

## Thesis approaches the conflict between large mining operations and Peruvian

### Researcher analyzes the impacts of the mining project in the Andean region of Cajamarca, Peru

Report: *Yuri Correa*

her Master's degree in Brazil, Adriana Peñafiel admits she still had a certain naivety and that she believed it would be possible to reconcile a mining project and the local agriculture in the Andean region of Cajamarca, in her native country. She was interested in the subject since her Administration course at the Universidad del Pacifico, in Lima. However, it was only in the beginning of the 2010s, after a period away from home, that she finally focused on the conflict between large operations in Peru and the peasants who rely on the lakes, which they fear could be destroyed in this process the government wrongfully calls development, according to her.

Although companies like Yanacocha promise to build reservoirs to replace the water supply of the villages and their plantations, Adriana reinforces that the conflict resolution would not be so simple. The farmers, who draw the mountainside with irrigation streams and fields, have a cultural connection with the water, as her ethnographic research revealed. For them, a river spring should be natural, because the disturbance of the natural lake formation would directly affect the harvest results.

Furthermore, Peñafiel stresses that these farmers' habits function as meeting spaces that dynamize oral exchange of knowledge and intensify collaborations between different groups that inhabit the mountainside.

In the Mamacocha lake, for example, she explains that an open irrigation channel in the top of the mountain may reach a plantation and keep going to the next one downhill, and so on. For the water to reach the inferior levels correctly, the peasants up top must draw and manage the stream properly, as well as those in the inferior level have to ensure that the water will come back to the river system, re-enacting the cycle. This kind of relationship these villages have with the local lake configuration has brought several families to form groups so they can protect it.

Adriana conducted her initial field trips to Peru in late 2012 and 2013. Since then, she returned for intersperse longer stays until the end of 2014. During these visits to the Cajamarca region, she focused mostly on the village of El Tambo and the mining in the Hualgayoc province, and also on the city of Cajamarca itself, where she lived with the local residents and performed an ethnographic observation, doing interviews. After collecting all data, she wrote a doctoral thesis in Rural Development at UFRGS, defended in 2016, for what she received an honorable mention by the Latin American Studies Association at the LASA/Oxfam America 2017 award.

The researcher emphasizes that, to comprehend the current context of her work, it is necessary to remember the circumstances in which these conflicts began. In the early 1990s, the civil dictatorship of Alberto Fujimori spread a resumption of the mining project throughout the Peruvian nation. According to Adriana, at first, the academic youth approved the idea and even the people, with a large tradition in the mining business, had high hopes, mostly because the country had just left behind a dark decade. Truth Commission estimates that, in the 1980s, over 69 thousand people were killed in protests and confrontations between the government army forces, and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA), and the population, who also suffered with inflation and negligence.

Nevertheless, not only the Peruvian citizens became skeptical about their government during that period, but Peru also withdraw from the international market. So, to make the country more attractive to external investments in the area, Fujimori implemented a reform that started



Called "Guardians of the Lagoon", residents of El Tambo village marched in defense of Mamacocha lake - Photo: Adriana Peñafiel/Personal Archive

the mining exploration. Such changes, however, allowed large foreign corporations to initiate technical practices in the country that were against the mining local culture. In Hualgayoc, for instance, where Goldfields company operates, on the contrary of what was expected, workers with experience in the area did not get opportunities in these new operations. Peruvian master miners usually use the undercarriage technique, a way of tunneling that follows the *vetas* (mineral laminar formations inside the mountains). Their mines, therefore, never interfere with lake formation, always going under or around the lakes. On the other hand, large mining companies use heavy machinery to open mining fields in the open air, reaching the *vetas* from top to bottom. Firstly, this is a complication concerning the delicate relationship discussed above that peasants have with the water and with the geography of the region, and secondly, it does not even offer work opportunity for local miners, who are not fit to handle the excavation equipment. Moreover, there is a feeling of exclusion, because mining is connected to Peruvian history, and it is a strong trait of those communities.

Adriana claims that it was in this context that lake protection groups were formed in the Cajamarca mountains. Residents of El Tambo village, for example, marched in defense of the Mamacocha lake, and were called "Guardians of the Lake". The group organizes vigils and camps around Mamacocha, generating a periodic migration to the region. Presently, the private sector already has a contract to explore the area with mining projects and energy production – there is still a litigation in justice about a construction of a hydroelectric plant. In another case, members of indigenous group Awajú Wampi demanded the revocation of legislative decrees that accelerated the implementation of the Peru-United States Trade Promotion Agreement, imposed by president Alan García Pérez in 2008 in unilateral form, without the consent of the population. Native Peruvians were, according to the researcher, decreed second class citizens by Pérez, losing their political strength.

The urgency of these economical and governmental disputes against the one by the traditional Peruvian population only became clearer to Adriana when she read the writings of anthropologist Arturo Escobar, from whom the researcher learned about the concept of cultural drawings, which are physical transformations performed by communities, such as the Andean, as a result of a symbiotic relationship with the local geography. He writes: "One of the tasks of an activist or an intellectual is to make the community more aware of the drawing that they have practiced". She pursues, therefore, through her thesis to highlight this ethnographic dynamic and products. When she still had the idea of theoretically reconciling the mining and agriculture projects, Adriana studied the Tambogrande case, which was the first record of a referendum in a communal society – a system which uses, similarly to those of some indigenous villages, collective means of production, as well as family relationships based on cooperativism. The poll targeted a debate about the expansion of mining activities in the area, and it is estimated that around 90% of voters were against the initiative. Manifestations such as this one, also as the Guardians of the Lakes and even the Awajú Wampi, are all part of a cultural organism that draws the Andean region of Cajamarca, which today is being redesigned by new mining projects.

#### Source:

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