

Spectacle

“Come Wednesday night. The president is coming Thursday.” The WhatsApp message was brief but clear. President Mario Abdo was headed to Sawhoyamaxa to officiate the transfer of 144 houses the Ministry of Urbanism, Housing, and Habitat (MUVH) had recently constructed for the community. Although Sawhoyamaxa did not yet have a land title, the 2014 law of expropriation coupled with community resistance eventually impelled the former landowners to leave the retiro they long resisted relinquishing. Six years after cutting the fence and reoccupying their lands, Sawhoyamaxa families would now have two-bedroom homes with a kitchenette and latrine, all built of brick, wired for electricity, and with glass windows. It was cold when I arrived in Sawhoyamaxa that night in late June 2019, but spirits were high and the mood was festive. A delegation from Kelyenmagategma was there, as were representatives from Amnesty International and Tierraviva and lots of people from Sawhoyamaxa. We gathered around small fires in Eriberto’s aldea to share stories, eat dinner, and enjoy time together before the momentous occasion. As the fires waned, all the guests retreated to their sleeping quarters in the retiro.

Early the next morning, we prepared maté, which we drank while sitting on the screened porch of the retiro and talked about the day’s planned events. President Abdo would arrive by helicopter, proceed directly to the small stage that had been constructed, officiate the ceremony, then tour one house before leaving. What sounded like a simple plan was quite involved. State officials had trucked in several loads of red earth from Concepción to ensure the path from the helicopter to the stage and back was firm, dry ground, not the muddy clay soil common to this part of the Bajo Chaco. A few of us watched as MOPC functionaries worked to fill in and tamp down a handful of stubborn puddles that had formed in the night. “He will cancel his trip if it is muddy,” one man said to me, as we contemplated the expense of creating this temporary path compared to many other necessities that warranted funding but never received support.

The morning warmed with the rising sun as state trucks emblazoned with different agency logos pulled in and parked: MOPC, SEN, MUVH, and the Ministries of Health, Justice, and Foreign Relations, along with an advance team of special forces that arrived to secure the location. A brand-new white Toyota Hilux truck purchased with restitution-as-development funds pulled up shortly after that with an altogether different logo emblazoned on the side: Yakye Axa Comunidad Indígena con Personería Jurídica (Yakye Axa Indigenous Community with Legal Personhood). Out stepped Anivel and Anibal, along with other community members. The event was a sort of reunion, convened on the one hand to celebrate advances in the restitution as development process and on the other for community members to continue pressuring the state to act. Some state functionaries had worked for Tierraviva previously or rotated jobs through different state agencies.¹ Several had been to Sawhoyamaxa, Yakye Axa, or Kelyenmagategma at one point or another in their careers. People shook hands, laughed, shared gossip, and waited for the president.

Sometime midmorning, a deep percussive rhythm could be heard approaching from the east, then the president's helicopter appeared overhead, circling the retiro before landing in a former pasture turned soccer field. A large group waited to greet Abdo and escort him along the freshly laid road of red earth that stretched several hundred yards from the soccer field to the makeshift stage for the event. Abdo, the governor, and a district representative of Presidente Hayes, along with the heads of several key state agencies, took their seats on chairs under the small white tent facing a crowd of perhaps 150 people. Then the president of INDI at the time, Ana María Allen, opened the event with a scant ninety-second statement. She noted the "historic debt" that the Paraguayan state has to the Indigenous peoples who live in the country. A man with a baritone voice who sounded like a skilled radio deejay then took the microphone to emcee the rest of the event. In true state-as-patrón form, he proceeded to announce that the state would give symbolic checks to leaders of Kelyenmagategma and Sawhoyamaxa "in accordance with the Inter-American Court." "Will the leader of Kelyenmagategma, Mr. Celso Benitez, please come forward to receive the symbolic check for 983,333,000 guaranies?" Akin to a game show host, he repeated the amount three more times, emphasizing and drawing out the number in a dramatic voice that reverberated through the loudspeakers. As the president handed over the symbolic check, the emcee announced, "Mr. Benitez will receive 983,333,000 guaranies for Kelyenmagategma!" "Next is Eriberto Ayala, leader of the community . . ." Reading from his cue cards, the emcee's suave voice did not know how to pronounce Sawhoyamaxa. He went silent for a full three seconds without naming the community before continuing, ". . . to receive 1,966,000 guaranies!" Again, he repeated the check amount three times in the span of no fewer than two minutes as Eriberto shook hands with Abdo, then showed the check to the crowd. "Now the president of INDI, Mrs. Ana María Allen, will sign the symbolic checks," which she did, after Celso and Eriberto

handed them to her. The emcee then called the leader of each Sawhoyamaxa aldea to the front to receive symbolic keys to their houses from Abdo, after which they sat again among the crowd.

Throughout the ceremony, Abdo said nothing but smiled and nodded, as did the other officials surrounding him. “Now we have a special surprise,” announced the emcee, as a man appeared with a bag of about forty soccer balls. “Please form a line and come to get a ball from Mr. President!” Kids cautiously but excitedly lined up to receive the gifts. With that, the ceremony was over ten minutes after it had started. Yet before anyone could move, Eriberto took to the microphone: “Today, Mr. President, the credibility of the state begins again. The Indigenous will have faith in your government, and we are happy in our hearts. All five leaders of Sawhoyamaxa would like to be in a picture with you, the president of INDI, and the minister [of justice]. This will be the only lasting memory of the visit of an authority of such high ranking in our community.” Several people in the audience from Sawhoyamaxa shook their heads slightly, seemingly skeptical at the comment, perhaps not agreeing with the statement but understanding its persuasive end; the power of the dialectics of disruption lies in strategically working with and against the patrón, with and against the law. The state dignitaries lined up alongside the leaders of Sawhoyamaxa for a picture. “Thank you,” announced Eriberto. “Everyone, please give a strong round of applause before we take the president to show him our new homes.” As the crowd clapped, a young man from Sawhoyamaxa approached me with a look of disdain, gesturing toward Abdo as he walked by. “He didn’t say anything, just sat there smiling and handing out toys like a poster boy for Coca-Cola.” The entire ceremony, from the opening statements to the president’s exit, was fourteen minutes long. Yet the photos that remain show images of care, the president smiling with his arm around community members, giving out soccer balls to kids, and handing checks to victims of human rights abuse caused by the state he leads. Indeed, news headlines following the event read, “President Intends to Raise His Image due to Social Pressures.”²

Predictable unpredictability precipitates the politics of recognition, thus creating spaces and situations of legal liminality that manifest as the slow violence of environmental injustice that Enxet and Sanapaná live with. With Abdo’s visit, 144 families from Sawhoyamaxa received new homes, monetary disbursements were made to further restitution as development, and Enxet peoples achieved an important goal in their long struggle to force the state to recognize them on their terms by coming to their land—no less, in the shadow of the retiro once used to surveil the community. On the other hand, the pomp and circumstance of the president’s visit embody the optics of care that masks the biopolitics of neglect.

Shortly after the president’s helicopter left for Asunción and the crowds left Sawhoyamaxa, I took a couple of people to check out the progress on the Yakye Axa access road that had begun in 2016 but was yet to be completed after three years of “work.” The road was impassable just 6 kilometers into the 35-kilometer



FIGURE 16. President Mario Abdo with his arm around a woman from Yakye Axa (center left) arriving in Sawhoyamaxa to inaugurate the SENAVITAT homes. The main retiro is the large building in the background, with a new home visible immediately behind Abdo. Photo by author, June 2019.

route due to a washout that swallowed my 4x4 rental truck in mud at the first creek crossing. MOPC has since restarted road construction, but it remains to be seen if it will provide a road built well enough to resist the seasonal floods. When I returned to Paraguay in February 2020, I encountered Gladys, Celso, Clemente, and several other interlocutors at the Tierraviva offices in Asunción. Gladys was there to launch a complaint against the construction company that had built the homes in her aldea of Sawhoyamaxa. “*ndovalei* [They are no good]. When it rains, the windows leak, and now most don’t open. You have to break out the glass for air to enter in the summer.” Celso was doing *seguimiento* (follow-up) on the land-titling process for Kelyenmagategma because it had still not been resolved. Clemente had come nearly 400 kilometers to bring his daughter to the doctor. Conversations about issues like these have become commonplace over the years of our relationships—so much that they seem almost natural, expected. Yet they are anything but.

There is nothing natural about environmental racism, persistent discrimination, and the biopolitics of neglect. They are conditions actively produced, often by direct state action or inaction. The Paraguayan state’s repeated neglect to ensure the rights of its Indigenous citizens naturalizes daily violence experienced across several registers: the loss of language and the ability to practice vital ceremonies,

the uncertainty of living with and without *de jure* land rights, the forms of material poverty that reproduce vulnerability to labor exploitation, and so much more. Several days after those conversations in Tierraviva, I celebrated five years of life in Xákmok Kásek—a ceremony that was a testament to the endurance of Indigenous resistance and the fact that the state cannot be relied on to ensure environmental justice. Instead, the pursuit of justice requires radical co-resistance that builds from the existing infrastructures of liberation that Enxet and Sanapaná peoples have forged through solidarity with one another and allies in their struggles.³ Little did we know at the time of the celebration that the specter of a global pandemic would manifest. I left Paraguay six days before the country's borders closed due to COVID-19. Since that time, Enxet and Sanapaná from across the Bajo Chaco mobilized a mass road closure to demand basic state services in response to the pandemic and the issuance of land titles to Yakye Axa, Sawhoyamaxa, Xákmok Kásek, and Kelyenmagategma. With each protest, community members gain new minor concessions from state officials but always lament that they are forced to take such actions. "We do not like to protest. It is dangerous. You never know what will happen, if the kids will get hurt, if someone will raid the community when you are gone. But we have to do it because the state does not see Indigenous people unless we make them," Clemente noted via WhatsApp.