

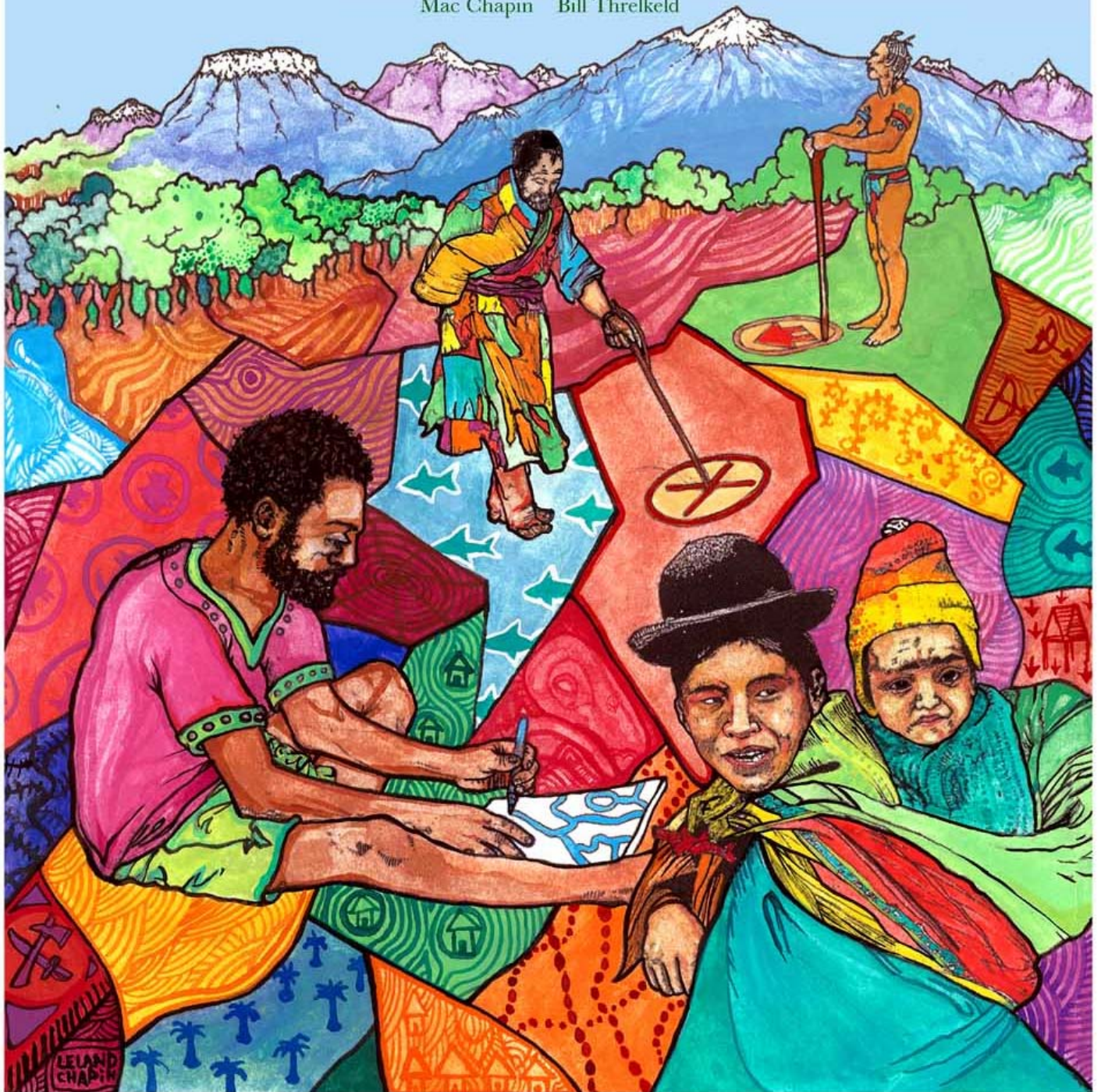
Mapping Indigenous Lands

A Practical Guidebook



Center for the Support of Native Lands

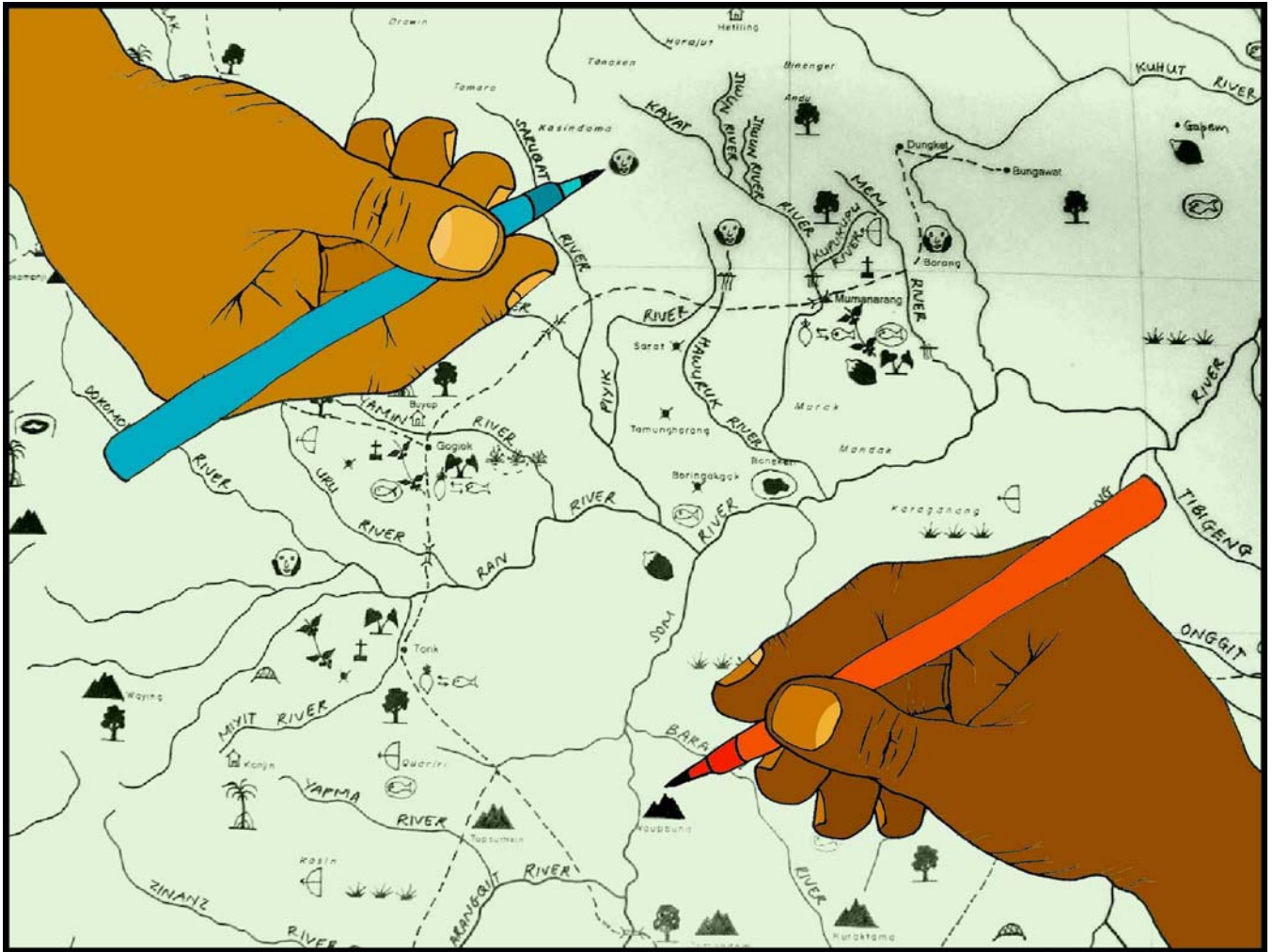
Mac Chapin Bill Threlkeld



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Environmental Law Institute

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2.3 Visiting the communities and assembling the Community Unit

As soon as financing has been secured (see Chapter 3) and project plans are laid, members of the Project Team and tribal authorities should make a systematic sweep through the area to be mapped. They should visit as many communities as they can – all of them if possible, as a matter of courtesy – to discuss the objectives and methodology of the mapping and the practical value of producing their own maps. These presentations should be accompanied by existing maps of the region, to show how deficient they are. If they are available, indigenous maps done by communities in other regions or countries that show how the methodology works should be shown and explained. Time must be taken with this, and a question-and-answer period is important.

Most people living in villages will be initially suspicious of the project. After all, the idea they are being presented with – the opportunity to map their own territory, on their own terms, and then being able to use the finished maps for their own benefit – is novel, even bizarre. This



Figure 2.1

Mac Chapin of Native Lands explaining what maps are, how they are used, and the methodology for participatory mapping in the Izoceño village of Guirayoasa (La Brecha). The meeting was attended by leaders from Guirayoasa and neighboring villages. Maps on the back wall are from an earlier mapping project in Panama and were used as illustrations showing how the process works. Marcelino Apurani, seated in a light blue shirt taking notes was the Guaraní interpreter during the Ground Preparation stage, and he later served as a Project Coordinator.



The consequences of poor ground preparation

Ground preparation was extremely weak and disorganized in the first two projects we were involved with.

In the Mosquitia, it would have been impossible to visit all 174 communities, and because the project was set in motion suddenly there was virtually no time to prepare. As it was, a few visits to communities were made, but this was far from systematic. The area being covered was vast – 20,000 km² – and travel would have been extremely complex and expensive, as well as far too time-consuming, so it was simply not feasible. Instead, the project was given some advance publicity through broadcasts of the Miskito station, Radio SAMI, “The Voice of the Mosquitia.” Letters describing the project were also sent to schoolteachers, religious leaders, and political authorities.

In the Darién, there were difficulties in the coordination of the three indigenous groups involved. The Emberá were the majority group and they dominated the project from the very start. The Wounaan were allied with the Emberá in the Emberá-Wounaan Congress and were semi-informed about the mapping. The Kuna, however, were traditional enemies of the Emberá and were excluded from the process until after the first workshop. This imbalance of power and the difficult terrain – most travel in the more than 16,000 km² region is by canoe – led to misunderstandings and a lack of coverage in the Kuna communities.

Both projects lacked adequate ground preparation, and both suffered the consequences. The Darién project in particular was marked with delays while explanations were given to the communities. People demanded a full accounting of the project before moving forward. One community in the Darién refused to participate unless paid – which, of course, was out of the question; it relented later on, reluctantly, and the information it provided was extremely thin. Criteria for selecting Village Researchers in both Honduras and Panama were not explained to most of the communities, with the result that many of those chosen were inadequate for the job.



is not the way “research” is traditionally done in rural communities. Standard practice is for outside researchers to arrive, undertake studies of one sort or another, and then leave with their findings, never to return. The communities never see the results. They will find it hard to believe that they will be in charge of planning the project, and when the maps are finished, they will be the owners.

For this reason, it is understandable that some villagers, when presented with the idea of mapping their lands, will be suspicious and reluctant to participate. It is our experience that there will always be at least one or perhaps two villages in a region that will refuse to provide information for the maps. Sometimes they can be talked out of it; other times they flat-out reject the mapping, saying that they see no value in it and they don’t trust outsiders. Rivalries among villages are common, with deep distrust among them.



Figures 2.2, 2.3, 2.4 Sources: Anthony Stocks, Bernard Nietschmann
 Communities are often difficult to reach because of remoteness and lack of roads. Canoes take people in and out of these communities: The Miskito village of Waunta on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua (top left); Children from the Tawahka Indian community of Yapuwas on the Patuca River, Honduras (top right); the Kuna Indian village of Wargandi in the Darién region of Panama (bottom).

It is necessary to establish some level of trust for participatory mapping projects to function. Without it, no reliable information will be gathered. It is essential at this point for the Project Team to visit as many communities within the area to be mapped as possible to explain what is being proposed, the project’s objectives and methodology, and answer any questions. Ideally, those visiting will be the Project Director, one or two of the Cartographers, and indigenous leaders. Beyond simply telling people what is being proposed, visits of this sort are a matter of courtesy. People want to be informed; if they are not, they can easily close the door and refuse to participate.

The truth is that explanations about community mapping are seldom sufficient to get all of the communities on board – or even to convince people throughout the project area that mapping is a good idea and they should dedicate their precious time to it. Most people will remain suspicious until they enter into project activities and begin to see the maps being produced. This is always gradual, a slow building of trust. When local authorities buy into the project, however, and it becomes clear that the villagers – not outside researchers – are calling the shots, suspicions will begin to disappear. This demands a good deal of work.

Often visits of this sort are difficult because of the remoteness of communities, bad weather, lack of money, or scarce time – or a combination of all of these. We have found that there is often an urge to get going with the actual mapping as soon as possible, without delay. Dallying around with jaunts through the forest,

spending months visiting villages, is seen as a waste of time.

But this is simply not the case. A thorough canvassing of the villages, with time spent in each village to allow people to think through and discuss the project, is extremely important for the smooth functioning of the mapping work once activities get underway. It is an important – nay, essential – step for bringing communities into the project and for selecting Researchers that will be their representatives in the project.



2.4 Selecting Village Researchers

Village Researchers are responsible for gathering information in the communities. They draw or supervise the drawing of the sketch maps and record information in their notebooks. They do not work alone; they work closely with village elders and those who know the region's landscape and history, plucking information out of their heads and recording it on their maps and in their notebooks. The Researchers are the ones who collect village knowledge and place it on sketch maps; in this way, they represent their communities.

Ideally, each community should select one or in some cases two Researchers. The Researcher is chosen by the community, not by Project Leaders, and the community should be made aware of the fact that the Researcher should be chosen for his skill, not for his political ties. For example, the tendency, found in some societies, to choose the Chief's son should be avoided – unless, of course, he is the most highly qualified person for the job (this happened to us in one project and the person selected was **not** the most highly qualified person for the job...). The quality of the maps produced depends overwhelmingly on the quality of the Researcher. He must therefore be chosen with great care. This should be done during the Ground Preparation period, before project activities begin.

In cases where communities are very small and located near each other, a single Researcher can be chosen to gather information for several communities. Care must be taken to make sure that the communities are closely linked and free of inter-village conflicts, and that the Researcher chosen has the confidence of all of the communities.

While the community has the final word in the choice of its Researcher, villagers should be made aware of the characteristics of the ideal Researcher.



Figure 2.5

Village Researchers from the Darién of Panama. The woman standing on the left was not a Researcher; she was contracted to make a record of the team's activities.



Figure 2.6

Village Researchers in the Izozog, Bolivia.



Researchers should have the following qualities:

- Be a respected member of the community. He should be mature and have a reputation for dedication and community service. This will allow him to work easily with village elders and other respected people to gather information.
- Have familiarity with the bush and subsistence areas. Because much of the information will deal with place names, areas far from the village, and areas where people hunt, fish, farm, and gather various materials, a good knowledge of most of these areas will make it easier for him to process the information he is receiving from villagers. (In the Honduran Mosquitia several teachers and pastors were selected as Researchers. Although literate and respected community members, they were unable to make sense of information about subsistence areas, for they had no experience there.)
- Be literate, as considerable writing is involved in his task. There are often cases where people are familiar with the bush and are recognized authorities on the surrounding landscape, yet they are not literate. Community members strongly believe that they should be part of the Researcher team (and we agree). When this happens, a community can choose two Researchers: one who is mature, respected, and knows the bush, but is illiterate; and the other who knows how to write yet is young and has less experience with subsistence activities. They can work together as a team.
- Be possessed of energy and doggedness in tracking down information.
- Be between 25 and 40 years of age, although there are exceptions and a need to be flexible. Younger people, although they may be literate and know the outback, often lack the respect in the community that comes with maturity. (In the Panamanian Darién project there was one Researcher who was very young. He found it difficult to approach elders and ask for information, and he ended up filling in the map from his imagination. This was caught in the Second Workshop, but by that time he had lost considerable time and was never able to bring in a complete map.) Those that are too old often have poor eyesight with advanced age, over the age of 40 (few wear glasses). This makes it difficult to write and draw maps. Also, if they have gone to school and learned to write,

The matter of gender

None of the Researchers in the projects we have accompanied have been women. Invariably, we are asked why this is the case when we give presentations of the methodology to audiences in the United States and Europe.

One answer to this question is that we are not the ones who choose the Researchers; village leaders have that privilege and in each case they have chosen only men. When we ask why this is so, we are often told that because the project will involve travel among communities, and this travel will at times be arduous and involve long distances, it is too risky for women; and they might be abused as they journey alone between communities.

A second answer has been that women do not know the bush as well as men because they seldom venture far from their communities. This argument, however, is not valid in some regions where women are involved in a variety of subsistence activities that take them far into the outback.

While these reasons may be valid – or partially valid – and outsiders (like ourselves) should not attempt to impose their notions on the process of selecting Researchers, it is both legitimate and important to bring up and discuss the matter of gender in the selection of Researchers – and, for that matter, in the conduct of the entire project. In certain circumstances, participation by women is entirely appropriate; and it is generally the case that women contribute information for the maps without being formal members of the team. The matter of gender should be at least openly discussed. In the end, this is a difficult and often sensitive topic, and the lead must be taken by the indigenous people, with little or no direction from outsiders.