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Field Stories



Visiting friends in the village of Limoncito in 2009. Photo: Raul Quispe

This past November, I returned to the U.S. from my fourth fieldwork session among the Tsimane, an indigenous group of some 12,000 who live in the lowlands of Bolivia. Each year, this trip takes me through either La Paz (in the highlands) or Santa Cruz (in the lowlands) to San Borja, a small, rugged town in roughly the center of Tsimane territory. Upon arrival in San Borja—which often reeks of decaying cattle blood dumped by slaughterhouses into the surrounding marshes—my primary goal becomes departure for the greener and friendlier territory of the Tsimane villages. Travel time to the villages ranges from less than an hour to three days by motorized canoe up or down the Maniqui River, or by truck on one of the logging roads that have been cut into the forest. My dissertation work there has focused on understanding the microeconomics of making a living through farming, hunting, and fishing, and the mechanics of social support between families in the absence of loans, insurance, or formal institutions of governance.

Although many of my experiences and friendships with the Tsimane have been positive and life-affirming, much about the situation is disconcerting. The Tsimane have long been treated as second-class citizens by most Spanish-speaking Bolivian nationals. While support resulting from the election of Bolivia's first indigenous president Evo Morales has improved their confidence to appear on the main streets of San Borja, derision, prejudice, and economic exploitation are still clearly evident. Bilingual education is available to less than half of the population, and young people in villages with Spanish-only instruction are quickly losing their native tongue. Ranchers and colonists encroach more and more each year on territorial boundaries; in some villages this has led to the concentration of Tsimane horticultural fields at unsustainable densities. Loggers continue at full-throttle to deplete the Tsimane *selva* of its tallest trees, and local leaders are too often induced to make irreversible concessions for short-term gains. Should fossil fuels prove extractable from Tsimane territory, this pattern could easily be repeated at an even larger scale. On the hopeful side, the Tsimane population is large compared with many indigenous groups, which may allow them to achieve some non-trivial political representation and buffer the risk of cultural extinction. The needs for healthcare and bilingual education are particularly immediate for their survival and well-being today and in the future.

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