PREFACE

It was late summer of 2001, during the second of seven research trips I have made to Rukullakta (pronounced Roo-koo-yáhk-tah), a legally defined territory in the Ecuadorian Amazon entirely inhabited and governed by Kichwa (also spelled Quichua) Indians. The previous year, I had completed a detailed history of Rukullakta, from its founding as a ranching cooperative in the early 1970s, through its current status as a self-governing, semiautonomous indigenous territory. During my second visit, I wrote an abridged version of this history and printed several dozen copies to distribute among Rukullakta's seventeen schools. The only thing left to decide was the title. I knew the title was important since it would frame the organization's history for young readers, and I anguished over several possibilities for weeks.

On numerous occasions, I tried to find out what Rukullakta's president, José Shiguango, thought of various options. My favorite was a slogan I had found in Rukullakta's archives, used before residents obtained legal title to their collective lands in 1977. In the years leading up to that date, 207 families came together, formed the cooperative, and began working together to raise cattle and create a government to manage their varied modernization projects. Their efforts convinced the state to do something unprecedented and almost unimaginable: grant them title to almost 42,000 hectares of their

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ancestral territory. This act was all the more important because the state had just encouraged a mass migration of poor settlers into their area, threatening indigenous people's access to the land where their families had lived for generations. The slogan I liked, scrawled in large letters on a number of pages in the archives, was "Sólo unidos venceremos!" (Only united will we overcome!). To me, it seemed to highlight the revolutionary beginnings of the organization.

It was clear that Shiguango did not want to use the slogan for a title, but I could not understand why, and he did not suggest an alternative. No doubt he found my impatience and frustration over the issue typical of his many interactions with foreigners and officials from Ecuador's government, who expect indigenous authorities to come to decisions quickly and decisively on behalf of their territory's population.

It took some time before I understood the reason for Shiguango's reluctance to use the slogan. "Only united will we overcome" came from the political Left. In the 1960s some men from the Rukullakta region traveled west to work on coastal plantations. They became participants in the rising union movement, and they learned the language and politics of union organizing. After returning to Rukullakta, they used some of the slogans they had heard on the coast to motivate their friends and neighbors during their campaign to form a cooperative. Variations of the "only united will we overcome" slogan have been repeated so many times in political speeches and protest marches around the world that I had never stopped to think about how it could be viewed negatively. When I finally paused to do so, I realized that Rukullakta's residents have not always been united. To assert that they must be united over the long term to maintain their access to land and to "overcome" those who strive to take it from them only highlighted the fact that they were still not fully in control of their lives or their territory. The slogan served as a reminder of their historical marginalization, as well as the exceptional obligations that modern nation-states often place on indigenous residents if they wish to maintain what was previously theirs.[1]

After much discussion, Rukullakta's elected leaders decided to use a title written in Kichwa rather than Spanish, in part due to the many indigenous language revitalization projects occurring both locally and nationally. Avoiding the obligation implied by "only united will we overcome," the leaders settled on a new title: *Ñukanchik Rukukuna Wankurishka Kawsay, 1970–2000* (roughly, "Our history of living together in a large group, 1970–

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2000"). Although perhaps less romantic or revolutionary than the title I had suggested, their choice indicates a key aspect of sovereignty as experienced by the leaders and people of Rukullakta and beyond—the daily obligation to live and act together as a singular political entity within a bounded space.

When most people hear the terms "indigenous territory" or "indigenous sovereignty," they imagine that, compared to non-indigenous groups, indigenous peoples who live in their own territories are more culturally homogeneous, with shared values and priorities, making political unity straightforward or even natural. This was the type of thinking that inspired my own choice for the title. But Rukullakta's government did not come into being because its people wanted to follow indigenous leaders rather than non-indigenous ones. There was no history in this region of submitting to indigenous authorities over the long term, and most Kichwa are very leery of individuals who attempt to assume positions of authority. As is the case with indigenous Shuar who live to the south (and who are famous for forming the first indigenous federation in the Amazon), Amazonian Kichwa "continue to value liberty to an extent inconceivable in the United States, where almost every aspect of our lives is governed by law or some bureaucratic regulation" (Rubenstein 2002, 11). Convincing 207 heads of extended families to place their family's lands under the control of a cooperative government took years of campaigning and cajoling. During the campaign, one of its early leaders suffered a tragic accident and became bedridden. Many older members of Rukullakta told me that they had finally been convinced to become members of the cooperative when they visited their friend as he lay on his deathbed and used his last energies to advocate for the cooperative cause. Hearing stories such as this drives home the fact that living in a bounded indigenous territory with a centralized government has not always been easy for Rukullakta's residents. The enactment of sovereignty has always been, and continues to be, a political process, full of the negotiations and controversies over expectations and obligations that characterize most (if not all) political processes.

Today the governments of indigenous territories are engaged in negotiations with a number of more powerful entities as well as with the groups they represent. One reason for this is that the territories have been granted what Richard Stahler-Sholk refers to as "autonomy without resources" (2005, 37), as part of a larger set of neoliberal changes: states are decentralizing and delegating social responsibilities to local governments without pro-

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viding sufficient financial resources to carry them out. Often unable to tax their residents, territorial leaders must seek funding by working with external entities, including state ministries, international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and multinational corporations. Such collaborations, however, often present difficult challenges. For example, should the leaders allow a petroleum company to build an oil well in the territory in exchange for a percentage of the profits, recognizing that an oil spill could contaminate the local soil and water? Or should a territory agree to receive payments from environmental organizations in exchange for conserving the local forest, a move that some people have interpreted as a ploy by outsiders to gain control of the lands indigenous people fought so hard to legally own? These hard questions are similar to those faced by governments worldwide, and the debates that surround them involve not only the sometimes conflicting values held by the territory's people, but also the dynamic relationships between the governments and residents of these spaces.

In this book, I argue that the enactment of sovereignty and the social relations that go with it are continually being negotiated, as leaders, their constituents, and a host of external entities — ranging from environmentalists to oil executives — seek to define the form that indigenous sovereignty will take. In tracing this process, I pay particular attention to varied efforts — those of residents, leaders, and outsiders — to determine the meanings and practices associated with what I call "territorial citizenship," the responsibilities and rights associated with living in an indigenous territory. In the context of a typically cash-starved territorial government, "sovereignty" is only an abstract concept without active citizens to produce it. Thus, in the context of new political openings for constructing a more meaningful sovereignty (associated with the growth of the indigenous rights movement as well as with neoliberal state decentralization), both territorial leaders and indigenous intellectuals have been hard at work in recent decades to define what an ideal "territorial citizen" should be. The ideas they propose about territorial citizenship are deeply tied to particular places but simultaneously transnational in that they are informed by the knowledge and perspectives gained through engagement with multiple outsiders.

I have spent the last twelve years studying the historical and contemporary struggles of Rukullakta, one of the longest-running "experiments" with territorial sovereignty in Ecuador, a country known as having the "most well-organized indigenous movement in the Americas" (Collins 2000,

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41; see also Zibechi 2004).[2] Rukullakta's population has risen from about 2,000 people in the early 1970s to about 8,000 in 2011,[3] primarily through high birth rates but also through marriage with outsiders. Rivers that run through the territory eventually enter the Amazon, and its altitude ranges roughly from 500 to 1,200 meters. Because of its location on the foothills of the Andes and proximity to the Napo River, the area where Rukullakta is located is often referred to as the Upper Napo region.

Rukullakta's history, both as a cooperative and as a territory, has always been shaped by international and national changes. During the Cold War, the 1959 communist revolution in Cuba motivated many Latin American governments to address potential rural unrest before it threatened to overthrow them. International and national development experts saw the formation of cooperatives as a key strategy for reducing poverty and thereby stifling any nascent communist movements. A small group of activists in Rukullakta decided that if they wanted to gain legal title to a large area of land, they should take advantage of this political opening and form a ranching cooperative with as many members as possible. By the 1990s, the Cold War had ended and development organizations were becoming increasingly worried about environmental protection. In particular, they were concerned that the conversion of rainforests into farmland was a serious threat to biological diversity. There was also a growing sense among these organizations that indigenous people were particularly adept at conserving forests. International development funding priorities in the Amazon region therefore shifted away from encouraging small-scale farmers to produce cattle and market crops, and toward providing assistance for indigenous peoples to carry out environmental conservation and sustainable forms of development. Rukullakta's geographical location between the Andes Mountains and the Amazonian lowlands contributes to high levels of biological diversity, making it and the surrounding region a hot spot for conservation efforts. In 2000 Germany's bilateral aid organization, GTZ—for Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (Agency for Technical Cooperation), now called GIZ, for Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for International Cooperation)—led an effort to obtain United Nations Biosphere Reserve status for much of the Upper Napo region, placing much of Rukullakta's territory under a high level of environmental protection. Partially in response to these global shifts, in 2006 Rukullakta's leaders changed their legal classification and name from "co-

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operative" to the "Pueblo Kichwa de Rukullakta" (or "The Kichwa People of Rukullakta").[4] With this change, they hoped to foreground their indigeneity, rather than their commitment to market-driven ranching and agriculture (implied by the term "cooperative"). No longer a cooperative with a president, Rukullakta is now seen by the local people as a "territory" with an elected *kuraka*. The latter term is sometimes translated as "chief," but that English word implies that the people in question were historically organized under a leader, which was not the case in this area. In fact, *curaga* is a term that was imposed by the Spanish during colonial times to create a hierarchy within the indigenous population, a hierarchy that made it easier for colonial authorities to control them. The indigenous intellectuals who promote using this term, however, are not romanticizing a colonial past. They are seeking autochthonous-sounding terms to signify and champion what are indeed very new social relations among indigenous people, and between indigenous governments and outsiders.

Rukullakta's shift in name, leadership terminology, and legal designation provide some sense of the global changes in development ideologies that its people have navigated as they have pursued sovereignty. Indeed, there has been a dramatic shift in what outsiders want Rukullakta's residents to do. No longer is the goal to cut down the forest, plant pasture, and raise cattle; instead, it is to conserve large areas of the territory for the protection of plants and wild animals.

Yet one of the key requirements associated with Rukullakta's sovereignty has remained remarkably unchanged. Time and time again, Rukullakta's leaders have been reminded that if they cannot control the actions of their people and guide them collectively toward the particular development priorities of the time, they could lose access to all sources of financial assistance, and possibly even to the lands where their ancestors have lived for centuries.

As may already be clear, I am interested in understanding the everyday practices of indigenous sovereignty. In this book I reveal how sovereignty is not merely and simply achieved by the acquisition of territorial rights but is attached to changing sets of expectations and obligations.[5] Outsiders expect, even oblige, territorial governments to act like modern states, making decisions about whether to allow particular development projects to take place within their territory. Those who fund development projects in indigenous territories expect local leaders to ensure that residents will participate whole-

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heartedly in their projects, following new rules and policies, providing their labor (often without pay), and showing enthusiasm for the project's goals. Residents also have high expectations of their leaders, wanting them to pursue development projects that will bring material improvements without requiring dramatic changes in the ways they work and live. Leaders, both as individuals and as representatives of the territorial government, expect residents to act as good territorial citizens. In particular, they want residents to attend assemblies, participate in decision making, contribute to the upkeep of the territory (such as clearing a soccer field or expanding a school), and volunteer for development projects, even though these initiatives might not bring significant income for years (if ever). Residents view these tasks as obligations that may or may not be warranted. Adding to the complexity of these expectations and obligations are the ever-shifting dynamics of opportunities and threats presented by diverse outsiders.

As has been the case with many anthropologists, my research project was not what I had originally imagined; instead, it was profoundly altered by the priorities of the people with whom I worked. Prior to beginning research in the Upper Napo region in 1999, I had already spent about fourteen months in Ecuador (ten in 1994–95 and four in 1997), and I had experienced little difficulty in finding people with whom to discuss my initial interest in ecotourism in indigenous communities. However, the territorial organization where I had originally planned to conduct dissertation fieldwork turned my project down, despite the fact that the president had approved it the year before. They felt that my desire to examine the interactions between environmental NGOs and their organization would be of little benefit to them and, if my conclusions were overly critical, could even jeopardize their access to sustainable development projects in the future. Indigenous people are increasingly aware of the potential dangers that can be posed by scholarly research and are more careful than in the past about whom they allow into their worlds (Warren and Jackson 2002, 3).

Through some mutual acquaintances, I met the leaders of another indigenous organization, the Rukullakta Cooperative, and learned that they were interested in having someone write a history of their organization, as many of the founding members had already passed away and the oral history project required more time than any of them had to spend on it. I wholeheartedly agree with Charles Hale's assertion that the most elemental meth-

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odological principle of activist anthropology is to "talk over research ideas with the people with whom you are primarily aligned, in hopes of producing knowledge that might be useful to them" (2006, 4). Thus, I was elated to find a collaborative research topic of local value and threw myself into the project.

After I had spent a few months conducting interviews, local leaders loaned me the cooperative's archives to study. The archives, referred to as the *Actas de la Cooperativa Agropecuaria San Pedro de Rucu-Llacta, Ltda.* (or *Actas*) throughout this book, are made up of thousands of pages of handwritten minutes of the meetings of both the administrative council and the larger assembly of members since 1970, recording those bodies' debates, disputes, and decisions. I also obtained and analyzed copies of aerial photographs taken by Texaco in 1973 and the Ecuadorian government in 1982 (both of which are currently housed in Ecuador's Military Geographical Institute) as well as satellite images from various dates, affording me a bird's-eye view of how debates over property lines and land use have shaped the landscape. Since that initial, ten-month period of fieldwork, I have returned six times to Rukullakta between 2001 and 2011, conducting additional interviews, visiting with friends, and continuing to trace the history of the organization.

The fact that Rukullakta's leaders wanted someone to document and publish the history of their organization is telling. The social movement that their parents formed in the late 1960s and early 1970s represented one of indigenous Ecuador's most successful efforts to secure legal ownership of a large area of land, and they are very proud of this history. Rukullakta's early leaders and founding members managed to convince the Ecuadorian government to give them title to 41,888.5 hectares of land. This translated into over 200 hectares per member at a time when most non-indigenous farmers moving into the Ecuadorian Amazon region from the highlands through state-backed colonization schemes were granted only 50 hectares. The success Rukullakta's members experienced contrasted starkly with that of many Kichwa families living in the region, who were left with insufficient land to sustain their previous ways of living.

Of all the indigenous peoples in the Americas, Amazonian Indians have a particular cachet: they are commonly seen as the most isolated from global forces, the most antithetical to Western civilization, and the most vulnerable

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to the devastation that can be caused by development projects. Yet, at least on most days, Rukullakta's leaders do not see themselves as barely hanging onto their territory, constantly at risk from colonists or transnational corporations that want to take it from them. They do not see themselves as "David battling Goliath," even though this is by far the most frequently invoked metaphor in both popular and scholarly accounts of indigenous peoples in the Amazon.[6] On the contrary, the leaders of Rukullakta more commonly see themselves as pathbreakers and visionaries, capable of forging the necessary alliances and identifying the appropriate paths toward creating a better life for their organization's members. This perception is also clear in statements made by other indigenous leaders dating back to the early days of the organization's history. Take, for example, the following quote from Rukullakta's archives, from a speech made by the president of the provincial indigenous rights organization (the Federación de Organizaciones Indígenas de Napo, or FOIN) to Rukullakta's members in 1976: "In Napo Province, there is one organization that is opening doors for work, for culture, economy, and social programs; I am speaking of your cooperative. It is the first organization that is advancing in the path of communal life in work, and in the economy" (*Actas*, July 17, 1976).[7] The quote not only highlights the way that indigenous leaders from both inside and outside Rukullakta have, during much of its history, thought of Rukullakta as a model for other indigenous organizations. It also points to the very high expectations of sovereignty that have guided the leaders' work over the past four decades.

The provincial indigenous rights leader quoted in Rukullakta's archives spoke about how the collective was making advancements in "communal work" and "the economy," demonstrating that indigenous leaders in this region have never seen their role as simply securing an area of land for their people so that they could live in isolation. They have also sought to improve their constituents' lives through a variety of projects, ranging from cooperative cattle ranching to ecotourism, and from public health campaigns to advancing adult literacy. From the beginning, leaders shared the long-term concerns associated with securing the "welfare of the [territory's] population, the improvement of its condition, [and] the increase of its wealth, longevity, health, etc." (Foucault 1991, 100). Yet such interests in improvement and welfare do not signal a simple conversion to a new universal or Western set of values. Instead, leaders have simultaneously sought to protect certain

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cultural practices and landscapes that they have identified as important to sustaining Amazonian Kichwa culture. Negotiating how to do both simultaneously, while navigating the territory's relationships with diverse and typically more powerful outsiders, has been and continues to be one of the biggest challenges leaders have faced as they pursue indigenous sovereignty.

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