



Article

The Forest as the Soul of a People

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When the Forest Weeps centers the Kichwa people's fight to preserve life in the heart of the Amazon

"They will have to assassinate us to enter here. As long as we are alive, we will not permit it. Even if they send the best army in the world." These are the words of Gerardo Walingu of Sarayaku, an Amazonian village in Ecuador. Sarayaku is besieged by multiple man-made crises that have devastated much of the surrounding region. The Ecuadorian government encourages tourism and urban development that cuts deeper and deeper into the forest ecosystem; ravaging oil companies tear down more and more trees to make way for petroleum production. And yet, even an account of the acres of deforested area every year does not capture the problem. To indigenous people like the Kichwa, who understand each tree as a foundation for human and non-human existence, the physical destruction of the Amazon is also a form of spiritual violence.

***When you are one with the forest, the forest rejoices.
When you are not, the forest weeps.***

—Todd Swanson’s explanation of Kichwa spirituality, as narrated by the film’s producer, Bill Gentile.

Walingu is just one of the many voices included in *When the Forest Weeps* (2015). It also features Walingu’s father, a shaman whose teachings instilled in him his resolve to defend the land and its people. Also featured is Dr. Todd Swanson of Arizona State University who owns a reserve near Sarayaku. Perhaps most importantly, the film highlights the Kichwa communities as they strategize different forms of resistance against the environmental degradation that threatens their language, culture, and future.

Note: This documentary was produced through a collaboration between journalist Bill Gentile and the American University’s Center for Latin American and Latino Studies (CLALS) as part of the “Religion and Democratic Contestation” project.