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Rationalities in Cavineño Economic Strategies

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Abstract

The economy of the northern Bolivian Amazon region has always relied heavily on the extraction of natural resources such as skins and hides, gold, rubber, palm hearts and, more recently, brazil nuts and timber. Although today indigenous people are among the forest owners, the monetary income generated through the seasonal extraction of timber and non-timber-forest-products in many cases is not sufficient to sustain their livelihood. Oftentimes subsistence agriculture, hunting and fishing remain the primary pillars of indigenous economies. This case study presents the findings in three months of fieldwork done in Galilea, a Cavineño community about 80 km up the Beni River from the city of Riberalta. The presentation lists the various economic problems that the community is faced with and tries to show the rationalities that underlie the behavior of the community members when dealing these difficulties. Some of the most pressing issues for the people of Galilea, e.g. the lack of wage labor and distant markets, are rather typical for many rural communities in northern Bolivia. On other economic issues, e.g. influence in regional politics or access to natural resources, Galilea has managed to avoid many of the more common pitfalls. In part, this has been due to the channeling of money and expertise from the Swiss Evangelical Mission to the community and to the placing of community members in strategic positions in regional indigenous organizations. Through these actions the people of Galilea have secured for themselves a terrain rich in natural resources and large enough to be managed in a sustainable way. By trying to better understand the rationalities in Cavineño economic strategies, the case study adds to the knowledge of how indigenous communities are active stakeholders within the national economy. The data obtained in Galilea will form part of a master's thesis in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Freiburg.

Keywords: Cavineño, economic strategies, extractivism, non-timber forest products, Northern Bolivia