

End of Year Report

ISRF Independent Scholar Fellowship

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Between planetary urbanization and thinking forests, or, IKIAM University and its Living Laboratory: a study of socio-ecological change in the Ecuadorian Amazon

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The aim of this fellowship has been to launch an inquiry into the socio-ecological impact of IKIAM, a new university in the Ecuadorian Amazon rainforest, envisioned as a first component of a wider study on the uneven effects of green economy transition initiatives in the Amazon and beyond.

Established by the Ecuadorian government as part of a far-reaching reform of the national education system, conceived as integral to an economic transition to a sustainable and knowledge-based society, its location on previously indigenous territory justified by its claim to be “in the Amazon, for the Amazon”, this university makes promises far beyond the provision of education and research facilities. It is presented as a catalyst for a transition away from the extraction of oil and other subsoil resources to a ‘green economy’ centred in particular upon the development of ‘Amazonian green wealth’. The actual effects of this university on the local socio-ecology – indigenous communities and organisations, smallholders, virgin and disturbed forest areas, the local town – have been the central focus of a six-months fieldwork period (from November 2016 to May 2017, reduced from the proposed eight months as discussed with ISRF staff due to travelling with an unforeseen infant).

The first two months of the fellowship were spent on a review of the recent literature on planetary urbanization (human geography), thinking forests (anthropology and plant neurobiology), and political ecology of the Amazon and Ecuador (interdisciplinary), as well as in discussion with the fellowship host, Laura Rival, at the Oxford Department of International Development, on research strategy and governmental policies in Ecuador. During this initial phase, the research blog which I had originally planned was decided against due to difficult ethical implications of photograph and video publication and potentially politically sensitive nature of the data collected. Involvement in socio-environmental conflicts and critiques of their causes are increasingly also endangering activists and researchers, who can become targets of violence.

The following six months were spent in the Ecuadorian Amazon, where I was based near IKIAM University, at the margins of Tena, provincial capital and gateway to the forest. I re-established a working relationship (with an official role as consultant) with three key indigenous organisations of the area, with whom I had previously worked during fieldwork in 2006-2008: FOIN, the longest-standing indigenous federation of community organisations in the Napo province; CYRAE, the first traditional healers association in the country; AMUPAKIN, an association of traditional midwives and women healers. Contact with IKIAM University was established through a meeting with the rector with whom my research intent was discussed and who formally agreed to my presence, facilitating further contact with the university administration and academic staff. I was also invited to

participate in the University's own impact evaluation, Plan Maestro, and the development of the University's Code of Ethics.

While the greatest amount of my time was spent as a participant observer in the aforementioned organisations and processes as well as within my key informants' everyday and family lives, with field notes as the chief data gathering technique, I also held a total of 15 semi-structured individual and group interviews with IKIAM staff, students, local government officials, national education administrators, researchers from other universities, indigenous politicians and movement activists, as well as members of the hygienic services association servicing IKIAM.

I organised a total of four focus group discussions with members of indigenous communities within the university's 'impact area' (an officially designated zone), with a total of 66 participants, of whom 42 were female. Together with the leaders of CYRAE, I also co-organised an international workshop which brought together over 80 participants (total numbers were not recorded, as the event maintained a fluid entry policy to enable members of indigenous communities to participate without formalities which may have reduced overall participation) to debate 'individual, collective and environmental health' from an Amazonian perspective, as a way to approach a bottom-up interpretation of 'the needs of the Amazon' – which are otherwise presented (crucially also by IKIAM) as needs of ecological modernization and market inclusion.

The final four months of my fellowship period were spent back in Europe, transcribing and evaluating fieldwork materials, as well as preparing several articles for publication and drafting a follow-on research proposal. Two articles were drafted during the fellowship period: (1) 'Post-representational ethnography in/of the mess between planetary urbanization and thinking forests' to be published as part of an edited volume on 'Messy Ethnography' with Vernon Press in early 2018; (2) 'Varieties of extraction: a historical political ecology of the Napo watershed, from rubber to bioprospecting' to be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal (e.g. *Development & Change*) before the end of 2017. Two further articles, based on research during the fellowship period, are currently in preparation: (1) 'Knowledge production in the Ecuadorian Amazon'; (2) 'Subsistence futures: rethinking green growth'. These I plan to submit to peer-reviewed journals before June 2018.

A transdisciplinary action research proposal using a participatory video methodology ('Reviving ancestral *chacra* and lifeway systems in the Ecuadorian Amazon for a food sovereign future'), that is based on needs and desires determined during the focus groups and workshop, and which I am currently circulating, has already attracted collaborators and is set to be elaborated and submitted as funding application within the current academic year.

Apart from my contribution to the annual ISRF workshop in Amsterdam, I also presented my fellowship research at the 12th Annual International Ethnography Symposium 'Politics and Ethnography in an Age of Uncertainty', and will present work from my fellowship period again at the AESOP Sustainable Food Planning Group's 8th Annual Conference on 'Re-imagining sustainable food planning, building resourcefulness: Food movements, insurgent planning and heterodox economics'.

Upon completion of my ISRF fellowship, I began a 2-year European Commission-funded Horizon 2020 Marie Curie Research Fellowship at Manchester University's School for Environment, Education and Development SEED, within the confines of which I will be able to return to the Ecuadorian

Amazon and deepen the analysis begun last year with the invaluable help of the ISRF, allowing me to further develop an ethnographic approach to the study of green transitions and their uneven effects.

I am grateful and honoured to have received the support of the ISRF for this work, which has enabled me to re-launch my academic career and played a significant role in my being awarded follow-on funding.