

Walking in the footsteps of the forefathers. The concept of “ancestry” between political use of molecular biology and indigenous territory, understood as a relationship between the living and the dead

Camminando sulle orme degli antenati. Il concetto di “ascendenza” tra un uso politico della biologia molecolare e il territorio indigeno, inteso come spazio di relazione tra vivi e defunti

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The sons of Anco Hallo¹

- 1 Arriving in the picturesque square of the little town of Lamas, located in the Upper Peruvian Amazon forest, the visitors can admire a large golden monument, depicting two men shaking hands. It is a tribute offered in 2008, by the municipality, to the legendary founders of the city. One of them, with a long mustache and dressed in Spanish armor, is the colonizer Martín de la Riva y Herrera. The other one, wearing a feather headdress, is an indigenous leader, heir of the *Chanka* warrior named Anco Hallo. Both are carrying weapons: a rifle and a spear. Nevertheless, the two men are immortalized during the act of peace that generated the alliance between the two great peoples, from which all *Mestizos*² living in Lamas claim to descend. The Spanish commander Martín de la Riva y Herrera is, in fact, the one who founded the ancient

Ciudad del Triunfo de la Santísima Cruz de los Motilones de Lamas on October 10, 1656. Anco Hallo, on the other hand, reminds every Peruvian historian of the famous story of the powerful *Chanka* warriors. They, according to legend, bravely rebelled against *Inca* rule and abandoned their native lands, located in the Andean region of *Huancavelica*, to find refuge in the dense and impregnable Peruvian jungle.

- 2 The *Chanka* population is described, by several local chroniclers, as composed of strong and fearless warriors who were partially conquered by the *Tawantinsuyu*³, but were never completely submitted by the Incas (De La Vega 1963; Quintana 1976). It seems that General Anco Hallo caused the *Chanka*-*Inca* War (1438) by invading Cuzco with the aim of expanding his Nation. After a disastrous defeat, the *Chanka* army had to retreat and face, a short time later, *Tawantinsuyu*'s offensive: during the famous battle of *Yahuarpampa*, which marked the beginning of Incan expansionism, the *Chanka* army was overwhelmed (Rostworowski 2001; Kurin *et al.* 2014). For this reason, Anco Hallo chose to lead his people into voluntary exile in northern Peru. In the 15th century, the wandering *Chankas* founded the small Amazonian settlement of Lamas, by subjugating the Natives and mixing with them. According to the myth, told to all tourists, from this ancient encounter descends the current indigenous *Kichwa* population that lives in the lower part of the small town.
- 3 Lamas is located in the San Martín department, 2667 feet above sea level, between the *Huallaga* River and the *Río Mayo*. It is divided, like many other colonial cities, into seven different neighborhoods (*barrios*): *Ancohallo*, *San Juan*, *Calvario*, *Quilloalpa*, *Muniches*, *Zaragoza* and *Huaico*. The last one (called *Wayku* in the native idiom) is the indigenous *barrio*. Despite the extraordinary proximity to the *Mestizos*, the *Kichwas* maintain their own way of life: they are semi-nomadic and live mainly by polyculture, harvesting, fishing, raising chickens and pigs, and hunting small animals. Each of these activities, according to local perception, constitutes an important criterion of differentiation, which allows the natives to self-identify as "real people" (*seres humanos legítimos*), that is as *sacha runakuna* (men of the forest, in *kichwa*).
- 4 Every day, several tourist vans drive along the unpaved streets of the native district. Travelers admire, from their windows, the typical *Kichwa* houses, built with unbaked clay, with *shapaja* (*Attalea phalerata*) palm leaves and with ceramic tiles. On the doorstep, they watch elderly women weaving colorful belts (*chumpikuna*) and cleaning cotton. Some indigenous children dance barefoot and sing in the indigenous language. After the stop at the *Wayku barrio*, sightseeing buses drive to the upper part of the city to reach the Lamas Museum. There, a guide (with a penchant for evolutionary theories) relates the supposed history of the city. In this version of the past, characterized by a double process of native civilization (*Chanka* and Spanish), the modern indigenous people are considered the *Mestizos*' ancestors:

In ancient times, many indigenous people lived in these lands. They wore no clothes and walked barefoot (a characteristic that still distinguishes the *Kichwas* today). They were not even able to speak. Lamas was conquered twice: the first time around 1438, when the *Chanka* group came to this area [...]. The second in 1650, with the Spanish colonization. The *Chankas* met the natives [...] and taught them the *Quechua* language. They also brought them leather clothes. [...] From this relationship came the *Kichwas*. Later, the Spaniards introduced the Catholic religion, cotton clothes and the Castilian language. Some Conquistadors mixed with the *Chankas*, while others mixed with the *Kichwas*: we, the so-called *Mestizos*, descend from those encounters (G.S., museum visit, 10 August 2017).

- 5 Over the years this historical reconstruction has been questioned by several anthropologists, archeologists, and linguists (Calderón Pacheco 2003; Figueroa 1986; Scazzocchio 1979; Weiss 1949), who believe that the current *Kichwas* are descendants of a series of Amazonian populations forced, by Jesuit missionaries, to live together in the so-called “*Reducciones de Indios*” (or Missions), where they had no choice but to learn *Quechua* as a *lingua franca*.
- 6 Given the conflict between a narrative produced by an important oral tradition and historical data, two teams of geneticists joint the debate, between 2012 and 2017, trying to put an end to the discussion (Barbieri *et al.* 2017; Sandoval *et al.* 2016). Through the analysis of the uniparental DNA⁴ of the *Kichwa* people and its comparison with some samples collected in *Huancavelica* and others obtained from the adjacent native groups, the scientists demonstrated that the *Chanka* origin myth has no biological basis. This essay aims to highlight some of the political or, better, territorial consequences of this unusual encounter, between scientists and indigenous people.
- 7 In recent years, many ethnographers have focused on the social and ideological implications of molecular biology. Various cultural anthropologists, for instance, have discovered the politics of identity, born in indigenous or local contexts, after the dissemination of paleoanthropology studies (Kent 2013; Kent, Ventura Santos 2012; Solinas 2013; Tamarkin 2014; Trupiano 2013). Medical anthropologists, on the other hand, have introduced the concept of “bio-sociality” (Rabinow 1996), revealing that certain genetic data can forge human communities that self-identify as enclosed within biological boundaries (Simpson 2000)⁵.
- 8 Even though they have investigated different aspects of the relationships between geneticists and human groupings, all these enquiries share one fundamental premise: desoxyribonucleic acid should be analyzed in the same manner as a social practice, a collective representation, or a traditional knowledge. In other words, DNA should be considered just like any other ethnographic object. For this reason, anthropologists should not focus on the scientific data itself, but rather on the way in which this data is handled, at a symbolic level, by local populations (Simpson 2000: 3). In the case described here, the biological reinterpretation of Natives’ past is used as a powerful strategic tool within the political arenas, related to the recognition of indigenous territorial rights.
- 9 This article is divided into two different stages. First, I will attempt to show the centrality of the ancestral-genetic narrative within the current political Amazonian context. *Kichwa* indigenous people have been facing, for several years, a territorial conflict due to the establishment of a Natural Conservation Area on their homelands. In order to question the legitimacy of native claims, the Regional Government of San Martín (GORESAM) puts forward the hypothesis of the *Chanka* migration. On the other hand, some native leaders use the aforementioned genetic data as proof of their Amazonian origins and, consequently, of their “ancestral relationship” with the surrounding territories.
- 10 Secondly, I will try to demonstrate that the connection between the ideas of “native ancestry” and “indigenous land” is conveniently acquired by local leaders, with the help of cultural mediators (NGOs, lawyers, and bilingual teachers) that implement a process of vernacularization (Marry 2006) of the legal and scientific language,

generating a connection between the *Kichwas* and a «transnational indigenous network» (Niezen 2003).

- 11 This ethnographic case highlights a major misunderstanding about the concepts of “ancestry” and “territory” whose meaning, in the native sphere, overcomes limits imposed by national jurisdiction and legal terminology. It is, in fact, in the permanent presence of ancestor's intentionality that we can identify the real meaning of the ancestral link between the Natives and their lands.

“Blood cannot lie, or so they say”. The discovery of the origins and the defense of “ancestral territory”

- 12 Between the 1970s and 1980s, a number of political, economic, and social transformations occurred in the Peruvian state. These changes stimulated the growth of the mining industry and created the conditions for the development of a market economy in the Amazon context. The construction of the *Fernando Belaúnde Terry* road, for instance, favored the expansion of commercial monocultures such as coffee, maize, rice, and coca plants⁶. This clearly changed the relationship between native populations and the forest: «other needs arose, [...] and natural resources began to be depleted due to deforestation, animal depredation and rivers' contamination» (Espinosa 2009: 154). The demographic growth, and the subsequent impact of human activities on woodland, forced the state to develop conservation strategies for natural resources. In 1997, Peru drafted the first law designed to promote the creation of Protected Natural Areas (*Áreas Naturales Protegidas*), «continental and/or marine spaces expressly recognized [...] to conserve biological diversity and other related cultural and scientific values» (Article 1, Law 26834, 4 July 1997). In this regard, several Regional Conservation Areas (ACR) were established on Peruvian soil, with the aim of safeguarding landscapes and conserving endangered animal and plant species (SERNANP 2013: 5).
- 13 The *Cordillera Escalera* ACR was instituted in the region of San Martín in 2005 to preserve the ecosystem of the *Cordillera Escalera*, an imposing mountain range that divides the two Amazonian regions of Peru (*Selva Alta* and *Selva Baja*). This 149870-hectare protected Natural Park soon became the object of bitter territorial conflicts involving the natives and the Regional Government (GORESAM). It is believed that, in the early 2000s, there were more than a hundred *Kichwa*, *Awajun* and *Shawi*-speaking indigenous settlements in San Martín. Many of them lived within the current boundaries of the Regional Conservation Area. However, after its creation, several native villages were relocated to better preserve flora and fauna and to prevent land loss as a result of cultivation. Today, many indigenous leaders accuse the San Martín Government of appropriating native ancestral territories, for its own economic gains, in the name of environmental protection. This impression is clearly accentuated by the fact that the extractive company Talisman is the current owner of an oilfield, located in the heart of the Regional Conservation Area⁷.
- 14 One of the *Kichwa* settlements most affected by the presence of the Natural Park is *Nuevo Lamas de Shapaja*, located in the San Martín Province⁸ and officially recognized, by the Peruvian Government, as a Native Community in 2016. According to Article 89 of the Constitution and to Statute 22175, Native Communities (*Comunidades Nativas*) are socio-economic units «formed by family groups, tied by [...] a common language or

dialect, by some cultural and social attributes and by the collective and permanent possession and use of the same territory» (Article 8, Statute 22175, 1978). In the San Martín Region, there are currently 79 indigenous *Kichwa* settlements, however only 15 of them have been officially recognized as Native Communities. The Peruvian State, through this denomination, establishes their juridical existence and recognizes them legal personality, guaranteeing the integrity of their traditional territory through Land Titling.

- 15 In 2016, during the official recognition procedure of *Nuevo Lamas de Shapaja*, the Regional Government of San Martín assigned the inhabitants of this settlement just over 31 hectares, which correspond to 1.95% of the land traditionally used by the indigenous for the provision of food, water, and medical resources. The remaining 1620 hectares of the forest belong to the *Cordillera Escalera ACR* and were granted to the Natives with a simple land use right agreement. I cannot go into all the problems generated by this situation, but it is important to remark that this agreement contains many limitations on the *Kichwas* that prevent them from hunting, breeding small animals, practicing polyculture and, in general, developing a native *modus vivendi* in that territory.
- 16 For this reason, in 2017, *Nuevo Lamas de Shapaja* and the indigenous *Kichwa* federation CEPKA⁹ presented to the High Court (*Corte Superior de Justicia*) of San Martín an appeal against the Regional Government and the authorities of *Cordillera Escalera ACR*. They, according to the indigenous leaders, failed to meet the requirement of prior and informed consultation (*Consulta Previa*) before the creation of the Regional Conservation Area in their homelands¹⁰. At the same time, CEPKA accused the Ministry of Agriculture of not having set uniform national criteria for the concession of land title to Native Communities, allowing each Regional Government to define these parameters independently. According to the indigenous federation and the native leaders, these actions represented a violation of *Kichwa*'s constitutional rights: the right to social, cultural, and physical integrity, the right to choose their own development model and, of course, the property rights on ancestral territories. In August 2018, however, the High Court of San Martín declared CEPKA's claims unfounded.
- 17 During this conflict, in 2017, the San Martín Government promoted an aggressive media campaign. Through it, the regional authorities wanted to respond to *Kichwas*' accusations, describing indigenous leaders as puppets of the oil companies. Several players also began to question the legitimacy of *Kichwas*' territorial claims, on the basis of their hypothetical Andean origin: «This assumption that they are not really Amazonian» reports an anthropologist involved in the conflict «is often used by the *Dirección Regional Agraria* to deny land title to *Kichwa* communities» (M.B., interview, 12 August 2018). Moreover, on social networks, some supporters of the media campaign strategically used the myth of *Chanka* migration to describe *Kichwa* peoples as "enemies" of the environment, who follow the Sierra tradition of felling trees (FECONAU, CEPKA, 2018: 18).
- 18 Given the importance accorded, by the Regional Government, to this ethnic narrative that considers *Kichwas*' origin a valid argument for the denial of their territorial claims, indigenous leaders today use and reverse the same political discourse:

The problem is to understand who arrived first: the [Regional] Government claims that the ancestral territory overlaps the *Cordillera Escalera*, but it is obvious that it is the *Cordillera Escalera* that overlaps the forests in which we learned to hunt, fish, and gather, thanks to our ancestors. Many people say we are *Chanka*. But if you see

things from geneticists’ point of view, that makes you realize that we are not migrants. It shows you that our territories are... are ancestral territories, right? That our grandparents and great-grandparents have lived in these lands for many centuries. [...] Our requests are not just simple whims. [...] The State and the Region want to deny this fact. But our genes are Amazonian, and so we have been living here for a very long time (CEPKA founder, interview, 14 May 2018).

19 As these words make clear, and as several contemporary anthropologists assert, molecular biology investigations (if reinterpreted by a non-expert audience) can potentially influence the present as well as the future of the populations involved, in accordance with the reconfiguration of their past (Kent 2013; Solinas 2013; Trupiano 2013; Tamarkin 2014).

20 In the case analyzed here, the use of genetical data does not simply allow the natives to demonstrate (once and for all) that they are not migrants. The idea that a kind of “native Amazonian identity” is concealed in their nucleotide text¹¹ enables the *Kichwa* to defend themselves against accusations of being a menace to the environment. Relying on the rhetoric of the «ecologically noble savage» (Hames 2007), they can finally claim to be “indigenous protectors of the environment”, thus getting rid of the backwardness label. An idea still too often associated, in South American countries, with indigenous peoples:

Me, I feel more Amazonian: I feel that I belong to my territory, and I will always defend it. [...] The process of Land Titling for Native Communities is crucial for environmental protection: we, the indigenous people, are working with a number of foreign organizations to reduce greenhouse gases. We, like all native peoples in the world, support this issue. But San Martín’s authorities are questioning our indigenous nature: you dress properly, you put on shoes, you speak Castilian and automatically you are not indigenous. Why not? I can dress as I like, but I’m still indigenous. [...] I am 100% Native. My grandfather sometimes used to go naked, didn’t he? My aunt still walks barefoot. Not me. But so what? Is that why I’m not indigenous? I feel Native because my blood is theirs, my genes are theirs. Blood can’t lie...or so they say, can it? (W.G., interview, 7 May 2018).

21 Many contemporary scholars point out that such excluding and essentialist categories are incompatible with indigenous South American cosmologies. As we will discuss in the following paragraphs, Amazonian identity is a fluid and elusive notion that needs to be continually reaffirmed and reformulated. Even the relationship that Natives have with Alterity is configured more like a “encounter of relations” than a “collision of substances”(Belaunde 2008; Gow 1991; Rival 2005; de Souza 2014). For this reason, concepts such as “indigenous territory”, “native blood or ancestry”, and “Amazonian genes” do not seem to find a place in the Native’s «relational universe» (Viveiros de Castro 2004).

22 Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the fact that, in the context presented here, the territorial conflict led the *Kichwas* to reshape their collective identity, borrowing alien concepts. This peculiar inclination to incorporate foreign discourses, knowledge, and institutions is nothing new for Native Amazonian communities. In *Histoire de lynx* (1991), Claude Lévi-Strauss points out that, since colonial times, the Amerindians showed their ability to incorporate and reconfigure different elements from the outside world: Christian religion, for example, as well as money, bureaucracy, and political institutions. This receptive attitude has often been described (by nearby Creole populations, NGOs, and foreign scholars) as an undesirable consequence of the so-called “acculturation”. According to this interpretation, contact with Western culture would

have generated in the past (and continues to produce in the present) a kind of submissive behavior in the natives that lead them to uncritically assimilate any novelty or change from outside¹². On closer inspection, however, this idea pivots on a premise of “cultural genuineness” or “authenticity” that misrepresents Amazonian indigenous peoples (Gow 1991; Belaunde 2008; Chaumeil 2010; Viveiros De Castro 2017).

- 23 Since the time of the European invasion, the history of South American native communities has always been characterized by the political negotiation of their positioning (with respect to conquerors, to *mestizos*, to the national state or to foreign multinationals). The systematic appropriation of alien notions, institutions or technologies should not be interpreted, therefore, as a manifestation of cultural depletion generated by the impact of the West on native societies. Rather, it should be observed as a form of «endogenous transformation» (Carneiro da Cunha 2007: XII), a social reproduction creative ability (Favole 2010; Santos-Granero 2021), which allows the indigenous to recuperate their agency and to claim their rights in front of national and regional institutions.
- 24 Let’s take an example. In the past, the term “indigenous” was often rejected by a large part of the *Kichwa* population. Until the 1990s, a number of native settlements refused various political and territorial advantages so as not to be officially classified by the Peruvian Government as “Indigenous peoples”. Today, on the contrary, self-identification as “Natives” allows the *Kichwas* to connect to a transnational indigenous network and to rely on supra-national institutions that have the power to force the Peruvian state and the Regional Governments to recognize their territorial claims (Niezen 2003; Sapignoli 2018; Surrallés 2009)¹³.
- 25 In accordance with this, it seems appropriate to analyze the *Kichwa* native movement, as a new global phenomenon (Niezen 2003): although indigenous leaders understand the importance of finding a specific political path, many of their claims refer to a «general indigenous subjectivity» (Mouriès 2014: 22). The numerous references to the United Nation Declaration on Indigenous Peoples, to ILO Convention no. 169, and to the right on prior and informed consultation precisely serve this purpose. From these considerations, it appears clear that even biomolecular narratives, that assume a relationship between the possession of a land and a supposed “indigenous ancestry”, are the result of the acquisition of strategic discourses, born in the international sphere and spread in the local context by some “cultural mediators”. During my fieldwork, I attended many seminars given by NGOs, anthropologists, lawyers, and bilingual teachers, who wanted to propose a “decolonized indigenous history”¹⁴, through a process of “vernacularization” (Marry 2006) of the linguistic, historical, and scientific investigations conducted in San Martín. Consider, as an example, the following words, uttered by an anthropologist working for GIZ¹⁵, a German institution devoted to international cooperation and sustainable development¹⁶:
- Well, are the *Kichwas* the first inhabitants of this area? [The audience, after a brief discussion, agreed]. Does this genetic study help us to justify the right to a territory? [...] In a globalized world, everyone says that we are equal, that we all have the same rights. Nevertheless, it is always important to know who populated these lands first, who cultivated them. Because this is not just simple forest: it is an ancestral territory that has been settled by people, for generations (GIZ anthropologist, workshop, 7 July 2018).
- 26 With these words, indigenous identity emerges as a transnational analytical category, capable of revealing something significant about local identities, against «the forces of

cultural uniformity and against the appropriation of Indigenous people’s sovereignty by states» (Niezen 2003: 2). In such a scenario, even the models of bio-sociality that genomics makes accessible to these cultural mediators «seems good to think and -possibly- to act on» (Palmié 2007: 210).

DNA, autochthony, and ancestral lands. Towards a “genealogical model” of territory

- 27 In the introduction to the famous book, entitled *Tierra Adentro*, Pedro García Hierro and Alexandre Surrallés provocatively question whether it is plausible to assert that, thanks to the process of Land Titling, the inhabitants of South American Native Communities can hope to develop, within the granted territories, their own production models, and *modus vivendi* (García Hierro, Surrallés 2004:9). The question is, of course, rhetorical. As I have tried to suggest through the presentation of the ethnographic case of *Nuevo Lamas de Shapaja*, lands granted by the state to the indigenous people do not often satisfy their real needs. Indeed, they represent small or fragmented habitats, contaminated or superficial lands, as well as areas invaded by mining companies. For this reason, nowadays, in the context analyzed here, many native leaders are suspicious and do not always look favorably on local and foreign NGOs that try to help them with the recognition of their “ancestral lands”.
- 28 In this paragraph I want to propose the following hypothesis: the territorial conflict between indigenous social players and state or regional authorities is the result of a big misunderstanding surrounding the concepts of “ancestry” and “territory”. On the one hand, as it emerges from the ethnographic case presented above, political circumstances often encourage native leaders to dialogue with national and regional institutions using a legal terminology that defines “territory” as a specific area enclosed within identifiable boundaries. On the other hand, however, a large portion of the indigenous *Kichwa* population continues to think of their territorial claims through a more Amazonian and “relational” conception of environment. It seems reasonable, therefore, to suppose that the local notion of “territory” can hardly enter into a political fruitful relationship with the ideas of “indigenous descent” and “ancestral heritage” (proposed by cultural mediators and strategically acquired by indigenous leaders) if the latter ideas are not revisited in the light of local categories.
- 29 The term “ancestry” approximately translates the Castilian word “*ancestralidad*”, so popular today within native and NGO political discourses. It is quite common, for instance, to find bilingual teachers promoting the recovery of an “ancestral *Kichwa* idiom”, or local authorities sponsoring meetings between the so-called “*abuelos nativos*” (native grandparents), with the aim of celebrating their “ancestral knowledge” and their “traditional culture”. As I tried to point out in the previous section, these notions have an ambivalent nature. From an internal perspective, the idea of “*ancestralidad*” represents the historical set of named and unnamed forefathers, acting as actual “bridges” (Zerubavel 2012), that is, capable of keeping whole communities together within a specific geographical space. From another perspective, however, the generic idea of “ancestral identity” (no matter whether it is Amazonian, North American, Andean, or African) helps the social players involved to become part of the Indigenous global movement (Chirif 1997; Niezen 2003; Sapiñoli 2018).

- 30 According to the anthropologist Adam Kuper, it is precisely due to this ambiguity, characterizing the «glocal» (Favre 2005) native reality that the risk of identity reification may emerge. In such a context, in fact, spokespeople and cultural mediators «demand recognition of alternative ways of understanding the world, but ironically enough they do so in the idiom of Western culture theory» (Kuper 2003: 395). Consider the many discourses quoted in the previous paragraph. Native leaders, who helped geneticists with blood and saliva collection and who are now fighting for their rights, are used to applying, on the idea of “territory”, the all-Western category of “autochthony”¹⁷. The latter represents the belief that human groupings derive their right to possess a certain piece of land because they have “always lived there” and their ancestors (who settled there before) have handed it down to them. Within such a narration, the notions of “ancestry” and “descent” become vehicles for the idea that true territorial belonging is only a matter «blood and soil» (Kuper 2003: 395). This is not surprising, considering that even the United Nation official documents define a human group as “indigenous” or “aboriginal” because it lived on its land «before settlers came from elsewhere» (United Nation 1997: 3)¹⁸.
- 31 The production of such a political narrative, insisting on the temporal primacy, and the many references to a shared bodily substance represent a clear expression of what anthropologist Tim Ingold calls the “genealogical model” (Ingold 2000). This is a (typically Western) way of perceiving social and territorial ties. The genealogical model, as described by Ingold, is characterized by an arboreal representation capable of graphically identifying the concept of “ancestry”, understood as an ahistorical and natural data. In this paradigm, common identity, far from being considered a cultural choice, is seen as a given element shared by social players and defined through the «transmission of biogenetic substances prior to their life in the world» (ibidem: 133). Here, intangible culture heritage, traditional values and common idioms are also considered ancestral characteristics transmissible (together with blood and genes) along the descent lines. On the basis of a classificatory operation, according to which individuals and peoples are placed on the many branches of a large family tree, the genealogical model seems to suggest that even the land (taken, claimed or protected) is nothing but «a surface [...], serving to support its inhabitants» (ibidem: 133). It is therefore not surprising that within territorial conflicts people often refer to the recovery or appropriation of “strategic resources”: water, animals, plants and places are seen, through this paradigm, as material legacies handed down within a long ancestral chain.
- 32 From this point of view, it seems important to emphasize that cultural mediators involved in San Martín’s territorial conflicts today are not only using biomolecular investigations, but also archaeological studies, wanting to certify and protect *Kichwa*’s customary culture connected with their use of the forest. In this manner, they hope to demonstrate that the current management of “traditional native territories” by the Regional Government jeopardizes the survival of a presumed “cultural identity” handed down, with the “ancestral territory”, over the centuries: «this is a very serious fact, which affects *Kichwa* people and determines [...] the interruption of the process of transmission of the native idiom and of other fundamental knowledge» (Vecco 2018: 11).
- 33 On closer inspection, however, the identification of a genetic or archeological link between the current *Kichwas* and the ancient inhabitants of San Martín, is unable to tell

us anything significant about the present and active relationship between the Natives and their territory. As suggested by the anthropologist Kim TallBear, specialized in the connections between new scientific technologies and native identity politics, this specific narrative presupposes a conception of kinship and personhood that is culturally circumscribed and, for this reason, not universally recognized. The archeological argument, as well as the genealogical-genetic one, «privileges relatedness along maternal and paternal lines to unnamed [...] ancestors, which is valid in certain contexts. But it is a narrow notion of relatedness that when used alone, entails distinctly nontribal ways of reckoning important ancestors and [human or territorial] relations» (TallBear 2007: 416).

- 34 In San Martín’s ethnographic context, for instance, the political-rhetorical use of the idea of “ancestral land”, clashes with the absence of a native word indicating the notion of “ancestor”, understood as “forefather” or “progenitor”. In no *Kichwa* dictionary there is a reference to this concept and indigenous leaders, who want to employ it, are obliged to use the Castilian term. Whoever, on the other hand, is asked to translate this word into the native idiom, indicates a number of complex periphrases, whose meaning is close (but not identical) to the notion of “forefather”: sometimes people refer to their ancestors using the expression “*ñawpa tatakuna*” (the fathers of the past)¹⁹, or the locution “*ñawpa wasi ayllukuna*” (the ancient relatives of the house)²⁰. As we will discuss in the next section, the lack of a specific term for the idea of “progenitor” is indicative of a different approach to ancestry, considered among the *Kichwas*, as a present and active link that has nothing to do with the transmission of substances, culture and lands from the past to the present²¹.
- 35 In the next section I will try to offer a broader perspective on this issue. Distancing my arguments from a purely constructivist approach (which sees local groupings uncritically adopting Western legal and scientific narratives), I will try to describe a peculiar way of reinterpreting the ancestral-genetic discourse. With the presentation of a specific ethnographic case, in fact, I will show how the young members of a Native clan²², today can read the new biological data in light of their unique way of conceiving family ties and territorial belonging.
- 36 Through the presentation of this case, it will be possible to introduce two important items. The first one concerns the Native’s creative ability to reinterpret the scientific narrative. The second one, concerns the peculiar indigenous way of defining “traditional indigenous lands”. The latter, far from being considered limited areas enclosed by specific geographical boundaries, are understood as peculiar spaces of «conservation and [generation] of memory» (García Hierro, Surrallés 2004: 22).

Walking in the footsteps of the dead. Ancestral territory as a space of memory preservation

- 37 In May 2018 I met a family of indigenous healers, living in the little settlement of *Llukanayaku*. The latter is a small Native Community located just over 49 miles away from Lamas. It has about one hundred inhabitants and it can be reached, from the village of *Chazuta*, by travelling for about thirty minutes along the *Huallaga* river in a small motorboat, called *peke peke*. During my visits to *Llukanayaku* I took several trips

into the nearby forests. Each of these excursions became an important opportunity, for the young members of the shamanic clan, to narrate stories of their family origins.

- 38 In these pages, I would like to go through one of these legends: the one that tells of a mythical character with extraordinary powers. He, before becoming a huge Lupuna tree (*Ceiba pentandra*), founded the small Native Community of *Llukanayaku*, leading the shamanic clan from *Huancavelica* to the Peruvian jungle. This story is clearly inspired by the *Chanka* origin myth. During my permanence in *Selva Alta* I had the opportunity to hear it several times, before and after the dissemination of the biomolecular studies.
- 39 The story goes that due to Inca persecution, the ancestors of the healers’ clan, together with other members of the *Chanka* population, undertook a long migration from *Huancavelica* to the city of *Chachapoyas* and subsequently moved to *Selva Alta*. When they arrived near Lamas, in the present-day metropolis of *Tarapoto*, the wandering healers defeated the native populations and finally founded the *Mawka Llakta* (literally, the “Ancient Settlement”). But peace, for them, was short-lived: after a few decades they had to leave this place, due to the arrival of the Conquistadors. Thus, after going through a dangerous pass in the *Cordillera Escalera*, called *Wayra Purina* (the “Way of the Wind”), some members of the clan found a quiet place along the river. They settled there and they called it *Llukanayaku*, which in *Kichwa* means “Highland water”.
- 40 This long journey was made possible only by the brave leadership of an ancestor, who had extraordinary shamanic powers. The name of this “uncle-grandfather” (as he is called by the inhabitants of *Llukanayaku*) was Cipriano. He, the legend goes, was able to transfigure his person into various predatory animals (eagles, panthers, and jaguars). This way he could protect his family and provide food.
- 41 As the years (or rather centuries) passed, all the members of the family grew old and died. All except Cipriano. Every day, he transformed himself into his favorite animal, the jaguar, and went hunting in the surrounding forests. Modernity arrived and, with it, came rifles. Cipriano felt threatened: he knew that some hunter from the surrounding villages, seeing him in the skin of a jaguar, one day would shoot him. So, he transformed himself, once and for all, into an element of the landscape: «he decided to put his soul and his knowledge into a Lupuna, a thousand-year-old tree that today lives in the *Llukanayaku* territory» (Artidoro, interview, 27 April 2018). Before his final transformation, Cipriano warned his descendants:
- “My grandchildren and great-grandchildren will fight for me” he said. “They will fight for me so that I’m not cut down, so that I don't lose my life”. And so it happened: in 2003, [...] the Regional Government decided to build a road passing through *Llukanayaku*, through our territory. They wanted to cut the Lupuna down. [...] We were forced to fight with everyone: we had to stand in front of the tree, because the Lupuna is the jaguar, and the jaguar is Cipriano (Artidoro, interview, 27 April 2018).
- 42 A few weeks after my first journey to *Llukanayaku*, following the dissemination of the biomolecular studies among the *Kichwa* leaders, I had the opportunity of hearing the founding story of this Native Community again. Surprisingly, I realized that, despite an initial rejection of the new historical-biological narrative, the young members of Cipriano’s clan embedded the genetical data within the mythical system of their family: they multiplied the ascending branches of their genealogical tree, in order to include both the traditional and the scientific versions of the *Kichwa* origin.

- 43 Cipriano, in this new version of the story, led his relatives from the Ecuadorian jungle (exactly as postulated by molecular geneticists). At the same time, and without any apparent contradiction, a new mythical character, named *Ayanku*, led them from *Huancavelica* to the jungle (in accordance with the *Chanka* origin legend). The *Ayanku* was, when in life, an extremely solitary and powerful being, with long ears and a big mouth. He vanished during a stormy night: a thunderclap made him disappear, but he left a deep pond in *Llukanayaku*'s territory, so that his descendants, finding it along the "ancestral paths", could always remember him. This pond is commonly called, by the inhabitants of this little Native Community, the "*Ayanku uchku*": literally, *Ayanku*'s hole.
- 44 This ethnographic case entails the exploration of several issues. The first concerns the possibility of manipulating genealogies and family histories. To better understand this unusual behavior, it is necessary to consider the native definition of *ancestralidad*. This concept, as said above, is distant from the "genealogical ancestry". The image of the family tree, in fact, is based on the idea that everyone's existence ends with his or her own death and collapses «into a single point, which is connected to other such points by lines of descent» (Ingold 2000: 142). On the contrary death, among the *Kichwas*, does not necessary put an end to a person's existence. Most of the deceased are conceived, in *Selva Alta* and *Baja*, as non-humans who conserve their memory and their intentionality. They can thus, act in the world of the living, influencing their lives and their behaviors.
- 45 The spirit of the dead called *aya*, for instance, weaves present and active relationships with his relatives, appearing in their dreams or visions and providing them with advice. This spirit, however, is considered an ambiguous and temperamental creature that, if resentful or angry, can cause nightmares and nocturnal terrors in his offspring. In some cases, he even tries to kill his beloved so that they can keep him company²³. In addition, according to *Kichwa* cosmology, some special individuals (like Cipriano, for example) before dying can transfigure themselves into natural elements, thus continuing to live in their territory. These ex-humans engage in a daily relationship with their living kin and with their Native Community. Today, for instance, the inhabitants of *Llukanallaku* often communicate with the *Lupuna* tree: the latter provides his descendants with care or ancestral knowledge; furthermore, his spirit composes new healing songs and communicates them to his great-grandchildren in visions and dreams. For their part, Cipriano's descendant honor him by blowing tobacco smoke on the *Lupuna*'s trunk and by telling visitors a number of tales concerning their mythical ancestor. They also participate in shamanic ceremonies, employing medical plants thanks to which it is possible to see Cipriano, with the appearance of a big jaguar²⁴.
- 46 As is made clear by the examples given, in the indigenous context, ancestors' memory is not merely evoked, but instead it «comes into being» (*ibidem*: 79). All the concrete and ritual actions of the descendants can make their ancestors' presence real: the forefathers' figures are, indeed, molded by their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, through the ingestion of medical and psychotropic plants; contextually, their teachings and their stories emerge through the redundant rhythm of the traditional healing songs, called *ikaros*.
- 47 For native Amazonians, in short, ancestors are not simply individuals who lived in the past and who should be remembered in the present. On the contrary, they correspond to the stories told by their offspring and thus, they, constitute a true «embodiment of memory» (Gow 1991: 185). The ancestral relationship is not seen as a top-down

movement in which the past and the present irrevocably follow one another. Rather, as suggested by the aforementioned Tim Ingold, in Amazonian Native clans «the life-lines of different beings cross, interpenetrate, appear or disappear [...]. [Parental branches] intertwine, grow together, as well as split apart, in a profusion of cross-cutting connections» (Ingold 2000: 142).

- 48 In such a peculiar conception of family ties, anti-arboreal or, better, rhizomatic (Deleuze, Guattari 1988), it does not seem unusual for descendants to give birth to new ancestors. Take the *Ayanku*'s generation, for instance: the creation of this new mythical character (and the consequent attribution of significance to a puddle now called the “*Ayaku Uchku*”) cannot be dismissed as mere fiction, or as a fabrication of the past, following the strategic incorporation of biomolecular investigations. This is a true generative process, perfectly coherent with the indigenous ancestral model, where memory can be simultaneously transmitted and reshaped.
- 49 All these issues also have a clear and direct consequence on the interactions that Natives entertain with the so-called “ancestral lands”. As should be already clear at this stage of the discussion, most of the *Kichwas* do not claim their territorial belonging through the rhetoric of “autochthony”, understood as “temporal primacy”. For the members of the *Llukanayaku* clan, for instance, it doesn't matter at all “who arrived first” in the San Martín forests: both legends reported in this paragraph admit the ancient migration of *Llukanayaku*'s inhabitants and, actually, certify the primordial presence of different Native human settlements in the conquered areas.
- 50 What guarantees the connection between the *Kichwas* and their territory is the present and active relationship that living people entertain with the environment and all the non-humans that populate it (spirits, animals, and plants). Among them we can also find ancestors, whose existence is actualized in the territory. From this point of view, it seems important to bring attention back to the so-called “Way of the Wind” (The *Wayra Purina*). Today, this path is considered one of the grounds for claiming ancestral lands in the *Coridillera Escalera* Regional Conservation Area. As mentioned in the previous pages, in fact, this impervious passage is considered an important mnemonic place for the inhabitants of *Llukanallaku*. But not only for them: all the *Kichwas* from San Martín claim to come in touch with the spirits of their dead, every time they cross this path between the mountains:
- The *Coridillera Escalera* Conservation Area overlaps our ancestral territories and ancestral trails, such as those used to reach the salt mines or the *Wayra Purina*. Our grandparents knew how to walk along this path, and they knew that in those mountains you had to move quietly, smoking the *mapacho* [cigar], so as not to bother the spirits of the dead who live in those places. And that's what we still do today. Sometimes we blow tobacco smoke to call the spirits of our grandparents. Other times, we smoke to tame them (William, interview, 15 May 2019).
- 51 In San Martín Native Communities, as already said, ex-humans reveal themselves to their living relatives quite often. This, however, can only happen within specific geographical boundaries: the boundaries marked by the dead's footsteps when he/she was alive. Not surprisingly, therefore, *Wayra Purina* is considered a mnemonic space: many of the *Kichwa* ancestors walked along this path to collect medical plants, hunt animals and reach the surrounding salt mines. In this territory they have left their traces, and by following these footsteps their descendants hope to keep intact the ancestral-mnemonic bond with them²⁵.

- 52 This discourse clearly recalls a very important topic for Amazonian studies: the concept of “territorialized memory” (Hill 1989; Santos-Granero 2004; Rappaport 1989, Cayón, Chacon 2014). For reasons of space and coherence of the text, it is not possible here to go over the extensive debate on this issue. However, it is important mention it, as many of the insights of anthropologists involved can explain the way in which the *Llukanayaku* clan (and the *Kichwa* people in general) conceive the connection between history and environment. Since the 1990s, many scholars have highlighted the importance, for societies without writing, of using the landscape as a memory preservation device (Renards-Casevitz, Dollfus 1988; Hill 1989; Morphy 1995; Espinosa 1995; Rappaport 1989). According to them, native social players are used to generate “historical archives” through the sacralization of specific geographical locations (Rappaport 1989; Cayón, Chacon 2014). The latter, on the one hand, are used as “mnemonic tools” for remembering past events (Santos-Granero 2004; Cayón, Chacon 2014) and, on the other hand, are conceived as real territorial boundaries (Rappaport 1989). According to some contemporary scholars, this attitude represents a form of proto-writing (Santos-Granero 2004) through which the indigenous peoples constitute real «topograms» (Santos-Granero 2004: 205), usually elements that stand out in the surrounding environment because of their shape or size and that, for this reason, are invested with historical or mythical meaning. These topograms, when combined together in different ways, allow natives to recall their past events, constructing extensive historical narratives without necessarily following a chronological order (Hill 1989; Rappaport 1989). These interesting reflections clearly demonstrate that territory, for these populations, is much more than a space useful for their subsistence. It is considered a place in which their past acquires «tangibility, immediacy, applicability and [plasticity]» (García Hierro, Surrealés 2004: 18).
- 53 Walking along the forest pathways and trails of *Llukanayaku*'s territory, I could observe several unusual landscape elements considered, by my *Kichwa* guides authentic traces of their history: centuries-old trees, deep ponds, bizarre-shaped rocks and dangerous whirlpools represented places where “official” history intertwined with a series of family stories and mythical events. Take, for example, the *Ayanku Uchku*, which can guarantee a mnemonic connection between the *Ayanku* and his descendants, or the *Lupuna* tree that, until recently, was the cause of a territorial conflict between the healers' clan and the Regional Government. In these locations, the native memory becomes a tangible product of the relationship between man and the environment. It is precisely thanks to this unusual conception of remembrance that it is possible for native leaders to claim their belonging to a specific territory. The latter, far from being considered “ancestral” because it has been inherited from the forefathers, is conceived as an important relational space, in which interactions between the living and the dead are experienced in the present.

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NOTES

1. This study was funded by the Department of Philosophy “Piero Martinetti” (University of Milan) as part of the project “Dipartimenti di eccellenza 2018-2022”, granted by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR).
2. In the past the term Mestizo indicated people born from the union between Natives and Spanish Conquistadors. Today this word is used to define people who occupy a higher social status than the Indigenous and who speak in the Castilian language.
3. Tawantinsuyu is the Inca Empire. This term is composed by the Quechua words tawa (four) and suyo (Nations).
4. This expression refers to the study of some specific regions of the mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) and the DNA of the Y chromosome. A more complete definition will be provided in the next paragraphs.
5. There are few ethnographic studies, in the contemporary anthropological landscape, that focus on the relationship between indigenous peoples and the narratives produced by modern genetics (Kent, Ventura Santos 2012; Tamarkin 2014). Indeed, there are far more investigations dedicated to the analysis of these issues in Western cultural contexts (Lippman 1991; Simpson 2000; Lindee *et al.* 2003; Trupiano 2013; Solinas 2013; Solinas 2015; Volpi 2018). There, the public receiving the results of biomolecular investigations is more inclined to believe, as Stephan Palmié suggests (Palmié 2007), that geneticists can identify a kind of “genomic essence”: in the eyes of these social actors, DNA appears as the substance that makes everyone what he or she is. Concerning the potential risks of such a conception of biology, see Lewontin 1993 and Sahlins 1981. In indigenous contexts, on the other hand, genomic investigations have elicited a wide range of responses (from the most strident hostility to the sincerest interest). Think, for example, of all the questions and criticisms concerning the Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP), promoted by Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza, or the dispute involving the Yanomami. For reasons of space, it is not possible to discuss these complex cases here. We refer the reader to Harry *et al.* 2000, Lock 2001, Borofsky *et al.* 2005 and Mancuso 2021.
6. This road, also known as Carretera Marginal de la Selva, is an important communication route connecting the Amazon regions of Venezuela, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, and Bolivia.
7. The company extracts oil in the block 103, already the object of major environmental conflicts between 2006 and 2009.
8. The San Martín province is situated in the north-east of the region of San Martín.
9. Consejo Étnico de los Pueblos Kichwa de la Amazonía.
10. Consulta previa allows indigenous peoples to dialogue with the state in order to reach agreements on decisions that may affect their collective rights, their physical existence, their quality of life or their cultural identity. For example, indigenous peoples should be consulted about the exploitation of natural resources in their territory, about the implementation of an urban project that might change their way of life, or about the adoption of a law that directly affects them. During this process, indigenous peoples should be provided with complete information, written in their mother tongue. This right is guaranteed by ILO Convention 169

(Article 7). However, although Convention 169 was ratified in Peru in 1993, the Consulta Previa law was not promulgated until 2011.

11. Nucleotides are the «elementary constituents» (Cavalli-Sforza *et al.* 1994) of DNA: adenine, cytosine, thymine, guanine (ACTG).

12. This is how some social actors in the cities of Lamas and Tarapoto explain the Kichwa’s current attitude in front of genetic investigations.

13. From this point of view, it seems important to emphasize that the receptive attitude of the Amazonian indigenous peoples is not only manifested in the political sphere. Also new technologies have been subject to an indigenization process (on the concept of “indigenization of modernity” see Sahlins 1999). Several communities, for example, are now using GPS, drones, or Google Earth to map, monitor, and protect their territories (Chapin *et al.* 2005; Plotkin 2009). Furthermore, many local leaders are taking advantage of internet platforms and social networks, aiming to develop linguistic or identity revitalization projects (Conklin 2002; Niezen 2003; Leite 2014; Santos-Granero 2021). Finally, new digital technologies are changing local forms of political activism, encouraging their deterritorialization (Conklin 2002; Niezen 2003; Leite 2014).

14. During my visit to the San Martín region, I heard many Native leaders refer to the importance of disseminating a new historical narrative able to “say the truth” and respect the suffering experienced by indigenous people during the colonization process.

15. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit.

16. For many years, this European organization has been helping the Kichwas with the Land Titling process. In 2018, after the dissemination of the molecular biology survey results, some GIZ experts proposed a series of conferences. During these meetings, evocatively entitled ¿De donde venimos? (Where do we come from?), genetic investigations were presented to the native leaders of the Chazuta, Lamas and El Dorado provinces.

17. This is not unlike the regional government which, on the basis of the same ideas, supports the hypothesis of Kichwa migration, denying native right to live in the Cordillera Escalera territory.

18. In this regard, it seems interesting to briefly consider the report presented to the United Nation by the Ecuadorian José Martínez Cobo. The document, submitted between 1981 and 1983, addresses a wide range of issues, including a first transnational definition of “indigenous people”. If read carefully, it is possible to observe that native common idiom, traditional culture, and shared descent are considered key factors for the individuation of native or aboriginal populations all over the world. Moreover, and this is fundamental to our arguments, in this report the author highlights the centrality of biological data, related to the idea of a “primordial occupation” of the lands (Martínez Cobo 1982: 6-16). On the concept of autochthony as “primordial occupation” see also Amselle 2012.

19. Literally: “formerly, fathers”. From *tata* (father): the suffix *-kuna* indicates, in Kichwa, the plural.

20. Literally: “formerly, relatives of the house”. From *wasi* (house) and *ayllu* (clan, kinship, family). The term *ayllu* comes from the Andes and traditionally indicates a community that self-identifies on the basis of shared territorial and parental ties. In kichwa context it indicates a patrilineal clan that consist of a core of agnates and some affine. Within all kichwa Native Communities, the presence of these social units can be clearly identified observing the spatial conformation: every Community is, indeed, conventionally segmented into subdistricts, whose names correspond to the surnames of the ideally endogamous native patrilineal clans that live there. In Wayku, for example, there are six sub-districts (and six native clans): Sangama, Cachique, Tapullima, Amasifuén, Guerra, Sinarahuahua. The origin of this social-spatial division goes back to the time of the colonization. During their rule, the Conquistadors introduced the institution of Vara, that is the delegation of authority to indigenous leaders. In that context, each Community was divided into barrios (districts) and, annually, in each of them was nominated a native leader, called “Varayuk”. This colonial organization, which implemented the principle of

divide et impera, formed the basis for internal tensions between the indigenous barrios, reinforced by the emergence of a norm of endogamy. Strong inter-clan hostilities existed, between the native clans, until the 1970s. Even today, the memory of these violent fights is alive in older social actors: everyone remembers that marriages between the different families were forbidden and that, especially on feast days, the patrilineal clans fought each other killing their enemies, using wood clubs and machetes. Today, deadly fights no longer occur. However, on feast day tension is manifested through ritual battles or political struggles. Moreover, as I mentioned above, intra-clan endogamy is conceived, by Kichwa people, only as an ideal model, a mere theoretical prescription. For this reason, it is no longer possible to define the patrilineal clans as discrete social units. Rather, they are families that historically self-identify on the basis of a shared surname, but whose boundaries are not clearly defined. All future references to the word “clan” are related to this definition.

21. Similarly, it is important to note that the concept of “territory” (*territorio*, in Spanish) roughly translates the Kichwa term “allpa kawsay”. The latter would be more correctly translated as “environment”. Literally, in fact, the periphrasis means “land in which one exists”. From *allpa* (land, world) and *kawsay* (to exist).

22. See footnote 20.

23. Infants are the most vulnerable to aya’s attacks. For this reason, after birth they are hidden in their parent’s house for about two months.

24. For reasons of space, I can’t explain here all the reasons that make possible the transfiguration of human beings into elements of the landscape (in life or after death), in Amazonian paradigm. From this point of view, it may be useful to recall some recent ethnographic theories, which refer to the so-called “ecological perspective” (Viveiros de Castro 1992; Fausto 2002; Rival 2005; Descola 1992; 2005; Belaunde 2008; Kohn 2013). Indeed, the latter represents an important foothold for the anthropological analysis of certain indigenous contexts in which the relationship between humans, animals, plants, and the environment appears fluid. Concerning the conditions of possibility of transfiguration in the Kichwa ethnographic context, see also Volpi 2020.

25. On the importance of walking for Indigenous peoples see Ingold 2009; 2010. On the concept of “walking” among the Kichwas, see Chaparro 2021.

ABSTRACTS

Kichwa indigenous people of the Peruvian Amazon Forest have been facing, for several years, a territorial conflict due to the establishment of a natural park on their homelands. In order to question the legitimacy of native claims, the Regional Government puts forward the hypothesis of the Andean *kichwa* migration. On the other hand, several NGOs hope to help this native people, using some biomolecular investigations that “scientifically certify” its Amazonian origins and its ancestral relationship with the surrounding territories. However, the natives seem lukewarm to the uncritical acquisition of a strategic discourse based on the rhetoric of “temporal primacy”. Thus, despite having assimilated an ancestral-genetic discourse, they reshape it in light of a more relational conception of territory. The latter, far from being considered an inheritance transmitted from one generation to the other, is seen as a peculiar space of conservation and generation of memory, in which the living constantly interweave present and active relationships with the dead.

I nativi *kichwa* dell'Alta Amazonia peruviana stanno affrontando, da diversi anni, un conflitto territoriale dovuto alla creazione di un Parco Naturale Protetto sulle loro terre d'origine. Per mettere in dubbio la legittimità delle loro rivendicazioni politiche, gli enti regionali sostengono l'ipotesi della loro antica migrazione andina. Al contrario, diverse ONG locali promuovono l'uso politico di alcune indagini biomolecolari capaci di “certificare scientificamente” le origini amazzoniche di questo popolo e la sua conseguente relazione ancestrale con i territori circostanti. Molti individui nativi, però, si mostrano scettici di fronte all'acquisizione di una narrazione strategica basata sulla retorica del “primato temporale”. Così, pur avendo assimilato il discorso ancestrale-genetico, lo rimodellano alla luce di una concezione nativa e relazionale del territorio. Quest'ultimo, lungi dall'essere considerato un'eredità trasmessa di generazione in generazione, viene visto come un peculiare spazio di conservazione e generazione della memoria, in cui i vivi intrecciano costantemente relazioni presenti e attive con i defunti.

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