Shuar, and Siona). Moreover, the number of communities has increased over time, with eleven officially recognized communities currently residing here⁴. The relationships between the indigenous communities and the MAE, as well as among themselves, are not always positive, mostly owing to their divergent perspectives of conservation.

Aside from animals and indigenous people, the flora of the RPFC is also worth mentioning. Five types of forest include over 473 tree species and at least 1400 plant species [1]. Compared to the situation outside their territory, especially to the west of the Reserve, forest cover has been almost entirely maintained inside the RPFC, as maps from different years of the same area indicate. Being located in a region that has been highly deforested due to oil explorations since the 1970s, the RPFC actually looks like a forest sanctuary from above [1]. When considering Figure 1, this can be seen as the influence of a certain ideology on political behavior, again influencing the environment in turn. However, over time, oil explorations have also been conducted inside the Reserve, which, alongside tourist operations, have contaminated the rivers. In response, the MAE has produced a management plan of the reserve to lay down some rules, but given that the Siona do not agree with the plan, they have created their own organizations (Figure 1), such as ONASSCE⁵. Finally, bargaining power (Figure 1) is always contested but is mostly dominated by the state in the form of the MAE, as well as foreign tourist operators. This represents one aspect where the establishment of the Reserve has brought about significant changes in the lives of the Siona. Due to its unique lagoon systems and incredible biodiversity, the RPFC is interesting for tourism. Currently, touristic activities are mainly concentrated around the Laguna Grande, which belongs to the Siona territory. Nevertheless, the Lagartococha lagoons, as well as other communities, are also visited on an irregular basis [1]. In the last twenty years, the tourist flux has constantly increased. However, this does not necessarily bring exclusive benefits for the local communities.

4.1. Tourism (Perceptions of Commoners to the Grabbing Process)

Although there are other influences on the Siona and other indigenous communities who today live inside the RPFC, including missionary action and petroleum production, tourism is by far the most ambiguous, being regarded as both a positive and a negative influence. Indeed, it provides an economic income source, which is considered a positive asset. However, like petroleum production, it is perceived as creating physical damage to the environment by contaminating the river. This might come as a surprise, as tourism inside the RPFC is promoted as being eco-friendly and as a means of heightening awareness of the importance of conservationism. However, the interviews revealed that local Siona do not necessarily share this opinion. In particular, the President of San Victoriano and her husband, the President of the ONASSCE, were furious about the lodges' ignorant treatment of their residual waters. Both described how wastewater is being directed into the river when the level of waste is high. As the latter estimated how much excrement the 600 tourists who stayed in the lodges during the high season produced, he became more and more agitated:

These biodigesters are made of a closed tank, it fills up. Because where would the water go? There is a tap, so when the tank is full, what do they do? They open it and send off all the shit to the river to keep operating. (President of local indigenous organization, male, 35 years old, living in Puerto Bolivar, Ecuador. Excerpt from an interview conducted in September 2018.)

⁴ Several communities have divided into two in order to obtain access to economic resources by creating communities in different cantons or have migrated into the Reserve in search of superior subsistence means.

⁵ Organización de la Nacionalidad Siona Sucumbíos Cuyabeno Ecuador.

He described how one day he had to take an early bus to the city of Coca. While driving his canoe to the road in Aguas Negras, he discovered how the lodge owners disposed of their unwanted sewage:

They thought that at this hour there would be nobody [. . .]. I was like two river bends away when I was hit by an unbearable smell! They heard my motor and turned off the lights. It was like a film of grease, and the fish shupshupshup [he moved his hand like a fish jumping out of the water]. So these are things I have seen, it is not that I am inventing it. (President of local indigenous organization, male, 35 years old, living in Puerto Bolivar, Ecuador. Excerpt from an interview conducted in September 2018.)

These quotations show how tourism is affecting the livelihoods of the Siona in a physical way, contaminating the river from which they drink water during dry periods⁶.

Tourism is also having a major impact on the social structure and cohesion of the villages. There are currently eleven lodges spread out around the lagoon system, an attractive aspect of the RPFC. According to village members, the system works along the following lines: If a tourist agency is interested in building a lodge in the Cuyabeno area, they ask an individual member of one of the four Siona villages for permission. This person asks for permission at a community assembly to use a certain part of their communal land for individual purposes. If this request is approved, he or she builds the lodge together with his or her family and usually also works for the owner in the future. The owners of all eleven lodges are foreign to the region, as the President of San Victoriano noted:

Throughout the twenty years that we have had tourism here, not one single [Siona] person has been owner of a lodge. (President of one of the four Siona communities, female, 32 years old. Excerpt from an interview conducted in September 2018.)

Significant power and economic differences can be observed between the tourist agencies/lodge owners and the local people. Indeed, of the approximately 300 tourists who enter the reserve every day and pay on average USD \$400 for five nights, the vast majority visit one of the four villages during their stay. However, the individual contracts between the members of the communities and the lodge owners state that they are only paid USD \$200 a month for the rental of the land plot⁷.

My research demonstrates that when categorizing the modes of income from tourism for the Siona, this first category of renting includes the rental of motorized canoes. Certain individuals who own a canoe rent it for a daily fee of USD \$80 to the lodges, which then have the canoe at their disposal during the day, including gas.

A further form of income from tourism is generated by working for the lodges. Today, there exist two modes of work. The first concerns transportation, whereby mostly young men drive the motorized canoes that represent the only possible means of transportation within the RPFC. The second kind of work concerns the kitchen, where men, as well as women, are employed to cook adapted traditional, as well as European dishes, for tourists. A third possibility of work, which is only just emerging, is that of guide. To date, only four of the over 50 guides working in the RPFC were born inside the Reserve⁸. It is likely that this will soon change, with discussions taking place to introduce a fee for outsider guides who apply for the guide course (*curso de guía*) in Cuyabeno. Furthermore, there have been attempts to only allow people native to the region to take the guide course⁹.

⁶ The organization Ceibo has provided them with rainwater tanks. However, even when no rain falls for a long period of time, the river is still used as a secondary drinking water source. Furthermore, all people bathe and wash their dishes and clothes in the river every day.

⁷ This amount has been achieved following numerous discussions wherein the lodge owners have argued that they cannot afford to pay the Siona more than this sum, which is obviously a lie. The Siona have achieved a rise in monthly rent only by arguing that tourism has been contaminating the Reserve for over 20 years and have threatened with compensation payments, which should be much higher.

⁸ An additional difference between the guides from inside the Reserve and outsiders is that the former usually do not speak English, affording them a lower status and thus a lower salary.

⁹ At the moment, there has been one course with exclusive access for Cuyabeno-born indigenous people. However, only people with a graduation (bachillerato) are allowed to take the course.

One final (although very small) source of income from tourism is represented by the shamans and certain women of the villages. In order to see the shamanic presentation and women's preparation of traditional flatbread, tourists pay an additional fee of USD \$5, which must be paid directly to the shamans afterwards. However, some of this money is occasionally diverted into the guides' pockets, as there exists some ambiguity about where and when everyone should pay. Furthermore, as every guide has his or her own personal contacts with certain families and shamans, conflicts can arise between different families, as unequal income situations are created.

Economic conflicts may be regarded as a general influence of tourism on the villages. In particular, individual land use contracts between lodge owners and individual families may create divisions inside, as well as across, the different villages. This can be seen by the fact that inhabitants of Puerto Bolivar enjoy considerably more contact with lodges than their three counterparts. The number of contacts one has at tourist agencies also seems to be related to one's degree of political power and engagement. This can be observed in the ascending scale of political recognition and infrastructure from one community to the others, from Tarabiaya (which does not even have legal recognition as a community) to Sëoquëya (which has very limited infrastructure) and San Victoriano and ultimately to Puerto Bolivar (which has rainwater tanks, a paved main street, and solar electricity, all products of personal contact with political authorities). However, other actors, such as the apostolic church installed in Sëoquëya, help to disturb these clear differentiations.

A final aspect I want to briefly mention is how tourism is physically taking away land from the Siona because the MAE has illegally assigned land titles to at least one tourist operator. Even though this issue may be contested due to its illegality, it still poses a serious threat to the Siona, as one village elder stated:

Well, about tourism. At the moment we have our little places with lodges. But as I said, who lived by the lagoon? The grandfathers. They lived there. And now, only recently the Ministry [of Environment] awarded the Neotropic Lodge this land. They give them titles. So what is this? As I always say, until when? Deals are made without consultation, under the table, without our knowledge. (Village elder in Puerto Bolivar, male, ca. 70 years old. Excerpt from an interview conducted in August 2018.)

This example of local perceptions of tourism indicates that the conservationist frontier, which most clearly manifests itself in the lives of the Siona in the form of tourism, has an influence on the social dimension of Siona life. It creates internal divisions and affects the physical dimension by damaging the river and taking away land that was in the past exclusively managed by the Siona. I consider tourism one product of the conservationist frontier, legitimized according to a conservationist ideology. However, it does not conform with the environmental visions of all actors involved. The grabbing process is, therefore, not being watched in total silence by the former commoners.

4.2. Re-Creation of an Indigenous Identity (Responses of Commoners to the Grabbing Process)

One important response among the Siona to the grabbing process concerns their identity building. I argue that the conditions that shape some components of Siona identity are derived from powerful global actors. Nevertheless, this does not imply that Siona identity is not authentic. Even though there is a discrepancy between the image the Siona present of themselves in their quest to obtain control over their ancestral territory and their actual daily life, their ideology operates as a bridge between the two. In addition, Siona ideology proposes a way of seeing identity in a hybrid way. This section will try to display how the Siona (re)create their collective identity on an everyday basis.

Identity is by definition dependent on its relation to others and is a result of interactions between different individuals and groups [36]. In order to separate one's group from others, markers are selected to define categorical boundaries in a subjective and contextual manner [36]. The UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples has created a definition for indigenous people. The requirements include cultural distinctiveness, priority in time with respect to occupying and using a certain territory,

and self-identification [37]. It may be argued that although the fairly rigid definition of indigenous peoples formulated by the UN has certainly helped many marginalized people across the world, it very much shapes and limits the picture an indigenous group is allowed to paint of itself in public. I, therefore, take these three categorizing factors to illustrate how outside conditions form Siona identity today.

The analysis has shown that two markers currently help to define who is Siona and who is not: language and clothing. These factors provide visible proof of cultural distinctiveness. Notably, these factors seem to have been imposed from the outside.

If I show up as I am now [in shorts and t-shirt], they won't pay me much attention. But when you are in your típica¹⁰, they pay attention; this attracts many, tourists, whoever. The clothing and the language attracts the whole world, because many people want to come and see the culture, the tradition from here. (President of local indigenous organization, male, 35 years old, living in Puerto Bolivar, Ecuador. Excerpt from an interview conducted in September 2018.)

In this case, the outside actors even get a face: tourists. However, the tourists are also influenced in their desire to observe pristine, native cultures. I argue that this is linked to the time in which we are living. The Anthropocene¹¹ fosters a feeling of urgency: for the Siona to survive as a people; for Western tourists to observe undisturbed cultures in a world of destruction. Moreover, even though most tourists who visit the RPFC have probably never read the UN definition, it indirectly forms their vision of an authentic indigenous group. This is not to say that these elements are not authentically Siona. Baicoca has always been the Siona language and their traditional clothing are embedded in their ideology:

Our necklaces are our knowledge. [. . .] When you drink *yagé*, the *cascabeles* are something quite beautiful. When you touch them, the spirit of nature¹² is present with the necklaces. And the clothing: the most beautiful color is bright blue, or sky blue and white. I don't know why but these colors call the spirits' attention. (Vice-President of Puerto Bolivar, female, 30 years old. Excerpt from an interview conducted in August 2018.)

Concerning the second requirement of the UN definition—priority in time—, there exists some further ambiguity. Almost all of the interviewees possessed an impressive family history to share. By collecting different kinship stories, I was able to produce a genealogical tree that related all of the families in Puerto Bolivar, including some in the other three villages. In this way, almost everyone is somehow related to one of the five men who were the first known in a line of ancestors to inhabit the area of today's Cuyabeno.

Hence, almost all people living in the four communities today can prove their kinship with people who lived here before settlers and other indigenous groups arrived in the region. It can, therefore, be argued that the second UN requirement for being an indigenous group is also fulfilled. However, a qualification needs to be made: not all of these five founding fathers were Siona¹³. Owing to the region's complex history and permeable indigenous boundaries as regards territories, different ethnic groups have always intermarried and mixed. The limits of collectivities have become blurred. How can this still be a distinctive indigenous group?

Here, the third UN requirement concerning self-identification comes to the fore. The Siona of the Cuyabeno have highly specific traditions, with the Secoya in particular, who share very similar practices and language, representing a threat to their identity claims. The two groups have even been

¹⁰ Traditional costume.

¹¹ Our current geological epoch, which is characterized by the fact that human agency has had such a substantial impact on the Earth that it can be recognized in geological sediment layers.

¹² Original version: *el espíritu de la naturaleza*.

¹³ Two of them were Secoya and one Cofán.

called Siona-Secoya due to the union created by the SIL¹⁴ in the 1960s [31]. However, given that most of the Secoya families followed the SIL to San Pablo on the River Aguarico in 1974 [4,31], the Siona argue that they have cared more for the Cuyabeno forest. Therefore, even though Siona, Secoya, and Cofán people have mixed for decades, the key point in defining an indigenous group as distinct is the fact that the four communities living inside the RPFC have formally united and self-identify as the Siona of the Cuyabeno. I, therefore, argue that, while all of the Siona are able to present family relations with one of the founding fathers of Siona Cuyabeno settlements, self-identification plays an even more important role at the collective, as well as at the individual level.

In general, it can be said that the Siona's response to the green grabbing process in which they see themselves involved concerns a re-creation of their indigenous identity in accordance with the UN definition for indigenous peoples.

5. Discussion

Considering the historical context, the application of the Ensminger frame to analyze institutional change [11] has allowed me to demonstrate how the situation of institutional pluralism and urgency for the commoners has come to be. The influence of the different frontiers overriding the region has played a particularly important role in this regard. The situation prior to the arrival of colonial conquerors was characterized by a relatively strong institutional setting: a spiritually interlinked world with indigenous territories governed by shamans who acted according to an animist ideology to manage common property resources in a period of permeable mobility. However, the arrival of the frontiers led to the gradual undermining and replacement of the Siona's traditional institutions through the introduction of a capitalist ideology, accompanied by conservationism.

I, therefore, argue that changes in institutions, as well as in the Siona's experiences with frontiers and institutions, explain their urgent need to legalize their land in order to re-establish control over who has access to the natural resources inside their ancestral territory and how they are managed.

As has been established in this article, the institutional setting in the RPFC is pluralistic and even ambiguous. Local informal institutions are being replaced in the re-territorialization process of the frontier. Furthermore, formal institutions are first not always implemented as legally stated and, second, occasionally contradict and override each other. Although the RPFC has been established as part of a global wave of conservationism in an attempt to save the abundant biodiversity of the Cuyabeno region, today its effectiveness in protecting the environment is being questioned by the Siona.

In order to regain control over their territory, the Siona have formed a union between four communities and have revived their formal organization through the creation of ONASSCE in order to augment their bargaining power. As has been shown by other authors, even though powerful actors may replace existing ideologies with their own, older ideologies might also be re-instrumentalized if they fit into the new system [14,15]. In order to achieve their goals, it could be argued that they apply a perspectivist ontology strategy [7]. Just as a hunter may paint his face with a jaguar design when hunting a peccary or an anaconda design when fishing, Siona representatives assume the role of either Western conservationists or ecologically noble savages, depending on their counterpart. When talking to MAE officials, the Siona use a Western conservationist discourse in order to legitimize their land claims. In contrast, in order to attract attention and financial support from NGOs and tourists, they assume the role of a remote, native people with traditions and institutions as old as the forest worthy of protection. Hence, they use different discourses of legitimization depending on their audience. Meanwhile, both discourses are connected through the animist worldview, which has been part of their ontology for centuries, but can also be partly integrated into a modern, conservationist logic of living in harmony with one's environment.

¹⁴ Summer Institute of Linguistics.

However, the Siona are struggling to maintain the UN-defined picture of an indigenous group because traditional institutions, as well as their language (despite being authentically Siona), are vanishing, and a modern indigenous identity that would combine old and new elements is not required. Having talked to members of the Cuyabeno Siona communities, examined their dynamic history and considered the importance of self-identification, I have come to the conclusion that Siona identity is coercively hybrid and ever-changing. There is a Spanish proverb that, even though it is generally interpreted in an alternative (and negative) way, seems to have considerable compatibility with animist ideas of seeing oneself in relation to others: Even though the monkey may wear silk, he is still a monkey¹⁵.

In Descola's definition of animism, physical appearance is important in distinguishing one from other beings [7]. Indeed, the monkey may wear silk in order to distinguish himself from other monkeys. The Siona may wear tunics in order to distinguish themselves from other human groups¹⁶. However, the inside is always human, or Siona, in this case. The monkey is still a monkey; the Siona are still Siona. It is not important whether it is a monkey or a Siona because in animist myths the idea persists that there was a time when everyone had the body of humans, until they changed their form under different circumstances [7]. Hence, everybody has a human interior, or a soul, when phrased in Western terms. In addition, when considering Viveiro de Castro's thoughts on perspectivism [8], in which everyone sees themselves as human, it can be concluded that in animist ontology, a cultural continuum exists across all human and non-human species [7]. This means that the monkey may wear anything or appear as anything he wants, but inside he will always be human, or seen from a human's perspective, a monkey. From their own perspective, therefore, a Siona will always be a Siona inside, no matter how he or she presents himself or herself to the outside. In this way, when seen from an animist perspective, identity is a hybrid concept that is able to change. As shown above, language and clothing, which are embedded in Siona ideology, form one authentic part of Siona identity. Even though they only represent a fraction of Siona identity, they are used to present a rigid picture of indigeneity, as requested by global actors, such as (conservationist) NGOs and tourists, in order to be accepted as a donor target on the one hand and, in this case more importantly, the legitimate owners of the Cuyabeno.

Taking into account foucauldian poststructuralist insights [38,39], it can be argued that the Siona are made subjects of more powerful actors, such as NGOs or the state. There exists some ambivalence between embodying and presenting an identity that stands in line with one's own values but that simultaneously is accepted by the outside world. Certainly, a balance has to be found and constantly upheld between externally imposed views and self-representation. However, I would like to stress the point that this argument should neither negate local people's agency nor their authenticity. Even though the Siona present a picture required from the outside, they are still Siona. Thus, they create their contemporary collective identity using traditional elements that have always been part of Siona life. When comparing this research with similar previous studies, its contribution on the importance of identity stands out. Indeed, while other authors have focused more generally on the region [5], on a different indigenous group and their environmental struggles [40], or on ontological perspectives [41], there is no recent study on the Siona and their battle for survival. The only study focusing on the Siona was conducted twenty years ago, when Siona-Secoya was considered a single indigenous group [4].

6. Conclusions

For these reasons, large-scale land acquisition processes under the name of conservationism must be analyzed regarding their implications for all concerned actors. The RPFC is presented as a protected

¹⁵ Original version: *Aunque el mono se vista de seda, mono es.*

¹⁶ When assuming an animist perspective, it is not disrespectful to compare a person to a monkey because both are actually human, as will be explained in a moment.

area where flora and fauna can thrive in an undisturbed manner, a forest sanctuary where Nature can still be observed in its pristine condition. Eco-tourism is promoted in the area and many Western tourists trek to the Amazon in order to observe this natural heritage. Local responses to tourism as one aspect of the grabbing process include ambiguous reactions. On the one hand, tourism provides—albeit in very modest ways—a source of income in one of Ecuador’s most marginalized and geographically remote regions. On the other hand, it does not concur with local visions of an environmentally friendly lifestyle and physically takes away land that was formerly managed exclusively by this local indigenous group. It has been shown in African [39,42] and Asian [43] contexts how commons systems provide vital resources for marginal groups, the dismantling of which undermines the resilience of social and ecological systems [44,45]. In this way, this article can be seen as congruent.

Furthermore, this article has shown how the reigning ideology in a society defines which discourses and forms of legitimization are acceptable. In the process of commons and resilience grabbing, the Western ideology of conservationism has spread to many parts of the world, where indigenous people find themselves obligated to legitimize their existence in resourceful areas in conservationist terms [14,38,46]. Consequently, the study’s main contribution to the debate around commons grabbing processes consists of focusing on its influence on identity building processes. This article has illustrated parts of a land grabbing process from the perspective of the Siona, a group of local indigenous people who, even though their agency is restricted, do not accept mere victimhood. Instead, they develop their own strategies and re-create their identities, including institution shopping from below.

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