

'The river told me so'
Narrating human-environmental relations
in indigenous Lenca territory

Ermesinde De Strijcker

Yo sabía que íbamos a triunfar,
me lo dijo el río.

#JUSTICIAPARABERTA

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Cover Page: Genevieve Roudané
'I knew we would triumph, the river told me so'



Universiteit Utrecht

Berta no Murió, se Multiplicó

Volveré y Seré Millones

Berta vive!

*Dedico esta tesis a mi corazón Lenca,
te amo muchos montones y muchos bastantes.*

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The journey continues in October, *'cheke leke' y hasta luego!*

Map of Honduras



Figure 1: Map of Honduras,

Credit: <http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/honduras-map2.htm>,

Last accessed: 31-07-2017.

Map of Intibucá Department, Honduras

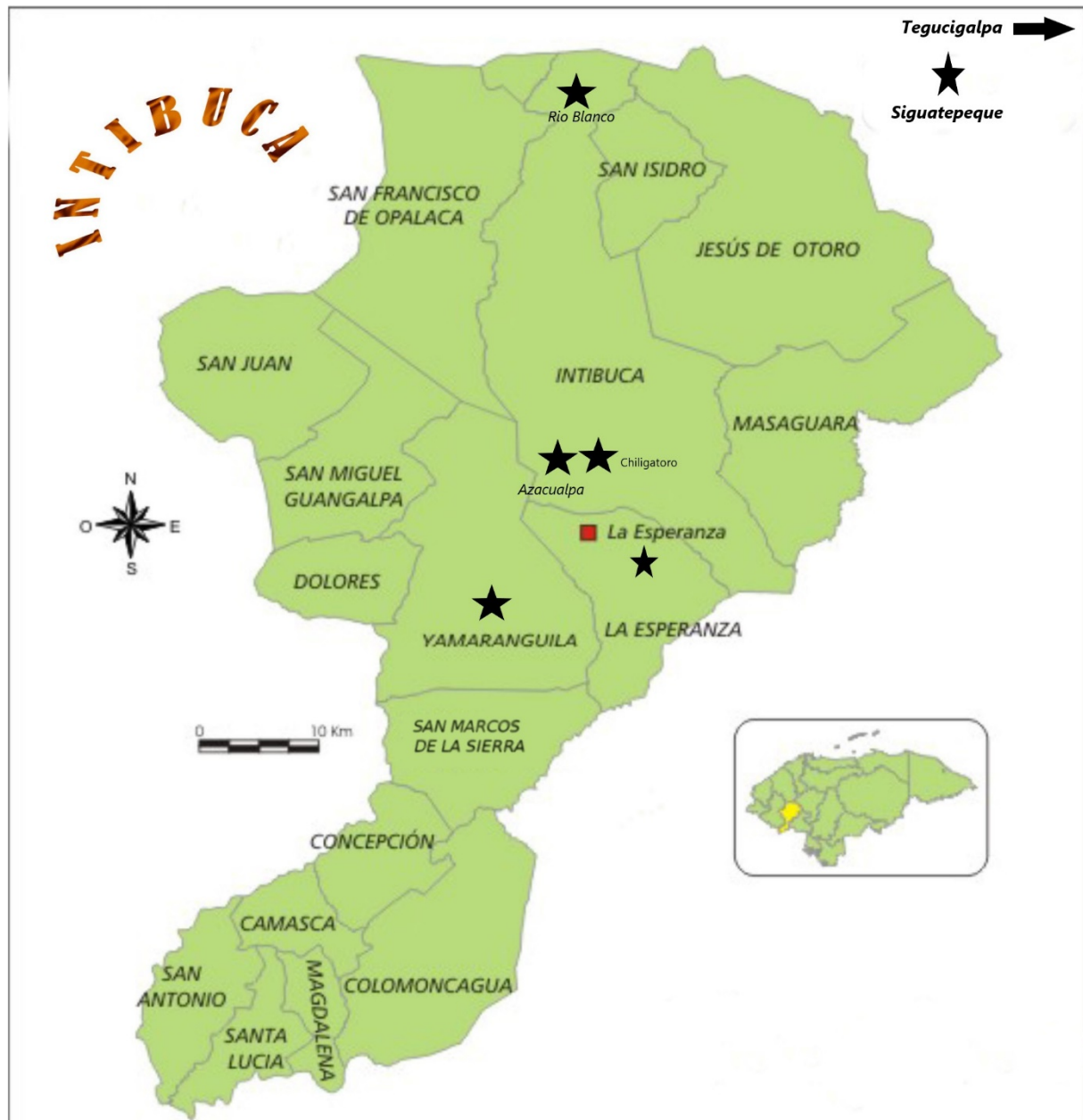


Figure 2: Map of Intibucá Department,
Credit: <http://shouldertoshoulder.org/who-we-are/where-we-serve>¹,
Last accessed: 31-07-2017.

¹ I Edited this map in Paint 3D with star figures as an indication for the reader to orientate (additional) places mentioned in this thesis. These are not exact geographical coordinates. In the thesis no reference is made to this map, but every location could be traced back.

Map of the River Gualcarque



Figure 3: Map of Honduras with the river Gualcarque,

Credit: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/04/honduras-dam-activist-berta-caceres?CMP=share_btn_tw,

Last accessed: 31-07-2017.

List of acronyms

| | |
|----------------|---|
| ASINGTUR | Asociación Intibucá de Guíos Turisticós |
| CABEI | Central American Bank for Economic Integration |
| CAMIF | Central American Mezzanine Infrastructure Fund |
| CANATURH | La Camera Nacional del Turismo |
| COPINH | The Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras |
| DESA | Desarrollo Energéticos S.A. |
| Finnfund | Finnish Fund for Industrial Cooperation Ltd. |
| FMO | Financierings Maatschappij voor Ontwikkelingslanden |
| INGO | International Non-Governmental Organization |
| Mission Report | Independent Fact Finding Mission: Report and Recommendations |
| PBI | Peace Brigades International |
| Project | The Agua Zarca hydroelectric (dam) Project |
| SOAW | The School of the Americas Watch |
| TNI | Transnational Institute |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |

Abstract

In Honduras, a country still heavily depending on fossil fuels, the government decided to commit itself to reduce its ecological footprint in the light of climate change. Since 2009 the country opened up towards foreign investors willing to finance sustainable development projects among others. At the river Gualcarque, the hydroelectric Agua Zarca Project, which until recently was co-financed by the Dutch Development Bank FMO and Finnfund, initiated a battlefield of different perspectives on sustainable development. Berta Cáceres, leading the indigenous Lenca resistance in defense of the river, was assassinated in March 2016. About this case Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous people, wrote that there exists tension between global development aspirations and local needs. In this research, the Agua Zarca Project at the river Gualcarque functions as the catalyst for narrating different types of human-environmental relations occurring in indigenous Lenca territory.

Key words: Indigenous people, Indigenous Knowledge, Territorial narratives, Human-environmental relations, Sustainable development, Renewable Energy, Rural Tourism

Preface

*La Madre Tierra militarizada, cercada, envenenada, donde se violan sistemáticamente los derechos elementales, nos exige actuar*². – Berta Cáceres, discurso al recibir el Premio Goldman.

‘Indignation as a motive’

In the early morning of 3 March 2016, Berta Cáceres, winner of the Goldman Environmental prize³ was killed in her hometown La Esperanza, in the department of Intibucá in southwestern Honduras. Since 2013 Berta had been leading the indigenous struggle against the construction of the hydroelectric Agua Zarca (dam) Project on the river *Gualcarque*. The dam project is perceived by a significant part of indigenous Lenca communities as an invasion of indigenous territory by foreign enterprises and capital, leading to a destruction of the environment. Many Hondurans are convinced that Berta, co-founder of the Indigenous organization COPINH (The Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras⁴), was killed because of her strong vocal opposition against the dam. A recent report of Global Witness (January 2017) mentions that *‘since 2010 more than 120 people have been killed in Honduras for standing up to companies that grab land and trash the land. It makes Honduras the deadliest country in the world for environmental activism’*⁵.

I remember vividly how the news about Berta’s death was spread all over my Facebook wall the morning after. The tragic news was picked up instantly and published by many of the human rights organizations that I follow online. Not much later a vacancy was published by Peace Brigades International⁶ (PBI) – the Netherlands, for a volunteer position as Honduras Country Specialist. Feeling indignant about Berta’s fate, I applied for the vacancy. I started volunteering for PBI in April 2016. During my volunteering period I learned in more detail

² ‘The militarized, besieged, poisoned Mother Earth, where rights are systematic violated, requires us to act’.

³ ‘The Goldman Environmental Prize honors the achievements and leadership of grassroots environmental activists from around the world, inspiring all of us to take action to protect our planet’. Source: <http://www.goldmanprize.org/about/>, last accessed: 18-06-2017.

⁴ *Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras*

⁵ Source: <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/honduras-deadliest-country-world-environmental-activism/>, last accessed: 18-06-2017.

⁶ Peace Brigade International is an international NGO that has been promoting nonviolence and protecting human rights since 1981. Source: <http://www.peacebrigades.org/>, last accessed: 18-06-2017.

about the Agua Zarca (dam) Project and that one of the investors of the Project is FMO, the Dutch Development Bank, which has its headquarter in the Hague (the Netherlands).

Meanwhile, Berta's murder triggered international outrage and piled pressure on the international backers to pull out of the project amid a campaign of intimidation against communities opposed to the dam⁷. In the Netherlands, Dutch civil society organized protest campaigns at the headquarters of FMO and the Embassy of Honduras to the Netherlands. I attended a public event organized by the Transnational Institute (TNI)⁸ wherein a Honduran indigenous delegation (of COPINH members) informed the audience about the situation on the ground in Rio Blanco, near the river Gualcarque. The aim of such events was to raise awareness and to mobilize Dutch society. Since the Dutch State holds 51% of the shares⁹ of FMO, many Dutch citizens unknowingly supported the dam project by means of their tax money. In response to the piling pressure, FMO decided to send an independent fact Mission to Honduras in order to examine the situation locally, which resulted in the publication of the Agua Zarca Independent Fact Mission: Report and Recommendations (September 2016). This report will be discussed later in the thesis.

In the midst of all these developments I started an internship in the Hague for three months for the Shelter City Project¹⁰ at Justice and Peace – the Netherlands. During my internship I closely worked together with Tomy, a human rights defender/journalist from Honduras. Our cooperation enabled me to deepen my knowledge about the human rights situation in Honduras, as well as the socio-political context in which the Project is happening. Furthermore, Tomy's personal testimony encouraged me to engage myself even more in the field of human rights. One day, while listening with Tomy to a speech given by Laura – daughter of Berta Cáceres - at a colloquium on 'Heritage and Rights of Indigenous Peoples', I received an email from the Platform of Authentic Journalism¹¹ (in cooperation with Utrecht University) wherein a call was made for researchers to conduct research on FMO related cases. Fascinatingly, that day Laura Cáceres and Dr. Anita Tzec (Leiden University) also

⁷ Source: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/04/honduras-dam-activist-berta-caceres?CMP=share_btn_tw, last accessed: 19-06-2017.

⁸ The Transnational Institute (TNI) is an international research and advocacy institute committed to building a just, democratic and sustainable world. For more than 40 years, TNI has served as a unique nexus between social movements, engaged scholars and policy makers. Source: <https://www.tni.org/en/page/introduction>, last accessed 18-06-2017.

⁹ Source: <https://www.fmo.nl/profile>, last accessed: 22-06-2017.

¹⁰ Shelter City is a nationwide initiative of Justice and Peace Netherlands to protect human rights defenders, in cooperation with a growing number of Dutch cities and local organizations. Source: <https://sheltercity.nl/en/about-us/>, last accessed: 18-06-2017.

¹¹ Source: <https://authentiekejournalistiek.org/>, last accessed: 19-06-2017.

specifically asked the academics among the audience to do research on the case in order to support '*la lucha*' (the resistance) of Lenca communities.

All the roads were leading me to Honduras, and I decided to go for it¹². After finalizing the proposal (in collaboration with the platform of Authentic Journalism), I travelled to Honduras in order to conduct qualitative research. In La Esperanza-Intibucá, I lived with one of Berta's sisters and became close to some of the family members. Members of the earlier mentioned indigenous delegation became my research informants and hosts when I resided in the Rio Blanco region. Suddenly, one year after I received the news about Berta, I found myself in the thick of it.

By means of this prologue, I want to inform the reader that a yearlong process has informed this Master thesis which made my indignation about the Project grow, as well as my fascination with the Lenca Indigenous Peoples. This process allowed me to analyze the situation in depth, and take an informed political stand without compromising my sensitivity and open mind towards the nuances of everyday reality in the field. Laura Nader (1972: 285) calls on us to valorize such normative impulses before doing research, because it often leads students to ask important questions about a phenomenon that would not be asked otherwise, or to define a problem in a new context. Furthermore, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995:411-418) argues that the time of anthropology has changed: it now seems that there is little virtue to false neutrality in the face of the broad political and moral dramas of life and death, good and evil, that are being played out in the everyday lives of the people. What makes anthropology and anthropologists exempt from the human responsibility to take an ethical (and even a political stand) on the working out of historical events as we are privileged to witness them? Seeing, listening, touching, recording can be, if done with care and sensitivity, acts of solidarity. Above all, they are the work of recognition. Through this thesis, my aspiration is to give testimony to Schepers-Hughes' proposition towards a militant and engaged anthropology.

12 August 2017

¹² Source: <https://sheltercity.nl/tomy-and-chindy-honduras-we-are-all-human-rights-defenders/>, last accessed: 19-06-2017.

Introduction

On the first of March 2017 I woke up at four thirty in the morning in order to catch the first bus from La Esperanza-Intibucá to Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. This day marked the first year ‘anniversary’ of the assassination of Berta Cáceres. Both local and international supporters of Berta travelled to the capital that week in order to participate in a peaceful protest march denouncing the lack of progress in the murder case. After a four hour bus ride, I encountered the mass of people in front of *La Corte Suprema*. Hundreds of people occupied the streets around *La Corte* demanding justice for Berta while shouting ‘*Berta no murió, se multiplicó!*’ (Berta did not die, she multiplied!). The march demonstrated how Berta’s struggle in defense of the river and the Lenca communities lives on among others.

In the debate around the hydroelectric Project the focus frequently lies upon the occurrence of violence and violation of human rights in the region which stems from the conflict between the protesters against the dam (e.g. Berta) on the one hand and the military and security forces protecting the Project on the other hand. While the violence is explicit, resulting in casualties, it can distract the attention from the underlying, more tacit, dynamic causing the violence in the first place. Reports presented by COPINH¹³ and Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, the Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous Peoples,¹⁴ point to an underlying tension between the western concept and indigenous perspectives on sustainable development. In this thesis, I analyze this tension by arguing that in Honduras several actors engage in constructing conflictive territorial narratives in which they give diverging meanings to nature and in particular to the river Gualcarque, which subsequently, informs their relation to the (sustainable development) Project.

Cremers and Rasch (2016: 75) consider narratives ‘*as social constructs that are able to represent complex situations that are understandable for everyone. As such, narratives provide a context in which we locate ourselves, where to situate our ideas, values and actions (González in Cremers and Rasch 2016). Territorial narratives provide people with [...] explanatory systems that allow them to engage with the territory they live [or operate] in*’. Subsequently, Cremers and Rasch unravel different territorial narratives by approaching nature as a source of negotiation and conflict, as a ‘field of force’. Nuijten (*in* Cremers and

¹³ Source: <http://copinhonduras.blogspot.nl/copinh-rechaza-el-informe-de-la-mision.html>, last accessed: 29-01-2017.

¹⁴ Source: <http://unsr.vtaulicorpuz.org/site/index.php/en/documents/country-reports/148-report-honduras>, last accessed 24-01-2017.

Rasch 2016) has conceptualized force fields as structural forms of power relations, which are shaped around the access to, and use of, specific resources like the river. It is important to unravel first the different meanings that people attach to nature, and second, how such meanings are made instrumental to gain control over nature and provide important arguments in conflicts over access to natural resources. Following Boelens (2008), Cremers and Rasch, therefore, argue that negotiating meanings of nature are about more than nature itself. It is about who has the right to decide about nature, about the regimes of representation.

I will analyze three different territorial narratives constructed in the context of globalization: nature as inherently spiritual and animated, nature as a commodity to be exploited in light of global development aspirations, and nature as a destination for rural tourism. Furthermore, analyzing the territorial narratives that are constructed about the river Gualcarque reveals that the heart of the tension between the narratives comes down to ontological questions regarding human-environmental relations. On the one hand, I will demonstrate that actors relate differently to nature, by either positioning themselves in or outside of nature (Pálsson 1996). On the other hand, I will demonstrate that actors perceive nature, in its ‘nature of being’, also differently, either in terms of a material commodity or in terms of a supranatural living entity (Descola 1996; De la Cadena 2010).

In sum, the analysis of the tension between the narratives is based on the following research question; ‘How do human-environmental relations inform the different territorial narratives about the river Gualcarque in indigenous Lenca territory?’ Finally, such analysis is relevant for ‘*understanding the manifestation of socio-environmental conflicts in Lenca indigenous territory, where the indigenous population has been excluded from main domains of political decision making processes regarding the lands that they use, inhabit and perform their rituals on*’ (Cremers and Rasch 2016: 73).

Contextual introduction to the territorial narratives

In its motivation to co-finance the (dam) Project, FMO, the Dutch Development Bank, stated the following: ‘*FMO co-finances the development of the project because the construction will provide clean and sustainable energy to Honduras, a country that is largely depending on fossil fuels. The project generates jobs, clean energy (also to the local communities) and helps to reduce poverty*’¹⁵. This statement demonstrates FMO’s ambition to contribute to economic,

¹⁵ Source: <https://www.fmo.nl/agua-zarca>, last accessed: 27-01-2017.

environmental and social betterment of the communities in a sustainable way. The three aforementioned dimensions relate to the triple bottom line that is increasingly invoked in western (development) culture to point out that sustainability has not only an environmental and economic meaning but also a social one: our livelihoods and models of development must be both economically viable and environment-friendly, and socially equitable (Grasseni 2015¹⁶).

Reports of COPINH and the Special Rapporteur mention that in Lenca cosmovision the Gualcarque river is sacred since it is the home of 'las niñas', the female spiritual beings who are the guardians of the river. The premise for constructing the dam project did not take into account this local indigenous perspective about the river. In the FMO independent fact Mission report (2016: 15-16), the spiritual attachment of local communities to the river is even questioned. COPINH denounced the Mission's visit because it was extremely superficial with only short visits to the communities. Furthermore, COPINH rejected the mission report and published an extensive document with their arguments for rejecting it.

*'The FMO report does not even try to understand Indigenous cosmovision or visions of development based on Indigenous self-determination and harmony with the river and Mother Earth. It does not even consider the right to self-determination about models of development. It operates on a western Worldview that dismisses Indigenous culture, cosmovision, and way of life. The report is premised on the false assumption that the Agua Zarca Project is a magic bullet for 'development' and creates the false dichotomy between poverty or the project, despite the fact that the report itself admits the majority of jobs are short-term. We reject the imposition of western and colonial notions of 'development' that in reality are the plundering of our territory, spirituality and cosmovision'*¹⁷.

COPINH's rejection statement was initially not sufficient to convince stakeholders such as FMO and DESA from withdrawing the (financial) support to the hydroelectric Project which was supposedly built for the greater benefit of the community. Earlier, in 2015, DESA already moved the construction of the dam to the other side of the river in neighboring department Santa Barbara (which is considered non-Lenca territory), turning the dam into a run of the

¹⁶ Sustainability and Social Contestation 2015, Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship, Utrecht

¹⁷ Source: <http://copinhonduras.blogspot.nl/copinh-rechaza-el-informe-de-la-mision.html>, last accessed: 29-01-2017.

river (ROR) scheme with no reservoir. The stakeholders assumed that these measurements would be sufficient to address the expressed concerns of community members.

Since the spiritual attachment is questioned by the stakeholders of the Project, I will explore the indigenous Lenca spiritual territorial narrative that defends the sacredness of the river. Through ethnographic writing my intention is to demonstrate how Lenca communities in Honduras define, interpret and experience connections between nature and society. The objective is to unravel the dynamic between the indigenous spiritual narrative and the sustainable development narrative; why is the dam seen as an obstacle to a significant part of Lenca communities? This begs the question whether the (dam) Project, promoted as a project that will result in sustainable economic growth without harming the environment, can be perceived as a threat to indigenous peoples' ability to set their own priorities for the sustainable development of their land and territories (Tauli-Corpuz 2016).

The Project is promoted in the FMO Mission Report (2016: 34) as the 'only' solution for the development of the communities: *'If the Project does not continue, it can be expected that the communities will return to a poverty cycle of subsistence living'*. This thesis will critically reflect upon this statement by regarding this perspective as one that is localized in the institutions of the West and has gained its apparent universality by being projected throughout the formation of colonial and neocolonial power relations (Escobar 1995). Nonetheless, in accordance with Lenca cosmovision, alternatives for developing the communities do exist. Examples of promising, bottom up alternatives, such as the rural tourism narrative, will therefore also be presented in this thesis, and might inspire the initiation of follow up research or new community based initiatives.

Research Methods

In order to answer the research question I used multiple qualitative research methods such as participant observation, informal conversation, semi-structured and open interviews, expert interviews, a focus group meeting and, analysis of written and online material, such as policy documents and websites. I conducted qualitative research across the Intibucá department, Honduras, in the range of three months (February 2017 until May 2017). La Esperanza-Intibucá, the capital of the department, was a convenient starting point of research, because one of the main gatekeepers in this research, COPINH, has its seat in the town of Intibucá. La Esperanza and neighboring town Intibucá form together a 'twin city'. The two towns are

almost indistinguishably intertwined, separated by only one road. While distinct with separate municipal governments they share for example the central public park.

La Esperanza is a town mainly populated by Ladinos¹⁸. The majority of Lenca live in smaller *aldeas* (villages) across the department. In order to experience the daily realities of the Lenca and gain insight in the indigenous knowledge and cosmovision, I regularly travelled up and down in one day to nearby *aldeas* like Yamaranguila, Chiligatoro, and Azacualpa, which are characterized by a hilly landscape with wide valleys, and are often referred to as ‘little Switzerland’. When travelling to remote communities higher up in the mountains, like the ones of Rio Blanco, I was required to stay for a couple of days. Rio Blanco is located near the site of contestation at the *río* Gualcarque, in the most northern part of the department.

Fray (brother) Emilio Gavarete (2013: 3), a Lenca priest¹⁹, writes that Lenca are generally very timid. Entering the communities was facilitated by people they trust, gatekeepers like COPINH and ASINGTUR²⁰ (local tourism office). Because of them I was able to reside at the houses of Lenca families in rural areas and establish rapport with Lenca communities, which allowed me to observe and participate in daily life, *composturas* (rituals), and ‘*la lucha*’. In Rio Blanco I made a call through the community radio ‘*El Voz de Gualcarque*’ for people to attend a focus group meeting I organized that day. Approximately 25 people, most of them engaged in ‘*la lucha*’, attended the focus group.

Next to Lencas, I also conducted semi-structured and open interviews with people circulating around the Lenca communities and the Agua Zarca project, such as (COPINH-) activists, family members of Berta, (international) press and documentary makers, (international) delegations and observers, and people working for INGO’s. I conducted expert interviews with an engineer from ENEE²¹, the national state electricity company, a consultant from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ‘*Proyecto Conjunto Ruta Lenca*’, and the president of the board of directors of *La Camera Nacional del Turismo, departamento Intibucá* (CANATURH). I had informal conversations with approximately 60 people.

Another important research method in this research has been analyzing policy documents (reports), websites, and news articles, published by stakeholders (DESA, FMO, Finnfund) of the Project, as well as booklets about the Lenca (handed out to me in the field),

¹⁸ Ladino; Central American person of predominantly mixed Spanish and indigenous descent. Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica online, last accessed 14-06-2017.

¹⁹ The religious universe of the Lenca is the fruit of an assimilation between Spanish colonial Catholicism and pre-Hispanic beliefs (Rivas: 45-47).

²⁰ ASINGTUR: Asociación Intibucá de Guíos Turisticós.

²¹ ENEE: Empresa Nacional de Energía Electrica Honduras

and promotional material that supports and advertises rural tourism in Lenca communities. Besides factual information, this material often articulates a message that stakeholders want to communicate to the world. Analyzing these messages ('what people say') allowed me to compare them during participant observation with actual behavior ('what people do') in the field. Especially here, the value of data triangulation became visible. On both sides, pro-dam (building and financing the dam) and contra-dam (living in harmony with nature), perceptions on sustainable development did not always match the behavior in practice.

Finally, fully embracing the potentials of indigenous knowledge is no easy task according to Briggs and Sharp (2004). Spivak (1988) questions whether the 'subaltern'²² can ever truly speak; even when apparently expressing her own views, the subaltern is not able to express her true self. In order to be taken seriously – to be seen as offering knowledge and not folklore or opinion – the lifeworld of the subaltern has to be translated into the language of science, dominated by Western languages and concepts. Briggs and Sharp (2004: 667) write that bringing the indigenous knowledges into conversation with Western notions of development, has to be a true exchange and not simply a case of incorporation.

However, Briggs and Sharp (2004: 666) continue that the voices are there if the methods of the researcher are appropriately tuned in to them. It is important to realize that when studying the several dimensions of indigenous knowledge the voices may actually be embodied performances, rather than the coherent articulations of speech or writing which the academic usually seeks. For example, from the conversation with an elderly spiritual Lenca guide, data came not only from her speech, rather from the embodied experience of the way she was holding and caressing my hands throughout the conversation; a gesture that enabled our (spiritual) energy to connect and 'read each other' while talking. In the field I constantly made an effort to reflect on the relativity of my knowledge and my interpretation of 'reality' (Nakashima and de Guchteneire 1999: 40).

²² Subaltern was coined by Antonio Gramsci, notably through his work on cultural hegemony, wherein the subaltern classes refer fundamentally in Gramsci's words to any "low rank" person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation (Louai 2012: 5).

My Research Position

In the preface a proposition was made towards a militant and engaged anthropology. Despite my willingness to move the research process along the continuum into the direction of an engaged anthropology, this was not always without challenges and my engagement was tested several times while in the field. My initial aim was to establish rapport with COPINH, since they act as the spokesperson of several Lenca communities and also have several local representatives near the dam project. Furthermore, since the assassination of Berta, the tension in the field intensified and the daily reality became semi-unpredictable for locals. Entering the Rio Blanco region the first time without a guide is not recommended and even dangerous. Several '*guardias*' (military posts) are still active even though they might keep a low profile. Also the presence of hitmen cannot be excluded.

One of the first things a COPINH coordination member told me was that they received in the recent past '*foreigners with hidden agendas*'²³. Although I introduced myself via email before entering the field, and at their office my first week in Intibucá, the tone was set, and during the whole research project I would encounter subtle hints of resistance by some members ignoring or questioning me. Eventually, with some COPINH members I managed to build up a rapport, with others not. I received various explanations for this subtle resistance. For example, Emily, who collaborates with COPINH, told me; '*it has not got anything to do with the fact they [COPINH] do not trust you as such, but that many people are not to be trusted in town. Maybe you can unwillingly slip some information to people with bad intentions, 'there are enemies everywhere'*'²⁴. After having several conversations with Emily about this issue, I concluded that somehow COPINH is forced to be careful about every outsider that comes along. Being used to the open and welcoming atmosphere of human rights organizations in the Netherlands, I came to realize that there is no actual threat to us, so we can permit ourselves to be like this. The Honduras context is completely different and lives are at stake (Berta is a proof of this). Perhaps this is also a tactic and/or consequence of putting so much stress on an organization: by killing their leaders, the perpetrators are also killing (international) solidarity.

On the other hand, one coordination member of COPINH contacted me several times to meet up and explained that some COPINH members are timid and traumatized after what happened to Berta. Furthermore, the coordination team is very occupied with their work and it

²³ Fieldnotes, COPINH, 15-02-2017, Intibucá.

²⁴ Informal conversation, Emily, 26-03-2017, Intibucá.

is not easy in general to get hold of them. I was advised by several people familiar with the issue to have patience and at the same time urged to keep insisting on making contact. Although I did not establish the rapport with COPINH I initially aimed for, our contact did enable me to enter the communities near the *río* Gualcarque, which was crucial in order to increase the validity of this research. Along the way I decided that I sympathize with COPINH's struggle, will respect their silence, and will contribute in my own way by means of this research. Finally, the situation pushed me to find other gatekeepers and informants, such as ASINGTUR, which turned out to be fruitful, resulting in new perceptions about the potentials of Lenca Indigenous knowledge.

Structure

The thesis explores three territorial narratives that are constructed about nature by different actors operating in indigenous Lenca territory. Within each narrative I reflect upon ontological questions concerning human-environmental relations. Since the actors are plenty, it is useful in Chapter one, to introduce and describe the various stakeholders or 'narrators'. First, I turn to the context wherein the Project was implemented with the backup of the Honduran government who granted the concession for the Project, DESA the owner of the Project, and FMO & Finnfund who co-financed the Project. Next, I introduce COPINH, the indigenous Lenca organization that organizes the resistance '*la lucha*' against the Project. Finally, I present Lenca indigenous people, the inhabitants of the region. In Chapter two, I focus on the indigenous Lenca spiritual narrative. In this Chapter I enter the spiritual realm that informs Indigenous Knowledge about the river. I demonstrate that within this narrative Lenca engage in relations of generalized reciprocity with the river, which they perceive as a willful nonhuman actor. In Chapter three, I first explore the sustainable development narrative in which the river is perceived as a natural resource by the owner and funders of the Project. Through the Project, they believe that the river can be exploited in a sustainable way. Describing this process reveals how stakeholders relate to the river as 'Masters of nature' in a material world. After the exploration of the two narratives, I turn to the heart of the tension between them. Next, a discussion arises whether the Project is the way forward for the communities in the light of (dominant) global development aspirations or, whether local, bottom up alternatives, like the rural tourism narrative, can perhaps combine the best of both narratives while addressing the needs of the communities. Finally, in a concluding chapter I

elaborate on the value of the argument made and my aspirations for this thesis in the near future considering the proposition made for an engaged anthropology.

Chapter 1

The narrators in *'el corazón Lenca'*:

Project stakeholders, COPINH and Lenca indigenous people



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²⁵ Photo: 'Mural of Lenca spiritual leader', photo taken by Ermesinde De Strijcker, 14-02-2017, UTOPIA.

*'Intibucá, as a department, is 'el corazón Lenca', the Lenca heart of Honduras, so to say, over here live the majority of people who just like me are descendants of Lenca indigenous culture.'*²⁶

– Alonso, proud Lenca from Intibucá.

El departamento Intibucá is situated in southwestern Honduras. Leaving the crowded urban *barrios* (suburbs) of the capital Tegucigalpa behind, it takes approximately four hours by bus to reach La Esperanza, which is the capital of the Intibucá department. After travelling two and a half hours from 'Teguc' the bus makes a stop at a crossroad in Siguatepeque before continuing its journey to La Esperanza. Although there is no official bus stop at the intersection, the bus makes a quick stop in front of the *baleadas*²⁷ and fried chicken food stalls to pick up other travelers heading to La Esperanza. The bus is already crowded, so new passengers have to stand in the aisle for the remaining journey. A woman with a newborn child in her arms is balancing herself while the bus speeds up. Someone at the other side of the bus urges to hand over the baby to her. The baby is passed on by several hands and over several heads before landing in the comfortable and safe lap of the seated woman. Meanwhile, the road starts winding and noticeably goes up while the climate drops a few Celsius. The scenery transforms into wild growing vegetation and one can see mountaintops as far as the horizon. Besides being the most mountainous district and having the coolest climate of Honduras, Intibucá is also the heart of *La Ruta Lenca*, a region of ethnic influence that spans Honduras from Santa Rosa de Copan to Choluteca.

Entering la Esperanza, graffiti mentioning '*Berta vive*', sprayed over the pyramid shaped entry monument, immediately catches the eye. The Lenca heart of Honduras has been stirred since the 2013 protests against the Agua Zarca dam Project and the assassination of Berta Cáceres. The Agua Zarca Project continues to cause friction between several actors that are operating in '*el corazón Lenca*'. In this chapter they are presented in a logical order. First, attention is given to the Honduran context and government that created impetus for the installation of the Agua Zarca Project. In the same cluster, DESA, the owner and operator of the Project, is presented, together with two of its European²⁸ lenders; FMO and Finnfund. Second, COPINH, the popular spokesperson of Lenca communities across several Honduran departments is introduced. COPINH takes an active role in '*la lucha*' (the struggle) against

²⁶ Unstructured interview, Alonso, 04-04-2017.

²⁷ Local dish made out of tortilla, fried beans, eggs and avocado.

²⁸ Other financial international lenders (e.g. CAMIF, CABEL) are left out of account in this thesis.

the Agua Zarca Project. Funneling down the broader context towards the local situation, finally, the Lenca indigenous communities, inhabitants of Intibucá, '*el corazón Lenca*', are portrayed.

1.1 The Agua Zarca Project

1.1.1 Honduran Government and the 2009 Coup

Peter J. Meyer, analyst in Latin American Affairs, reported (2010: 1-2) that prior to the Honduran coup in 2009, the Central American nation of 8.8 million²⁹ people, enjoyed 27 years of uninterrupted elected civilian democratic rule. The Liberal (PL) and National (PN) parties have been Honduras' two dominant political parties since the military relinquished control of the country in 1982. Manuel Zelaya of the PL was elected president in November 2005, narrowly defeating his PN rival, Porfirio Lobo Sosa. Zelaya was generally regarded as a moderate when he was inaugurated to a four-year term in January 2006. As his term progressed, however, Zelaya advanced a number of populist policies, including free school enrollment, an increase in teachers' pay, and a 60% increase in the minimum wage. Although Zelaya's populist policies allowed him to maintain considerable support among certain sectors of Honduran society, they alienated many within the traditional economic and political elite.

The conflict in Honduras that led to the coup d'état in 2009 began when President Zelaya issued an executive decree that called on the National Statistics Institute to hold a popular referendum on June 28, 2009, to determine if the country should include a fourth ballot box during the general elections in November 2009. The fourth ballot would consult Hondurans about whether the country should convoke a national constituent assembly to approve a new constitution (Meyer 2010: 2). The proposal was immediately criticized by a number of officials. President of Congress Roberto Micheletti expressed ardent opposition, the 2009 presidential nominees of the PL and the PN accused Zelaya of trying to perpetuate himself in power, the Attorney General's office accused Zelaya of violating the constitution, and the Honduran judiciary declared Zelaya's proposal unconstitutional. Nonetheless, Zelaya pushed forward, maintaining that the law of citizen participation, approved shortly after he took office, allowed him to consult the people of Honduras in a non-binding poll (Meyer 2010: 3). On June 28 President Zelaya was taken from his home by soldiers and brought to

²⁹ 2016, source: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2119.html>, last accessed: 25-06-2017.

Costa Rica. The National Congress later accepted a letter of resignation from Zelaya, although Zelaya claimed he never wrote the letter. Speaker of Congress Roberto Micheletti was sworn in as temporary president³⁰.

President Zelaya's removal and replacement were swiftly denounced as a coup d'état by governments throughout the region. In contrast, this was vigorously defended by a broad, if not unanimous, array of Honduran civil authorities. In written communiqués, they insisted that his ouster was a lawful and constitutional action to defend Honduran democracy and the rule of law from a president who had defied both courts and Constitution, and who was maneuvering to amend the Constitution to allow him to run for a second term (Cassel 2009: 2). While Honduran civil authorities accused Zelaya of taking actions in violation of the constitution, Physicians for Human Rights reported that in the four months following the coup there was more than a 4,000 percent spike in human rights violations. The violations included torture, mass arrests, military force used against protesters and media supporting Zelaya³¹.

1.1.2 Overview of the Project

NACLA (North American Congress on Latin America) Research Associate, Dawn Paley, states that the coup government, under Porfirio Lobo (2009-14) proposed a number of pro-business laws, ranging from a new mining law to a new law promoting international investment³². The EIU (Economist Intelligence Unit) reports that President Juan Orlando Hernández, who took office in January 2014, continued the pro-business reforms of his predecessor. The administration in May 2014 launched *Pro-Honduras*, a programme that aims to promote foreign investment and trade, as well as the growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises³³. Paley concludes that what has happened in Honduras since the coup is the fusion of the transnational business class with government. The initiation of the Agua Zarca Project dates from above reforms. A country report³⁴ written by Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, gives an overview of the lifeline of the Project.

³⁰ Source: <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/justice-forensic-science/torture-investigations/honduras-constitutional-crisis-and-coup.html>, last accessed 25-06-2017.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Source: <https://nacla.org/news/honduran-business-elite-one-year-after-coup>, last accessed 25-06-2017.

³³ Source:

http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1041964088&Country=Honduras&topic=Regulation&subtop_8, last accessed 27-06-2017.

³⁴ Source: <http://unsr.vtaulicorpuz.org/site/index.php/en/documents/country-reports/148-report-honduras>, last accessed 24-01-2017.

'The Agua Zarca project is part of approximately 40 hydroelectric projects whose contracts were approved through a legislative decree in September 2010 without previous consultation with the indigenous peoples concerned. The approval of the contracts was preceded by legislative reforms in 2009 and 2010 that allowed water concessions for third parties and the repeal of national regulations that previously prohibited hydroelectric projects in protected areas. The above took place in the context of a State policy favoring renewable energy sources through hydroelectric among other projects. The Agua Zarca hydroelectric project consists of a 20-year concession to the Honduran company Desarrollo Energéticos S.A. (DESA). The company hired the Chinese company SINOHYDRO to build the dam. In 2012, the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI) contributed US\$24.4 million to the project through an investment co-structured with the Netherlands Development Finance Company (FMO) and the Central American Mezzanine Infrastructure Fund (CAMIF). [In 2013 the life of Indigenous leader Tomas Garcia was brutally taken away by the Honduran military when a soldier shot and killed him at close range in broad daylight in front of 200-300 people while he was leading the delegation that had come to deliver a message to the companies constructing the dam at their installations in Rio Blanco³⁵]. This murder and the protest against the dam in 2013 were among the factors behind SINOHYDRO's withdrawal from the project. In December 2013, CAMIF as well decided not to proceed with its investment in Agua Zarca (thus the IFC and World Bank stopped participating actively in the project). In October 2015, DESA moved the construction of the dam to the other side of the Gualcarque river in San Francisco de Ojuera, Santa Barbara. This phase of the project obtained financing from the Netherlands Development Finance Company (FMO) for US\$ 15 million.'

1.1.3 DESA: owner and developer of the Project

Desarrollos Energéticos S.A. is an independent power and renewable electricity producer that engages in the generation of hydroelectric power³⁶. DESA is a special purpose company incorporated in Tegucigalpa in 2008 for the development of the Agua Zarca hydropower

³⁵ Source: SOA Watch: <http://www.soaw.org/about-us/equipo-sur/263-stories-from-honduras/4129-tomasgarcia>, last accessed 18-06-2017.

³⁶ Source: <https://www.bloomberg.com/research/stocks/private/snapshot.asp?privcapid=298110979>, last accessed 24-06-2017.

Project³⁷. DESA is both the owner and developer of the Agua Zarca Hydroelectric Project, thus ownership of the project is completely in the hands of Honduran parties³⁸. DESA aims to promote sustainable development:

*'[...] with the purpose of taking advantage of hydroelectric resources in Honduras, generating clean and renewable energy, through the construction of hydroelectric power plants and related works. DESA has always been concerned with the protection of the environment, and therefore all its operating and maintenance practices follow strict rules to be in harmony with nature. We are a 100% Honduran company managed by Hondurans. We believe in the progress of our region and therefore we will continue working to contribute to the development of our country and throughout Central America.'*³⁹

Banktrack notes that although DESA was created in 2008 solely for the project Agua Zarca, community members in Río Blanco remember the first studies for the dam project dating back to 2006, when the indigenous local population and COPINH immediately expressed objections⁴⁰. Annie Bird (2013: 4), co-director of Rights Action, writes that although the community rejected the proposal, the Mayor of Intibucá gave the company a permit to construct the dam. Although DESA's mission statement promotes sustainable development, arguably, the context wherein the dam originates invokes questions on the authority of the Project.

1.1.4 European lenders: FMO (and Finnfund)

FMO (de Nederlandse Financierings-Maatschappij voor Ontwikkelingslanden), which has its headquarter in the Hague (the Netherlands), is the Dutch Development bank. One can read FMO's mission statement on their website: *'[In order to] to empower entrepreneurs to build a better world, we invest in over 85 countries, supporting job creation and income generation and improving people's lives in those parts of the world where this makes the biggest*

³⁷ The project has its own webpage: <http://www.hidroelectricaaguazarca.hn/index.php>, last accessed 24-06-2017.

³⁸ Source: <https://www.fmo.nl/project-detail/43464>, last accessed 24-06-2017.

³⁹ Source: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/desarrollos-energ-ticos-s-a->, last accessed : 27-06-2017.

⁴⁰ Source: https://www.banktrack.org/project/agua_zarca_dam, last accessed : 27-06-2018.

difference. Our role extends beyond financing, as we help businesses to operate and grow transparently in an environmentally and socially responsible manner.’⁴¹

FMO was financing the Agua Zarca project with USD 15 million (Finnfund participates as a B-lender and channeled it’s financing of USD 5 million to the project through FMO⁴²). In an identical statement FMO and Finnfund declare to ‘*co-finance the development of the [Agua Zarca] project because it is designed to provide clean and sustainable energy in Honduras, a country that is largely dependent on fossil fuels. The project would generate jobs, clean energy (including jobs for the local communities) and would help to reduce poverty*’.

1.2 Berta Cáceres and COPINH

‘El COPINH, caminando con otros pueblos por su emancipación, ratifica el compromiso de seguir defendiendo el agua, los ríos y nuestros bienes comunes y de la naturaleza, así como nuestros derechos como pueblos’. – Berta Cáceres, discurso al recibir el Premio Goldman.

‘Berta grew up as a very intelligent child. Later on she went to fight together with the guerilla in the war in El Salvador. After that, when she was back in Honduras, she started the organization COPINH together with her husband’. Mama Berta maintains her piercing glance throughout the whole conversation, but tears are running down her cheek when she talks about Berta’s childhood. While drying her tears she continues: ‘One of the first victories of COPINH was in San Francisco Opalaca where they blocked a dam project, and helped in developing the community while establishing an independent municipality which is now officially recognized. Later they started to focus on the Rio Blanco region and the río Gualcarque. Berta was able to mobilize people, and was not afraid of confronting the companies’⁴³.

Locals often state that from a young age on, Berta, born Ladina, loved to play outside with Lenca age mates. This memory of Berta demonstrates that it was quite a deal in those days for a Ladina girl to socialize with Lenca who had, and to great extent still have, a marginalized position in Honduran society. Berta was consistent in her engagement during her

⁴¹ Source: <https://www.fmo.nl/about-fmo>, last accessed: 18-06-2017.

⁴² Source: https://www.finnfund.fi/ajankohtaista/uutiset17/en_GB/aqua_zarca_finnfund/, last accessed : 27-06-2017.

⁴³ Unstructured interview, Mama Berta (Austra Berta Flores López), 03-05-2017, Intibucá.

adult years, and took up the struggles of Lenca communities in the department by establishing COPINH in 1993, in La Esperanza-Intibucá. The organization describes itself as follows:

‘‘The Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH) is an Indigenous Lenca organization made up of 200 Lenca communities in the western Honduran states of Intibucá, Lempira, La Paz and Santa Barbara. COPINH was born in 1993 when the Indigenous and popular movements in the Honduran state of Intibucá came together to stop logging and advance popular struggles. Today, COPINH encompasses 4 states in western Honduras and struggles for the rights of the Lenca people, including environmental, cultural, economic, social, health, education, and Indigenous rights. COPINH defends the Lenca territory and our natural resources as part of our Lenca cosmovision of respect for Mother Earth. For over 20 years, the Lenca people organized in COPINH have defended our communities and natural resources from logging, dams, mining projects, and other mega projects that would destroy our way of life and environment.’’⁴⁴

Berta’s struggle in defense of the *río* Gualcarque became eventually, according to many Hondurans, fatal to her. In La Esperanza-Intibucá, however, Lenca communities perceive Berta as still alive. Although she is not physically existent, her spirit is still present among Lenca. Berta leads their struggle now as *‘la Guardiania del río’*, the spiritual guardian of the river. At several gatherings and ceremonies, Berta’s spirit was invoked and her presence celebrated: *‘Berta vive, la lucha sigue y sigue!’* (Berta is alive, the struggle goes on and on!).

After Berta’s death, a select group of COPINH members, *‘la coordinación’*, organized themselves to continue the work of their beloved coordinator. In July 2017, Berta’s daughter ‘Bertita’ was elected as the new general coordinator of COPINH. When not out in the field, COPINH members work from the office in Intibucá, or community center UTOPIA, which is located in the outskirts of La Esperanza. At the intersection of two dirt roads, The COPINH office is signaled by a rusty iron board that mentions *‘Sede COPINH’* (Seat of COPINH). Located in midst of the dusty dirt roads of Intibucá and surrounded by some trees and dry grassland stands a humble one-storey office block. Made out of stone and covered with peeling paint and barred windows, the building is in a state of decay. At first sight, it is simultaneously hard and intriguing to imagine that from this place a protest movement is

⁴⁴ Source: <http://copinhenglish.blogspot.nl/p/who-we-are.html>, last accessed: 14-08-2017.

orchestrated. However, the interior of the building reveals that this building is home to grassroots activists; walls are densely decorated with articles about Berta, solidarity banners from International NGO's, slogans about Mother Earth, and quotes from Ché Guevara. In one of the corners a Lenca altar is built in respect and memory of Berta.

The office also houses *la radio comunitaria 'La voz Lenca del COPINH'* (community radio 'The Lenca voice'). Through this radio COPINH informs Lenca communities about their rights, and gives them updates about the Lenca Indigenous struggle (as well as other Indigenous peoples' struggles in the country). COPINH is very outspoken in their opinion and rhetoric about the Agua Zarca dam project; they perceive it as a capitalistic and paternalistic project that did not respect ILO 169⁴⁵, and violated the human rights of the local communities while destroying the environment. In Rio Blanco, COPINH installed another community radio: *'La voz del Gualcarque'* (the Voice of Gualcarque), which is maintained by locals.

COPINH regularly organizes activities in their community center UTOPIA, which is located in pasture land that is declared autonomous indigenous territory. As an example, for the one year anniversary of Berta's death (March 2017), COPINH organized a weeklong event to celebrate Berta's life and inform the public about the latest updates concerning the Agua Zarca Project. In a week like this, UTOPIA serves as the place to accommodate conferences, debate, ceremonies, fora, and artistic performances wherein Lenca, (international) delegations, press and civil society participate. The building is, just like the COPINH office, in a poor state. However, it is sufficient to host people that came from wide and far; besides a conference room, there are two dormitories and an improvised kitchen to offer these people a place to stay over. Furthermore, the pasture lands surrounding UTOPIA offer ample space for spiritual ceremonies that entail dancing and sacred fires.

Berta's death turned her into a martyr⁴⁶; a majority of people are convinced she died because of touching upon significant money interests while defending the rights of Indigenous Lenca people. However, the admiration for Berta does not necessarily result in a higher validation of the organization she left behind. The Agua Zarca Project is not the only one being contested in the region - COPINH is contested as well. Although the organization acts as a spokesperson of Lenca communities, not every Lenca (activist) is automatically linked with COPINH. Furthermore, the Mission Report (2016) refers various time to locals that are pro-project (I did not encounter them). In Rio Blanco, however, I met two persons who blame

⁴⁵ This document establishes the right of indigenous peoples to participate in decision-making processes in the development in territories where they live, as well as the spiritual rights of indigenous peoples (Cremers and Rasch 2016: 77).

⁴⁶ Informal conversation, Sabinal, 04-04-2017, Rio Blanco.

COPINH for causing all the trouble in the first place. Various rumors about COPINH engaging in criminal activities (e.g. burning fields, destroying DESA machinery⁴⁷) circulate as well in the region. At a public event Tomás Gómez argues in front of the press that *'outsiders' are trying to discredit the organization, aiming to dismantle 'la lucha'. They put everything at work for COPINH to give up the resistance*⁴⁸.

Tomás' his explanation reflects a widespread phenomenon in Latin America where Human Rights Defenders are criminalized⁴⁹. The International Federation of Human Rights writes that in the contexts of extraction of natural resources and of megaprojects criminalization of human rights defenders is most virulent⁵⁰. Organizations like COPINH are targeted because they promote land rights and defend vulnerable groups such as rural indigenous communities. They are also targeted because they have a key role in drawing attention to human rights violations related to property, exploitation of land and resources, the environment, and water rights, among others.

Seen in this light, being associated to *'la lucha'* is potentially dangerous: *'some people have been intimidated and do not voice their opposition publicly out of fear, especially now after Berta's murder*⁵¹. Allegations about COPINH and the assassination of Berta created a climate of distrust and fear. Today, an atmosphere of secrecy prevails; COPINH maintains a distance towards unknown outsiders, activists whisper when they talk about the organization, and some people prefer to not talk about COPINH or the project.

1.3 Los Indigenas Lenca

'Clap clap clap clap clap'.... It is three thirty in the morning. In the bedroom I can hear the clapping sound in the kitchen continuing on the same rhythm. Alba woke up at three o'clock today. This early morning, it is her turn to grind the maize kernels that have been soaking for hours and prepare the tortillas by 'clapping' the dough between her hands. In a couple of hours about fifteen family members will wake up to enjoy a tortilla breakfast with banana, eggs or beans, before they head to school, work on the land, or manage the household.⁵²

⁴⁷ Informant wishes to remain anonymous.

⁴⁸ Participant observation, *Foro: las consecuencias de los proyectos hidroelectricos en la zona Lenca*, 03-03-2017, UTOPIA.

⁴⁹ Source: <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/criminalisationobsangocto2015bassdef.pdf>, last accessed 15-08-2017.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Email correspondence with SOA Watch, 21-06-2017.

⁵² Participant observation, 21-03-2017, Rio Blanco.

Several times I stayed at the house of Alba and her family who live high up in the mountains of Rio Blanco. The family lives in several little houses made of *adobe* (sun-dried bricks) that are grouped together, and located in proximity of their plots where they cultivate a whole array of fruits, vegetables, and staple food like maize, coffee, beans and potatoes. Lenca families are generally highly self-sufficient by living from their own cultivations. Often, they trade with neighbors in order to obtain crops they do not cultivate themselves. A renowned Lenca custom in the region is '*el trueque*'⁵³ wherein community or family members exchange products, meaning that no money is involved in the transaction.

Diego, who lives with his family in the *aldea* of Azacualpita, says that one or two times a week some of his family members travel to the nearest town to sell the remaining crops at the colorful open air markets. With its various markets offering fresh products all week long, La Esperanza is often referred to as the 'fruit basket of Honduras'. However, the actual credit goes to the Lenca who live and cultivate in the peripheries of the city and therefore are being recognized as 'feeders of the city'. With the income from selling at the markets, Lenca pay for school and doctor fees, medicines, bus transportation, processed food (e.g. sugar, cooking oil, chips, sodas), and fabricated products, among other things.

Today, the families of Alba and Diego are in constant negotiation between so-called modern practices and traditional Lenca customs. Rigoberto, consultant for the UNDP programme '*Proyecto Conjunto Ruta Lenca*', says that the co-existence of traditional and modern practices can sometimes be confusing. For example, Lenca families have the (human) right to maintain their cultural customs, such as giving birth at home in the presence of a woman who has the spiritual gift to assist in childbirth, while at the same time Lenca women are encouraged to reach out for modern healthcare, like giving birth in a hospital, which is also considered a human right⁵⁴.

The co-existence, or in some cases even replacement, of customs and practices also influences the aspirations for and the articulations of indigenous identity. For example, the Independent Mission Report (2016: 19) states that '*the question of ethnic identity was examined and in general they were unable to find evidence of a distinct indigenous culture. The studies note there is no longer an indigenous Lenca language, there are no traditional activities that distinguish the peoples in the area from the wider culture and there are no recognized ancestral lands*'. Inevitably, the classification and presentation of people as one homogeneous group is always a simplification. Li (*in* Dove 2006) writes that especially

⁵³ Expert interview, Rigoberto, 09-03-2017, La Esperanza.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

indigenous identity is a narrow target, which is easily over or undershot; once indigenous status has been attained, official expectations of behavior can be exacting.

'Indigenous' is a highly debated concept, both inside and outside academia. Dove (2006: 192) states that whereas the connotations of popular use of the term indigenous focus on 'nativeness', formal international definitions focus more on historic continuity, distinctiveness, marginalization, self-identity, and self-governance. Kenrick and Lewis (2004: 8) mention that indigenous peoples often have to display naivety by maintaining a tradition untainted by change and are constrained to present their cultures in ways that reinforce the dominant societies' worldview in relation to for example claiming ancestral land (which is illustrated by the above Mission statement). Saugestad (2001a) suggests that we should understand the term indigenous in a relational way. Seen from this perspective, 'indigenous' describes one side in a relationship between certain unequally powerful groups of people (Kenrick and Lewis 2004: 9).

For example in Honduras, among different actors in the field, several perspectives about Lenca flourish, which illustrates the heterogeneity of their indigenous identity; 1) Among some ladinos a persistent image is adhered of Lenca being '*sucios*' (dirty) and '*pobres*' (poor) marginalized communities living in the rural areas maintaining a backward lifestyle.⁵⁵ 2) Therefore, the UNDP and tourism institutions like ASINGTUR aim to alter this image by promoting Lenca instead as '*trabajadores*' and '*luchadores*' (hardworking and persistent), focusing on their work as artisans and cultivators. They do this by encouraging rural tourism and stimulating the sentiment 'proud to be Lenca'⁵⁶. 3) COPINH portrays Lenca as well as a '*pueblo luchador*', focusing on their continuous historic struggle against powerful groups of people such as the Spanish inquisition, the Catholic Church, multinationals, banks and the Honduran government, among others. At the same time, Lenca are victimized in COPINHS' rhetoric due to the violation of their human rights, but also encouraged to participate in the Indigenous rights movement. Special attention is also given to their role as spiritual keepers of the earth living in harmony with nature. Many NGO's follow this line of thinking.

Mercurino, former Lenca mayor of Intibucá⁵⁷, has witnessed many labels being attributed to Lencas such as; '*campesinos*' (farmers), '*Indígenas*', and '*pueblos originarios*' (original people). These labels were introduced after specific events such as agrarian reforms

⁵⁵ Fieldnotes, Rigoberto, Intibucá, 15-03-2017.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ *La Auxiliaría de la Vara Alta Indígena Lenca* is the Lenca municipality that co-exists next to the official legal system.

and promotion of the human rights agenda, or on behalf of cultural institutions. Mercurino says that the labels are confusing his community; *'before the labels we just saw ourselves as 'la gente del campo' (people from the countryside)'*⁵⁸. Lenca often refer to their position of 'being left behind' in the margins, in relation to urbanized wealthier towns that attract governmental funds and aid in general.

However, for Mercurino, central to Lenca 'indigenous' identity is the relationship with nature: *'We respect Mother Earth and take care of her, by means of specific beliefs and spirituality, that although influenced by Catholicism, are our own'*.⁵⁹ The spiritual relationship of Lenca with Mother Earth, the cosmovision and *composturas* (spiritual ceremonies) are less visible, or even 'secret' identity markers of Lenca indigenous identity. Secret, because in Spanish America, the Catholic Church considered the spiritual engagement and practices with nature as diabolic and idolatries condemned to extirpation (De la Cadena 2010: 344). Therefore, explains Mercurino, in the past Lenca became forced to take the practices underground in order to not be accused of witchcraft by the Catholic Church. Mercurino mentions that today several '*composturas*' are still only carried out among a small group of people that are familiar with each other.

1.4 Concluding Remarks

This Chapter introduced the actors living and operating in '*el corazón Lenca*'. Directly or indirectly, all of them are associated to the Agua Zarca dam Project, either by being a stakeholder of the Project, by supporting '*la lucha*' against the Project, by living in a community near the river Gualcarque, or by coping with the assassination of Berta, a former prominent community leader of the wider Intibucá department. In their perspectives about the Project, all these actors turn into 'narrators' that engage in constructing territorial narratives about the river Gualcarque. Starting with the indigenous Lenca spiritual narrative, in the next Chapter I explore the perspective of the river Gualcarque that is 'home to *las niñas*'.

⁵⁸ Unstructured interview, Mercurino, 30-04-2017, La Esperanza.

⁵⁹ Unstructured interview, Mercurino, 18-03-2017, Chiligatoro.

Chapter 2

The Indigenous Lenca spiritual narrative about the river Gualcarque:

‘Earth-practices’ between human and nonhuman actors



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*'Ya tu nombre, Río Gualcarque,
por todo el mundo resuena;
el desconocido antes
y al que tanto amara Berta
que bautizó con su sangre,
para que el río fluyera,
libre, de vida donante,
no apresado por represa'*

Corrido de Berta, Autor: el Pueblo.

⁶⁰ Photo: 'The spirit of the river protects us', photo taken by Ermesinde De Strijcker, UTOPIA, 02-03-2017.

'The spirit of the river protects us'. I am standing next to Pasqualita, a Lenca elderly (age 75) and spiritual leader of COPINH, when I am observing the mural at UTOPIA⁶¹. I ask Pasqualita who or what the spirit is, and how it protects us. While she responds I notice that I am distracted from her speech. During the conversation she holds my hands carefully, and with her fingertips she caresses the back of my hands meanwhile looking into my eyes. I feel a strange sensation, as if our 'energy' connects. As if she is reading me. I understand that this subjective experience can easily be set aside by a critical rational mind as 'imagination'. However, in the weeks after this experience I encountered several people (Lencas, Garifunas⁶², family members of Berta, international visitors) for whom connecting with, let us call it 'energy' for now, is a natural occurrence. Furthermore, they gave testimony of conversing with ancestral spirits, as well as being guided by them. Like Marta, a Peruvian woman based in the United States who is allowed by shamanistic tradition to maintain sacred fires. Marta travelled all the way to Honduras under the protection and guidance of Berta's spirit in order to keep the sacred fire going during the Lenca and Garifuna ceremonies held in honor of Berta⁶³. Or Diego, a young Lenca adult, who urged me to go visit him again in his *aldea* to learn more about, and perhaps even 'meet', the female spirits who live in the rivers and protect them⁶⁴. The above testimonies are characteristic for the spiritual, often intangible, dimension of the territorial narrative (Cremers and Rasch 2016) expressed by Indigenous Lencas, as well as for people who relate to this narrative. Isabelle Stengers (*in De la Cadena 2005*) deliberates about *'how to present a proposal intended, not to say what is, or what ought to be, but to provoke thought, a proposal that requires no other verification than the way in which it is able to 'slow down' reasoning and create an opportunity to arouse a slightly different awareness of the problems and situations mobilizing us'*. Using the words of Stengers and De la Cadena (2010: 336), this chapter might represent an epistemic occasion to 'slow down reasoning' and, rather than asserting, adopt an intellectual attitude that proposes and thus creates possibilities for new interpretations about the river Gualcarque articulated by the voices of the 'subaltern'.

In this chapter, I argue that the spiritual narrative is shaped by the sacred view of nature, which in turn influences how Lenca decide what should happen to their ancestral

⁶¹ Informal conversation, Pasqualita, 02-03-2017, La Esperanza.

⁶² Garifuna or black Carib; a member of a people descended from African former slaves and the Indigenous Caribs of St Vincent in the Lesser Antilles, and subsequently dispersed over parts of the Central American mainland and some Caribbean islands. Source: Oxford dictionaries online, last accessed: 25-07-2017.

⁶³ Informal conversation, Marta, 28-02-2017, Intibucá.

⁶⁴ Unstructured interview, Diego, 05-05-2017, Intibucá.

territory and in what way this should happen (Cremers and Rasch 2016). Within the indigenous Lenca spiritual narrative human actors and nonhuman actors, ‘earth-beings’ such as rivers, mountains and forest, engage and communicate with each other through ‘earth-practices’ (Harvey 2007; De la Cadena 2010). Subsequently, the spiritual narrative touches upon two ontological questions. Starting with the first ontological question, the belief in ‘earth-beings’ reduces the social construction of ‘nature’ as a mechanical reflection in the mind of physical and technical determinations, wherein the supernatural (spiritual) order is a residual category for all those phenomena which appear incompatible with the rational working of the laws of the universe (Durkheim 1960; Descola 1996). In other words, it debunks the nature-supernature dichotomy which constitutes the building blocks of the history of western thought (Descola 1996: 98). Continuing with the second ontological question, exploring the ‘earth-practices’ between Lencas and ‘earth-beings’ reveals how the dominant dualistic thesis wherein ‘nature’ and society are treated as separate spheres should not be projected as an ontological paradigm onto cultures where it does not apply. Opting for a monist perspective (Pálsson 1996; Descola 1996) wherein Lencas and nonhuman actors engage in a relation of general reciprocity, at the same time, I argue that nowadays both perspectives, dualism and monist, are represented in Lenca communities by means of intensified contact between western and indigenous culture. Finally, the concluding remarks reflect upon the importance of the chapter in relation to the other territorial narratives – Sustainable Development narrative and Sustainable Rural Tourism narrative – presented in Chapter 3, looping the spiritual narrative back to the sustainable development debate concerning the dam project.

2.1 The indigenous Lenca spiritual narrative

2.1.1 A sacred river

It is a warm Saturday morning, 4 March 2017, the day that Berta Cáceres would have celebrated her 46th birthday. In the Rio Blanco community dozens of community members, (foreign) activists and press, gather in the shadow of ‘el roble’, an oak tree that is almost 100 years old: it was here that Berta reunited the indigenous Lenca in order to organize the

resistance against the dam project that would lay dry the Gualcarque, a sacred river for the Lenca (New York Times 2017⁶⁵).

We finish our lunch, freshly prepared by Lenca community members on a wooden fire. Any moment now, the mixed delegation will head to the river Gualcarque. From *el roble*, the place where Berta would organize road-blocks to hinder DESA's machinery, it is a long walk downhill to the river. The few pick-up trucks available are loaded with young children to spare them the walk and save some time. Most delegation members go on foot. The first part of the journey down is a relative easy walk over a dirt road, surrounded by breathtaking views over the mountains, wild growing vegetation and colorful flowers. On both sides of the road, almost hidden from the eye because of the vegetation, are little plots where Lenca cultivate crops. Approaching a cliff one can hear the sound of a flowing river getting closer. The pick-up trucks are parked, from here everyone needs to descend on foot. While locals (children included) do not have any trouble descending the cliff, the untrained visitor needs to watch his steps extra carefully, especially when clambering down while the abyss is looming. One mountain flank near the river is completely stripped of its vegetation by machinery, looking like a deserted island in midst of all this green fertility. A year earlier, before the dam project was moved to another department, access for locals to this part of the river was prohibited by DESA⁶⁶. Finally, we arrive at the bottom of the valley where the 'sacred river Gualcarque' and its rock formations welcome the, by now, sweaty delegation.⁶⁷

The Lenca people of Rio Blanco, who are mentioned in the above vignette, live in close proximity to rivers, forests, and mountains. According to Toledo (2001: 457) under indigenous cosmovision, nature is the primary source of life that nourishes, supports and teaches. For indigenous peoples, land and in general nature have a sacred quality which is almost absent from western thinking. In the words of Don Marcos, a Lenca *campesino* (farmer) from Rio Blanco; '*everything in nature is sacred, because the earth maintains us. That is why we need to love her, as if it is our mother*'⁶⁸. In the Lenca spiritual narrative, the sacredness of nature, and in particular of the river Gualcarque, is often defined in terms of '*dar vida*' (to give life); '*the river refreshes [refrescar] the earth, fertilizes our plots and sustains our agriculture*'⁶⁹, explains Sabinal, a Lenca primary school teacher.

⁶⁵ Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2017/07/02/los-herederos-de-berta-caceres/?smid=fb-share-es>, last accessed: 25-07-2017 (English translation from Spanish by Ermesinde De Strijcker).

⁶⁶ Informal conversation, 'Pancho', 16-02-2017, Rio Blanco.

⁶⁷ Participant observation, 04-03-2017, Rio Blanco and the river Gualcarque '14 barras'.

⁶⁸ Unstructured interview, Don Marcos, 23-02-2017, Rio Blanco.

⁶⁹ Semi-structured interview, Sabinal, 04-03-2017, river Gualcarque.

However, indigenous Lenca do not consider nature as merely an economic resource. Nature is for them not only a productive source, but the center of the universe, the core of culture and the origin of ethnic identity (Toledo 2001: 457). At the heart of this deep bond is the perception that all living things and natural and social worlds are intrinsically intertwined. In Lenca cosmovision the *'cosmos, the earth, and the body are in a relationship with each other'*⁷⁰. The expression *'el río tiene que correr, no parar'*⁷¹ (the river needs to keep flowing) illustrates this very well. Generally, Lenca believe that everything that is alive is in movement; a tree grows, a human body walks the earth, a river flows. So, if something does not move, it means it is dead. Furthermore, the perception of how a human body functions also applies to Mother earth; for a human body to be alive, the blood needs to flow through the veins, for the earth to be alive, the river needs to flow, because the rivers are *'las venas de nuestra tierra'*⁷² (the veins of the earth). In order to remain sacred (*dar vida*), *'the river needs to remain 'pure', not contaminated, and be able to run freely'*⁷³.

2.1.2 Indigenous Knowledge

When examining the world view of indigenous peoples, Toledo works within an ethno-ecological framework. Toledo (2001: 457) defines ethno-ecology as an interdisciplinary approach exploring how nature is seen by human groups through a screen of beliefs and knowledge, and how humans in terms of their images use and/or manage natural resources, by focusing on the *kosmos* (the belief or cosmovision), the *corpus* (the whole repertory of knowledge) and the *praxis* (the set of practices). Together, they are often addressed by scholars under the umbrella term 'Indigenous Knowledge'. Indigenous knowledge is on the one hand hailed as a unique system of knowledge that can serve as the basis for more successful development interventions (Sillitoe et al. 2002), while becoming on the other hand a subject of a wide-ranging critique in which the validity of the concept is questioned (Dove 2006).

In addition, Briggs and Sharp (2004) argue that studies on indigenous knowledge often are allowed to offer contained technical solutions that fit within the current

⁷⁰ Informal conversation, Coordinación COPINH, 14-02-2017, Sede COPINH Intibucá.

⁷¹ Expressed during public speech, *'La cargadora del fuego'* (the one who is in charge of the fire), 04-03-2017, el roble Rio Blanco; unstructured interview Don Marcos, 23-03-2017, Rio Blanco.

⁷² Unstructured interview, Don Marcos, 23-03-2017, Rio Blanco.

⁷³ Focus group, community members Rio Blanco, 22-03-2017, Rio Blanco; Unstructured interview, Don Marcos, 23-03-2017, Rio Blanco.

scientific/development world-view, but not to challenge the content, structure or value-system of this view. Concern has typically been with technical issues related to cultivation, such as methods of indigenous soil management, water preservation and medicinal plant use. There has been rather less engagement with those knowledges underlying such indigenous technical and environmental knowledges (Briggs and Sharp 2004: 205). The spiritual dimension, embedded in Lenca cosmivision (*kosmos*), informs the *corpus* and *praxis* of Lenca communities near the river and the wider area within the Intibucá department. Therefore, in what follows and in light of the argument formulated by Briggs and Sharp, the spiritual dimension underlying Lenca indigenous knowledge of a sacred river is explored⁷⁴.

On a final note, against the will of the colonizers, Lenca indigenous practices and knowledge have always been there; Lenca beliefs and symbols have not disappeared in 500 years (De la Cadena 2010). Although Lenca culture has been characterized since pre-Hispanic times by a great spirituality, the prehispanic spiritual cosmivision has been inserted in the mold of Catholic theological vision. Due to cultural imposition and cultural exchange in the current context, Lenca catholic syncretism and Lenca spirituality have been weakened according to COPINH; but somehow the spiritual worldview remains. For example, many Lencas have joined the Protestant religions or agnosticism, but they still regard the earth as a living being and maintain with the greatest naturalness of the world the many ancestral beliefs (Informe 9/81 2015: 13). Finally, depending on the *aldea*, Lenca spirituality and praxis can differ slightly throughout the region, but fundamentally **most** Lenca share the general belief in a sacred Mother nature.

2.2 ‘The river told me so’: revealing ontological questions

In articles about Berta Cáceres often reference is made to a motivational statement she once expressed: ‘*Yo sabía que íbamos a triunfar... me lo dijo el río*’⁷⁵ (I knew we would win... the river told me so). Meeting Hazel, one of Berta’s sisters, she talks about her sisters’ dedication to defend the river Gualcarque; ‘*she [Berta] has even slept at the riverbed of the Gualcarque river, guarding her and she knew the river would guard her*’⁷⁶. The mural decorating UTOPIA mentions the spirit of the river protecting the local communities. The three above mentioned statements are interrelated and illustrations of the spiritual narrative that perceives

⁷⁴ This exploration does not pretend to be an all-encompassing version of Lenca spiritual world.

⁷⁵ Source: <https://cerai.org/en-memoria-de-berta-caceres-me-lo-dijo-el-rio/>, last accessed: 01-08-2017.

⁷⁶ Informal conversation, Hazel Cáceres Flores, 22-03-2017, Intibucá.

the river as a willful nonhuman actor that is able to undertake actions such as ‘guarding’, ‘telling’ and ‘protecting’. Furthermore, the actions undertaken by the river are reciprocal; between a nonhuman actor, the river Gualcarque and human actors, like for example Berta and the local communities.

The perception of an animated river, not adhered to in western science, demonstrates that conceptions of nature vary according to cultural and historical determinations, and therefore are socially constructed (Descola 1996: 82). Exploring the indigenous Lenca spiritual narrative about the river challenges the dominant ontological perspective wherein the persistence of a binary opposition between the natural and the supernatural has been favoured. Assuming that perceptions of nature are a social construct, however, does not question another dominant ontological perspective; that of the separation of nature – society (Descola 1996). The aforementioned reciprocal dynamic between human actors and nonhuman actors, therefore, also challenges the dualistic thesis of nature - society.

2.2.1 ‘Earth-beings’: challenging the separation of nature-supernature

In Chapter one the human actors involved in the Agua Zarca dam project were presented. However, according to the indigenous Lenca spiritual narrative, this presentation is not complete. Often, in this narrative the river Gualcarque is invoked as a nonhuman actor. In various Lenca communities, the landscape and the river do not only exist in a physical state, but capture a much broader and more intangible realm in which specific religious and non-religious worldviews are enacted and negotiated (Cremers and Rasch 2016: 84). To understand such a process, one must also take into account such dimensions as local theories of the working of the cosmos, and the sociologies and ontologies of non-human beings (Descola 1996).

What concerns Lenca cosmovision (*kosmos*), the spiritual world is the ‘connecting glue’ that allows the cosmos, the earth and the body to communicate with each other. As an illustration, Don Marcos expresses how ‘*the spirit of the river, is like the soul which moves us human beings. It is the spirit of the river that allows her to move [to flow]*’,⁷⁷. In Rio Blanco, according to local beliefs, the river Gualcarque is home to three *niñas*⁷⁸, three female spirits

⁷⁷ Unstructured interview, Don Marcos, 23-03-2017, Rio Blanco.

⁷⁸ Informal conversation, Lenca elderly woman, 01-03-2017, Protest march Tegucigalpa.

who live in the river, and protect the river as *guardianas del río* (guardians of the river)⁷⁹. When Lenca pass away, it is also believed that the '*body becomes part of the earth and the blood flows back to the rivers*'⁸⁰, which might explain why the spirits of the river, and of nature in general, are often referred to by Lenca as the 'ancestral spirits'. For example, many Lenca are convinced that after her death, Berta became a *niña* herself and that she joined the other spirits of the river Gualcarque.⁸¹ As a spirit, she continues to defend and protect the river. Lenca believe that the ancestral spirits do so by filling community members with positive energy to continue '*la lucha*'⁸² while taking away their fears, hence the quote on the mural 'the spirit of the river protects us'.

Conjuring nonhumans, including rivers, mountains, the landscape, and animals, as actors, Marisol De la Cadena calls these entities 'earth-beings' (2010: 336). Earth-beings have individual physiognomies more or less known by the individuals involved in interactions with them (2010: 341-342). For example, Don Marcos and Diego described the spirits of the river as a female entity that is '*mitad persona, mitad pescado*'⁸³ (half person, half fish). According to De la Cadena, earth-beings are not simply nonhumans, they are sentient entities whose material existence - and that of the worlds to which they belong - is currently threatened by the neoliberal wedding of capital and the state (ibid.). 'Slowing down reasoning' and taking my cue from De la Cadena, I wonder if we can think about these presences as willful actors, instead of brushing them away as excessive, residual or infantile (2010: 336)? How do we do that? These questions seem unusual, they disrupt conceptual comfort zones (ibid.).

Currently, earth-beings as actors in the controversies are 'beliefs' honored only when they do not express an epistemic alternative to scientific paradigms (ecological and economic) and their cognate policies working toward the production of the common good (productive efficiency, economic growth, even sustainable development) designed to satisfy a homogeneous humanity benefiting from an also homogeneous nature (De la Cadena 2010: 349-350) Scientific paradigms and their cognate policies are what De la Cadena refers to as the nonnegotiable limits of the modern state (ibid.). Thus, when sentient entities (like the river Gualcarque), break into political stages, 'they do so as 'contentious 'objects' whose mode of

⁷⁹ Informal conversation, Pasqualita, 02-03-2017, UTOPIA; Expressed during public speech, '*La cargadora del fuego*' (the one who is in charge of the fire), 04-03-2017, el roble; Focus group, 22-03-2017, el roble Rio Blanco.

⁸⁰ Expert interview, Rigoberto, 09-03-2017, La Esperanza.

⁸¹ Informal conversation, Gustavo Cáceres, 24-02-2017, Intibucá; Informal conversation, Sabinal, 04-03-2017, el roble Rio Blanco; Unstructured interview, Mama Berta, 03-05-2017, Intibucá.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Unstructured interview, Don Marcos, 23-03-2017, Rio Blanco; Unstructured interview, Diego, 05-05-2017, Intibucá.

presentation is not homogenous with the ordinary mode of existence of the objects thereby identified' (Ranci re in De la Cadena 2010).

The representation of non-humans in the spiritual narrative, is contentious because their presence disavows the separation of the natural and the supernatural. For Lenca who testify to the existence of the spiritual world, the representation of non-humans in their *Knowledge* and *Praxis* is informed by the belief in earth-beings. In this sense, the intangible realm of the spiritual dimension, becomes tangible in daily actions and interactions, in lived-in knowledge and body techniques, in practical choices and hasty rituals, in all those little things that go without saying (Bloch in Descola 1996).

Moreover, the spiritual dimension is the driving force between earth-beings and human interactions with them, which Penelope Harvey (2007) defines as 'earth-practices'. Earth-practices enact the respect and affect necessary to maintain the relational condition between humans and other-than-human beings that makes life in (many parts of) the Intibuc  department (De la Cadena 2010: 341). Which brings me to revealing the second dichotomy; earth-practices are relations for which the dominant ontological distinction between humans and nature does not work (Nash 1993; Allen 2002; Harvey 2007).

2.2.2 'Earth-practices': challenging the separation of nature – society

Much anthropological thinking, in different academic settings, representing a wide range of theoretical 'schools' or paradigms, assumes a fundamental distinction between nature and society (P lsson 1996: 63). Usually, within the dualistic thesis, it is emphasized that nature and society were not to be seen as totally separate spheres but dialectically interlinked; each other complements and supplements in many ways (Hollingshead in P lsson 1996). Most modern day scientists continue to compare the order of nature and society as if they were separate, autonomous, systems, exploring the links between them (Holling et al. in P lsson 1996).

According to P lsson (1996: 65), the modern nature-society dichotomy is often taken for granted and it is necessary, therefore, to situate it in a wider historical and ethnographic perspective.

'In medieval Europe, there was no radical separation of nature and society. Gurevich (1992: 297) argues, in medieval times 'man thought of himself as an integral part of the world. His interrelation with nature was so intensive and thorough that he could

not look at it from without; he was inside it'. The systematic fragmenting of the medieval world and the 'othering' of nature it entailed first took shape in the Renaissance period, during which the whole western attitude to the environment, knowledge and learning was transformed. [...] The Cartesian anxiety of estrangement and uncertainty, however, of the separation from the mother-world of the Middle Ages and the nursing earth, was compensated for by the rational ego, the obsession with objectivity, and a 'masculine' theory of natural knowledge; 'She [nature] becomes 'it' – and 'it' can be understood and controlled. The otherness of nature is now what allows it to be known' (Bordo 1987: 108). (in Pállson 1996: 65-66).

The modernist project resulted in the appearance of a single world, inhabited by many peoples (now we call them cultures) more or less distanced from a single 'Nature' (Descola 1996, Latour 1993, Viveiros de Castro 2004 in De la Cadena 2010). Furthermore, the categorization of nature by western scientist as 'Otherness', created the impetus wherein humanity could position itself as the Master of nature (Pállson 1996). Nonscientific relations with other-than-humans were reduced to belief, a far cry from a method to ascertain truth, yet perhaps worthy of preservation as long as they did not claim their right to define reality (De la Cadena 2010: 345-346). De la Cadena (2010: 360) argues that we have learned to ignore earth-practices their occurrence, considering it a thing of the past, or a matter of ignorance or superstition. However, nonrepresentational, affective interactions with other-than-humans continued all over the world, also in Intibucá among Lenca communities.

In recent years however, the distinction between nature and society, one of the key constructs of modernist discourse, has itself increasingly been subject to critical discussion in several fields, including anthropology (Pállson 1996: 64). Following Pállssons' lead (1996: 66-67); *'rejecting the radical separation of nature and society, object and subject, and the modernist assumptions of othering, certainty and monologue, adding the dimension of continuity and discontinuity, yields a paradigm which may be referred to as communalism'*. Opting for a monist perspective, communalism suggests generalized reciprocity in human-environmental relations, invoking the notions of contingency, participation, and dialogue.

With generalized reciprocity, Pállson (1996: 72) means an 'exchange often metaphorically represented in terms of intimate, personal relationships'. In Lenca communities across the Intibucá department this was regularly expressed in terms of *'vivir en*

*armonía con Madre tierra*⁸⁴ (living in harmony with Mother earth), projecting an image of the ‘giving environment’ – which was described earlier as ‘*dar vida*’. Additionally, this means that one ‘only takes what he/she needs and receives from nature’⁸⁵. Generalized reciprocity, or ‘giving back to Mother Earth’⁸⁶, is established in various Lenca communities by means of ‘*composturas*’, which are celebrations dedicated to Mother Earth in order to express gratitude that ‘she’ gives plenty⁸⁷. *Composturas* are regularly also framed by community members as ‘*pagos*’ (‘payments’ made to the earth)⁸⁸.

In the community of Mercurino, for example, *composturas* are carried out before sowing the seeds and after yielding. Often, a *compostura* involves utilizing an altar, *ramas* (branches of a tree), aliments such as cacao, maize and frijoles, drinking *chicha* (a fermented drink) and burning *copal* (incense)⁸⁹. The aroma of the burning *copal* cleans the energy and attracts the spirits, while the smoke is the vehicle of communication between humans and non-humans⁹⁰. The latter also explains why during public events and ceremonies one or two persons are carrying around non-stop a copal holder, distributing the smoke over the whole area. Often, someone is also in charge of the sacred fire, which serves the same purpose as the copal. This person is referred to as ‘*el cargador del fuego*’, the one who maintains the fire.

Importantly, according to Lenca cosmovision, *composturas* also serve to ask permission from the spirits⁹¹ for cultivating the earth, cutting a tree for firewood, or crossing a river. Correspondingly, one is protected within cosmovision belief; nothing will harm one when for example cultivating the earth or crossing the river⁹². In sum, humans and non-humans are thus substitutes for one another and they contribute jointly, by their reciprocal exchanges to the general equilibrium of the cosmos (Descola 1996: 94).

⁸⁴ Focus group, 22-03-2017, Rio Blanco.

⁸⁵ Participant observation, 18-03-2017, Chiligatoro.

⁸⁶ Informal conversation, COPINH coordinación, 14-02-2017, Sede COPINH.

⁸⁷ Fieldnotes, 18-03-2017, Chiligatoro.

⁸⁸ Semi-structured interview, Rosalina, 21-03-2017, Rio Blanco.

⁸⁹ Participant observation, 18-03-2017, Chiligatoro.

⁹⁰ Informal conversation, Lenca elderly woman, 01-03-2017, Protest March Tegucigalpa; Participant observation (Pasqualita), 02-03-2017, Jornada Artística UTOPIA; Semi-structured interview, Sabinal, 04-03-2017, 14 barras Río Gualcarque.

⁹¹ Sometimes referred to as ‘God’ (in accordance with Catholic syncretism), Fieldnotes, 18-03-2017, Chiligatoro.

⁹² Expert interview, Rigoberto, 09-03-2017, La Esperanza.

2.2.2.1 The polyphonic continuum

Since the 1980s Lenca farmers across the Intibucá department started to use pesticides on their fields⁹³. Radio shows promoted the pesticides via the radio in rural and mountainous areas, promising a yield increase and bigger sized crops. Being highly self-sufficient generations long, another novelty is the consumption of products wrapped in plastic, of which the package afterwards is either thrown into nature or burned by absence of waste collecting services⁹⁴. Both pesticides and plastic packages are modern inventions influencing earth-practices in Intibucá. Generally, most people agree that both inventions are intrusive because of damaging the environment.

Being aware of the negative repercussions, the introduced practices - representing a dominant position of man over nature - do not undermine the reciprocal relation that many Lenca communities maintain with nature. Anita, the sister of Diego, explains; *‘instead of giving life, nature is now giving diseases and plagues. We now see all kind of new sicknesses in the community, like cancer, and since ten years our crops are plagued by fungus and little mosquitos who are able to reach the root of the plants. Unfortunately, we became dependent on the products, without the pesticides our yields now fail’*⁹⁵.

Social discourse is often, if not always polyphonic; Pállson (1996: 77) argues that the dualist and monist paradigm should not be regarded as bounded regimes or discursive islands in either time or space. Accounts of nature-society relations can be placed along a ‘continuum’ between exploitation (‘Master of nature’) and reciprocity (Brightman in Pállson 1996). In a pioneering and influential analysis Agrawal (1995: 422) writes: ‘Certainly, what is today known and classified as indigenous knowledge has been in intimate interaction with Western knowledge since at least the fifteenth century. In the face of evidence that suggests contact, exchange, transformation, communication and learning over the last several centuries, it is difficult to adhere to a view of indigenous and Western forms of knowledge being untouched by each other.

Ellen and Harris (2000) point out that the epistemic origins of much knowledge, whether scientific or folk, are hidden, and they argue that this anonymity has contributed to the emergence of a perceived divide between scientific practice and indigenous knowledge. When the origins of knowledge can be revealed, the label of indigenous knowledge often

⁹³ Fieldnotes, 21/22-03-2017, Rio Blanco; Fieldnotes, 30-04-2017, Azacualpita; Fieldnotes, 25-04-2017, Rio Blanco.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Unstructured interview, Anita, 30-04-2017, Azacualpita.

becomes more questionable (Dove 2006: 195). By problematizing a purported division between local and extra-local, the concept of indigenous obscures existing linkages or even identities between the two. Many scholars argue for replacing this concept of a neat divide with something more complicated by understanding knowledge about nature as heterogeneous, negotiated and hybrid (Nygren in Dove 2006).

2.3 ‘Our ancestral right’: Framing the river as territory

*‘Even if banks cannot understand why the river is sacred, that does not give them the right to denigrate our rights and culture. We affirm our struggle for life [‘dar vida’], for our right to coexist and live in harmony with Mother earth’.*⁹⁶ This statement, formulated by COPINH, demonstrates how both COPINH and indigenous Lencas insert the spiritual narrative to claim their spiritual, cultural and historical rights to territory referring to their cosmovision in which nature, and in particular the river, play a key role (Cremers and Rasch 2016: 78-88). In their article about territorial narratives in the Western Highlands of Guatemala, Cremers and Rasch (2016) describe ‘framing nature as territory’ as the narrative wherein nature is something inherently political. They follow Boelens (2008) among others, stating that it is often not only about nature, but also about who can decide what happens to nature and how this is done (Fulmer et al. in Cremers and Rasch 2016).

In the spiritual narrative that frames nature as territory Lenca indigenous people are portrayed as inhabitants of nature and the real owners of the land who have the right to decide on nature and what happens to it. To justify this, natural resources are framed in terms of territorial, political as well as sacred rights (2016: 82). Nature and its resources are often related to the sacredness of the territory since indigenous Lenca often advocate a strong connection with (self)declared sacred ancestral territory, such as the river Gualcarque (ibid.).

Generally, Lencas who live near the river depend on the constant availability of a ‘pure’ and ‘flowing river’, home to the ancestral spirits, in order to ‘maintain communication with the river’⁹⁷ and to sustain in their (spiritual) livelihoods by carrying out *composturas* (2016: 78). Therefore, Lencas do not only attach spiritual, but also political or economic meanings to the Gualcarque in order to ‘gain control’ over the access to the river. Arguably, the spiritual narrative becomes more politicized under the influence of a perceived threat,

⁹⁶ Source: <http://copinhonduras.blogspot.nl/2016/09/el-fmo-y-su-informe-mentiroso.html>, last accessed: 31-07-2017.

⁹⁷ Semi-structured interview, Sabinal, 04-03-2017, Rio Blanco.

such as the sustainable development territorial narrative that informs the Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam project. Subsequently, in the next Chapter the lead question is in which way the dam project interferes with the spiritual narrative about the river according to Lenca who are contra project.

2.4 Concluding remarks

This chapter touched upon the indigenous knowledge of those in the communities involved, and critically reflected about matters such as the social construction of indigenous knowledge and power in knowledge production and exchange, by exploring the Lenca indigenous spiritual narrative wherein humans and non-humans, earth-beings, engage in earth-practices involving the sacred river Gualcarque. While doing so, two dominant ontological dichotomies, nature-supernature and nature-society, were questioned, demonstrating that these dominant ontological paradigms are not a universal given. Moreover, the actors, human and non-human, engage in constructing a territorial narrative that is informed by the interests that they have in the process of territorialization: spiritual life and indigenous identity. To understand the tension around the dam project, in the next chapter the lead question is in which way the dam project interferes and/or corresponds with the spiritual narrative about the river explored in this chapter.

Chapter 3

The Sustainable Development and the Rural Tourism narrative:

From '*un Proyecto de muerto*' towards ownership and generating local solutions



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⁹⁸ Photo: 'Members of a Lenca indigenous community of Rio Blanco protest against the planned construction of the Agua Zarca dam on the Gualcarque river in Honduras', by Edgard Garrido. Photo is online retrievable.

‘The reports from early 2012 looked into possible cultural and spiritual attachments of the community to the river and found no evidence. [...] It could be suggested that cultural uses of land will not be significantly impacted by the Project. However, there is insufficient information available to the Mission to make any determination as to whether the Project might endanger the spiritual values of the river’ (Independent Fact Mission 2016: 15-16).

In a response on the Report COPINH argued ‘The FMO report does not even try to understand Indigenous cosmovision or visions of development based on Indigenous self-determination and harmony with the river and Mother earth. The report is premised on the false assumption that the Agua Zarca Project is a magic bullet for ‘development’ and creates the false dichotomy between poverty or the Project⁹⁹’.

Above statements illustrate how little weight is given to the spiritual narrative in the construction and promotion of the Project by the Stakeholders. In this Chapter, I turn to the sustainable development narrative that gives a different meaning to the river: a natural resource that can create major development impacts along three considerations: economic, social and environment, by means of (economic) exploitation of the river that results in the protection of the wider (social) environment (Pálsson). Having analyzed the human-environmental relations within both narratives (spiritual and sustainable development), subsequently, the tension between them can be framed and the question can be addressed why the dam is perceived by a significant part of Lenca as an obstacle and, why they engage so vigorously in the defense of the river. Finally, a discussion arises, if the Project is not the way forward, what are the alternatives? Promising, bottom up, initiatives can be found within a third narrative, the rural tourism narrative, that, arguably, combines the best of the other two narratives.

3.1 The sustainable development narrative

3.1.1 Renewable energy: the new lifeline of Honduras

‘Energy is the lifeline of a country’s economy’¹⁰⁰. An electric engineer working for the national energy supplier ENEE (*Empresa Nacional de Energía Eléctrica*) explains; ‘there is a whole industry in energy, because from here more industry can be created. The first interest of

⁹⁹ Source: <http://copinhonduras.blogspot.nl/copinh-rechaza-el-informe-de-la-mision.html>, last accessed: 29-01-2017.

¹⁰⁰ Expert interview, engineer ENEE, 28-04-2017.

investors is the energy supply, because it supports machinery. When energy is not properly generated, the location is not attractive for investment'¹⁰¹. In Honduras, one of the poorest countries in the region, currently the supply of energy does not meet local demand and this gap is expected to widen with economic and population growth¹⁰².

Therefore, the Honduran state is promoting the construction of energy projects in the country¹⁰³. Given the context of high dependency on fossil fuels and the increase in energy demand, Honduras's energy policy revolves around reducing dependency on fossil fuels for generating electricity by promoting the generation of renewable energy such as hydro's, wind, solar and biomass¹⁰⁴. According to the ENEE engineer, solar energy and biomass are small generators, perfect for residential use, however, they will not move the economy of Honduras. That is why the government prefers hydro power; it provides for a clean, low cost and stable source of energy¹⁰⁵, with a high potency to move and attract industry¹⁰⁶.

Nonetheless, starting a project in renewable energy is very expensive, according to the engineer, it requires major investments. In order to increase the potential of generating energy like hydro power, the Honduran State chose for the model of privatization by decentralizing its own power¹⁰⁷. In 2007 it created a new law¹⁰⁸ that allows private companies to sell renewable energy to the national supplier and distributor ENEE, who in turn sells it for residential energy consumption (Hidroeléctrica Agua Zarca 20xx: 4). This law makes investing in renewable energy considerably more profitable, and therefore attractive. In 2016, this regulation was adjusted by a new law; from now on, players in the energy field are also allowed, besides generating energy, to sell and distribute the generated energy privately, even in foreign countries¹⁰⁹. In above context, DESA was incorporated (2008) for the development of the Agua Zarca hydropower Project at the river Gualcarque.

In the article about territorial narratives in the Western highlands of Guatemala, Cremers and Rasch discuss the 'nature as development narrative' wherein nature is framed as a 'natural resource' for large-scale (neoliberal) development (2016: 78-79). Meaning, the development narrative is based on extractivism and the expropriation of nature. Although the

¹⁰¹ Expert interview, engineer ENEE, 28-04-2017.

¹⁰² FAQ on Agua Zarca, Finnfund, 2016: 3.

¹⁰³ Expert interview, engineer ENEE, 28-04-2017.

¹⁰⁴ FAQ on Agua Zarca, Finnfund, 2016: 3.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Expert interview, engineer ENEE, 28-04-2017.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ '*La ley de promoción a la Generación de Energía Eléctrica con recursos Renovables*', by decree 70-2007.

¹⁰⁹ Expert interview, engineer ENEE, 28-04-2017.

Agua Zarca Project is not a large-scale project¹¹⁰, the incentive of the Project is very similar to the one Cremers and Rasch describe. Exploiting nature, in this case the river Gualcarque, is considered in the interest of Honduras as it can help development at the national level, hence ‘energy is the lifeline a country’s economy’.

3.1.2 The rationale of the Project: ‘the magic bullet for sustainable development’

FMO, co-lender of the Project, believes that investments and economic growth as described above, must ‘be coupled with social and environmental considerations so that it is sustainable in the long term’. Subsequently, all FMO’s investments are guided by this approach.¹¹¹ Likewise, DESA, the recipient of the funding, made various additional commitments to the communities as part of a corporate social responsibility program. Thus, from the very beginning DESA and FMO stated that the key reason for developing and funding the Agua Zarca Project have been the major developments impacts of the project along three considerations: economic, social and environmental.

FMO’s statement and DESA’s additional commitments illustrate the western ‘triple bottom line’ that is increasingly adopted by a growing number of companies and financial institutions. The triple bottom line is illustrated by three overlapping circles representing the social, economic, and environmental dimensions¹¹². An activity, process, region, or project is deemed sustainable if it supports, maintains, or carries the weight or burden of all three dimensions over the long term (Herremans and Reid 2002: 17).

| | |
|---|-------------------------|
| Energy increase: estimation of 99GWh of electric power per year, which corresponds with power consumption of half a million people. | Economic, Social |
| Renewable energy project result in CO2 reductions | Environmental |
| The project is estimated to offer hundreds of jobs during construction phase | Economic, Social |
| Reducing dependency on imported oil | Environmental, Economic |

¹¹⁰ Agua Zarca is considered a small run of the river with only 23MW and with no reservoir (FAQ on Agua Zarca, FinnFund 2016: 4).

¹¹¹ Source: <http://www.fmo.nl/mission>, last accessed: 07-08-2017.

¹¹² See Appendix A: Charts.

| | |
|--|-----------------------|
| Corporate social responsibility Program: contributions towards education facilities, education scholarships, road maintenance, access to potable water, electrification of the villages, contribution towards hospital infrastructure. | Social |
| DESA's environmental and Social Management System (IFC Performance Standard 1), and Biodiversity Management Plan | Environmental, Social |

Figure 4: List of major development impacts. Source: FAQ on Agua Zarca, FinnFund 2016; FMO Mission Report, 2016. Dimensions added by Ermesinde De Strijcker.

Conjuring the development narrative into a sustainable development narrative, the latter is voiced in terms of interest for the people, as a way for all Lenca to get out of poverty (social dimension), by way of generating renewable energy and therefore reducing CO2 emissions (environmental dimension). The social dimension (see Figure 4 for examples) of sustainable development is considered as a strategy for poverty alleviation and employment, a strategy that, furthermore, has the support of the World Bank (Bastos & Brett in Cremers and Rasch 2016). The engineer explains, ‘when signing a *‘carta de intenciones* (Letter of Intent related to this strategy), the Honduran State receives loans from the World Bank’¹¹³. Arguably, this is what Marisol De la Cadena (2010) refers to when mentioning the neoliberal wedding of capital and State.

What concerns the environmental dimension, the idea of renewable energy almost promotes itself as a way of being green, as an environmentalism rooted in the richness of natural resources in terms of water, without harming community life, nor the environment (Cremers and Rasch 2016: 79). In sum, taking everything in consideration, one of the main arguments of the Honduran government to grant concessions to (trans-)national companies in this area is ‘sustainable development’ (Cremers and Rasch 2016). ‘Nature’ then turns into a natural resource and becomes a commodity, and the central government is considered the representative authority to make decisions about it (2016: 80).

¹¹³ Expert interview, ENEE engineer, 28-04-2017.

3.1.3 Humans as masters of nature in a material world

When the Honduran government, DESA and FMO, and to certain extent even the World Bank, make decisions about natural resources, they also represent a particular stance with respect to human-environmental relations. The Agua Zarca Project holds out the prospect of a ‘win/win’ situation: stimulating growth without increasing pollution (Redclift 2005: 216). Following Pálsson (1996), in this ‘win/win’ situation we can distinguish between two radical different kind of human-environmental relations; environmental orientalism and paternalism. The key difference between them is that while the former ‘exploits’, the later ‘protects’. Thus, while the river Gualcarque is exploited for reasons of economic growth (profit), it supposedly simultaneously contributes to the protection of people and planet (see examples Figure 4). Therefore, environmental orientalism suggests negative reciprocity in human-environmental relations, whereas paternalism implies balanced reciprocity, presupposing human responsibility (Pálsson 1996: 66).

Pálsson (1996: 67-70) explains that the vocabulary of orientalism is typically one of domestication, expansion, exploring and exploiting the environment - for the diverse purposes of production, development, consumption - while the protection within paternalism tends to fetishise nature, thereby setting it apart from the world of humans. This involves privileging scientific expertise, an inversion in the relative power of experts and laypersons. In both cases, says Pálsson, humans are the masters of nature (1996: 66). Therefore, the sustainable development narrative operates within a dualist perspective reflecting the radical separation of nature and society, object and subject, and the modernist assumptions of othering, certainty, and monologue (ibid.).

Next, it was mentioned in Chapter 2 that the indigenous Lenca belief of an animated river is not adhered to in western science. Official policy documents related to the Agua Zarca Project (FMO Independent Fact Mission 2016; Finnfund FAQ on Agua Zarca 2016; Hidroeléctrica Agua Zarca 20xx), publicly made available, demonstrate how within the sustainable development narrative the Lenca indigenous cosmovision is downplayed by either questioning it or not mentioning it in the first place – conform the dominant dualist perspective that adheres to the separation of nature, ‘the material world’, and supernature. It is useful to refer once again to De la Cadena (2010: 349-350) who writes that ‘‘earth-beings’ as actors in the controversies are ‘beliefs’ honored only when they do not express an epistemic alternative to scientific paradigms (ecological and economic) and their cognate policies working toward the production of the common good (productive efficiency, economic growth,

even sustainable development) designed to satisfy a homogeneous humanity benefiting from an also homogeneous nature’.

3.1.4. The Project as the way forward?

Related to the ‘Exit by FMO without continuation of the project’, the Independent Mission report states various times (2016: 24-34); *‘Without the Project and the income it will generate, the communities will revert to the status quo ex-ante – with continuing state neglect, a subsistence economy, minimal basic services and below average incomes. [...] If the project is not completed, the staff of DESA believes it would mean an end to these community development opportunities. [...] If the Project does not continue, it can be expected that the communities will return to a poverty cycle of subsistence living’*. In sum, the Project is perceived as the way forward in light of achieving global development aspirations.

In this report ample reference is made to Indigenous Lenca who appear to agree with the statements. Moreover a you-tube documentary video¹¹⁴, ‘The punished consequences of a lie’, appeared online wherein Lenca families are victimized because of losing all the benefits if the Project does not continue. Nonetheless, a heated discussion exists about the validity of such testimonies. Both Rio Blanco community members and COPINH claim that people pro-project have been bribed¹¹⁵, involve municipal mayors pressured to go along due to violence or intimidation¹¹⁶ (including the falsification of signatures¹¹⁷), or, actually are nonindigenous people from neighboring department Santa Barbara who bought up land in the region from locals, re-selling it afterwards for much more money to DESA¹¹⁸.

Verifying these claims, on both sides, are beyond the scope of this thesis. What is important, however, is the given that also a significant part of indigenous Lenca, living near and far away from the river, are contra-project. Holden and Jacobsen (*in* Cremers and Rasch 2016) argue that projects such as the Agua Zarca reflect neoliberal development policies that are often not compatible with indigenous cosmovision and identity. Agreeing with this statement; I argue that in Intibucá irreconcilable perspectives towards human-environmental

¹¹⁴ Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8V_KhDdPlo (16-10-2016, Congediscba Honduras), last accessed: 09-08-2017.

¹¹⁵ Informal conversation, Patronado, 24-04-2017, Rio Blanco.

¹¹⁶ Informal conversation, Patronado, 24-04-2017, Rio Blanco.

¹¹⁷ Independent Fact Mission, FMO 2016: 27.

¹¹⁸ Unstructured interview, Rosalina, 24-04-2017, Rio Blanco; Unstructured interview, COPINH coordination member, 03-05-2017, La Esperanza.

relations eventually resulted in a tension between the indigenous Lenca spiritual narrative and the sustainable development narrative.

3.2 ‘Una lucha fundamental’

3.2.1 *Un Proyecto de muerto*

‘On Monday, July 15 2013, Tomas Garcia his life was brutally taken away by the Honduran military when a soldier shot and killed him at close range in broad daylight in front of 200 people. Tomas was leading the delegation that had come to deliver a message to the companies constructing the dam at their installations in Rio Blanco’¹¹⁹. This was the day that the tension between the narratives took a violent turn and turned into, using the words of current Rio Blanco community leader Rosalina, ‘*un Proyecto de muerto*’ (a Project of death).

Rosalina explains; ‘development [referring to DESA and FMO] apparently equals killing the people who are against the company. But, development, it is already here, it is in the earth that we cultivate. Our only wish is to have peace so that we can cultivate the earth in freedom.’¹²⁰ In order to cultivate the earth, the local Lenca indigenous farmers, depend on a ‘sacred river’, a river that is able to ‘give life’. In return, both the river and the earth are celebrated by means of carrying out *composturas*, which are expressions of generalized reciprocity (described in Chapter 2, Pálsson 1996). By engaging in ‘earth-practices’, I argued that humans and non-humans are substitutes for one another and that they contribute jointly, by their reciprocal exchanges, to the general equilibrium of the cosmos (Descola 1996: 94).

In depth analysis of all the testimonies given by Lenca indigenous people near the river and across the wider Intibucá department, demonstrates that ‘the Project of death’ also interferes with another, intangible, realm wherein the (dam) Project disturbs the general equilibrium of the cosmos. At the first stage of the Project, when it was still a dam, community members believed that the dam was disturbing the home of the *niñas* by blocking the river and its natural flow. Considering that ‘the *niñas* of the river are like what the soul is to humans’, that ‘everything that is alive is in movement’ and that the rivers are ‘the veins of Mother earth’, the dam was literally killing the river, and therefore Mother Earth, and eventually human beings who need both in order to live. This was accordingly articulated by

¹¹⁹ Source: <http://www.soaw.org/about-us/equipo-sur/263-stories-from-honduras/4129-tomasgarcia>, last accessed: 10-08-2017.

¹²⁰ Informal conversation, Rosalina, 25-04-2017, Rio Blanco.

COPINH as ‘Our harvest comes from an ancestral force. The Project destroys life; it destroys the origin of everything’.¹²¹

Another argument often raised, is the belief that the river needs to be ‘pure’ in order to be sacred. Several informants, both Lenca and Ladino, voiced concerns about the contamination of the river because of the Project; ‘the sacred river needs to be pure in order to give life, now it is full of chemicals’¹²². During a focus group, it was mentioned how the use of dynamites and turbines pollutes the home of *las niñas*. Given the environmental considerations of both FMO and DESA, the pollution of the river raises some questions. Redclift (2005) writes that in similar cases critics of corporate greening have sought to distinguish between the rhetoric of corporate environmentalism and the reality. Arguably, the environmental considerations of the Project might allow the government and business to be in favor of sustainability, persuading the benefits of a ‘green image’, without fundamentally challenging the present course (Redclift 2005; Hopwood et al. 2005).

Eventually, the initial dam Project was modified in 2014 by moving the operation to the other side of the river Gualcarque, in the neighboring department Santa Barbara, turning the dam into a run of the river scheme.¹²³ A political candidate from Intibucá explains that legally speaking there is little what the community of Intibucá can do now, the Project is situated outside of the legal realm of their department’¹²⁴. While the Mission Report (2016: 6) perceives the new Project as a way of accommodating the concerns of those opposing the project, Rosalina is clearly upset about this evolution. She argues that contamination of the river is not bound to one place. Furthermore, she says, in Santa Barbara more people are pro-project, allowing the river to be turned into a ‘*negocio*’ (business) after all; ‘these are nonindigenous people dealing with and deciding about a sacred indigenous river’¹²⁵.

3.2.2 Warriors of the earth

Since the start of the Project, several community members organized themselves through COPINH under the lead of Berta in order to defend the river Gualcarque. The resistance against the Project, ‘*la lucha*’, has been delegitimized, turning it into a resistance backed up in

¹²¹ Informal conversation, coordination COPINH, 14-02-2017, Sede COPINH Intibucá.

¹²² Courtesy of photojournalist Sean Hawkey, attending personal interviews between Sean and mama Berta, 14-02-2017, Intibucá and ‘Maria Machete’, 16-02-2017, Rio Blanco; Focus group meeting, local community members, 22-03-2017, Rio Blanco.

¹²³ FAQ on Agua Zarca, Finnfund 2016; Independent Mission Report FMO 2016.

¹²⁴ Informal conversation, Political candidate, 21-04-2017, Intibucá.

¹²⁵ Informal conversation, Rosalina, 22-03-2017.

blood. Rosalina recalls how Tomas Garcia refused to sell his land by saying ‘*You will have to kill me first*’¹²⁶. Since his death, the resistance intensified. Despite geographical borders, the most active members of the resistance show no signs of defeat. Although she lost a finger due to a machete attack, Maria states ‘*we are willing to die for speaking the truth and for defending the land and the river*’¹²⁷. Also Rosalina is not giving up the river; ‘*no tengo miedo, el carcel o el muerte*’ (I have no fear, the prison or death)¹²⁸.

Defending the river is what Don Marcos perceives as ‘*una lucha fundamental*’, meaning that the resistance defends the fundamentals of their existence¹²⁹. Emily, a foreign activist who used to work with Berta and currently works with COPINH, calls them ‘the warriors of the earth’, meaning that Lenca have the sacred responsibility to defend the earth when she is in danger; ‘*the cosmovision of Lenca is intertwined with taking action, they will go to great lengths when defending her*’.¹³⁰ Next, I argue that the interpretation of the fearlessness that the warriors of the earth display can be framed through the lens of the indigenous Lenca spiritual narrative.

Sabinal explains that when Lenca take up the defense of the river, they do this in dialogue with the spirits of the river and the earth. Among these spirits are martyrs who have fought for the Lenca people before, like Tomas and Berta. While the spirits protect the Lenca communities, filling them with hope while taking away their fears, Lenca in turn defend the river from the Project¹³¹. In sum, also the defense of the river, is an act of generalized reciprocity (Pálsson 1996). Furthermore, according to Lenca cosmovision, the river, as a willful nonhuman actor (De la Cadena 2010), is able to undertake action as well. Sabinal gives an example of the day that the river Gualcarque burst its banks, intentionally flooding all the machinery of DESA, delaying their activities¹³². Arguably, this means, that the warriors of the earth, do not only involve Lenca community members, but also the spirits of the earth; Lenca defending nature alongside nature.

¹²⁶ Informal conversation, Rosalina, 20-03-2017, Rio Blanco.

¹²⁷ Courtesy of photojournalist Sean Hawkey, attending a personal interview between Sean and ‘Maria Machete’, 16-02-2017, Rio Blanco.

¹²⁸ Unstructured interview, Rosalina, 24-04-2017, Rio Blanco.

¹²⁹ Unstructured interview, Don Marcos, 23-03-2017, Rio Blanco.

¹³⁰ Informal conversation, Emily, 07-03-2017, La Esperanza.

¹³¹ Informal conversation, Sabinal, 04-03-2017, Rio Blanco.

¹³² Semi-structured interview, Sabinal, 04-03-2017, river Gualcarque ‘14 barras’.

3.2.3 The ‘needs – solutions’ tension

After years of resistance against the Project, in July 2017, the financial institutions (FMO and Finnfund) officially withdrew from the Project.¹³³ According to many informants, several of the promises (economic, social and environmental considerations) made by DESA and the financial lenders have never been fulfilled. Initially, one can argue that not fulfilling these ambitions is a logical consequence considering the fact that the Project was on hold for a long time. However, during the ‘Forum: The consequences of hydroelectric Projects in Lenca territory’¹³⁴, organized by COPINH, other arguments were raised, pointing out the underlying motivations of the Project, covered under the banner of (sustainable) development¹³⁵.

| The Project | Lenca communities near river Gualcarque |
|--|--|
| Privatizing natural resources | Communal land use |
| Buying the land without consultation | ILO 169: indigenous communities have right to prior consultation |
| Main objective Project: profit. Development for ‘ <i>los grandes</i> ’, the capitalists. | Clean energy does not go to the communities, but straight to foreign countries |
| Turning us into consumers; creating a dependency relation | Cultivating the earth and highly self-sufficient |
| Creating division between communities | Before Project communities living peacefully together |
| Destroying our communities instead of ‘developing’ | COPINH is looking for truly alternative, community-based energy sources in harmony with Indigenous cosmovision and Mother Nature. ¹³⁶ |

Figure 5: Objectives and impact of the Project according to the Forum: The consequences of hydroelectric Projects in Lenca territory.

Besides the spiritual attachment to the river, I consider it important to mention above arguments for resistance as well, for two reasons. First, to demonstrate that the tension between the narratives is complex and intertwined with many other preoccupations of the communities. Second, because it opens a window to a final question that needs to be addressed, that of ‘ownership’. Following Cremers and Rasch (2016: 79), arguably many

¹³³ Source: FMO Press Release 06 July 2017;

file:///C:/Users/Asus/AppData/Local/Packages/Microsoft.MicrosoftEdge_8wekyb3d8bbwe/TempState/Downloads/PRESS%20RELEASE%20FMO%20%20FINNFUND%20FINALIZE%20EXIT.pdf, last accessed 12-08-2017.

¹³⁴ Participant observation: ‘Foro: las consecuencias de los proyectos hidroeléctricos en la zona Lenca’, 03-03-2017, UTOPIA.

¹³⁵ Public presentation, COPINH coordination, 03-03-2017, UTOPIA.

¹³⁶ Unstructured interview, COPINH coordination member, 03-05-2017; Email correspondence SOA Watch, 21-06-2017.

activists consider the Project to be *'a new system of dispossession and a new way of controlling the population. Taking control of the land as a source for economic development is considered a way to recolonize the land as the revenues will benefit foreign companies and the state, rather than the local inhabitants for whom nature is an important element of livelihood and worldview'*.

The prospect of recolonization of the land, the resistance against the Project, and being highly self-sufficient, notwithstanding, locals do acknowledge that they have certain needs what concerns energy, healthcare, schools and roads¹³⁷. Needs that have been recognized by the owner and funders of the Project. According to Alonso, this is where the 'needs-solutions' tension is created¹³⁸. Accordingly, the political candidate puts this tension into words; *'the communities need to advance, they cannot stay behind. However, the Agua Zarca Project is not the way forward, because it is not in the hands of the communities but serves foreign multinationals' interests. If it was in the hands of the people themselves, things would be different'*¹³⁹. Thus, if for all the reasons mentioned in this thesis, the Project is not considered welcome in the region by a significant part of community members, the questions remains; what are the alternatives regarding the 'needs-solutions' tension?

3.3 The rural tourism narrative

On February 28, an early Tuesday morning, the day before the protest march in Tegucigalpa, people start gathering at UTOPIA. Among them are Garifunas, Lenca both representing the communities near the river and *aldeas* of the wider department, COPINH members, and international activists. They come together this day to carry out ceremonies in order to ask the spirits for protection, anticipating the protest march of the next day. Specifically, they ask the spirits to guide them on their journey to the capital, for assistance during the protest, and for justice for Berta.¹⁴⁰

Near the entrance of UTOPIA, Marta, the woman who came to Honduras under the guidance of Berta's spirit, has built a sacred fire during sunrise. Marta explains that the fire supports the other rituals being carried out today¹⁴¹. The fire, made out of dry sticks that she collected around UTOPIA, is neatly positioned in a circle of stones. Regularly Marta

¹³⁷ Informal conversation, casa Rosalina, 24-04-2017, Rio Blanco.

¹³⁸ Informal conversation, Alonso, 02-05-2017, La Esperanza.

¹³⁹ Informal conversation, Political candidate, 21-04-2017, Intibucá.

¹⁴⁰ Participant observation, 28-02-2017, UTOPIA.

¹⁴¹ Informal conversation, Marta, 28-02-2017, UTOPIA.

repositions the trunks and adds new ones. She will maintain the fire like this until the sun goes down. One by one, the people are invited to feed the fire with tobacco, while sending their positive thoughts and wishes into the fire. When it is my turn, I kneel down, stare into the fire while slowly releasing the tobacco snips from my hand. In utter concentration I send positive wishes and ask through the fire for protection during the protest march and, a fruitful research period.

That afternoon, after the performance of the rituals, I meet Alonso for the first time. Alonso works for ASINGTUR, the local tourist office of La Esperanza-Intibucá. Alonso is an enthusiast person who likes to share all ‘the knows about’ of Lenca culture in a proud manner. A Lenca himself, his objective is to build bridges by means of rural tourism between on the one hand Lenca communities/*aldeas* surrounding La Esperanza-Intibucá and (foreign) visitors on the other hand¹⁴². Initially completely focused on Lenca spirituality, the Project and ‘*la lucha*’, I encounter a vibrant new narrative, the rural tourism narrative, indicating promising, bottom up alternatives.

3.3.1 Agents of their own development

Earlier it was argued that the Project can be perceived as a way of territorializing nature in which nature becomes framed as a natural resource that can be exploited while taking economic, social and environmental impacts into consideration. Such a process of territorializing often does not include the role of municipal and local authorities as agents of their own development (Cremers and Rasch 2017: 78). The special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous people Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, raised the question whether the Project can even be perceived as a threat to indigenous peoples’ ability to set their own priorities for the sustainable development of their lands and territories¹⁴³.

Eventually, as argued before, negotiating meanings of nature are about more than nature itself. It is about who has the rights to decide about nature, about the regimes of representation (Boelens *in* Cremers and Rach 2016). Rosalina, for example, often mentioned that ‘*la lucha*’ is about maintaining independence; ‘*Keeping the land is keeping an independent lifestyle*’¹⁴⁴. As the tension between the narratives demonstrates, in a region rich of natural resources, ‘keeping the land’ is not self-evident. Nonetheless, COPINH is looking

¹⁴² Unstructured interview, Alonso, 29-04-2017, Intibucá.

¹⁴³ Source: <http://unsr.vtaulicorpuz.org/site/index.php/en/documents/country-reports/148-report-honduras>, last accessed 24-01-2017.

¹⁴⁴ Unstructured interview, Rosalina, 24-04-2017, Rio Blanco.

into ‘truly alternative, community-based energy sources in harmony with indigenous cosmovision and Mother Nature¹⁴⁵, that can be administrated by the communities themselves¹⁴⁶. Subsequently, with the money that it generates they could invest in the needs of the communities¹⁴⁷. However, as a COPINH member mentions, the government is against such type of projects and puts a deaf ear towards them¹⁴⁸.

Meanwhile, while the tension between the narratives in Rio Blanco continues, I turn to other *aldeas*, who are just like Rio Blanco, looking for community based alternatives regarding their needs. Alonso introduces me to the vice mayor of one of the *aldeas* of Intibucá. According to Alonso, this *aldea* has the reputation of being the best example of sustainable development in the whole department. Sustainable development, in the vice mayor his opinion, means in the first place ‘ownership and the ability of a community to generate its own solutions’.¹⁴⁹ According to the vice mayor, an example that generates successful solutions within the communities is rural tourism.

3.3.2 Rural tourism: a sacred work

Alonso guides tourists regularly through the valleys of ‘little Switzerland’, showing them natural (sacred) sights, while also introducing them to local Lenca families and culture and, simulations of *composturas* that bless the earth¹⁵⁰. Alonso established rapport with various local organizations and families in several communities who ‘receive the tourists’. Often the organizations and families engage in all sort of ‘*talleres*’ (workshops) like making artisan craftwork out of organic waste (like pine needles) and weaving traditional Lenca fabric. The colorful fabric is bought up by community members who turn the fabric into all sorts of gadgets to decorate the house and the body. While the work of Alonso and the local organizations and families allows them to generate an income, simultaneously through their work they can share the beauty of their culture, strengthen Lenca reputation and their position in the country, and acknowledge the importance of Lenca spirituality¹⁵¹. A local Lenca elderly woman explains that for all of these reasons and for working in ‘harmony with Mother earth’

¹⁴⁵ Email correspondence SOA Watch, 21-06-2017.

¹⁴⁶ Unstructured interview, coordination member COPINH, 03-05-2017, La Esperanza.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Unstructured interview, 28-04-2017, Vice alcalde *aldea*.

¹⁵⁰ Participant observation, Chiligatoro, Azacualpa, El Cacao, Yamaranguila, Rio Grande, Los Olivos, 18-03, 29-03, 30-03 and 05-04-2017.

¹⁵¹ Unstructured interview, Alonso, 29-04-2017, Intibucá.

it is a 'sacred work'¹⁵². The rural tourism sector in Intibucá is relatively young, celebrating its 11 anniversary, and therefore is still growing exponentially.

In their article about territorial narratives, Cremers and Rasch write also about nature as a Cultural and Ecological Tourist destination. They mention that the general idea of [rural] ecotourism is that it facilitates rural development by, for example generating and diversifying income possibilities (2016: 84). Caring about nature as a sacred being, is of course, not at odds with a desire for economic well-being. Therefore, In Intibucá rural tourism constitutes a promising route for generating benefits for those living close to tropical biodiversity without undermining its existence (Agrawal & Redford *in* Cremers and Rasch 2016).

In sum, Hopwood et al. (2005) notice that all proponents of sustainable development agree that society needs to change, though there are major debates as to the nature of sustainable development, the changes necessary and the tools and actors for these changes. In Intibucá, rural tourism is perceived as an example of sustainable development that allows communities to reflect what they can do with natural resources. Therefore, within the rural tourism narrative, nature is also framed as a natural resource that has development impacts carrying the weight of the three dimension: economic, social and environmental. In this sense, rural tourism corresponds with the rationale of the Project, as described above. However, the rural tourism narrative can be distinguished from the sustainable development narrative by including local authorities and community members as agents of their own development, generating their own solutions according to their own (spiritual) beliefs and perceptions and relation with nature.

3.3.3. Critical considerations

Alonso witnessed the evolution of the sector since the very beginning and is still passionate and enthusiastic about it. Furthermore, there is still a lot of potential to grow. Arguably, sharing best practices can also benefit other Lenca communities in the department¹⁵³. Since the rural tourism narrative was a new discovered route in the field, further research is recommended about this topic. Despite encountering generally positive experiences, in academic literature also critical concerns about rural [eco] tourism are voiced.

For example, Cremers and Rasch (2016: 86) refer to Johnston (2006) who stresses that ecotourism is emerging so fast that it will overwhelm communities that 'own' the resource

¹⁵² Group interview, 28-04-2017, Yamaranguila.

¹⁵³ Informal conversation, Alonso, 26-04-2017, La Esperanza.

and lead to the loss of the initial resource itself. Furthermore, critics argue that the ‘package’ of ecotourism is some sort of guise for business as usual (Stronza 2001: 275) and claim that economic revenues do not reach the local people (Stem 2003: 324). Stronza (2010) also warns that common pool resources’ management becomes more complex as the amount of users increases. Taking these critical voices into consideration, it can be carefully suggested that the rural tourism narrative, with its emphasis on ‘ownership’, generalized reciprocity, and engagement, provides an avenue out of the modernist project and current environmental dilemma’s.

3.4 Concluding remarks

In the final chapter I analyzed the Sustainable development narrative of which sustainable development of the communities along three considerations (economic, social, environmental) is the main incentive. Subsequently, I discussed the supposedly win/win situation that it promotes; stimulating economic growth without harming the environment. This perception reveals both the exploitation of nature (the river) and the protection (the wider environment, reducing CO2 emission). In both situations, it was argued that humans position themselves as Master of nature by means of negative and balanced reciprocity. While the Project is promoted as the way forward by its owner and funders, the local communities differ different. On the one hand I described how the dam interferes with the spiritual narrative about the river, and on the other hand I also addressed reasons for concern that should not be excluded when framing the tension by means of territorial narratives. Resulting in that local communities take up the defense of the river and protest against the Project, notwithstanding, the Project does trigger questions regarding the ‘needs-solutions’ tension in the region. Looking for sustainable, bottom up, alternatives, I described the rural tourism narrative which is, under reservation, an example of communities owning the process of generating their own solutions.

Conclusion

Berta Vive! Berta is alive! In '*el corazón Lenca*', the struggle of Berta in defense of the river Gualcarque lives on. When Lenca shout 'Berta Vive!' they mean that Berta is not death, as a spirit she joined '*las niñas*' of the river, and continues to protect the river. During gatherings, rituals and protests, they can feel her presence and her energy. The ancestral spirits that inhabit nature are guiding and protecting the communities in the defense for the home of the spirits.

Since its initiation in 2011, the Agua Zarca Project at the river Gualcarque created an ongoing tension between local Lenca communities and the Project Stakeholders. I argued that the tension results from diverging meanings that people give to the river. In this sense, the river was approached as a field of force (Nuijten *in* Cremers and Rasch 2016), a source of negotiation and conflict. The thesis frames this tension by means of territorial narratives that are constructed about nature, and the river Gualcarque in particular.

In the indigenous Lenca spiritual narrative I demonstrated that the spiritual intertwinement of the cosmos, the body and the earth, jointly contribute, by their reciprocal exchanges, to the general equilibrium of the cosmos (Descola 1996: 94). In the sustainable development narrative, I demonstrated that the (dam) Project, by exploiting the river, supposedly generates development impacts along the economic, social and environmental dimensions of a material world.

Furthermore, the diverging meanings attributed to the river are informed by fundamentally different ontological perspectives regarding human-environmental relations. Analyzing the territorial narratives contributed to a deeper understanding of how actors, living and operating in indigenous Lenca territory, perceive nature 'in its nature of being', as well as how they perceive their own position towards *this* nature. Especially, by analyzing the spiritual narrative I demonstrated how two dominant dichotomies that constitute the building blocks of the history of western thought (Descola 1996: 98), 'nature-supernature', and 'nature-society', should not be projected as an ontological paradigm onto cultures where it does not apply.

Seen in this light, the debate about the Project, which is usually framed in terms of violence, can be seen through another lens which hopefully can contribute to new understandings about the conflict. Although many other arguments are raised against the Project, arguably, on a fundamental level these arguments also interact with the spiritual narrative. Furthermore, in the debate often the spiritual narrative is downplayed or even questioned by the proponents of the Project. This fact sparked my interest in researching the topic, considering that Western (development) perspectives and aspirations are eventually also indigenous; they are localized in the institutions of the West and have gained their apparent universality by being projected throughout the formation of colonial and neocolonial power relations (Escobar 1995).

Therefore, the thesis concluded with the rural tourism narrative, which empowers Lenca communities to generate sustainable development while addressing their local needs according to their indigenous Lenca beliefs and perspectives. Thoughtfully, it can be argued, that the rural narrative combines the best of both worlds, or narratives.

* * *

According to COPINH, in Lenca territory alone 49 other concessions for similar projects like the Agua Zarca have been granted. Arguably, the withdrawal of the stakeholders from the Agua Zarca Project is not the end of *'la lucha'*. My personal aspiration is that this thesis contributes in disrupting conceptual comfort zones and, therefore, can contribute to a critical assessment of similar future (sustainable) development projects.

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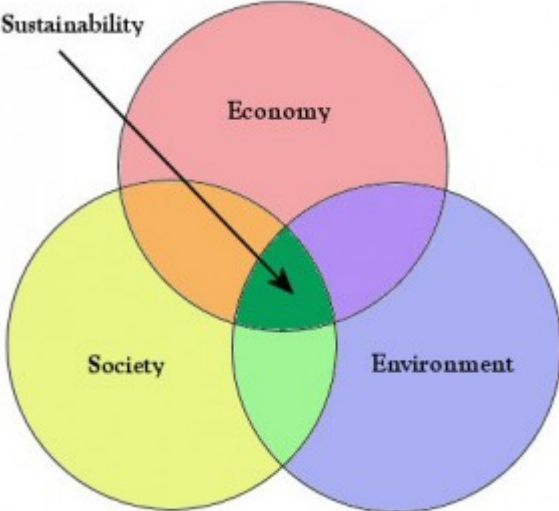
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Appendix I: Charts



The Sustainability Triad¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Source: <http://www.homeperformancenc.com/is-sustainability-a-bad-word/>, last accessed 24-01-2014.

Appendix II: Resumen en Español

Resumen de la tesis escrita por Ermesinde De Strijcker

De Strijcker E.,

2017 'El río le dijo': Narrando las relaciones humano-ambientales en el territorio

Indígena Lenca

De Strijcker realizó una investigación cualitativa en el departamento de Intibucá, Honduras, durante un período de tres meses (febrero de 2017 hasta mayo de 2017). Utilizó múltiples métodos de investigación cualitativa, tales como observación participante, conversación informal, entrevistas semiestructuradas y abiertas, entrevistas de expertos, una reunión de grupo de enfoque, análisis de material escrito y en línea, como documentos de política y sitios de web.

Honduras, un país que sigue dependiendo en gran medida de los combustibles fósiles, el gobierno decidió comprometerse a reducir su huella ecológica a la luz del cambio climático. Desde 2009 el país se abrió hacia inversores extranjeros dispuestos a financiar proyectos de desarrollo sostenible entre otros. En el río Gualcarque, el proyecto hidroeléctrico Agua Zarca, que hasta hace poco fue cofinanciado por el Banco Holandés de Desarrollo FMO y Finnfund, inició un campo de batalla de diferentes perspectivas sobre el desarrollo sostenible. Berta Cáceres, líder de la resistencia Indígena Lenca en defensa del río, fue asesinada en marzo de 2016. Sobre este caso Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, Relatora Especial sobre los Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas, escribió que existe una tensión entre las aspiraciones globales de desarrollo y las necesidades locales. En esta investigación, el Proyecto Agua Zarca en el río Gualcarque funciona como el catalizador para narrar diferentes tipos de relaciones humano-ambientales que ocurren en el territorio.

En la tesis, De Strijcker analiza la tensión mencionada argumentando que en Honduras varios actores se dedican a construir narrativas territoriales conflictivas en las que dan significados divergentes a la naturaleza y en particular al río Gualcarque, que posteriormente informa su relación con el Proyecto.

Cremers y Rasch (2016: 75) consideran las narrativas como construcciones sociales que son capaces de representar situaciones complejas que son comprensibles para todos. Como tal, las estas proporcionan un contexto en el que nos ubicamos, donde podemos situar nuestras ideas, valores y acciones (González *en* Cremers y Rasch 2016). Las narrativas territoriales proporcionan a las personas [...] sistemas explicativos que les permiten involucrarse con el territorio en el que viven [y operan]. Posteriormente, Cremers y Rasch desentrañan diferentes narrativas territoriales al abordar la naturaleza como una fuente de negociación y conflicto, como un "campo de fuerza". Nuijten (*en* Cremers y Rasch, 2016) ha conceptualizado los campos de fuerza como formas estructurales de relaciones de poder que se configuran en torno al acceso y uso de recursos específicos como el río. Es importante desentrañar primero los diferentes significados que las personas atribuyen a la naturaleza, segundo cómo estos significados se hacen instrumentales para obtener el control sobre la naturaleza y proporcionar argumentos importantes en los conflictos sobre el acceso a los recursos naturales. Siguiendo a Boelens (2008), Cremers y Rasch, por lo tanto, argumentan que los significados de negociación de la naturaleza son más que la naturaleza misma. Se trata de quién tiene derecho a decidir sobre ella, y sobre los regímenes de representación.

De Strijcker analiza tres narrativas territoriales diferentes construidas en el contexto de la globalización: la naturaleza como intrínsecamente espiritual y animada, la naturaleza como mercancía a ser explotada a la luz de las aspiraciones de desarrollo global y la naturaleza como destino del Turismo Rural. Además, analizar las narrativas territoriales que se construyen sobre el río Gualcarque revela que el corazón de la tensión entre las narrativas se reduce a cuestiones ontológicas sobre las relaciones hombre-medio ambiente. Por un lado, De Strijcker demuestra que los actores se relacionan de manera diferente con la naturaleza, ya sea posicionándose dentro o fuera de esta (Pálsson 1996). Por otro lado, demuestra que los actores la perciben, en su «naturaleza del ser», también de manera diferente, ya sea en términos de una mercancía material o en términos de una entidad viviente supranatural (Descola 1996; De la Cadena 2010).

El análisis de la tensión entre las narrativas se basa en la siguiente pregunta de investigación: "¿Cómo pueden las relaciones humano-ambientales informar las diferentes narrativas territoriales sobre el río Gualcarque en territorio Indígena Lenca?" Finalmente, este análisis es relevante para "comprender la manifestación de conflictos socioambientales en el territorio,

donde la población Indígena ha sido excluida desde los dominios principales de los procesos de toma de decisiones políticas con respecto a las tierras que usan, habitan y realizan sus rituales" (Cremers y Rasch 2016: 73).