

Book Review: Beatriz Huertas Castillo, *Indigenous Peoples in Isolation in the Peruvian Amazon: Their Struggle for Survival and Freedom*

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Abstract.

In *Indigenous Peoples in Isolation in the Peruvian Amazon: Their Struggle for Survival and Freedom*, Beatriz Huertas Castillo examines the vulnerability of isolated aboriginal groups, focusing on those groups residing in the Amazonian region of Peru. As well as describing the problems facing indigenous Peruvian groups today, she offers insights into the historical events that have contributed to their position of vulnerability. Finding a balance between respecting an indigenous group's desire to remain isolated and ensuring that their needs are represented and protected is a delicate task. Castillo presents the complexities of this precarious balancing act and makes some recommendations on how it might best be handled.

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Book Review

Beatriz Huertas Castillo, *Indigenous Peoples in Isolation in the Peruvian Amazon: Their Struggle for Survival and Freedom*. Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2004. Pp. 247, paper. \$25.00 US.

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In *Indigenous Peoples in Isolation in the Peruvian Amazon: Their Struggle for Survival and Freedom*, Beatriz Huertas Castillo examines the vulnerability of isolated aboriginal groups, focusing on those groups residing in the Amazonian region of Peru. As well as describing the problems facing indigenous Peruvian groups today, she offers insights into the historical events that have contributed to their position of vulnerability. Finding a balance between respecting an indigenous group's desire to remain isolated and ensuring that their needs are represented and protected is a delicate task. Castillo presents the complexities of this precarious balancing act and makes some recommendations on how it might best be handled.

Castillo outlines the problems faced by isolated aboriginal groups in today's world by using the example of those living in the Peruvian Amazon, specifically those in the department of Madre de Dios, close to the Bolivian border in southeastern Peru. She describes who these voluntarily isolated peoples are and what factors contribute to their decision to remain apart from wider society. In doing so, she provides a well-rounded overview of the history of indigenous peoples of the Peruvian Amazon, outlining issues they have dealt with such as outsiders encroaching on their land and exploiting their natural resources.

Based on the descriptions in this book, both historic and recent, the isolated indigenous peoples of the Peruvian Amazon have experienced what can be described as cultural genocide or ethnocide, the destruction of a group's culture. At the same time, they have had to cope with overt and purposeful violence aimed at destroying them or removing them from their habitats in order to facilitate "modernization," development, or resource exploitation. Violence is a common theme in the stories of these groups. Members of some isolated indigenous communities have claimed that they were "hunted like animals." Pressured by transnational forces and exposed to disease and environmental destruction, as well as governments, organizations, and companies intent on modifying their lifestyles and livelihoods, isolated Amazonian indigenous groups are some of the most threatened peoples in the world today. Current problems facing the indigenous groups of the Madre de Dios region include logging, mining, oil and gas exploration, colonization, and government plans to open up the region to tourism. There are fears that some, if not many, of the isolated indigenous peoples in the Peruvian Amazon could become extinct if efforts are not made to protect and promote their rights to life, liberty, health, and physical and mental well-being.

Ethnocide in the Peruvian Amazon also occurs when non-native religious organizations promote their views and actively seek to discourage the practice of indigenous traditions. It is important to note, however, that although ethnocidal policies are practiced widely, they have not necessarily led to cultural disintegration.

One reason that groups opt to move further into the forest and avoid contact if at all possible is to maintain their cultural, economic, and spiritual identities.

Castillo points out that isolated indigenous peoples have had to abandon their traditional areas and move to new places, in some cases to escape destructive development projects; one example is the Camasea gas project, whose pipelines have experienced leaks, fouling rivers and affecting the quality of drinking water, fish, and aquatic animals such as turtles. Children in environmentally polluted areas exhibit a variety of health problems.

Each indigenous group has experienced colonization in its own unique way, but they often share the same story of exploitation, vulnerability, and violations of their human rights. Castillo's efforts to provide context for the group of indigenous peoples living in the Madre de Dios area shed light on the reasons why indigenous groups wish to remain isolated and avoid exposure to the complexities of modern society.

Members of isolated indigenous groups have moved out of areas where there are environmental problems, expanding numbers of outsiders, and rising disease rates. The impacts of these migrations include tensions and conflicts between host populations and newcomers. As recently as June 2008, a small group of isolated Makuxi Indians was attacked by gunmen hired by a local businessman in Roraima, Brazil. In 2000, a massacre of a dozen Tagaeris, who total less than 300 in the Ecuadorean Amazon, was carried out by other Indians at the behest of a logging company seeking to exploit resources in their area. The effects of these varied processes on isolated indigenous peoples include depopulation, social and economic collapse, misery, and, in some cases, rising suicide rates. A major problem, according to Castillo and to spokespersons for organizations working to protect isolated indigenous peoples, is that government policies with respect to groups that choose to remain isolated are vague at best.

Castillo also examines the efforts of indigenous organizations to represent and protect those groups residing in the Amazonian region of Peru, one example being FENAMAD (Federacion Nativa del Rio Madre de Dios y Afluentes, meaning "the native federation of the Madre de Dios River and its tributaries"). In addition, she discusses the diverse impacts of outsiders—including missionaries, anthropologists, hunters, loggers, oil companies, miners, fishermen, and gatherers of wild edible and medicinal plants—on the region.

Specifically, Castillo delves into the rich and complex history of the aboriginal peoples of Madre de Dios, beginning with the rubber boom of the 1850s–1920s, during which their lands were destroyed, they were exposed to disease epidemics in which large numbers died, and many were left in positions of bonded labor, dependent on "rubber barons." Since then, the indigenous peoples of southeastern Peru have had to cope with the intrusions of the above-mentioned outsiders.

Today, some three-quarters of the Peruvian Amazon—approximately 123 million acres—has been allocated by the government to oil and gas exploration. Logging and mining operations dot the landscape, and there are plans to put large roads in the area. Not surprisingly, local people react negatively to the incursions of outsiders, and in some cases violence results, with casualties on both sides. The types of violence have been wide-ranging, including but not limited to clashes between outsiders and indigenous groups in which members of indigenous communities have died; retaliation by rubber barons, loggers, miners, and others when members of indigenous groups leave their employ; rapes of indigenous women; disappearances of members of indigenous groups; and booby-trapping of trade goods left in the forests for isolated

indigenous peoples. Members of isolated indigenous groups have also been captured, held in detention, and mistreated. While large-scale massacres of indigenous groups are rarer now than they used to be, they have sometimes occurred, as, for example, in the case of a group of Brazilian Yanomami who were killed by *garimperos* (gold miners) in 1993. Conflicts between members of national Indian organizations such as the National Indian Foundation of Brazil (FUNAI) resulted in a decision by FUNAI to change its policy of seeking direct contact with voluntarily isolated indigenous communities, opting instead to leave them alone.

In an effort to end conflicts and reduce impacts on isolated indigenous peoples, Castillo offers some proposals on ways to handle the various issues, ranging from the establishment of protected natural areas (PNAs) and indigenous reserves to rules about how contacts should take place. She also suggests ways to handle contacts once they have occurred and outlines some useful proposals involving emergency health plans, land zoning, and contingency plans.

Castillo notes that national Peruvian indigenous organizations such as AIDSESEP (Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana, meaning “inter-ethnic association for the development of the Peruvian jungle”) have played important roles in addressing the issue of isolated indigenous peoples. AIDSESEP’s National Assembly created a National Program for Indigenous Peoples in Isolation and Initial Contact at its Nineteenth Congress in December 2002. AIDSESEP, FENAMAD, and other organizations have pressed the Peruvian government to create territorial reserves for indigenous peoples who prefer to remain isolated. They have also sought to persuade the government to establish state policies on the rights of isolated indigenous groups. Castillo emphasizes, however, that there are legal loopholes in the national legislation on land titling and a lack of clarity with respect to institutional responsibilities and mechanisms for protecting small-scale indigenous groups from outside intrusion.

Interestingly, in the late 1990s oil companies such as Mobil came up with policies on risk assessment and social behavior, drawing on their experiences with isolated indigenous peoples. The government of Peru has also considered developing policies that protect isolated indigenous peoples, though these have yet to be implemented in any serious way. From the perspective of some isolated indigenous peoples, the Peruvian government and other institutions, including some (though not all) faith-based organizations, are pursuing policies aimed at cultural modification, settlement, and economic and environmental transformation that would ultimately undermine the cultures of indigenous peoples. It is for this reason that at least some of the indigenous groups in the Peruvian Amazon prefer to avoid contact with outsiders.

Castillo has much to offer in her descriptions of historical events and of efforts by indigenous organizations in Peru to create protected territories for isolated groups. She treats in detail the situations of a number of different indigenous groups, including Murunahua, Mashco Piro, Isconahua, and Harakmbut. When it comes to offering concrete proposals for change *vis-à-vis* such efforts, however, she becomes very idealistic. She describes the years of turmoil involved in creating a territorial reserve against the wishes of the logging companies, yet her proposals do not take into account the needed shift in ideology. Her suggestions involve making contingency plans for interacting with isolated groups in the event of contact, preventing outside agents from interfering with isolated groups, and creating territories strictly for the use of such groups. Although all these measures are necessary to the survival of the vulnerable groups, they would be expensive endeavors. In the absence of an ideological shift

whereby the government begins to feel responsible for isolated indigenous groups, some sort of incentive would be necessary to entice the Peruvian government into investing large sums in Castillo's proposals.

Representing the needs of a group of people who have chosen the survival strategy of non-contact is difficult. This is especially true when at least some politicians and government agencies would prefer to follow a policy of purposeful contact and assimilation, something that some indigenous peoples in the Madre de Dios region and other parts of Peru would like to avoid. Castillo's approach, which involves studying the histories of isolated groups along with the issues they currently face, is a useful one. Castillo raises important questions for genocide scholars and those interested in indigenous peoples' rights and development. In the words of genocide scholar Leo Kuper,

The varied processes associated with this diversity of annihilatory contexts offer different possibilities for preventive action. The destruction of hunting and gathering groups tends to be the least accessible for monitoring and preventive action. They maintain few, if any, relations with other groups, and their annihilation has little significance for the wider society. Their habitats are usually remote areas, removed from contact and visibility, and their victimizers are generally invading groups of settlers or development agencies.

When governments intervene on behalf of the victims, their intervention tends to be half-hearted or inept, offering little protection against the undermining of the culture and the ultimate destruction of the group. The outside world generally reacts with indifference to the fate of these groups, save where there are broader and more threatening implications, as in the ecological destruction consequent upon the deforestation of the Amazon basin.¹

Castillo's recommended strategies attempt to address these kinds of concerns, bringing together ideas, perspectives, and policies that draw on the viewpoints of indigenous peoples; the state; non-governmental organizations, including environmental, indigenous-rights, and community-based organizations; and the private sector. Her proposals, if subscribed to fully, would go a long way toward resolving the complex issues facing those contemporary indigenous peoples who choose to remain isolated, not only in the Peruvian Amazon but in other parts of the world as well.

Note

1. Leo Kuper, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 158.