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Road Blockades During the Pandemic: Indigenous Citizenship and New Territoriality

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ABSTRACT

In the Peruvian Amazon, the blocking of land and river routes has become an increasingly common strategy among Indigenous groups to exercise active citizenship. Originally a means to express opposition to government decisions—particularly those concerning land tenure, territorial governance and property rights—this form of collective political expression has long shaped Indigenous histories across the Americas throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Road blockades in Peru have a long and complex trajectory; through them, Amazonian communities have redefined their position vis-à-vis the state, shifting from marginalisation and invisibility to recognition as legitimate political actors. Despite their significance, the spatial dimensions of these protests—especially in relation to infrastructure as both the site and object of contention—remain understudied in social science research. In 2020, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, many Indigenous communities in Peru deployed road blockades for an unprecedented purpose: as a strategy of health self-defence, grounded in political and economic self-organisation. This response echoed long-standing demands and exposed deep-rooted structural inequalities. The adoption of this protest tactic during the pandemic raises two central questions: First, what socio-political and cultural factors shaped this collective action? Second, what consequences did it have within the triangular relationship between emergent spatial practices, modes of collective action and broader political disputes?

1 | Introduction

In the Peruvian Amazon, the blocking of land or river routes has become an increasingly frequent measure among different Indigenous groups to exercise active citizenship. Originating as a way to voice their opposition of government decisions, especially in terms of land and territory management and property rights, this form of collective political expression has shaped the history of Indigenous groups in the Americas throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century (Brown 1984; Blomley 1996; Blaser 2010; Murray-Li 2014; Simpson 2021). As a direct form of popular action, blocking land or river routes has been challenging the existing spatial order, forcefully advocating significant and inclusive socio-spatial changes. In Peru, road blockades have a long and complex history (Lavaud 2010): through this protest measure, Amazonian groups have been redefining their position vis-à-vis the State, transitioning from invisibility and marginalisation to being recognised as legitimate political actors (Pinedo 2017). Their relationship with space, particularly regarding infrastructures—which becomes the key locus of protest and, in many cases, the actual reason for protest—has remained largely overlooked in social sciences research (Merino 2024).

In 2020, during the first wave of the COVID-19 in Peru, many Indigenous communities used road blockades for an

unprecedented purpose: as a strategy of health self-defence upheld through political and economic self-organisation (Cáceres et al. 2021; Romio et al. 2022; Arenas et Piccoli 2025). This response echoes enduring demands and deeply entrenched issues regarding the accessibility of essential services and the need to pave the primary access roads to Indigenous communities. Over the past four years, the Arakmbut—like many other Indigenous people in the Peruvian Amazon—have repeatedly employed road blockades as both a political protest strategy and an expression of active citizenship (Moore 2021). Adopting road blockades during the pandemic has given rise to two main questions: first, what were the socio-political and cultural factors that have shaped this collective action? Second, what were its consequences within the triangular relationship among new spaces—collective action—political disputes?

To address these questions, we will introduce the case study of an Indigenous community in the Peruvian Amazon, the Shintuya community, located in the Madre de Dios region, inhabited by Arakmbut and Wachiperi families. By integrating the theoretical tools of anthropology and political geography, we analyse the case of the Salvación-Boca Manu road blockade (April–June 2020) and its local socio-political impact.

The study is based on ethnographic research conducted in 2022 by the first author, involving direct participation in the political life of the community of Shintuya. This author is an anthropologist who has been studying Indigenous ethno-political dynamics in the Peruvian Amazon since 2010; the results were then analysed and interpreted in systematic collaboration with the other two co-authors. The research followed a critical comparative approach that intended to examine how border Indigenous communities creatively and collectively responded to the social, health and political crises triggered by the pandemic. This study involved more than 50 interviews with Arakmbut and Wachiperi men and women in Shintuya, as well as around 20 interviews with non-Indigenous individuals, including experts on the Arakmbut and professionals connected to the community. The data collected by the first author were later analysed and elaborated upon by all three authors of this article. These findings were also discussed within the Laboratoire des Mondes Américains team during the congress titled 'Road Blocked/Block the Road: On Disruption in Extractive Territories'.

This article explores how road blockades along with social, political and economic self-organisation has served to develop new forms of strategic collective knowledge across various scales of social action, while also producing new spatial formations. Our findings demonstrate how the relationship between space and power can be rethought on the basis of marginal areas of the country, which are both marginal to the political interests of the State and central to its economic life. By doing so, we will show how road blockades reconfigure spatiality and enable the exercise of Indigenous sovereignty.

2 | New Spaces of Resistance in Road Disputes

The road blockade in the Shintuya community during the pandemic should be examined within the broader contexts of road-related conflicts where disputes create new social spaces. This case provides insights into the political dynamics of social groups in frontier circumstances, which have commonalities but also major idiosyncrasies. In marginal areas, the construction of a new road signifies a more stable State presence, ensuring its full bureaucratic State apparatus (Campbell 2010; Uribe 2017). In short, hopes of ultimately integrating with urban and political centres promise access to essential services such as electricity, communication technologies, clean water, sanitation, improved education and health care. The link between border societies and their demand for roads is often framed by narratives of 'modernisation' and 'development', between hope and frustration (Harvey and Knox 2015).

Unfortunately, the road opening process often triggers disruptions in local social, economic and cultural life including rapid local decline, abandonment of historically traditional productive activities, territorial contamination, increased tension and violence, both internally or by external foreign agents and rapid immigration processes. This is the perspective of Harvey and Knox (2015), who argue that opening new roads in jungle frontier regions leads to a deep transformation of places which can become dormitory sites where brothels and bars proliferate, while Indigenous people lose their livelihoods due to development-oriented land and resource grabbing. Despite these recurrent processes, remote communities continue to dream and demand new roads: This irrational phenomenon is referred to as 'infrastructure enchantment' (Harvey and Knox 2015). The unorganised construction of roads in the Peruvian Amazon reflects the State's absence, in turn fuelling the 'enchantment' of political integration.

In recent decades, Indigenous communities have also recognised that roadblocks can serve as powerful tools to accelerate political processes, amplifying their political influence and helping them break free from institutional marginalisation and invisibility. Moreover, the media often features cases of blockades in political and socio-environmental conflicts, significantly amplifying their visibility internationally. Our paper draws inspiration from numerous cases, especially studies by geographers and anthropologists on conflict dynamics in Africa (Schouten 2022; Lesutis 2020) and Asian countries (Davis 2023; Campbell 2010), which view infrastructure blockades not as disturbances of logistical circulation, but as catalysts to reorient and reshape political and social processes. In particular, Davis (2023) considers blockades and occupations as globally connected social networks that seek to reshape an alternative governance by reorientating places and their interconnected topologies. On the other hand, Deshoullière (2016) examines the Shuar community protests in the province of Morona Santiago (Ecuador), related to the construction of the Transkutukú road, and shows that the speeches of the Indigenous chiefs assert what they believe as 'their right' to obtain a paved road to improve socio-economic conditions. 'I will kneel before no one. I will stand and fight—because my people deserve this road, and we will build it, whatever it takes' (Deshoullière 2016, 210).

In Peru, road blockades have become the most effective and straightforward way for historically marginalised groups to assert their citizens' rights. These medium- or long-term traffic

interruptions (from a few days to several months) are often accompanied by complex, collective, socio-political dynamics. Nowadays, the Amazon peripheries constitute 'new frontiers for economic development and often reveal a disconcerting combination of change and continuity, if not frustration' and death (Ioris 2020, 1). Anna Tsing proposes the concept of an 'economy of appearances', that is, promises and ideas that circulate with sufficient emotional force, which may have very powerful far-reaching effects. In describing the rise and fall of a stock market bubble, Tsing explores how potential business opportunities may enchant through what she calls 'dramatic performance' and 'spectacular legerdemain' (Tsing 2005).

For communities in socio-economic frontiers—realities on the 'margins of the State' (Scott 2009)—such process often means re-thinking their place within the national territory. Rather than accepting narratives of scarcity, poverty and exclusion from 'modernity', they begin to reassess their living conditions as potentially beneficial. It is worth noting that the State acts both as mediator and as catalyst for socio-spatial transformations. Moreover, the State apparatus is not merely a collection of regulatory agencies and instruments, but it also comprises structures and strategies that embody the evolution of the balance of political power and related social antagonisms. This is particularly evident in domains such as economic development policy, large-scale infrastructure projects and State-sponsored initiatives in public services, biodiversity conservation and mineral exploration. These areas expose a broad spectrum of competing interests and agendas, while also revealing the State's susceptibility to political pressure and aggressive lobbying (Ioris 2025).

New interpretations are, however, needed to explore the synergies between ecological responses and the underlying political-ideological factors influencing their effectiveness. The case study from the Peruvian Amazon clearly demonstrates the tensions and interactions among the State, communities and individuals in overseeing public works, particularly road circulation.

3 | Roads, Mobilisation and Self-Organisation in the Community

The current Salvación–Boca marginal road is the result of more than 20 years of debates, political struggles and episodes of violence involving Indigenous communities, regional and provincial governments, environmental NGOs, local farmers' associations and politicians at various levels (Salazar-Moreira 2017; Gallice 2019). According to the Arakmbut Indigenous people,[1] the road was built at the direct request of Indigenous communities located at the entrance to two different adjacent protected areas: the Manu National Park and the Amarakaeri Communal Reserve. All these protected areas are emblematic of Peru's environmental protection policy—and of global significance—due to their biodiversity and fragile ecosystems.

Since the early 2000s, the Indigenous peoples historically inhabiting these areas have increasingly demanded recognition of their right to self-determination within their ancestral territories. However, they were largely excluded from the demarcation processes and environmental management of the parks (Salazar-Moreira 2017). As a result, their living conditions remained precarious, with little to no access to electricity, clean water, healthcare or education. Fourteen years after the establishment of the Amarakaeri Communal Reserve (RCA), these communities were still economically isolated and politically marginalised. Despite their strategic position within globally important conservation zones, they lived on the periphery of the state and were systematically left out of development initiatives (Álvarez et al. 2008). Infrastructure improvements that could enhance access to basic services were repeatedly halted or rejected by NGOs and the Ministry of the Environment.

As various studies have shown, territories that lie at the intersection of modernisation and conservation policies—each enacted by separate state institutions—exert a dual pressure on Indigenous communities (Pieck and Moog 2009). Territorialisation, in this context, becomes a disempowering force. When its sources are multiple and contradictory, its impacts become even more severe. Indigenous communities often find themselves trying to navigate these conflicting pressures, which can become overwhelming (Leal et al. 2015). Against this backdrop, the collective push for new road construction became a form of resistance and aspiration, as a way to 're-enchant' local life with the promise of modernisation and economic opportunity (Salazar-Moreira and Palomino-Schalscha 2020). In the Alto Manu district, establishing informal alliances with drug trafficking groups was seen as the only viable path to building the road and escaping long-standing poverty, isolation and a fragile public health situation.[2]

The road was envisioned as a means to expand international trade of Brazil nuts (*Bertholletia excelsa*) and other edible products, in addition to the existing timber economy. After years of governmental refusal, in 2015, local communities launched protests, including a blockade of the river and the temporary detention of 40 foreign tourists in Boca Manu. Between February and March 2016, communities including Shintuya began constructing the road with voluntary labour, without any formal approval or environmental impact study. One community leader declared: 'We are determined to do the work and clear the trees to allow the road to go ahead' (Torres López 2016). The conflict escalated significantly in 2016, but the roadwork progressed. Finally, in 2019, the road was officially approved for paving. By early 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic, Arakmbut communities like Shintuya saw the arrival of electricity, internet access and refrigerators for the first time.

4 | The Pandemic in Shintuya: Road Closure

To understand the Shintuya community's historical connection to the road requires considering two key aspects of its geo-political and economic history. The community currently consists of 61 Harakmbut families, mostly Arakmbut and five Wachiperi families.[3] Villagers engage in sustainable activities that include logging, plantain cultivation, tourism and fish

farming, supplemented by sporadic subsistence activities such as hunting and fishing.

The Arakmbut have a long history of epidemics and death by contagion following the arrival of *whites* (non-Indigenous people) in the mid-twentieth century (Pinedo 2022). In March 2020, news of a deadly new epidemic wave caused by an unknown virus, COVID-19, reawakened old fears and nightmares among everyone. During assemblies, of the Shintuya and of the other four Arakmbut communities in the region, several collective decisions were made regarding behavioural norms to limit the spread of the virus and restrict contact with outsiders (Romio and Piccoli 2025). The most politically risky and complex decision was to block the Salvación—Boca Manu road, which crosses the entire Shintuya communal territory preventing any outsider from entering into the community territory. It also aimed to reduce the potential risk of contagion.

All these decisions demonstrate how the community responded, creating a fascinating blend between their ancestral self-care practices—where Indigenous peoples isolated themselves from outsiders in remote jungle areas—and the government's restrictions on movement, transit and interpersonal contact during that period. For the first time, the *comuneros* sought to define the borders of their communal space, identifying an 'inside' and 'outside'. Consequently, with wooden sticks planted along two points on the transit road, they barricaded the route, symbolically defining the entry and exit points. They then established behaviour norms, regulating Indigenous movement within communal territory, particularly in entering or leaving its 'borders', requiring outsiders (non-Indigenous people) to leave, thus preventing their reentry. The Shintuya villagers justified these measures, claiming that the road in their communal territory was the result of a local political struggle:

> The Shintuya community members felt that this road was "their road" insofar as it crossed the communal territory, and that they themselves had loved and cared for it in the past. Therefore, it was difficult for them to understand this space as a State highway, where they cannot make a decision of this nature.
>
> (Peruvian biologist and local expert, Lima, interview of 10.04.2022)

As a self-surveillance measure, groups of volunteers were instituted. Through rotating shifts, they maintained a constant presence at these points to prevent outsiders from entering the community. The board of directors would formalise volunteer groups made up of Arakmbut or Wachiperi men (divided by family nuclei and ethnic group), to ensure continuous surveillance day and night. Women participated in these operations taking on other tasks as fishing and cooking for the men on duty, among others (Reymundo 2021).

Initially, the measures were met with shared enthusiasm: marking the borders corresponded to a common desire where the world 'outside' and the 'city' were perceived as an ultimate threat of danger and contagion.

> We have made the gates to control, taking care of ourselves because we have been told that we are very vulnerable to this disease.
>
> (Arakmbut man, 60 years old, Shintuya, 31.08.2022)

This volunteer vigilante group was based on the *ronda campesina* peasant patrol system: a community surveillance system that arose in Andean contexts throughout the twentieth century to defend the fields from thieves during nighttime; later re-adopted in the 1980s and 1990s against the incursions of armed groups in times of Peruvian internal Armed conflict (Piccoli 2011). In recent years, Andean *ronderos* are still actively engaged in self-surveillance of their community territories (among other things) against unauthorised mining projects (Salazar-Soler 2016; Le Gouill 2017; Grieco 2023). At the beginning of the pandemic, many Indigenous communities followed the *rondas campesinas* model throughout all the Peruvian territory (Romio et al. 2022). Faced with the news of the virus, they reactivated and reinforced their self-surveillance system, and in the case of the Shintuya community, the *rondas* system: to have full control over community territory, the road in particular. All the above processes are clearly new forms of sovereignty based on self-care and health needs. Such actions go against the grain since the road represents a gateway to 'modernisation', an artery that must be kept open, fluid and bustling with traffic to accumulate individual economic capital through continuous exchanges with urban society.

During the pandemic, the above measures were simultaneously implemented by several other Indigenous communities throughout the country (Burneo and Trelles 2020; Cáceres et al. 2021; among others): the apparatus of the State reacted differently, and in some cases applied severe punishments. The particularity of the Shintuya case is that the Salvación-Boca Manu road is a 'marginal road:'[4] the only way to access the Alto Manu and Fizcarraldo area, connecting two district capitals. Additionally, it is the sole route linking numerous Indigenous communities in the region and all those within the Manu Natural Park. In the eyes of government institutions, the self-care measure of road blockade was considered an unauthorised protest and, in the case of a marginal road, it became a 'crime'. The collective self-care action sparked a crisis among institutional State authorities—national and regional government, and within the health system itself—since neither their vans nor other means of transport could cross the Shintuya territory to reach other sites. Thirdly, by closing off a marginal road the State boundaries and its territorial access had to be redefined. The situation inverted the balance of power and agency between the State and a previously invisible, marginalised ethnic group of citizens. In fact, closing the road off implied new boundaries between Indigenous society and the urban context. It also challenged the usual dynamics of exchange and submission between the former and the latter.

As James Scott explains, the communities situated at the margins of the State enjoy an intermediate condition: of being within

a State-controlled territory, and at the same time autonomous because geographically located away from urban centres, where territorial sovereignty is run by State institutions. The process of paving a new 'marginal road' compels a reassessment of the power asymmetries between the liminal community and the State, which emblematically reflects emerging forms of resource management, spatial governance and mobility regulation (Scott 2009).

Naturally, the State deemed this situation unviable and unacceptable, both at the regional and national levels. The Shintuya community, in the midst of a national health crisis, through the blockade, attracted the State's attention for several days (Ortega 2020). Before long, the Attorney General's Office filed complaints against the Indigenous leaders of the Shintuya community, demanding a rapid reopening of the road. Shintuya members, conscious of the virus' risks, and after a long experience of collective death due to the exposure to unknown diseases, refused to do so. In this context, what were the State's main priorities? Was it the community health status, or the transit traffic of a 'marginal road?' Both, perhaps: but the State focused exclusively on one of these points—the second one.

A few days later, since the paving of the road had shortened the distance between the community and the city, the police arrived in Shintuya on their motorbikes. For the first time, community members could meet face to face with State officials within their own physical territory. In those days, long messages and phone calls were exchanged between community leaders and district government officials, as well as other Indigenous leaders of organisations in Lima. The Shintuya community was at the heart of a political debate, both locally and nationally. Who did the road belong to? Who should control road traffic during the national health crisis? All these debates emerged for the first time after the Shintuya community had electricity and the internet. The above services were activated in the community in 2019, after the paving of the road. Their self-defence strategy was turning into a political struggle, which, thanks to the work of some activists, found its way onto the web pages (Ortega 2020).

Discussions lasted several weeks. Villagers defended their position by appealing to the Indigenous rights of ILO Convention no. 169, in particular their right to self-determination within their ancestral territory. Meanwhile, they eased road control, allowing transit of the police, State officials and basic services, such as the electricity company, the Health Ministry vehicles and others. However, for the regional government this was not enough. On 26 May 2020, the Attorney General's Office filed a complaint accusing the president of the community of a crime against the State. From then on, the Shintuya assembly allowed nighttime vehicle traffic, maintaining but one prohibition, that no one could stop. The long-term result of the decision related to opening the road led to a gradual loss of political power and authority of the Shintuya community members within their territory. The usual relation of power based on pyramidal hierarchy was re-established and the State reinforced citizenship along its territorial boundaries. The Shintuya community thus went back to be a marginal and subordinated community.

By rescaling the sense of danger that the pandemic had triggered, villagers returned to their usual economic activities in the following weeks. At the same time, it became evident that even in difficult situation a subordinate community can leverage power through collective approaches to reclaim autonomy, assert rights and build political influence. They mobilised a deep knowledge of ecosystems and landscapes, positioning themselves as environmental stewards and guardians of biodiversity, therefore champions of environmental justice and climate change. This strategy can attract allies, provide economic opportunities and reinforce their authority in decision-making on natural resource management. It is relevant to observe that in the existing literature, confinement and mobility restrictions are predominantly conceptualised as top-down mechanisms imposed by the State, wherein communities are positioned as passive recipients obliged to comply. Nonetheless, the case of Shintuya exemplifies a profound inversion of this paradigm: an Indigenous community exercising autonomous agency by voluntarily restricting movement to safeguard collective health rights, notwithstanding State pressures to uphold mobility. This reversal not only challenges prevailing theoretical frameworks but also elucidates emergent forms of territorial sovereignty enacted from below. Furthermore, it compels a critical reconsideration of the interplay between mobility regulation, collective rights and the processes underpinning the construction of Indigenous citizenship.

5 | Conclusions

For many Indigenous communities, the pandemic in tandem with road closures, marked another chapter in their construction of the sense of citizenship from the margins, linked to the processes of defining new spatialities. During the 2020–2021 health emergency, road closures and other self-care practices, evolved into acts of political defiance to claim new forms of territorial autonomy. This phenomenon underlines the capacity of Indigenous communities to adapt and resist in the face of adversity, using strategies that combine both traditional knowledge and new dynamics of territorial autonomy. The debate over State-controlled versus communal management of public infrastructure has intensified into a power struggle over territory. As demonstrated in political ecology literature, the commons can be a resistance tool against neoliberal hegemony and experiments in socio-spatial reconfiguration based on justice and respect for ethnic and social identities (Peluso and Lund 2011; Ioris 2015).

While Clastres, in the 1970s, chose the Amazon as an ethno-political laboratory to elaborate an original, collective experience 'against the State' (Clastres 1974), the past 25 years have pointed to a reversed trend: a series of continuous and innovative ethno-political expressions of protest to demand greater State presence, whether in the form of infrastructures, services or bureaucratic bodies that change the traditional logic of State interventions (Surrallés et al. 2016, 9). Indigenous groups have thus become active players in the national political arenas of Amazonian countries, finding widespread international recognition. In this case, the demands took an opposite direction, as the road became a socio-spatial locus that prompted the emergence of new political identities, facilitated by the services and communication networks it introduced.

The pandemic has meant rethinking power relations among marginalised settlers, external society and State institutions,

alongside the role played by the road within the 'modernisation' process. In the imagination of the Shintuya villagers, the road, once the main artery of their economic and social life, gradually came to be a threatening, unsafe and potentially dangerous place. For this reason, it needed to be kept 'under control', closed off and guarded at its access points. This could be achieved using *troncones*, but also through coordinated collective efforts (the *ronderos*, men and women). The sense of self-care was generally tied to the need to reconsider Indigenous territory imagining it as a closed place, in contrast to the external national space and society. The Shintuya community on this occasion could experiment direct control and political authority over its territory, without approval from above. At that time, the Communal Assembly was the most important political and institutional body. Once the road was officially closed, relations among community members changed: they began reassessing their challenges and their ethno-political identity as a collective, especially in relation to external society.

The pandemic experience has catalysed the emergence of novel community-based initiatives that empower citizens to exercise their rights, reinforcing the integration of health entitlements into transformative frameworks of territorial governance and inclusive planning. The experience has fostered new forms of Indigenous political identity in regions that are peripheral to the State's political priorities, but central to its economic interests. Moreover, it has opened up new, anti-state power arenas. In exercising active citizenship, particularly in terms of health and territorial rights, communities have brought to light hidden norms, restrictions and mechanisms of subjugation. This, in turn, has led to a shift in the power dynamics and the way groups and nations in socio-economic frontiers govern their resources.

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Data Availability Statement

Data openly available in a public repository that issues datasets with DOIs.

Endnotes

[1] This ethnic group is gradually disappearing: in the 1990s, it was estimated that there were more than 10,000 people spread across some 40 communities, whereas today there are only a few hundred.

[2] Drug trafficking is present in at least half of the ethnic group in the Amazon ethnic groups, and surface of cultivation in Indigenous area triplicated between 2018 and 2023 in the Peruvian Amazon, commonly with the complicity of local authority and incorporation strategies to the communities (Sobrerón 2025, 38).

[3] The communal land covers an area of 6739 ha.

[4] In Amazonian contexts closely located to international borders and far from urban centres, the term 'marginal road' (*Carretera marginal*) refers to the only transit route built by the State. It serves multiple purposes, including the integration of peripheral areas, contact with Indigenous groups, access to forested areas and the assertion of state sovereignty in historically weakly controlled zones.

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