

Centroamérica Indígena: Land Rights and Stability in Indigenous Societies of Central America

CA Indígena is a geographic research project of the University of Kansas (KU) and the American Geographical Society (AGS), funded by a prestigious Minerva Initiative Grant for University-led Research of the U.S. Department of Defense. The project is distinguished as an AGS Bowman Expedition, and follows the ethical guidelines governing that program, as well as those of KU.

Struggles over land tenure and territorial sovereignty are common in municipalities where indigenous peoples live in Central America. Throughout the region, indigenous communities work to gain or retain collective ownership of their lands and to protect their natural and cultural heritage. Given that most of their populations have long suffered discrimination, land dispossession, and poverty, how is it that some of them are thriving and protecting their lands, natural resources, and cultural identities?

We hypothesize that certain factors, like conservation, tourism, and local autonomy can bring cultural stability and associated benefits to these municipalities. Conversely, other factors can bring instability and conflicts, such as an advancing colonization front, certain commercial activities, or particular land ownership rights. To analyze these issues, we use the methods and techniques of human geography.

The *CA Indígena* project employs publicly-available geographic information, together with geographic information systems (GIS), and participatory research mapping (PRM) to map and understand the stability of indigenous municipios and other indigenous territorial jurisdictions in Central America. We research at two different scales: a) at the regional scale, using *municipio* data on land and stability variables (mostly national census results); and b) at the local scale, researching specific territorial jurisdictions of indigenous populations.

Results will include digital maps and statistical analyses of indigenous municipalities at the Central American regional level, and of specific indigenous territorial jurisdictions (*concejos territoriales*, *comarcas*, autonomous regions, *municipios*, biosphere reserves) at the local level. Whenever possible, our results are designed with and for the indigenous populations and their federations where we work.

The *CA Indígena* project established a collaboration with the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional Francisco Morazán (UPNFM), setting up an office called the ***Mesa Geográfica Indígena***, where presently four undergraduate students (3 of indigenous heritage) receive training from and work directly in the field and the office. They are part of our small research team of two KU professors, two UPNFM professors, one KU/AGS post doc, and two KU PhD students. Through our PRM methodology, we also train and certify community-elected representatives as “local geographers” who combine basic geographic skills with their local knowledge to help their communities use the digital map and statistical results.