

The Embrace of the Serpent: A Chronicle of Atacameño Life in the Face of Mining

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My book examines the effects of copper mining on the environment and indigenous peoples of the Atacama Desert. During the twentieth century, the Anaconda Company increasingly captured water for copper production in the Chuquicamata mine. The environmental impacts of water extraction had a tremendous effect on an important part of Atacameño people's economy, which is based on animal herding. Llamas were a significant source of protein for their diet, important for ceremonial commitments, and the only source of savings to which they could turn during times of economic hardship. Ironically, the history of mining development also reveals that Anaconda gave jobs to the natives to build and maintain the pipelines that took away their water. In the present, Anaconda is remembered more for the jobs it gave than for the water it took.

I argue that changing modes of co-optation in conjunction with changing corporate moral identities affect how socioenvironmental impacts of mining are silenced. To develop my argument, I address different ethnographic case studies in which the common theme that emerges in relations between the mining company and indigenous communities is co-optation.

In the times of Anaconda, the economic and technological conditions made indigenous labor valuable. The need for their wage labor shaped the positive perceptions natives had of Anaconda. Several changes came along with the transition of ownership from the American to the Chilean administration (1971): technological advances that rendered indigenous labor irrelevant; privatization of water in the context of a military dictatorship (1973–1989); environmental legislation that increased the visibility of the environmental impacts of the extractive industry; and international awareness of indigenous peoples' rights, among others. These all transformed the ways co-optation unfolds in the present. The jobs of the old days were replaced with material compensation to communities that range from sponsoring a religious festival, to recycling computers discarded by the company to be used in local schools. I suggest these are strategies to renew the company's social license to operate. While some indigenous communities do gain some material benefits in the present, they have lost deeper claims to historical water rights.

In my research, I found that the expectations of the relationships with the mining industry that Atacameños most hoped for were partly shaped by the mining corporation's moral identity. Atacameño indigenous peoples tend to associate positive aspects of the company with earlier times when it was owned by North Americans, because the employment opportunities for native populations are remembered as being greater. They make a sharp contrast between *gringos* and the Chilean administration. The former's well appreciated way of establishing warm, personal relationships secures them a positive moral identity. The latter are perceived as selfish and cold, warranting them a negative moral identity.