

***“Nosotros no solamente podemos vivir de cultura”:***  
**Identity, Nature, and Power**  
**in the Comarca Emberá of Eastern Panama**

by

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## **Abstract**

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This dissertation centres on the lives of the indigenous men and women inhabiting the Comarca Emberá, an indigenous territory located in the Darién region of eastern Panama. Using theoretical contributions from poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and feminist political ecology, and drawing on twelve months of ‘field’ research together with an analysis of state discourses, I argue that while dominant discursive practices continue to construct the experiences and realities of contemporary indigenous peoples in stereotypical and simplistic terms – i.e., as undifferentiated, static, simple, and disconnected – the Emberá are in fact a highly adaptable and dynamic people engaged in complex struggles to maintain recognition of their land rights, re-create their lives amid increasingly contradictory conditions, and reconcile the tensions between ‘external’ demands, ‘local’ constraints, and their own aspirations.

Dominant discourses continue to construct Panama as an unproblematic space of naturally isolable units, whereby indigenous groups are contained within *comarca* territories. This classification obscures the complex web of power relations, historical interconnections, porosities between human groups, and regimes of representation through which these territories and identities are produced. This imaginative geography conceals the fact that indigenous peoples have their own histories and trajectories. Far from being a bounded, homogeneous enclave within the state, the Comarca Emberá is a fluid, dynamic, porous, and contingent space. Through an examination of the disruptions and responses fuelled by the market economy in the situated lives of Emberá peoples, particularly in relation to land and forest resources for household needs, the research reveals a move away from a heavy reliance on shifting cultivation and use of forest

resources, to cattle ranching, specialized handicraft production for national and international markets, and other 'non-traditional' activities. It also exposes important struggles over, and on-going re-codification of, local meanings of 'nature', place, indigeneity, and gender. The thesis thus tells a story of a place that continues to be remade through its multiple – and unequal – articulations with other places, state discourses, and processes of globalization, and of socially differentiated and versatile indigenous men and women actively renegotiating their interactions with the land, with each other, and with the rest of Panamanian society.

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## Table of contents

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<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>x</b>
<b>List of Photos</b> .....	<b>x</b>
<b>List of Illustrations</b> .....	<b>xi</b>
<b>List of Maps</b> .....	<b>xi</b>
<b>List of Acronyms</b> .....	<b>xii</b>
<b>Glossary of Spanish terms</b> .....	<b>xiv</b>
<b>Glossary of Emberá terms</b> .....	<b>xv</b>
<b>Chapter I – Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1. Purpose of the research .....	6
2. Theoretical underpinnings of the research .....	9
3. Thesis outline .....	11
<b>Chapter II – Theory</b> .....	<b>14</b>
1. Power .....	18
2. Power, knowledge, discourse.....	24
3. Identity .....	27
4. Nature and culture.....	32
5. Space, place, and scale.....	36
6. Development .....	40
<b>Chapter III – Methodology</b> .....	<b>52</b>
1. Writing against generalizations.....	53
1.1 Rejecting objectivity: ‘Situatedness’, partiality, and reflexivity .....	53
1.2 The politics of difference and representation.....	55
2. Challenging unequal power relations and resisting othering.....	60
2.1 Creating ‘spaces of betweenness’ .....	60
2.2 Countering notions of power verticality .....	61
2.3 Uncovering processes of othering in our constructions of ‘the field’ .....	64
3. The ebbs and flows of a research journey.....	66
3.1 Producing ‘the field’ .....	66
3.2 Negotiating with Emberá traditional authorities.....	71

3.3 Producing and negotiating the ‘self’ in ‘the field’ .....	72
4. Research methods .....	78
4.1 Selection and training of local research assistants .....	78
4.2 Study area population census.....	81
4.3 Individual interviews .....	82
4.4 Focus group discussions .....	84
4.5 Participant observation.....	86
4.6 Sketch map exercises and GPS field mapping.....	87
4.7 Archival research, data interpretation, and discourse analysis .....	89
5. The research site .....	91
<b>Chapter IV – Exposing the ‘unseen evidence’: Dismantling contemporary discourses of indigenous places and identities .....</b>	<b>102</b>
1. A postcolonial visibility .....	105
1.1 ‘Indigenous areas’: Blurry locations and ambiguous identities.....	105
1.2 A dichotomous racial landscape .....	108
2. The politics of identity .....	113
2.1 Collapsing indigenous peoples in place/nature.....	113
2.2 Enduring essentialist narratives .....	119
2.3 Indigenous poverty: Homogenization, normalization, and ‘empowerment’ ....	126
<b>Chapter V – Setting the scene.....</b>	<b>142</b>
1. Building the nation: Producing ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries’ .....	144
1.1 Panama’s historical ‘centres’: the trans-isthmian zone and the ‘Interior’ .....	144
1.2 Crisis of the ‘Interior’ and emergence of the ‘forested frontiers’ .....	150
1.3 Symbolic and materials ‘conquests’ of Darién .....	154
1.4 Village formation and creation of the Comarca Emberá .....	165
2. Contemporary changes in Emberá livelihoods and household economies.....	173
2.1 The crisis of subsistence activities.....	173
2.2 The booms and busts of Emberá commercial agriculture.....	179
2.3 Shifting livelihood strategies .....	184
2.4 Changing gendered labour relations in agriculture.....	188
<b>Chapter VI – Commodification of chungu-palm crafts and reconfiguration of gender relations and identities .....</b>	<b>196</b>
1. <i>Astrocaryum standleyanum</i> and the commodification of crafts .....	199
1.1 Origins of chungu crafts in the Sambú area .....	199
1.2 Ecology and harvesting practices of <i>Astrocaryum standleyanum</i> .....	200

1.3 Making and marketing chungá crafts.....	204
1.4 Changing rights of access to and use of chungá palms.....	213
2. Making money, negotiating gender relations and identities.....	220
2.1 Re-introducing the ‘political’ in the household.....	220
2.2 Importance of basketry work in household economies.....	222
2.3 Making female productive work invisible.....	226
2.4 Negotiating gender relations/identities through basketry.....	233
<b>Chapter VII – How raising cattle redefines space, nature, and identity.....</b>	<b>247</b>
1. Brief history of cattle ranching in Panama.....	249
2. Cattle ranching in the Comarca Emberá: A powerful ‘development’ trope.....	257
3. A new ‘doing’ of the land.....	268
4. Struggles over belonging.....	280
5. Discourses of ‘nature’, performances of indigeneity, and territorial threats.....	284
<b>Chapter VIII – Conclusion.....</b>	<b>300</b>
<b>References cited.....</b>	<b>309</b>

## List of Tables

---

<b>Table 1:</b> Typology of problems existing between individuals and between groups in Panama's urban, rural, and indigenous communities .....	126
<b>Table 2:</b> Indigenous population in Panama and in Darién .....	167

## List of Photos

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<b>Photo 1:</b> President Martin Torrijos and the head of the MIDES, María Roquebert León (top right corner), delivering the first cheques from the <i>Red de Oportunidades</i> Program to an Emberá woman in Puerto Indio, <i>Comarca</i> Emberá .....	138
<b>Photo 2:</b> The mud road connecting the towns of Sambú, on the Sambú River, and Garachiné, on the Gulf of San Miguel .....	182
<b>Photo 3:</b> A fruiting chungá palm .....	202
<b>Photo 4:</b> Emberá woman peeling off chungá pinnae to extract weaving fibres.....	205
<b>Photo 5:</b> Processed chungá fibres drying and bleaching in the sun on a corrugated steel sheet. ....	206
<b>Photo 6:</b> Coloured chungá fibres ready to weave.....	208
<b>Photo 7:</b> Bottom of a basket with a geometric design made using the <i>diente peinado</i> technique. The core of naguala fibres are on the left side, around which the thin black chungá fibre is tightly woven with a needle .....	209
<b>Photo 8:</b> Small Wounaan chungá basket, with a zoomorphic design made using the <i>diente peinado</i> stitching technique. ....	209
<b>Photo 9:</b> An Emberá couple from the village of Playa Muerto selling chungá baskets, masks, and plates exhibiting zoomorphic and geometric designs and <i>escalera</i> stitches. ....	210
<b>Photos 10, 11, and 12:</b> Emberá woman carrying a cargo basket with plantains (left), carrying firewood (right) and pounding rice with her daughter.. ....	231
<b>Photo 13:</b> An Emberá pasture in the village of Bayamón. ....	259
<b>Photo 14:</b> Emberá men vaccinating a cow with the help of a <i>colono</i> man in a pasture of Bayamón .....	259
<b>Photo 15:</b> A sign along the boundary of the <i>Comarca</i> Emberá between the villages of Bayamón and La Colonia de Bijagual. Four bullet holes are noticeable.....	294

## List of Illustrations

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- Illustration 1:** A map of Darién published in the national Panamanian newspaper *La Prensa* to illustrate the violence in the region from 1993 to 2003..... 68
- Illustration 2:** A poster from COPEG displayed in an Emberá house in Atalaya and warning farmers against the threat of the screwworm, a disease transmitted by flies.... 252

## List of Maps

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- Map 1:** Indigenous *comarcas* of Panama in 2009.....2
- Map 2:** Study area.....93
- Map 3:** The Darién region.....94
- Map 4:** Provinces of the Interior.....147

## List of Acronyms

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<b>ACEGAN</b>	Asociación Comarcana Emberá Ganadero
<b>ANAM</b>	Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente
<b>ANCON</b>	Asociación Nacional para la Conservación de la Naturaleza
<b>APROWOCA</b>	Asociación de Productores Wounaan Comunidad de Capetí
<b>BDA</b>	Banco de Desarrollo Agropecuario
<b>CEALP</b>	Centro de Asistencia Legal Popular
<b>CEASPA</b>	Centro de Estudios y Acción Social Panameña
<b>CFPA</b>	Comisión Panamá-Estados Unidos de América para la Prevención de la Fiebre Aftosa
<b>COPEG</b>	Comisión Panamá-Estados Unidos para la Erradicación y Prevención del Gusano Barrenador del Ganado
<b>IDB</b>	Inter-American Development Bank
<b>IFAD</b>	International Fund for Agricultural Development
<b>IMA</b>	Instituto de Mercadeo Agropecuario
<b>IPAT</b>	Instituto Panameño de Turismo
<b>MEF</b>	Ministerio de Economía y Finanzas
<b>MICI</b>	Ministerio de Comercio e Industrias
<b>MIDA</b>	Ministerio de Desarrollo Agropecuario
<b>MIDES</b>	Ministerio de Desarrollo Social
<b>MIPPE</b>	Ministerio de Planificación y Política Económica
<b>MIVI</b>	Ministerio de Vivienda
<b>OAS</b>	Organization of the American States
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>PRD</b>	Partido Revolucionario Democrático
<b>PRO-DARIÉN</b>	Programa de Desarrollo Rural Sostenible de Darién
<b>PDSO</b>	Programa de Desarrollo Sostenible de Darién
<b>SGP</b>	Small Grants Program
<b>SENACYT</b>	Secretaría Nacional de Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Program
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development
<b>USDA</b>	Department of Agriculture
<b>WWF</b>	World Wildlife Fund

## Glossary of Spanish terms

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Afrodarienita	Black person from Darién
Cacique	Chief
Campesino	Farmer
Caoba	Mahogany tree ( <i>Swietenia macrophylla</i> )
Caserío	Farmhouse
Cedro Espino	<i>Bombacopsis quinata</i>
Cédula real	Royal letters patent
Chicha	Corn alcoholic beverage
Chocó	Former name given to Emberá and Wounaan indigenous peoples
Cocobolo	Rosewood tree ( <i>Dalbergia retusa</i> )
Colono	Farmer from western Panama (the Interior) living in Darién
Congreso	Congress
Corregidor	Police magistrate of the <i>corregimiento</i>
Corregimiento	Subdivision of a district in Panama (~ Township)
Comarca	Semi-autonomous indigenous territory of Panama
Chunga	Black or spiny palm ( <i>Astrocaryum standleyanum</i> )
Cultura del potrero	Culture of the pasture
Diente peinado	'Combed tooth' (weaving technique for woven handicrafts)
Escalera	'Stair' (weaving technique for woven handicrafts)
Espavé	Wild cashew tree ( <i>Anacardium excelsum</i> )
Finca	Farm
Gringo/a	Non-Spanish Caucasian
Guarapo	Alcoholic beverage made of sugar cane juice
Interiorano	Person from the Interior provinces of western Panama
Junta	A group of day-labourers
Mestizo	Person of mixed race
Minifundio	Smallholding
Monte	Forest, land
Naguala	<i>Carludovica palmata</i>
Paruma	Coloured sarong Emberá women wrap around their waist

Pasear	To visit, hang out
Potrero	Pasture
Rastrojo	Fallow
Tagua	Vegetal ivory ( <i>Phytelephas seemanii</i> )
Tienda	Small convenience store
Tierras baldías	Underworked/idle lands

### **Glossary of Emberá terms**

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Amboromia	Banana
Cabuya	Unit of measurement use by the Emberá (~ 3.67 acres)
Drua	Land
Ē	Work basket
Hai	Spirit
Häimbaná	Shaman
J'iwa	Chunga palm ( <i>Astrocaryum standleyanum</i> )
Kampuniá	Non-indigenous person, black or Caucasian
Nokó	Elected representative of an Emberá village inside the <i>comarca</i>
Pada	Plantain
Pärärä	Naguala palm ( <i>Carludovica palmata</i> )
Pikiwa	Vine

## Chapter I – Introduction

---

*“[As ethnographers] we search (like shamans) for new strategies of representation that elude dominant regimes, that are open and quick to convey the instability and proliferation of meaning along the contours of social space” (Kane, 1994:17).*

According to Article 5 of the 1972 constitution, Panama is politically divided into provinces, districts, and *corregimientos*. This article also stipulates that other political divisions may be legally defined, “whether to hold them under special regimes or for reasons of administrative convenience or public service”. Article 5 has thus been central to what Herlihy (1995) has recently coined a ‘silent revolution’: the legal demarcation of several indigenous territories – locally referred to as *comarcas* – that enjoy a semi-autonomous administrative and political organization operating under the national government’s jurisdiction (1995:88). Law 2 of September 16, 1938 created Panama’s first and most famous *comarca*: the Comarca of San Blas<sup>1</sup>, home to the majority of the Kuna indigenous population. Since then, four other *comarcas* have been established: Emberá-Wounaan<sup>2</sup>, Ngöbe-Buglé, Madugandí, and Wargandí (Map 1).

*Comarcas* span over 20 percent of the Panamanian territory and, according to the most recent national population census taken in the year 2000<sup>3</sup>, are home to 150,073 indigenous individuals – or 53 percent of the national indigenous population. This includes seven ethnic groups – the Ngöbe, Kuna, Emberá, Buglé, Wounaan, Naso, and Brí-Brí – who, combined, represent 10 percent of the total population of Panama. The

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<sup>1</sup> In 1995, the Kuna delegates adopted the *Ley Fundamental Kuna* (Fundamental Kuna Law), under which the name Comarca of San Blas was replaced by Comarca of Kuna Yala (meaning land of the Kuna peoples).

<sup>2</sup> This *comarca* is also sometimes referred to as the Comarca Emberá-Drua (*drua* in Emberá means land). For convenience, hereafter I will use the term Comarca Emberá.

<sup>3</sup> Contraloría General de la República (2000). *X Censos Nacionales de Población y VI de Vivienda: Resultados Finales Total del País*. Panamá.

**Map 1:** Indigenous *comarcas* of Panama in 2009



Source: Government of Panama, 2009

establishment of *comarcas* has brought critical benefits to local indigenous groups, including official recognition of collective ownership and use of their territories, self-determination, and political representation. As a middle-aged Emberá civil servant once told me: “The *comarca* is something that allows us to shout and have the government listen to us” (Interview May 11, 2007). These important advances aside, the homogenizing, simplifying, and stereotypical understandings of both indigenous groups and their relationships to land remain as entrenched and persistent as ever – reproducing, in Panama’s postcolonial present, a containment and marginalization of indigenous peoples typical of colonial modernity. When looking at maps, *comarcas* are typically represented as homogeneous, bounded spaces neatly separated from the rest of the national territory. Some may retort that this is a rather trivial observation; after all, spatial information must be represented one way or the other. I contend, on the contrary, that these cartographic representations and associated discourses are powerful visual tropes through which *comarcas* enter the geographic imagination as inherently delimited and autonomous enclaves. These maps are part of a ‘visual grammar’ (Stepan, 1991:11) constructing Panama as an unproblematic space of naturally isolable units of ethnic groups, identities, and cultures. This visual trope reinforces the idea that indigenous peoples are ‘different’ because they inhabit places that are ‘naturally’ disconnected from the rest of the country. In turn, the seemingly evident geographical separation and remoteness of indigenous territories often serve as convenient pretexts for the marginalization and poverty experienced by contemporary indigenous groups. More importantly, underlying this visual grammar is an imagining of space as a flat surface, a template *on* which places, peoples, and cultures ‘happen’. This is not innocent, as Massey

warns us. As she explains, conceiving space in these terms deprives these human groups of histories: “They lie there, on space, without their own trajectories” (2005:4). It becomes impossible to imagine that they, too, “have been living and producing” and that they are ‘coeval others’ (2005:4-5).

These maps and other dominant discourses at the national level authorize ideas of mechanical connections between particular places and ethnic groups. They produce a neat and absolute geography of identity and difference (i.e., of ‘us’ and ‘them’) that obscures the complex power relations, historical interconnections, porosities between human groups, performances of space, and regimes of representation, knowledge, and truth, through which these territories and identities are produced. In this context, Panamanian indigenous peoples (in a similar fashion to other Latin American indigenous groups) continue to be predominantly cast – as much by state institutions as by international financial institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – as undifferentiated, static, and vulnerable groups inhabiting disconnected, faraway lands. Their relations to nature remain portrayed as either inherently harmonious, benign, and frozen in time or, alternatively, as inescapably distorted and corrupted by acculturation and the expansion of market forces and ‘modern’ influences. The following extract from a recent report published by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) on the current socio-demographic situation of Panama’s indigenous population illustrates some of these problematic representations:

...having at their disposal such territory [i.e., *comarca*] and because they represent such a [small] population, [indigenous peoples] have suffered a historical isolation, which results from the dispersion and difficult access of the areas they inhabit, and subjects them to a marginalization that is evidenced by the high level of poverty and extreme poverty they exhibit, despite the implementation of social policies. On the other hand, it is important to note that

this dispersion and isolation made possible the conservation of both their culture and traditional practices of interrelation with the natural environment (2005:35).

The same report states that:

The labour insertion of these groups is differentiated: inside the *comarcas*, they devote themselves massively to agricultural activities, whereas outside *comarcas*, they work mainly in the tertiary sector. ...The adoption of such activities is part and parcel of the processes of indigenous acculturation. Because of it, their cultural practices and traditional activities (agriculture and handicrafts) are being altered (2005:73).

These enduring discursive and representational practices are deeply problematic in that they both obscure and flatten the complexities of contemporary indigenous experiences and realities. They prevent a refined understanding of how the socially differentiated indigenous men and women inhabiting *comarca* territories face, deal with, and respond to changing ecological, political, and socioeconomic conditions – especially current processes of capitalist development. They also limit an effective comprehension of the multifaceted and often hybrid ways in which their environmental needs and practices are continuously changing, in which their understandings of themselves are being reconfigured, and in which their interactions with the national society are being rearticulated. Rather, we only see them as “[y]ing] there, on space, without their own trajectories”. One narrative is privileged, obliterating, Massey further argues, the “multiplicities, the contemporaneous heterogeneities of space” (2005:5). This thesis thus represents an attempt to switch theoretical lenses and to look at the world of indigenous peoples from a different angle. It firmly refuses the seeming coherence of space underpinning state discourses, their systematic division of the world in ‘us’/‘them’ binaries, and the implicit belief that certain groups are inherently less apt to adapt, change, invent, and create stories.

Contrary to the stereotypical views of indigenous peoples/places that continue to permeate most Panamanian decision-making circles, the Emberá of Darién have engaged in complex relations closely entangled with the drastic reorganization of the region's space, peoples, and resources initiated in the mid-1960s. The statement identified in the title of this thesis – i.e., “We can't live on culture” – is what an Emberá man told me when I asked him how he felt about the critiques people were voicing against him for raising cattle. His statement responds, in part, to those who argue that indigenous peoples should conserve their ‘culture’ – that is, their ‘traditional’ practices and ways of living – as if their existences could be hermetically contained and maintained unchanged through time in a designated place. As I demonstrate in Chapter V, the spatial relocation of Emberá households together with various ‘regional’ and ‘national’ trends make it increasingly difficult to subsist from the land. ‘Traditional’ practices no longer ‘put bread on the table’, which forces Emberá peoples to diversify their livelihood strategies. In addition, as Chapters VI and VII illustrate, processes of capitalist transformation are expanding in the *comarca*, restructuring social relations to land and resignifying meanings of identity, nature, and place. This rancher's claim thus also marks a strong refusal to ‘stay put’, or borrowing Massey's words, to “hold places still” (2005:125). Resisting timelessness, he asserts a view of the *comarca* as always already engaged in change.

### **1. Purpose of the research**

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The present research centres on the following question: given the rapid and profound shifts in their environments, economies, and social lives, and the increasingly contradictory conditions in which indigenous peoples' lives are embedded, how do the

indigenous men and women inhabiting the Comarca Emberá renegotiate their identities and their interactions with the land, and how do their lived experiences compare to portrayals of indigenous peoples in the discourses of the state? In order to address this question, I pay particular attention to the disruptions and responses fuelled by capitalist transformation in the situated lives of Emberá peoples. A detailed analysis of recent changes in Emberá land subsistence strategies sheds light on the move away from a heavy reliance on shifting cultivation and the use of a wide range of forest products for subsistence, to cattle ranching, specialized handicraft production for national and international markets, and other 'non-traditional' activities. It also exposes important struggles over, and on-going re-codification of, local meanings of 'nature', place, indigeneity, and gender. Together, these processes offer a picture that greatly contrasts with and resists the state and mainstream society's dominant representations of indigenous peoples highlighted above. My findings demonstrate that indigenous peoples are not "static loci of eternal suffering" (Radcliffe, 1994:26) or "passive victims" trapped in patterns of domination and rigid hierarchical categories, but astute, adaptable, and resourceful social agents capable of forging, navigating between, and adjusting to, new identities, meanings, practices, and networks of relations as their circumstances change and to create for themselves greater spaces of autonomy and control (Villareal, 1992:257). The story that unfolds draws a richer portrait of the possibilities and contexts of Emberá subjects – a portrait that "move[s] beyond fixed, dichotomous understandings of change that emphasize[s] a shift from traditional to modern societies" (Laurie and Calla, 2004:101) and that steps out of simplistic dichotomies of domination and

resistance or, to borrow Perreault's words, ideas of "the powerful global and the powerless local" (2003:99).

I have chosen to deal with my central research question through the production of an ethnographic study. Ethnography, Marcus reminds us, "is predicated upon attention to the everyday, an intimate knowledge of face-to-face communities and groups" (1995:99). This kind of research allows placing at the centre of analysis women's and men's daily experiences, thus making it possible to examine their multiple realities, shifting identities, conflicting interests, and plurality of views. It pays particular attention to the crucial role of social differentiation – e.g., ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, generational positioning, political membership, and education – in shaping individuals' rights, practices, roles, and beliefs. Finally, it refuses to take at face value identities, places, and events, and emphasizes, rather, "*how* they are produced and changed in practice in relation to one another" (Hart, 2004:98; emphasis in original). This requires, in part, resistance to viewing the local as the product of the global, which assumes, Massey explains, the global to be 'unlocated' – as well as "cohesive, powerful, unavoidable" (Chase, 2002:4) – and the local to be without agency, "inevitably the *victim* of globalisation" (Massey, 2005:101; emphasis in original). But espousing an uncritical 'defence of place' is equally problematic, she further argues, as it still pitches the 'local' against the 'global', equating the former "with the good and the vulnerable" and typically exonerating it (2005:102). Against this view, Massey supports a relational understanding of globalization in which 'global' and 'local' mutually produce each other, and in which different places are showed to "stand in contrasting relations to the global" (2005:121). Here the uneven terrains of power geometries, resource endowments, and cultural

histories on which and through which capitalist processes unfold produce new spatial disparities (Harvey, 2000:178) and render “the specific local effects of global capital and idea flows unique and unpredictable” (Appadurai, 1996:33-36).

In producing an ethnographic study of the Comarca Emberá grounded in this conceptualization of space and identity and attentive to individuals’ distinct positionings, I thus strive to draw a more nuanced and complicated picture of the *comarca*, not as “an isolatable physical space but as a dimension of historical and contemporary connections” (Gezon and Paulson, 2005:9), existing ‘here’ and ‘now’, always in a process of becoming through repeated encounters and interconnections and what are made of them (Massey, 2005:139) – rather than lying in timelessness. In doing so, I attempt to make a theoretical contribution to the field of political ecology by building on recent research to explore the ways in which the global plays out in specific locales, emphasizing processes of intertwining and mutual constitution of people, place, and environments (Hart, 2004:98).

## **2. Theoretical underpinnings of the research**

This dissertation is informed by theoretical contributions from postcolonial, post-structuralist, and feminist scholarship, particularly re-conceptualizations of notions of power, discourse, knowledge, and identity, following the path-breaking work of Foucault (1977, 1978, 1980). Discourse, these scholars insist, always involves more than the production of representations: it is a deeply performative system of meaning, in the sense that it constitutes – rather than simply reflects – social and physical ‘realities’ (institutions, practices, identities) in contradictory and disjunctive ways (Escobar, 1996:46). In addition, discursive productions are always historically produced and situated and, as such, constitute only a privileged version of ‘reality’ (Parpart and

Marchand, 1995:3). A poststructuralist approach is thus “suspicious of anything that tries to pass itself off as simple statement of fact, of anything that claims to be true” (Wylie, 2006:298). It focuses on tracing the power relations and regimes of truth out of which certain experiences, identities, and knowledges take shape and are normalized, and tries to decentre analysis in favour of subjugated voices (Laurie with Calla, 2004:100). The influence of post-colonialism is perceptible in the attention paid to the ways in which the colonial past continues to ‘haunt’ the present by reproducing and reworking a number of colonial relations, ideologies, and subjectificatory practices – notably the pervasive construction of the world according to ‘us’/‘them’ binaries (Gregory, 2004). Postcolonial thinkers alert us to the porosities and interdependences that necessarily – although unequally – unite these two entities.

Common to postcolonial, poststructuralist, and feminist scholarships is also a strong non-essentialist stance – that is, the refusal to take identities as pre-given and fixed. Identification emerges through continuous interactions and relations with a variety of ‘others’ that operate as constitutive outsides (Hall, 1997c:4). No ‘thing’ enters the world fully formed: the identities and meanings of every ‘thing’ (e.g., people, knowledge, institutions, or material artefacts) are the products of their inscription/positionings within specific networks of relations. Besides, insofar as processes of identification are social and political productions that emerge within particular discourses and systems of representation, they are always about the exercise of power (Smith, 1999:130).

The empirical evidence for this dissertation stems from fifteen months of field research conducted in Panama between May 2006 and July 2007. I spent three months in Panama City (carrying out archival research and interviews) followed by twelve months

in two Emberá villages of the Comarca Emberá located in eastern Panama near the northern Colombian frontier<sup>4</sup>.

### **3. Thesis outline**

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The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter II discusses the main theoretical underpinnings of the thesis. I present a brief review of poststructuralist political ecology, which provides the overarching theoretical framework for the present work. I examine some of the key concepts this scholarship draws on, illuminating its particular stances in contrast with other theoretical approaches, and emphasizing the analytical usefulness of viewing these concepts through this lens. In Chapter III, I provide a detailed discussion of the methodological approach of this study, present the methods I used to collect and analyze data, and describe my research site. In Chapter IV, I critically examine the particular conceptualizations of indigenous space and identity informing various key reports and documents produced by government institutions, NGOs, international donor agencies, and academics, from the 1970s to the present, providing a window into the postcolonial visibility prevailing in Panama. This visibility grounded in ‘us’/‘them’ binaries also conceals the ‘topography of power’ through which these identities are produced, re-inscribing as a result, in the present, deeply colonial relations. In Chapter V, my objective is to assemble a picture of the historical connections and spatial articulations out of which the Comarca Emberá was produced and in which the subjective, lived experiences of contemporary Emberá individuals are embedded and weaved. A central focus of the analysis is a key report published in 1978 by the Organization of American States (OAS) marking the institutionalization of state

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<sup>4</sup> As a political and administrative entity, the Comarca Emberá is separate from the Province of Darién, although it is included within the longstanding and widely recognized geographic region of Darién.

ideologies of progress, modernization, and development in the Darién region. I reveal how scientific and technical representations grounded in a nature/society dichotomy and particular performances of space obscured indigenous presence and legitimized the 'rational' restructuring, settling, and exploiting of the province. These initiatives of the state catalyzed, in turn, the mobilization of Emberá peoples to fight for the recognition of their territorial rights and the creation of a *comarca*. Using primarily ethnographic data from my own research, I then examine contemporary changes in the economies, environments, and social lives of the Emberá residing in the *comarca*. The following two chapters seek to offer additional views of the experiences and realities of contemporary indigenous peoples, exploring how Emberá people actively reconfigure their interactions with the land and with each other as capitalist processes further make their way into their territory. In Chapter VI, I focus on the recent involvement of Emberá women in the production and marketing of handicrafts made from the fibres of chungá palms, examining how the gendered micro-politics of Emberá households are being reshaped as basketry gains a prominent position in many household economies. I offer a detailed portrait of women's and men's multifaceted experiences and heterogeneous conditions that contradicts essentialist notions of gender/identity, challenges the homogeneity of power/oppression, and refutes the uniform effects of capitalist transformation into indigenous communities. Finally, Chapter VII examines the current emergence of cattle ranching inside the *comarca* as part of the expansion of capitalist processes within the Emberá territory. The Emberá men who engage in this land use typically frame their activities as a powerful 'development' device and concomitantly remove them from the realm of politics. I demonstrate, on the contrary, that cattle ranching engages in deeply

political matters as it reconfigures contemporary nature-society relations, exacerbates the current shift towards a non-egalitarian society, and challenges longstanding conceptions of 'proper' performances of space/identity within indigenous territories. These are critical issues considering the growing contestation over, and invasion of, the Comarca Emberá by colonists from other regions of the country. The last chapter of this dissertation brings these various stories together and reveals that the Comarca Emberá is a fluid, dynamic, porous, and contingent space, whose fabric and meanings are continuously being produced and reconfigured through particular topographies of power, self-other relations, and practices and discourses that take place in a variety of social and geographical settings. Similarly, the inhabitants of this indigenous territory are not unchanging, subsistence-oriented, and isolated individuals living on the margins of the state, but people that are highly socially differentiated, participating in heterogeneous, dynamic, and fluid interactions, positioned at the interface of multiple worlds and systems of value, and constructing their lives together with, rather than outside of, the dominant knowledges, representations, and forces of the national society.

## Chapter II – Theory

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*“I see theory as the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of life and to determine where we are as we navigate social space” (Kingsolver, 2001:4).*

### **Introduction**

Under the broader framework of poststructuralist political ecology, the present work draws on several theoretical contributions from poststructuralist, postcolonial, and feminist scholarship, particularly their re-conceptualization of the notions of power, discourse, knowledge, and identity. Contrary to mainstream nature-society studies, political ecologists argue that in order to understand the complexity of the processes shaping human-environmental interactions, one has to look beyond a single geographical scale of analysis – usually the local ‘community’ or ‘village’ – and focus on the broader, multi-scale political-economic, social and ecological processes in which rural livelihoods are embedded (Zimmerer and Bassett, 2003:288). Political ecology forms a rich and varied body of work drawing on a wide range of analytical contributions. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to provide an exhaustive account of the theoretical complexities and conceptual nuances of each approach. Rather, I focus primarily on poststructuralist political ecology, a branch that emerged in the early 1990s, partly in reaction to a number of limitations associated with neo-Marxist political ecology (Bryant, 2001; Paulson et al., 2003), and that combines the insights of various social theories, from poststructuralism and gender theory, to postcolonialism and science studies.

Poststructuralist political ecology is characterized by its strong non-essentialism<sup>5</sup>, that is, its refusal to take identities as pre-given and fixed. Central to this scholarship is

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<sup>5</sup> Privileging here the term ‘non-essentialism’ over ‘anti-essentialism’ reflects my strong agreement with Moeckli and Braun’s observation, according to which “anti-essentialist critiques can also fall into the same

the idea that social identities (e.g., gender, ethnicity, class) are not biological facts: they have no ontological foundations. Rather, they are the products of historical social relations and interconnections (Leach, 1991; Mbilinyi, 1992). Such identities are created, stabilized through time, and given an appearance of 'naturalness', through their continuous re-enactment (Butler, 1990:33, cited in Moeckli and Braun, 2001:124). Identities need to be constantly negotiated and reworked as power constellations are reconfigured, and in order to adapt to changing socioeconomic, political, and environmental conditions at the intra-household, community, and broader levels. As a result, poststructuralist political ecology questions the self-evidence of such identity categories as those of 'farmers', 'women' or 'indigenous'; it alerts us to the plurality, contingency, and flexibility of individuals' subject positions and to the constitutive role of power. As such, it also draws attention to the fact that identity categories are not innocent.

Since we cannot dissociate people's everyday experiences from the ways in which these experiences are portrayed, poststructuralist political ecology pays particular attention to discourse. Yet, language is not understood here as reflecting a pre-existing reality but as being fully constitutive of it (Escobar, 1996:46). In other words, discourse is "the process through which social reality inevitably comes into being" (ibid.). Because any discourse is always situated (i.e., inscribed in a specific historical, geographical, and socio-cultural context), the knowledges we produce about the world are always partial and subjective. It follows that discourses of 'nature' or of 'environmental problems', for

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epistemological traps that they critique others for reproducing. The obvious problem is that the essentialism/anti-essentialism debate may simply produce another dualism. One way out of this impasse may be to reframe *anti-essentialist* accounts as *non-essentialist*, thereby allowing for accounts that focus on the processes that continually decentre or interrupt seemingly fixed identities, without implying that the resulting identities are polar opposites to 'essences'" (2001:128).

instance, are neither neutral nor self-evident but effects of power. This points to the importance of disaggregating the meanings of terms like 'environment', 'nature', or 'resource' (Jackson, 2003:462) in order to trace the power relations and regimes of truth out of which they take shape and are normalized, recover the other stories they silence, and examine their concrete material implications.

Poststructuralist political ecology scholars derive from this theoretical stance a conceptualization of struggles over natural resources as always both material and symbolic (Carney and Watts, 1990; Moore, 1996; Peluso and Watts, 2001; Schroeder, 1996). Such struggles reveal deeper conflicts over meanings in the ways that rights, responsibilities, and resources are defined, negotiated, and contested within various social institutions and through time. This entails, as Berry argues, thinking about social institutions not as clearly bounded social identities or static and rigidly regimented entities, but rather as processes and 'constellations of social interactions' in which "people move, acquire and exchange ideas and resources, and negotiate or contest the terms of production, authority and obligation" (1997:1228). Underpinning Berry's claim is a conceptualization of all social institutions and relations (e.g., household, community, conjugal contract, and kinship) as 'arenas of struggle' and competing 'discursive fields' (Paulson et al., 2005:28; Staeheli and Kofman, 2004:2-3; Watts and Peet, 2004:37).

Poststructuralist political ecology departs from previous political ecology approaches by integrating feminist researchers' claim that one cannot fully understand human-environmental interactions without fully recognizing the crucial role of gender and other axes of difference (e.g., ethnicity, class, and marital status, among others) in shaping the social arrangements defining individuals' access to, use of, and control over,

land and natural resources. This scholarship does not take ‘men’ and ‘women’ as starting points for its analysis – looking, for instance, at how they are differently positioned with respect to particular rights, resources, struggles, or institutions (Moeckli and Braun, 2001:125). Rather, the objective is to examine how constructions of gender are part and parcel of the processes of negotiation or struggles over such rights or resources. In other words, the focus is on the ways in which meanings of gender are constantly being reworked and redefined as struggles unfold.

The influence of postcolonialism within poststructuralist political ecology is perceptible in its examination of the ways in which colonial legacies continue to ‘haunt the present’ by reproducing and reworking a number of colonial relations, ideologies, and subjectificatory practices. Postcolonialism is motivated by the desire to challenge the apparent naturalness/neutrality of colonial modernity’s sustained construction of the world according to ‘us’/‘them’ binaries, expose the coercive and oppressive nature of such imaginative geographies, and reveal the porous/leaky nature of these boundaries of otherness. As such, postcolonialism pays particular attention to the articulation of culture (i.e., understood as a series of representations, practices and performances) and power, that is, the ways in which they mutually support and constitute each other to produce particular identities and meanings of the world/‘other’(Gregory, 2001:85).

Poststructuralist political ecology relies on a number of core concepts. It is the central concern of this chapter to examine each of these concepts, illuminating the particular stance of this scholarship on them in contrast with other theoretical approaches, and emphasizing the analytical usefulness of viewing them through such lenses. I start my analysis by addressing the specificities of a Foucauldian understanding of power,

followed by a discussion of its productive articulation with knowledge and discourse. I then examine the concept of identity – particularly in relation to the notion of indigeneity. The following section reviews briefly the origins, material outcomes, and analytical limitations of the deeply ingrained nature/culture binary. It then looks into the concept of ‘social nature’ as a very effective alternative to bridge the nature/society dichotomy and to shed light on the constellations of power/knowledge at play in discourses of nature and society. The discussion proceeds with an examination of the concept of space as an essential component of the working of power, discourse, and identity. I then conclude this chapter with an exploration of the discourse of ‘development’.

## **1. Power**

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Poststructural political ecology commonly relies on a Foucauldian conceptualization of power. First, as it is now well-known, Foucault does not think of power as simply negative, constraining, and coercive, that is, as a repressive instrument (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983:129). Rather, he understands power as essentially positive and “productive”. In sum, Foucault rejects a view of power as primarily located within legal, judicial, and governmental apparatuses. He suggests that power infuses and reproduces itself through the diffuse, quotidian minutiae of everyday practices, encounters, and interactions. Power is thus ‘productive’ in that it is not in a position of exteriority to bodies, individuals, truth, knowledge or discourse: it is inscribed in them; it produces them (Foucault, 1978:94). In other words, the latter are both an ‘effect’ of power and its vehicle – i.e., the elements through which power circulates and is exercised (Foucault, 1980:98).

Second, Foucault (1978:93) argues that power is not an institution, a commodity to be held, a privilege, or a certain strength that powerful individuals are endowed with to coerce, dominate, manipulate or control powerless individuals. To borrow his words:

...power is not...that which makes the difference between those who exclusively possess and retain it, and those who do not have it and submit to it. Power must be analyzed as something which circulates...It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth (Foucault, 1980:98).

Foucault's assertion that power is not unilateral but 'multidirectional' is not to suggest that processes of domination or subjugation do not exist, but to insist that all groups, even the ones positioned in non-egalitarian, asymmetrical relations, are involved in power relations. This is a crucial insight in that it elucidates the fact that power is at work in moments of both domination and resistance (Sharp et al., 2000:3). Similarly, it suggests that far from being monolithic, autonomous processes, domination and resistance mutually constitute each other; they are, to borrow Sharp et al.'s apt formulation, 'entangled', since "the one always contain[s] the seeds of the other, the one always bear[s] at least a trace of the other that contaminates or subverts it" (2000:20). As a result, a power relationship does not act upon bodies or upon things – for this would equate it to a relationship of violence – but upon other actions. It designates "a set of actions upon other actions" (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983:220). As such, relationships of power can only exist between free subjects and as long as those over which power is exercised conserve the capacity to act, resist, respond or strategize over it, in a variety of ways (1983:220-221). This concept of 'entanglements of power' is key for it allows a more subtle and refined understanding of social relations and identities than the usual binary opposites pervading Western thinking (e.g., domination/resistance, colonizer/colonized,

modern/traditional). It unsettles notions of totalizing power and regimes of domination and makes it possible to open, within them, spaces of subversion and action for resisting subjects.

The breaking down of Europe's feudal institutions in the early modern period (i.e., the 1600s and 1700s) and their slow replacement by what would become the modern administrative state was marked by a major shift in the ways that power was thought about and exercised in European societies. "This shift", Ina observes, is "from a sovereign notion of power to an art of government" (2005:3). The main end of sovereignty is the preservation of the principality: the object of sovereign power is the exercise of authority over a territory and concomitantly the subjection of people to the law (Dean, 1999; Ina, 2005). Sovereign power is primarily a repressive force: spectacular punishments, bloody repression, and brutal submission are the common means to control unruly hearts (Sharp et al., 2000:13). By contrast, to 'govern' – as Foucault understands it – is "to structure the possible field of action of others" (Rayner, 2001:147). An 'art of government' is thus concerned with the proper and effective organization, ordering, quantification, optimization, and management of populations and individuals so as to maximize their value as resources (2001:148). Here, human conduct is understood as "something that can be regulated, controlled, shaped and turned to specific ends" (Dean, 1999:11).

Hence, the transition from sovereignty to 'government' witnesses the emergence of a new technology of power over life, what Foucault calls 'biopower': a disciplinary and 'normalizing', rather than repressive, force. While sovereign power commonly entailed control through the breaking of the body of the condemned, biopower attempts primarily

at increasing the docility and productivity of human beings (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983:195-96) through the internalization of discipline – in other words, the implementation of ‘self-discipline’ (Sharp et al., 2000:14). Thus, a key feature of this enterprise was the proliferation of ‘normalizing discourses’, which defined abnormal behaviours and deviant subjectivities and, as a result, created the necessary conditions for the spread of technologies of bio-power to administer, correct, and reform these abnormalities (ibid.). McClintock summarizes this idea in the following statement: “Normality thus emerged as a product of deviance, and the baroque invention of clusters of degenerate types highlighted the boundaries of the normal” (1995:46).

In his early work, Foucault is particularly attentive to the ways in which particular spatial arrangements, timing of activities, and the specific distribution of individuals in relation to one another, work as techniques that are less concerned with exercising control over individuals than with enabling particular subjectivities and securing the conduct of subjects in certain directions. For Foucault, eighteenth and nineteenth-century penal, medical, educational, and military institutions constitute critical sites to examine the operation of ‘technologies of power’ through the interplay of particular material practices, knowledge, discourse, power, and spatialization of individuals (i.e., the specific ways of making people and certain things within them visible). Bentham’s Panopticon is probably the best illustration of such modern disciplinary institutions. As Foucault demonstrates, the subjection of inmates to permanent visibility and observation, as well as their inability to see whether the guardian is in the control tower, induce prisoners to constantly self-regulate and police their conduct – as if surveillance were unending. Similarly, although guardians are invisible to inmates, the act of observing prisoners

'fixes' guardians' bodies in a location. Such fixation is part and parcel of the working of disciplinary power through the ordering of individuals and regulation of subjectivities: "Those who occupy the central position in the Panopticon are themselves thoroughly enmeshed in a localization and ordering of their behaviour. They observe, but in the process of so doing, they are also fixed, regulated, and subject to administrative control" (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983:189). This example clearly shows that power is not operationalized through the exercise of direct control over individuals, but through the inducement of practices of self-regulation that "make it difficult for individuals to constitute themselves in any other way" (Allen, 2003:65). Power here is completely anonymous and disembodied and, yet, eminently disciplinary and normalizing thanks to the constant exposure of bodies to observation, visibility, and judgment. In Chapter VII, for instance, I show how the Comarca Emberá too operates, in many ways, as a disciplinary space, producing normalizing discourses about people's relationships to land and regulating individuals' behaviours and subjectivities.

Foucault's subsequent work (particularly *The History of Sexuality*) exhibits a shift in the focus of his investigations. According to Allen, Foucault's earlier attention to the practices of institutions, and how subjects constitute themselves in a number of confined spaces, progressively gives way to an examination of the practices of government, or, as he states, "to the more dispersed technologies of normative constraint and benevolent guidance" (2003:79). This version of power, Allen contends, is "even less instrumental in its execution and peculiarly aspatial in the play of its forces" (2003:77). In fact, some have criticized Foucault's early work on disciplinary power for retaining elements of excessive domination. *Discipline and Punish* still portrays power as something that is

ubiquitous and whose normalizing gaze is hardly escapable (Sharp et al, 2000:15) and seriously limits individuals' ability to act (see McNay, 1994, cited in Allen, 2003:77). Yet, Allen warns us that "rather than posit a sharp separation between discipline and government, it is perhaps better to understand the latter as part of broader, more supple strategy of normalization" (ibid.).

While Foucault's disciplinary power was primarily visible in confined spaces, power – as defined in the notion of 'government of the self' – is exercised in more diffuse social and political arenas and among more scattered and dispersed populations. It is primarily characterized by individuals working on their own conduct, "becom[ing] instructed in, and learn[ing] to instruct themselves in, the crafting of 'the self'" (Sharp et al., 2000:17). Here behaviours are shaped as much by disciplinary techniques (e.g., physical layout and organization of surroundings) as by the ways in which subjects interpret the meaning of such techniques, accept the 'truth' they project, and internalize and put them into practice (Allen, 2003:72). The government of oneself perfectly exemplifies the productive and positive side of power in that no outside constraint or force is exercised: people 'make up' themselves (Hacking, 1986:234, cited in Allen, 2003:77) through processes of self-fashioning, self-regulation, and self-control. As Allen observes, "people are free to govern their own behaviour in all kinds of ways, yet do so in ways that coalesce around the acceptable 'norm'" (ibid.). This echoes the idea that no power relation is possible if the subjects involved in such relation are not free actors.

One of the key implications of conceptualizing power in these terms lies in its ability to denaturalize the world; it alerts us to the mechanisms, techniques/technologies,

discourses, and micro-practices through which all relationships, objects, subjects, identities, and knowledges are produced and normalized.

## **2. Power, knowledge, discourse**

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Power and knowledge, Dreyfus and Rabinow insist, are neither identical with each other nor do they exist in a causal relationship. Power and knowledge have a correlative relationship: they “directly imply one another” (1983:203). On the one hand, power cannot be exercised without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge (Foucault, 1977:27): for instance, the operation of normalizing and disciplinary power inside the Panopticon requires the constant observation and visibility of inmates. On the other hand, the production of such knowledge always presupposes, constitutes and cements power relations (ibid.): the knowledge being produced through the unending surveillance of inmates enables the deployment of constraint, regulation, and discipline.

A key element of the power/knowledge relationship is the issue of truth. As Rose explains:

Knowledge and power are imbricated one in the other, not only because all knowledge is discursive and all discourse is saturated with power, but because the most powerful discourses, in terms of the productiveness of their social effects, depend on assumptions and claims that their knowledge is true (2001:138).

It is partly this ability of power/knowledge to produce ‘truth’ that allows, according to Foucault, certain discourses to dominate and others to be “dismiss[ed] as false, deviant or nonsensical” (Wylie, 2006:304).

“Discourse”, according to Gregory, refers to the “vast network of signs, symbols, and practices through which we make our world(s) meaningful” (1994:11, cited in Wylie, 2006:303). Discourses do not limit themselves to written texts; they include all the ways

in which we communicate with one another: speeches, dialogues, representations, ways of thinking, bodily gestures, habits, actions and so on. In other words, “discourse *is* everyday practice” (2006:304). Yet, discourses always involve more than the production of representations; they are deeply performative: they not only disclose the world for us, they “constitute the ‘objects’ of which they speak” (Johnston et al., 2000:180). Wylie notes that:

A discourse is *not* a series of things that are said and done regarding a pre-existing thing – gender, say. A discourse of gender is not ‘about’ gender: instead it creates gender, makes it really, actually exist as a consequential and meaningful set of beliefs, attitudes and everyday practices and performances (2006:304; emphasis in original).

Although discourses are heterogeneous (i.e., they carry multiple meanings and implications), they are not spontaneous, unstructured constructions: they are always ‘regulated’ (Johnston et al., 2000:180). They are built according to certain rules and protocols or ‘regimes of truth’ that define the contours of ‘proper knowledge’ (Gregory, 2001:86) – i.e., what counts as a meaningful or valid statement, and what can or cannot be said/done. Since the regimes of truth that structure discourses are “produced and reproduced through interlocking networks of individuals and institutions” (ibid.), discursive practices are always only a privileged, partial, and localized version of ‘reality’ (Parpart and Marchand, 1995:3). They are always historically produced and situated, rather than objective and unproblematic constructions. Second, since discourses contribute to the normalization (and sometimes universalization) of particular knowledges, identities, and behaviours at the expense of others, they are privileged sites for the operationalization of power/knowledge relationships. They are always infused with political intent, never innocent (Castree and Braun, 1998:19). Yet, discourses are not

monolithic, stable, and all-powerful; they are pervaded with fissures, contradictions, and discrepancies that constitute as many interstices within which practices of resistance and counter-discourses can lodge themselves, and thus challenge dominant forms of knowledge. As Foucault (1978:101) notes, discourse can alternatively transmit, produce, and reinforce power, as well as expose, undermine, and impede it.

Wylie argues that poststructuralist theorists are therefore:

profoundly suspicious of anything that tries to pass itself off as simple statement of fact, of anything that claims to be true by virtue of being 'obvious', 'natural' or based upon 'common sense'...[they] expose all such claims as contingent, provisional, subject to scrutiny and debate (2006:298).

The backbone of a poststructuralist approach is to disrupt the authority of claims to truth through a critical examination of the ways in which particular narratives/identities acquire the status of truth while other ways of understanding the world are disqualified or silenced (Haugaard, 2002:185). As Foucault fittingly puts it:

The problem does not consist in drawing the line between that in a discourse which falls under the category of scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category, but in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false (1980:118).

'Genealogy' constitutes a critical tool to undertake such an enterprise. Genealogy aims primarily at challenging and breaking down the apparent neatness, truthfulness, and self-evidence of norms, ideals, and concepts; it attempts to reveal the "conglomerations of blind forces" (Prado, 1995:38) and "multiplicity of events" (Smart, 1985:56) through which certain narratives are brought into being and their meanings stabilized through time. In doing so, genealogy looks for the ruptures, 'cognitive failures' (Spivak, 1988), and 'subjugated knowledges' (Foucault, 1980:85), and tries to unearth and connect obscured and marginal events in order to reconstruct – from a historical perspective – the

relations between power, knowledge, and the human subject. Yet, it dissociates itself from historical analyses in that it privileges dispersion and disparity over recovery and restitution (Harrison, 2006:124) – that is, the search for a unique and fixed ‘point of origin’, an underlying principle beneath the constructed unity of things (Smart, 1985:59).

Similarly, Said’s (1993:32) notion of ‘contrapuntal analysis’ alerts us to the fact that the intelligibility of dominant discourses is not to be found in some kind of pure, self-sufficient, and independent experience, but rather in the myriad discrepant and often hidden histories, spatio-temporalities, and narratives that, despite a certain autonomy of development coexist, interact, and overlap with each other. Contrapuntal analysis designates a sort of working ‘against the grain’ that is attentive to the “different histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (Said, 1993:51).

The deconstruction of self-evidence and the rehabilitation of ‘subjugated knowledges’ that characterize both genealogy and contrapuntal analysis enable the emergence or rehabilitation of new or buried narratives, which constitute as many points of resistance to destabilize dominant and normalizing discourses and forms of knowledge, reconstruct new meanings and histories, as well as engage in different kinds of politics (Butler, 1992:17).

### **3. Identity**

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Ingold (2000:133-8) argues that conceptualizations of indigenous identities commonly rest on what he calls a ‘genealogical model’<sup>6</sup> – a model that equates the

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<sup>6</sup> Ingold’s use of the term ‘genealogy’ bears no resemblance with Foucault’s. For this last author, genealogy is a method that aims primarily at challenging and breaking down the ‘self-evidence’ of certain narratives and representations of the world. Such method seeks to alert us to the constellations of power, knowledge, and discourse involved in the normalization and consolidation of meanings through time. Ingold’s concept

human subject with a 'generated identity'. From this perspective, subjects inherit their substance and identity from their ancestors through 'genealogical connection' (i.e., lineage and blood). Three main implications unfold: first, identity can be 'reclaimed' and 'uncovered'. Second, because people are pre-constituted entities whose essential characteristics are tied to their lineage, differences between individuals are seen as 'facts of nature' (i.e., a matter of distinct inherited qualities). Finally, since identity is viewed as an unalterable attribute, it remains outside the reach of history and change.

Similarly, indigenous peoples' struggles for the recognition of their rights are frequently framed around essentialist ideas of roots, ancestral belonging, authenticity, and innate connections to nature. The taken-for-grantedness of indigenous peoples' inherent ties to their natural environment has enabled them to secure moral authority and to obtain the support of outsiders (Barron, 2000:93). External support for, and recognition of, indigenous demands have systematically depended upon their ability to display evidence of authenticity. Yet, because essentialist identities typically set the limits of what is accepted as legitimate and right (Pickering, 2001:xiii), the instant they step outside of the essentialist script, they run the risk of being labelled inauthentic and illegitimate. Demands of authenticity rely on three highly problematic assumptions: first, the idea of 'purity' of blood and lineage; second, a conception of identity as 'originary', unified, and unchanging; and third, the inherent rootedness of identity in place, which is responsible for claims of a 'natural' sense of belonging. Hence, portraying indigenous peoples along essentialist lines is not without consequences: it requires the erasure of internal identity differences, forces individuals to be narrowly selective in the ways they represent

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of 'genealogical tree' refers to the place and evolution of human societies through time with respect to their natural environment.

themselves, as well as lock them in a single position that prevents them from adapting to changing circumstances (Keith and Pile, 1993:35). This ‘petrification’ of identity, as Pickering (2001:48) aptly calls it, secures the power relations through which these identities are, in fact, continuously being produced. The uncritical use of this – and any other – identity category thus obscures the powerful disciplinary and exclusionary effects it entails (Gibson-Graham, 1994:213).

Poststructuralism offers valuable insights to reconceptualise ‘indigeneity’, insisting that a group’s self-identification as ‘indigenous’ is neither innate nor inevitable (Li, 2000:151). Urban and Sherzer make the persuasive claim that “until the arrival of Europeans, there were no ‘Indians’. The concept is a European invention. In the Americas, before 1492, there were only individual groups, Kuna, Shuar, Shavante, and so on” (1991:12).

Hall’s (1997c:2-3) concept of ‘articulation’ usefully captures how subjects’ identification is formed. First, it stresses the fact that identification is always conditional and ‘collaborative’: the ‘Self’ simultaneously requires and must exclude the ‘other’ in order to form itself and acquire meaning. Second, it suggests that the articulation of particular identities is always provisional, ‘in process’. Identification is a temporary and unstable ‘suture’ that momentarily positions and constitutes, as well as constantly ‘reforms’, the subject so as to enable him/her to act (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997:13a). Finally, it hints to the fact that identity is constructed through *difference*, as well as in/through ‘*différance*’. First, through ‘difference’ because it can only emerge in opposition to what it lacks and what it is not. Central to poststructuralism is, indeed, the idea that meanings are not inside words, objects, things, or processes; rather, the meaning

of something is constituted through an infinite series of differential relations and primarily by what is absent from it, what it excludes (Wylie, 2006:300). Second, identities are also constructed through 'différance' because they can never reach a definite closure or completion of meaning. Meaning is constantly postponed, deferred, and destabilized as a result of the continuous re-articulation and re-positioning of the 'Self' with respect to its constitutive outside(s). Consequently, the meanings of an identity are always open to contestation, deferral, and change by new processes of differentiation (Wade, 1997:80). Finally, Hall (1997c:4) also reminds us that processes of identification and 'sutures' always emerge within discourse and representation, which alerts us to the crucial role played by particular historical and cultural contexts, as well as by the material, political, and symbolic 'equations of power' through which, and within which, identities are framed and emerge. That is why the "substance of ethnicity can never be defined in the abstract" (Comaroff, 1996:116).

Conceptualizing identities and cultures as formed through interconnections, "appropriations and common experiences" (Said, 1993:217) renders claims of authenticity difficult to sustain: biophysical features do not determine particular innate qualities or essences (Fanon, 1952:184). Cultural and ethnic identities always emerge partly through 'self-production' and partly through 'categorization by others'; they are a sort of 'bricolage' involving multiple and complex processes of negotiation, borrowing, resistance, and transformation (Malkki, 1997:71). Similarly, such identities do not 'persist' despite hybridity or are demeaned and corrupted because of hybridization. On the contrary, they "emerge in that interaction" (Wade, 1997:90) and, as Said convincingly

argues, they “assume more foreign elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude” (1993:15).

Yet, while poststructuralist theorists challenge the continuity and stability of essentialist identities, they do not contend that identities are just imposed, invented, or claimed (Comaroff, 1996; Li, 2000), or represent some mere “phantasm...[or] trick of the imagination” (Hall, 1994:395). Scholars like Hall recognize that identities have origins, roots, and specific histories. They insist that identities are as much a question of ‘becoming’ as a matter of ‘being’. Yet, such ‘being’, Hall argues, is not frozen and fixed in some naturalized and ahistorical past, waiting to be unearthed and appropriated. The search for the origins and histories of a particular identity always involves a ‘production’, a ‘re-telling’. In this light, identity and culture must be understood as discursive constructs and lived experiences that are always opened to multiple regimes of signification and readings: not something which groups just ‘have’, but something that is struggled for, negotiated, and evolving. In a similar fashion, Nash (1999:459) contends that polarizing the debate on identity between essentialism and anti-essentialism prevents a critical and nuanced engagement with the complexity of contemporary cultural politics. She argues that accepting that “return to origins and roots can never be direct, literal, or naïve” (2000:33) allows re-conceptualizing ‘genealogy’ and the ‘search for roots’ in ways that are not exclusive (2000:28). Despite assumptions of neat blood lineages, pure identities, and strict senses of belonging, genealogical research is always disrupted by the ‘uncontrollable proliferation’ of interconnected networks and messy relationships that routinely characterize genealogical trees. Her work provides a middle ground to rethink

identity and culture as products of both belonging and difference, similarities and contaminations, and homogeneity and hybridity (Nash, 2000:39).

Drawing on such insights, postcolonialism radically challenges the ‘purity’, ‘impermeability’, and rigidity of the boundaries of otherness created by colonial European subjects. It alerts us to the ‘porosities’ that pervade the ‘us’/‘them’ binary, the interdependences that necessarily – although unequally – unite the two. It points to the “wider historical geographies of interconnections [and] interdependencies” (Nash, 1999:476) – rather than isolation and separation – through which colonial and postcolonial identities and cultures are produced.

#### **4. Nature and culture**

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A poststructuralist political ecology applies the insights from Foucault’s concepts of power, knowledge, and discourse to an understanding of the ‘social construction’ of nature. In one of its most conventional meanings, ‘nature’ refers to the biophysical world that stands outside of human society. It is the domain of the raw, pristine and untouched. This conception of nature as an ‘external domain’ is grounded in the assumption of an ontological dichotomy between society and nature whose roots can be traced back to both the Judeo-Christian tradition and the European Enlightenment (Castree, 2001:6). As such, this dichotomy has acquired the status of an almost unquestionable truth that deeply obscures its theoretical, political, and material implications. The dichotomy operates as a ‘violent hierarchy’ (Derrida, 1972:41): one in which, as Derrida explains, the first term (i.e., here ‘society’) works as a dominant, superior, and active agent while the second is relegated to a passive role. The view of nature as external to society sanctioned the accumulation of capital and growth through the exploitation of its materials (Escobar,

1996:47). The degree to which a group was considered ‘civilized’ was strongly correlated to its ability to dominate, exploit, and transform nature.

This notion of external nature has served to ground the conservationist rhetoric and its insistent calls to ‘save’ and ‘rescue’ a seemingly pure and authentic nature from an inherently destructive humanity. It has been used, for instance, to legitimate the worldwide creation of thousands of protected areas as a way to ensure the preservation of nature from human interferences. Yet, many of these natural reserves and parks have been responsible for the expulsion of local inhabitants and ancestral users, often dramatic socio-economic repercussions at the local level, and numerous unsound ecological projects. As Katz observes:

Preservation represents an attempt both to delineate and maintain a boundary in space and to arrest time in the interests of a supposedly pristine nature which, of course, is neither bounded nor static. As such, preservation is quite unecological, defying natural history and the vibrancy of the borders, where evolution, change and challenge are negotiated and worked out in nature as in culture (1997:54).

Such an understanding of nature as a strictly biophysical entity also commonly underpins scientific-technocratic approaches to nature (as illustrated by the field of environmental sciences). These approaches have been responsible for recasting ‘nature’ as ‘environment’, while its (valuable/utilitarian) components are reframed as ‘natural resources’ that “can be planned for and managed” (Escobar, 1996:50). In a similar fashion, Escobar demonstrates how, within what he calls the “post-modern form of ecological capital”, nature is redefined as ‘reservoir of value’ that must be used wisely and conserved properly, in order to sustain economic growth and, with it, the whole capitalist system. The management of nature, central to both discourses of ‘sustainable development’ and ‘biodiversity conservation’, authorizes its further commodification – in

other words the 'economization of life' (1996:53). This clearly evidences the fact that our discursive constructions of what nature 'is' deeply shape the kind of relations we develop with it (Castree and Braun, 1998:17).

Concomitant with nature's new visibility as 'environment' is its creation as an object of scientific study, which, thanks to the production of accurate, 'objective' knowledge promises to solve all of nature's problems. For instance, in her examination of oil operations in Ecuador, Sawyer (2003:79) shows that the framing of the local rain forest as 'pristine' sanctioned its portrayal by the oil company as an 'empty' forest – that is, a place without competing claims. Boosted by this image, the ethical and political problems linked to oil exploitation could be removed and replaced by “the *technological* calculus for making oil operations *ecologically* correct” (2003:72). The corollary of nature's dissociation from society is, thus, its removal from history and social changes (Braun, 2002:12). While this has commonly led to the erasure of indigenous peoples' presence in, and use of, forests, it also clearly entails viewing nature as an unproblematic, self-evident entity existing outside of politics (2002:3). In other words, taking the society/nature divide as an ontological given goes hand in hand with the epistemological belief that knowledge of the world/nature is produced through direct observation and truthful, value-free representation of the world as 'it is'.

In sharp contrast with such views, social nature theorists argue that nature and society are deeply entwined (Braun, 2002:14). Nature, in this context, is understood as both a 'material artefact' and a 'social construct' (Moore et al., 2003:6). The idea of nature as material artefact points to the role of socioeconomic processes (e.g., capitalization or commodification) in physically re-making nature, particularly since the

industrial revolution of the 1800s. Thus, what we define as ‘virgin’ rain forests and ‘pristine’ mountains are in fact the products of both ecological and social relations (Balée, 1989; Braun, 2002). It follows that the objective is no longer to save nature from an inherently destructive humanity, but to take responsibility for our involvement in nature, primarily through a critical understanding of the ways in which nature is continuously (re)made, in whose interests, and with what implications (Castree and Braun, 1998:4).

Yet, the crucial contribution of a social nature approach does not lie so much in its demonstration of nature’s material production as in its insistence that nature is also discursively produced – or, to borrow Haraway’s oft-quoted phrase, that nature “cannot pre-exist its construction” (1992:296). Far from denying the materiality and existence of the world ‘out there’, this statement points to the fact that language does not reflect ‘reality’ but is constitutive of it (Escobar, 1996:46). In fact, “there is no place external to, or outside, language...from which [nature] can be objectively known” (Braun and Wainwright, 2001:46). Since nature is experienced, made intelligible, and acted upon through specific historical and discursive practices, every account of nature is always situated and partial (Castree and Braun, 1998:17). Nature has no trans-historical, universal meaning (Stepan, 2001:21): what it is/means is highly contingent upon individuals’ historical, geographic, and cultural locations, as well as upon the particular constellations of power/knowledge at play in particular discourses of nature.

Similarly, “the social in these social constructions is not just ‘us’: it includes other humans, non-humans, and even machines and other, non-organic actors” (Demeritt, 1998:181). It is only by shifting our attention to the ways in which both humans and non-

humans are ‘stitched together’ to form heterogeneous associations, as well as by focusing on the flows and connections between the various entities of the networks they form, that we become able to overcome enduring binary constructions of the world and, thus, problematize notions of ‘nature’ and ‘society’. Tracing such interconnections allows us to shed light on the workings of power and better grasp how particular understandings of ‘nature’ and ‘society’ come into visibility, are stabilized through time, and are legitimized as unquestionable objects of knowledge, while other accounts are deemed irrelevant (Braun and Wainwright, 2001:41). Destabilizing seemingly unproblematic views of ‘nature’ and ‘society’ opens up possibilities for alternative conceptions to emerge and compels us to pay greater attention to the social and ecological consequences of the particular networks and assemblages that are embedded in our every day practices (Castree and Braun, 1998:33). In this sense, “tracing networks”, these authors argue, “is where political hope lies” (1998:32).

### **5. Space, place, and scale**

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As I emphasized earlier in this chapter, poststructuralist political ecologists insist that an understanding of the complex and overlapping processes shaping human-environment interactions requires the application of multiscale research models and attention to diverse arenas – including the household, the community, and the state (Gezon and Paulson, 2005:12-13). In addition, they are also concerned with the performances of power embedded in the production of these diverse arenas and particular constructions of space/place.

Reading about the Darién region, one cannot fail to notice the prevalence of spatial descriptions emphasizing the province’s sustained isolation, separation, remoteness,

marginalization, and difficulty of access. These representations legitimize, in turn, recent initiatives to 'integrate' and 'connect' the region to the rest of the country. On this 'visual grammar' (Stepan, 1991:11) are superimposed representations of indigenous territories as bounded, autonomous enclaves separated from the rest of the national territory. In other words, Panama is produced as an unproblematic space of naturally isolable units of ethnic groups, identities, and cultures. This visual trope backs up the idea that indigenous peoples are 'different' because they inhabit places that are 'naturally' disconnected from the rest of the country.

Modern thinking commonly assumes that spatiality is divided into 'places' and 'spaces' (Grossberg, 1996:175): 'place' is usually viewed as referring to the 'local' while 'space' is associated with the 'global'. Each term of the local/global binary is itself connected to a number of ideas and assumptions. For long, there has been a tendency within contemporary ethnographic thinking to 'prize the local' and to view it as the 'natural' site of culture, identity, nature, authenticity, or heterogeneity. By contrast, the global is portrayed as the site of cultural homogeneity, artificiality, generality, abstraction, and openness (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997:99). This view of places as containers of integrated cultures is highly problematic. First, it leads us to theorize cultural differences between groups as being the natural outcome of these spatial ruptures. Second, it encourages a view of cultural change as the product of the contact between two spatially bounded and autonomous places, which routinely sanctions discourses of 'cultural corruption'. Third, the cultural territorialization and essentialism underlying such representations have far-reaching material and moral implications in that they have repeatedly authorized exclusionary and violent practices (Malkki, 1997).

Our constructions of space are thus not innocent: they are profoundly intertwined with our understandings of identity and difference. I have shown earlier in this chapter that for Foucault, for instance, the constitution of docile bodies/subjectivities is part and parcel of the production of particular normalizing spaces. Similarly, in *Imperial Leather*, McClintock (1995) exposes the role played by the constitution of ‘anachronistic spaces’ in both producing and disavowing colonial modernity’s ‘others’ (e.g., the colonized, the industrial working class). The power of this trope, McClintock contends, lies in its ability to render “geographical difference across *space* as...a historical difference across time” (1995:40; emphasis in original). Such spatialization constructs, ‘contains’, and ‘disciplines’ modernity’s threatening others as temporally different (i.e., lying ‘behind’ on the scale of progress and history), rather than as simply “socially or geographically different from Europe”. In other words, the ‘anachronistic space’ fixes and dramatizes the differences between the modern European subject and its others, and authorizes and legitimizes the conquest, domination, and control of the West (1995:182). While this is a dramatic example, the penchant for recasting spatial variations as temporal differences has invariably underpinned modernist understandings of the world, as illustrated by discourses of progress, development, and modernity (Massey, 1999:280).

Recent contributions to the conceptualization of space have insisted that space is not a pre-given, inert substratum – i.e., a ‘thing’ that “exists in its own right” (Massey, *ibid.*) and on which social actors inscribe themselves and their actions. As Rose argues, “space is practiced, a matrix of play, dynamic and iterative, its forms and shapes produced through the citational performance of self-other relations” (1999:248). Space and time are relational: they are ‘materialized’ out of social relations. In the same vein

that there is no absolute nature/society, there is no absolute space; rather, space is always an effect of particular assemblages of relations. As such, space is always a 'doing': it is "constituted through iteration rather than through essence" (Rose, 1999:247-8).

Being the products of social relations, performances of space are always at the same time 'performances of power' (Rose, *ibid.*). It is the topographies of power that continuously (re)construct space (that is, makes it into specific places and localities) and through which it acquires meaning. The nature of these power relations and how people are 'placed' within them may thus promote movement, passage, and contact, or on the contrary solidify exclusionary, discriminatory spatial processes (Murdoch, 2006:22-23). This clearly illustrates the fact that the construction of space is both a consensual and contested process. The nature of 'performance' enables the constant remaking, transformation, and re-imagination of both space and the meanings attached to it. It makes it "possible for 'newness' to enter the world" (Gregory, 2004:19), challenge discriminating and rigid imaginative geographies, and open the ways for other stories and memories to be told and to take place. Hence, meaning, identity, power, and space/place are closely intertwined. In other words, engaging in space is to "pose the question of the social, and thus of the political" (Massey, 2005:99).

Adopting such an approach to space has also profound implications for the way that scale is conceptualized, since it disjuncts the practices of defining, *a priori*, levels of analysis, and of classifying the social world into 'local'/'global' or 'micro'/'macro' levels. Just like identity and space, scale is an effect of the relations established between different entities within a specific network (Murdoch, 1997:322). It is the length, the degree of connection, and activity of the network – not some innate quality of the latter –

that produces scale. It ensues that one does not need to switch from one level of analysis to another, but must simply follow the network from one locale to the next (2006:73). The ability of the network to assemble itself in ways that allow the constant circulation of knowledge, material artefacts, human practices and so on is key for spatial relations to be stabilized and for the assemblage to achieve effects; it also explains why “interaction is never (for humans at least) purely local; it is constituted, construed and configured by distant actions” (Murdoch, 1997:329).

## **6. Development**

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Since the early 1990s, there have been over twenty large-scale ‘development’ and conservation projects in the Darién, many of them with funding packages of several millions of dollars. Despite many differences in funding amounts, institutional affiliations, targets and objectives, the discursive and representational practices informing these projects are remarkably consistent. All of them share the same commitment towards promoting ‘development’ and, as such, tend to subscribe to the same rhetoric of ‘rational planning’, ‘progress’, and ‘poverty reduction’, and so on. In this section, I examine the origins, assumptions, and implications of ‘development’ discourse. The discussion also alerts us to the fact that the romanticizing of ‘traditional societies’ commonly associated with recent critiques of ‘development’ is itself highly problematic.

Underlying ‘development’ is a strong yearning for progress, order, and the ‘betterment of society’, and the belief that, to meet such ideals, “social change can be engineered and directed, produced at will” (Escobar, 1992:132). Esteva (1992) explains that it is in the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that the biological metaphor of ‘development’ – denoting the unfolding/transformation of organisms into their natural,

appropriate, and complete form – was transposed to the social sphere and, under the influence of Darwin’s theory of evolution, came to convey the idea of human societies’ gradual, linear progression “towards an *ever more perfect* form” (1992:8; emphasis in original). This process was also understood as natural, inevitable, and universal as natural laws (1992:9). As Esteva emphasizes:

The industrial mode of production, which was no more than one, among many, forms of social life, became the definition of the terminal stage of a unilinear way of social evolution. This stage came to be seen as the natural culmination of the potential already existing in Neolithic man, as his logical evolution. Thus history was reformulated in Western terms (1992:9).

Under the influence of European social evolutionists, the Bible’s cosmological, divine tree depicting the family of ‘man’ was secularized, naturalized, and projected across space (McClintock, 1995:37). It represented a natural evolution of human progress that could be measured based on the distance that a human group had travelled from its original nature – at the bottom of the tree (Gregory, 2001:87). The image of the family tree served to bring into one visual (European) trope the world’s discontinuous cultures, as well as to portray global human history as “naturally teleological, an organic process of upward growth, with the European as the apogee of progress” (McClintock, *ibid.*).

Current ‘development’ practices can be traced back to the rise of planning at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. On the one hand, the enterprise was rooted in the strong concern of the new modern, administrative state with the proper organization, rational ordering, and efficient management of populations. On the other hand, it hinged on the deep conviction that “social change c[ould] be engineered and directed, produced at will” (Escobar, 1992:132). While operating under the banner of progress, welfare, health, and prosperity, the creation of disciplined, ‘governable’ subjects, as well as of a more

legible/transparent and ordered world, were critical to industrial growth and, more generally, to the spread of the capitalist venture (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983:135). Planning (in the same way as 'development' today) authorizes and legitimizes itself by framing its enterprise in scientific and technical terms. Modern science derives its credibility from the widespread belief that scientific knowledge is rational, objective, natural, and universal, for it proceeds from the direct, unbiased, and methodological observation of a pre-existing, independent reality (Demeritt, 2001:26). This is exemplified today by the almost undefeatable authority of 'development' experts, who, by framing their ideas in the 'neutral' and 'universal' language of science, manage to both 'depoliticize' and 'naturalize' them. As Dreyfus and Rabinow observe:

A technical matrix [is thus] established. By definition, there ought to be a way of solving any technical problem. Once this matrix [is] established, the spread of bio-power [is] assured, for there [is] nothing else to appeal to. ...We are promised normalization and happiness through science and law. When they fail, this only justifies the need for more of the same (1983:196).

The production of such knowledge requires the world to be produced and treated as a fixed object, which can be in turn endlessly subjected to the omniscient – but always very selective – scientific gaze. The myriad of processes, phenomena, individuals, and identities that composed the social world are reduced to static, transparent 'facts' to be collected, recorded, summarized, schematized, categorized, and tabulated (Scott, 1998:80). In the process, the world's complexity, rich traditions, and histories, as well as heterogeneous lifestyles and values, are erased, for planners' and 'development' agents' field of vision is necessarily narrow: it only takes into account what is deemed relevant to their missions and domains of action. As Crush notes, a key feature of all contemporary 'development' discourses is:

...the almost overwhelming need to reinvent or erase the past...[P]rior histories of the object of development – the people, country, region, sector or zones – are deemed irrelevant...Because development is...gazing towards the achievement of as yet unrealized states, there seems little point in looking back (1995:9).

In a similar fashion, the use of homogeneous categories and labels such as ‘small farmers’ or ‘poor women’ obscure the complex subjectivities and experiences of individuals: it “makes [them] into a ‘case’ to be treated or reformed” (Escobar, 1992:140). The frames through which ‘development’ discourse represents and constructs its ‘others’ are thus infallibly narrow: these ‘others’ are systematically portrayed as ‘sites of lack’ (Johnston et al., 2000:515) – e.g., deficient, vulnerable, helpless, backward, unruly, abnormal, and chaotic – and, as a result, in need of being ‘saved’, ‘redeemed’ or ‘improved’ through ‘development’ intervention and a greater application of science and technology – a discourse that, as many authors have observed, shares strong commonalities with the colonial mission of civilizing the ‘natives’ (Shrestha, 1995:274). As a result, the frames of representation through which the object of ‘development’ is produced are intrinsically ‘frames of control’ (McClintock, 1995:147).

One of the great strengths of ‘development’ is, thus, its ability to operate through an apparent neutrality, while implicitly contributing to the rationalization and standardization of reality (Escobar, 1992:134), which render populations and social spaces “more legible...[and thus] more amenable...to the techniques of state officials” (Scott, 1998:83). In other words, the ‘development’ apparatus operates, as Ferguson defines it, as an ‘anti-politics machine’ – a machine that “depoliticiz[e] everything it touches, everywhere whisking political realities out of sight, all the while performing, almost unnoticed, its own pre-eminently political operation of expanding bureaucratic

state power” (1990:xiv-xv). In sum, ‘development’ works as many other ‘political technologies’, removing its actions from the realm of politics and recasting them in the ‘neutral’ language of science (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983:196). Under the guise of rationality and neutrality, ‘development’ thus normalizes and naturalizes certain knowledges, identities, and practices – typically, Western ones – while dismissing or stigmatizing non-Western views, experiences, and knowledges (Parpart and Marchand, 1995:12).

Shrestha (1995) describes such processes in very powerful terms. While he does not deny the pervasiveness of poverty (and remembers regularly attending school hungry), poverty, he argues, was never a threatening or dehumanizing experience – it was part of life. Yet, as ‘development’ discourse penetrated Nepalese society in the early 1950s, poor people were suddenly recast as being ‘underdeveloped’, ‘inferior’, and ‘lacking human dignity’ (Shrestha, 1995:268; see also Sachs 1992). In reality, it is not just Nepalese people but entire nations and countries that were, for the first time, redefined as ‘poor’ and ‘underdeveloped’ for failing to meet the World Bank’s annual per capita income of US\$100 (Rahnema, 1992:161). Within the frames of ‘development’ discourse, “a host of everyday observations are rendered intelligible and meaningful” (Ferguson, 1990:xiii) in particular ways: here, Nepalese ways of life, customs, labour system, education, and agricultural knowledges were devaluated and deemed ‘backward’, ‘traditional’, and ‘irrational’ in comparison with their Western counterparts:

In the eyes of bikasis [‘developed’ people], whatever human capital, productive forces or knowledge our parents had accumulated over the years did not count for much. Many students felt ashamed to be seen in public with their parents. The new education gave us the impression that our parents’ manual labour was antithetical to bikas [development]. So we sneered at manual work, thinking

that it was something only an abikasi or intellectually ‘underdeveloped’ mind would do. It was not for the high-minded bikasis (Shrestha, 1995:268).

This is congruent with Escobar’s argument that the internalization of ‘development’’s planning typologies and practices has resulted in shaping the very “way in which people experience life and construct themselves as subjects” (1992:133). In other words, “people who were once simply the objects of ‘development’ now came to see and define themselves in its terms” (Crush, 1995:11) – an issue I explore in Chapter VII of this dissertation. As Scott explains:

Categories that may have begun as the artificial inventions of cadastral surveyors, census takers, judges, or police officers can end by becoming categories that organize people’s daily experience precisely because they are embedded in state-created institutions that structure that experience. ... [T]hese synoptic data are the points of departure for reality as state officials apprehend and shape it. ... [T]here are virtually no other facts for the state than those that are contained in documents standardized for that purpose (1998:83).

For planners, ‘development’ experts, or builders of the modern nation-state, the world only exists to the extent that it can conform to and validate their categories and norms. As such, representations do not mirror a pre-existing reality: they are highly productive, in the sense that they enter fully into the constitution of the world. Thus, such categories as ‘Third World’, ‘underdevelopment’, or ‘poverty’ are not neutral devices through which “‘reality’ innocently shows itself” (Escobar, 1992:132). As Shrestha’s account demonstrates, they actively produce the conditions they purport to describe.

Although imperatives of coherence and clarity often drive us to erase certain nuances, it is important to recognize two things. First, that ‘development’ discourse has neither been monolithic and homogeneous, nor a strict production of the Western world. Second, even when such discourse seems to clearly originate in the West, various scholars have insisted that it is not the case. On one hand, people from the global south

are not the passive, silent victims of 'development' discourse; they actively resist and reshape it, forcing it to continuously renew and reinvent itself. In doing so, 'developed' and 'developing' societies are drawn "together in webs of affinity, influence, and dependence" (Johnston et al., 2000:614). On the other hand, 'development' needs 'underdevelopment' or 'non-development' to sustain its own identity; it is never 'pure' but always 'haunted', 'contaminated' by its 'other'. As Watts argues:

Development as a nineteenth-century concern was, therefore, neither *sui generis* nor simply imposed (subsequently) on the non-developed ('uncivilized') world, but rather development was in an important way a product of the non-developed. Development required non-development and to this extent the origins of modernity were not simply located in the West (1995:49).

The previous discussion draws attention to two main points: first, ideas about 'development' are not free-floating, self-evident constructions emerging in a vacuum; they are *situated* in particular institutional, historical, geographical, and socio-cultural contexts (Watts, 1995:44). They are embedded in, at the same time as they reproduce, specific power relations (Crush, 1995:6). In other words, 'development' discourses and ideas are highly ideological and political, not unproblematic. Second, it clearly exemplifies the deeply colonizing and pernicious relationship between power and knowledge for the ability to control the terms of 'development' (i.e., what knowledges are considered scientific, how the 'other' is framed, and so on) is inseparable from the exercise of Western expertise, authority, and dominance.

While Western modernity has most commonly been associated with progress, enlightenment, and reason, some philosophers have also condemned it as a corruptive process responsible for the destruction of a primitive humanity perceived as inherently good, simple, and innocent, and living in harmony with a pure, unsullied nature. Central

to such critique is an idealization of the aboriginal societies encountered by European colonizers in the 1500s and 1600s – an idealization clearly evidenced by Enlightenment’s myth of the ‘noble savage’. Underpinning this myth is the conviction that the contact with European civilization led to the degeneration of a fundamentally pure, homogeneous, and timeless indigenous society.

Although various studies have shown that the sustainable livelihood strategies of many neotropical indigenous groups were often the products of low population densities, lack of technologies (Schmink, Redford and Padoch, 1992:8), or high mobility rather than a deliberate, conscious strategy (Colchester, 2003:53), and that indigenous groups often resort to destructive resource-use practices (Conklin and Graham, 1995:703; Kaplan and Kopschke, 1992:104), the romanticizing of indigenous societies and the stereotypes of indigenous peoples as conservationists living in harmony with their natural environment endure today. It is perceptible, for instance, in the persistent assumption that traditional systems of authority or common property institutions are inherently good and work in favour of nature conservation (Paiment, 2007:14).

Indigeneity thus continues to play an important role in the various processes of resistance to modernity, and more recently to ‘development’ practices, particularly as a backdrop for all kinds of environmental struggles around the world. For modernity’s critics, ‘indigeneity’:

...becomes a grab bag, a slot, in which to throw all that is not modern and that has the potential to resist modernity’s incursions...modernity’s Other now comes to be seen not as that which stands in the way of modernity, but as those people and cultures who hold the key to its sustainable future (Braun, 2002:91-93).

Such an attitude towards present-day indigenous peoples finds, in part, its roots in the trope of the genealogical model that still infuses Western thinking (Ingold, 2000:134). Because indigenous peoples continue to be viewed, within this trope, as ‘people of the land’, they are systematically placed at the foot of the evolutionary tree, occupying the place of our ancestors and, as such, representing not only “an essential part of the heritage of global humanity” (2000:135), but also modernity’s loss (Braun, 2002:91). In this context, “to the extent that modernity threatens to displace indigenous communities, it risks destroying itself” (2002:93) – which explains our constant drive to ‘save’ or ‘preserve’ indigenous heritage. Similarly, the concept of tradition (which previously negatively connoted that which was not sufficiently modernized) has been positively recast as “that which guarantees indigeneity’s non-modernity” (ibid.), the point of reference to measure the degree of ‘authenticity’ of indigenous peoples. So while ‘tradition’ was previously condemned by the supporters of modernity as “static, communal, in thrall to the sacred, and either outside the West, or definitely in the past” (Robinson, 2006:15), today indigeneity is praised by the critics of modernity and ‘development’ (Braun, 2002:91).

This trend is, nonetheless, deeply problematic too. Why, for instance, should indigenous peoples maintain some kind of ‘authentic’ identity while we (i.e., non-indigenous peoples) “exempt ourselves from this sort of claim...because we are too enamoured of the complexities of our history [and] the diversities of our societies” (Appadurai, 1988:37)? Second, how, and by whom, can the authentic be authenticated (Keith and Pile, 1993:9)? How does one define what an indigenous pre-contact mode of existence was like? Even if it was possible, how is one to be sure that the moment chosen

as representative of that pre-contact lifestyle had not itself already been 'altered'? How far back should we go?

These issues point to several important shortcomings in our treatment of indigeneity with respect to modernity. First, the persistent collapsing of indigenous peoples with nature compels us to constantly view their identities through essentialist lenses. This, in turn, renders indigenous peoples' legitimacy contingent upon their ability to display authentic identities and pre-contact modes of living. Second, the conceptualization of the contact between indigenous peoples and European settlers as a 'rupture' suggests that the socio-cultural changes undergone by indigenous societies, including the hybridization fostered by the new colonial order, can only be appreciated in opposition to what was there before, rather than as processes of adaptation, negotiation, and reworking of indigenous cultures and identities. In other words, "contact becomes rupture, and hybridity equated to inauthenticity" (Braun, 2002:104). Time as rupture legitimates binary visions opposing a 'pure' past to a 'corrupted' present; it sanctions a view of indigenous peoples as unable to initiate change and as always being the victims of a modernization over which they have no control (2002:103). It erases the complexities, fluctuations, fluidity, and dynamism of indigenous peoples' histories. On the contrary, accepting Braun's claim that "the traditional is already dynamic, a shifting constellation of ideas, forms and beliefs" makes it possible to understand indigenous cultures as equipped with the necessary "resources to build alternative modernities, at once continuous with, but not imprisoned by, the past" (2002:210).

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the theoretical approach undertaken here is one in which everyday practices are understood as emerging within particular discourses, which are not only historically produced and situated, but constitute privileged sites for the operationalization of power/knowledge relationships. From this perspective, particular meanings and understandings of ‘forest’, ‘Emberá identity’, ‘*comarca*’, ‘development’, or ‘women’ can no longer be approached as ‘objective’ reflections of the world, but have to be dealt with as the products of particular ‘equations of power’. The main thrust of one’s analysis thus becomes, not to provide a more ‘truthful’ account of what these ‘things’ are, but, rather, to expose how these particular meanings come to predominate – i.e., how they are naturalized – and what social effects and material consequences they have, re-infusing them with politics. In Chapter VII, for instance, I show how conceptualizing nature as a category of reality existing outside of human thought and action, legitimizes abusive social relations, in particular the erasure of indigenous resource use practices and the criminalization of indigenous presence. In addition, because the social relations through which particular understandings of the world are achieved are dynamic and contingent, meaning is always open to contestation, deferral, and change.

Second, the non-essentialist stance infusing the present work leads to a particular attention to the differences in knowledge, rights, beliefs, and practices among social groups and individuals differentiated by multiple, overlapping dimensions of identity, including socioeconomic status, ethnicity, life-cycle positioning, marital status, and gender, thus resisting flattening the manifold, contradictory locations subjects inhabit. In Chapter VI, for instance, I show how women’s heterogeneous positionings shape their

experience of both *chunga* basketry and shifting gendered politics at the intra-household level.

Third, the conceptualization of space as the product of interrelations challenges the rigid boundaries of otherness and ‘innate’ disjunctions of place still prevalent in the national Panamanian imagination, emphasizing, instead, a view of the Comarca Emberá as produced through “wider historical geographies of interconnections [and] interdependencies” (Nash, 1999:476). The notion of space as relational is also used in the dissertation to resist positioning the ‘local’ – i.e., the *comarca* – as the inexorable victim of global capitalist developments. Instead, the expansion of cattle ranching and women’s participation in the production and marketing of *chunga* handicrafts inside the *comarca* reveal “a situated, performed, and locally embedded globalism, one that exists and evolves in human interactions shaped by social difference” (Gezon and Paulson, 2005:5).

In sum, my theoretical framework builds on poststructuralist political ecology through the production of an ethnographic study connecting the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ and emphasizing interconnections and multiplicities.

### Chapter III – Methodology

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*“Any ethnographic text is, almost by definition, a stereotype”*  
(Herrera, 1998:265; my translation).

#### **Introduction**

As outlined in the introduction, underpinning the present work is a commitment to the production of an ethnographic account that illuminates – from the perspective of social relations of land and forest resources – the many ways in which Emberá people make meaningful sense of, experience, and respond to contemporary processes of capitalist transformation. Such a project requires theoretical and methodological tools in order to move beyond dichotomous understandings of people, places, and events, and to position women’s and men’s daily experiences, multiple realities, shifting identities, conflicting practices, and pluralities of views at the centre of analysis.

A primary objective of this chapter is to ‘unpack’ the ways in which I conducted fieldwork and what took place in ‘the field’, disclosing how insights were gained and how knowledge was produced. In the first section, I examine the various strategies I have used to produce knowledge that resists the taken-for-grantedness of identities, places, and events (Hart, 2004:98) and recognizes the situatedness of all ethnographic accounts. I then examine the unequal power relations that infuse research encounters as well as the politics of difference and representation implicit in the incorporation of others’ experiences and voices in our academic texts. Whereas these first two sections focus on the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of my work, the third section pays greater attention to the actual experiences of conducting field research. I narrate some of the complexities and dilemmas associated with the production and negotiation of my researcher identities, problematize the notion of ‘the field’, and address the importance of

making one's informants visible. In the last two sections of the chapter, I specify the various research methods I used to collect data, and provide a description of the study area.

## **1. Writing against generalizations**

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### **1.1 Rejecting objectivity: 'Situatedness', partiality, and reflexivity**

Writing against generalizations means producing knowledge that resists the tenets of positivism (i.e., neutrality, disembodiment, and objectivity) and recognizes the fact that researching and writing are always deeply political and personal practices.

For long, research in geography (and most other social sciences) has relied heavily on positivist methodologies firmly grounded in a dichotomy between 'subject' (i.e., the researcher) and 'object' (i.e., the researched), which placed the researcher in a position of externality – that is, outside the world s/he studied and represented. Such position constructs the researcher as a detached observer endowed with what Haraway has famously called “the god-trick illusion of ‘infinite vision’” (1991:189). Here, detachment and omniscience are the two cornerstones of the production of objective – ‘uncontaminated’ – accounts of a ‘reality’ understood as a “world of transparent objects” (Scott, 1992:23). This subject/object dichotomy is deeply colonizing in that it ‘inscribes’ and “places [others] in their otherness” (Hall, 1997a:20), while granting the researcher the “power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation” (Haraway, 1991:188). As the eye becomes “coterminous with sight itself” (Hall, 1997a:21), the researcher is very much blind to the role s/he plays in the stories s/he tells (Gregory, 2004:4). As a result, positivist methodologies “ignore the actual *making* of geography” (Burawoy, 1991:8; emphasis in original), for they silence the processes through which

knowledges are being produced, to the benefit of the final intellectual product (England, 1994:82).

Feminist methodologies have played a key role in combating this dichotomy (Wolf, 1996:5), as well as in recognizing researchers' 'situatedness' – that is, their location “in certain times, cultures, and historical traditions” (Hayles, 1995:48). Because we are always “speaking from somewhere” (Skelton, 2001:89) and since what we are *able* to see is always constrained by specific historical, cultural and scientific practices (Crary, 1990:7), research is never value-free (England, 2006:287) and our accounts are inevitably partial and subjective. The ‘truths’ they tell are always “incomplete and selective...reflecting the interests and circumstances of the researcher” (Hyndman, 2001:266). It is in this light that one must understand Haraway’s insightful claim: “only partial perspective promises objective vision” (1991:190).

Feminist researchers have thus advocated processes of ‘self-reflexivity’ that make explicit the partiality of our accounts – that is, the way(s) in which one’s specific positionality, location, and “embodiment in the world” (Rose, 1997:308) shape and impact the kind of research we choose, the fieldwork processes we engage in, and the texts we write (England, 1994:87). Rather than an end in itself – which would equate ‘self-reflexivity’ to some form of “self-absorbed navel gazing” (Harding, 1987:9, cited in Lal, 1996:207) – this process constitutes a powerful tool to counter the production of objective, disembodied, and over-generalized knowledges (Pratt, 2000:641). Yet, self-reflexivity cannot lead to “full transparency” either, for this would mean reintroducing the ‘god-trick’ of full vision. As Haraway warns us:

There is no way to ‘be’ simultaneously in all, or wholly in any, of the privileged positions structured by gender, race, nation, and class...The

knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original (1991:192-3).

Second, processes of ‘self-reflexivity’ are also complicated by the socially constructed nature of identity categories: there is no universal, transhistorical/cultural understanding of what it means to be, for instance, a woman or to be white. It is more useful to examine the many cross-identifications of one’s ‘multiple subjectivity’ (Narayan, 1993:676, cited in Wolf, 1996:17).

For these reasons, my attempt at ‘self-reflexivity’ in this chapter is primarily intended to make visible and reflect on the ‘fractured spaces’ (Rose, 1997:314) – i.e., the messiness, uncertainties, and contradictions – of my distinct location(s), the ways in which insight and understanding were gained, and how this dissertation was produced. It is important to acknowledge that since this reflection about my fieldwork occurred *with hindsight*, it too is itself necessarily subjective and partial. It occurs in a specific time, location, and set of social relations. It is done, as Saad puts it, “from the safety of my home/office, and without the input of those who in one way or another are included in my reflections” (2008:57-58).

## **1.2 The politics of difference and representation**

Writing against generalizations not only requires being aware of the partiality of the knowledge we produce and of the role we play in its production; it also demands that we critically examine where we are located vis-à-vis the researched (Henry, 2003:11), as well as the nature of the devices we use to both represent others and incorporate their experiences and voices in our texts. Writing is replete with practices that have the potential to capture and colonize the ‘other’ – whether such practices are, as Lal

(1996:201) emphasizes, ‘technologies of inscription’ (e.g., tapes, surveys, interviews, word processing), or universal categories like ‘third world woman’ (Mohanty, 1991) or ‘culture’ (Abu-Lughod, 1993). By producing effects of homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness, such categories strip local contexts of their rich details and heterogeneity; they essentialize identities, fix boundaries between ‘self’ and ‘other’, and perpetuate a view of local people as discrete, static, and ahistorical ‘others’ existing outside of social relations (1993:7). In doing so, they erase the diversity and complexities of individuals’ experiences, subjectivities, and positions, and deprive them of their historical and political agency (Mohanty, 1991:71-72). On the other hand, essentialist views of identity naturalize differences and obscure the fact that such differences are always produced and constructed through the exercise of power (Smith, 1999:130). In other words, our representational practices “are never merely descriptive, but always normative” (Butler, 1992:16), which makes it necessary to examine “the *political* implications of our *analytic* strategies and principles” (Mohanty, 1991:55; emphasis in original).

Many authors contend that the power relations involved in representing others’ experiences and voices cannot be avoided (Henry, 2003:12). In other words, it is impossible to represent postcolonial, oppressed subjects without colonizing them and reproducing existing structures of domination and exploitative relationships (Spivak, 1988, cited in Wolf, 1996:33). Yet, rather than agonizing over our culpability or abandoning our research projects, such awareness can be used to acknowledge the limits of our writing and encourage us to combat what, in our writing, makes us complicit of such exploitative structures (Patai, 1988:24-25, cited in Wolf, 1996:34).

In the present work, resisting generalizations in my representations of the Emberá primarily means recognizing that research participants do not form a homogenous and static group. Rather, individuals are socially differentiated through gender, ethnicity, life-cycle positioning, socioeconomic status, and political affiliation, among other things, and, as such, they inhabit multiple, evolving identities and “live in contradictory locations” (Lal, 1996:199). Differences between research participants (and between them and me), as well as the meanings attached to these differences, are not understood as being natural and existing a priori – i.e., outside social interactions. Rather, they are viewed as the product of provisional, contingent, and negotiated positionalities, representations, and configurations of power. In this context, subjects (e.g., Emberá women) are not taken as the ‘points of departure’ in which to ground my analysis, insofar as these subjects do not rest on any foundational premise that can be known in advance (Butler, 1992:13). Instead, I explore how particular identities, axes of differentiation, subjectivities, and meanings are constituted, negotiated, and reconfigured through time. Conceptualizing the subject as a permanent condition of ‘becoming’ allows accounting for the inherent ‘incoherence’ and ‘messiness’ of subjects’ identities (Butler, 1990:104) and does away with claims of (in)authenticity. In this vein, a qualitative approach is necessary in that it provides the spaces needed to recognize “the diversity of voices and perspectives [and] avoid the erasure of difference in the production of knowledge” (Gunewardena and Kingsolver, 2007:14-15). Researchers can listen to what informants have to say, and informants may share their views and experiences, display the complexity of their identities/positionalities, and reveal the diversity and fluidity of their social worlds. In doing so, these ethnographic methods reduce the risks of misunderstanding local

conditions and misrepresenting men's and women's lived experiences/realities (Pottier, 1993:3). In this dissertation, I rely heavily on my informants' own words, reproducing at length their comments in order for their own voices to be heard. This mechanism is still subject to my own selection process and still places me in a privileged position – i.e., as the one allowing the 'subaltern' to speak. However, although "the inclusion of 'authentic voices' is a credentializing technique and rhetorical strategy" (Crang, 2001:229), it nevertheless provides a means for the readers to hear things in people's own words and to share experiences and views that would otherwise likely remain silent.

Recognizing the agency of research participants constitutes another critical device in my attempt to write against generalizations and resist colonizing participants' voices and experiences. It meant, first, acknowledging that local individuals are 'knowledgeable' and 'capable'; they have the capacity not only to process social experience and invent ways to cope with life (Long, 1992a:23), but also to make meaningful choices for themselves and explain them to me as they wish (Pottier, 1993:9). In sum, research participants are able to engage in processes of strategic self-representation, in view of securing access to resources, material benefits, or 'development' (Verma, 2001:55-56). All the Emberá participants in my research, notwithstanding their socioeconomic status (e.g., whether they were subsistence farmers, teachers, artisans, or day labourers) commonly portrayed themselves as 'poor', 'powerless', 'marginalized' and 'uneducated' and, as a result, as individuals in need of external support, money, resources, technologies, and projects. At other times, some participants highlighted their education, professional occupation, or position within a political party to present themselves as 'knowledgeable' and 'powerful', and as such,

assert the authority and truthfulness of their opinion about particular issues, compared to other views.

One of my research assistants' accounts is a telling example of the complex strategizing over identities and positionalities involved in these local practices of self-representation. A team of governmental experts had recently visited the area to conduct a survey and determine the future beneficiaries of a new governmental program<sup>7</sup>, targeting Panama's poorest inhabitants. "You have to be very tactical", my research assistant said to me:

...because if you give them – when they ask you 'how much land do you cultivate?' – an estimate that's 'too high', the government could keep you out of the program for not being 'poor enough'. But if the estimate you give them is 'too low', the government could criticize the Emberá for owning a *comarca* but being too 'lazy' to cultivate it.

"Ultimately", he continued, "this could be seen as a proof that we don't need all this land, and the government could decide to give it to *colonos*". This example clearly illustrates local actors' keen awareness of and ability to integrate outsiders' discourses and expectations and, as a result, to strategically manoeuvre and position themselves within the politics of representation so as to obtain particular benefits.

Second, the recognition of research participants' agency entails re-conceptualizing the research process as a 'dialogue' and an 'intersubjective practice' (De Neve, 2006:73). The plurality of representations produced by – and about – various actors, including myself, remind us that representations are never an unmediated guide to 'truth' but *situated* accounts. This challenges, in part, the taken-for-granted authority of researchers and their texts.

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<sup>7</sup> The *Programa Red de Oportunidades* (Network of Opportunities Program) of the Ministerio de Desarrollo Social (MIDES, the Ministry of Social Development).

## **2. Challenging unequal power relations and resisting othering**

### **2.1 Creating 'spaces of betweenness'**

As many feminist researchers have emphasized, fieldwork is fraught with unequal power relations and processes of othering. For instance, Stacey reminds us that "fieldwork represents an intrusion and intervention into a system of relationships that the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave" (1988:22-3 cited in England, 1994:85). Similarly, there is little doubt that the researcher commonly controls most of the research components (e.g., delineating 'the field', defining research content and methods, setting up the context of interviews, analyzing and publishing findings). In addition, the rigid positionalities typically associated with the subject/object dichotomy and the production of value-free knowledge have consistently resulted in maintaining the 'other' at a distance (i.e., in subordinated and passive positions) and in fetishizing it. These issues become even more relevant in the context of 'First World' researchers conducting research projects with groups of people identified as 'subaltern' and 'subjected'.

Recognizing one's embodiment in the world is not only critical for the epistemological implications it bears. It is also indispensable to counter the patterns and structures of domination we embody as researchers, for it forces us to (re)consider our relationships with the individuals we research. As Haraway argues:

Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and authorship of 'objective' knowledge (1991:198).

From this perspective, the researched is no longer a transparent 'object' waiting to be deciphered by the researcher, but an active collaborator in the process of knowledge production (Gunewardena and Kingsolver, 2007:12).

Countering structures of domination and othering requires researchers to create 'spaces of betweenness' (Fine, 1998) – i.e., spaces in which both the researcher and the researched can examine and discuss the modalities/implications of the research process as well as their personal interactions – through the 'disruption' and 'dislocation' of their different positionalities/identities (Fuller, 1999).

## **2.2 Countering notions of power verticality**

While I do not deny the validity and great value of such claims, or the necessity to actively resist processes leading to the reification of the 'other', I think these arguments tend to view power relations as 'fixed', and to conceptualize power as a 'unilateral' attribute. They suggest a rigid understanding of research activities: one in which fieldwork is always, at least in part, an exploitative process that inevitably disrupts informants' lives and appropriates their stories, and in which local informants are powerless victims stripped of agency.

While researchers may initially enter 'the field' in seemingly greater power positions than their research informants, many scholars have described how such power is repeatedly challenged over the course of the research process, and how they must often simply "go along with the flow of events around [them]" (Hedican, 2006:5). These accounts demonstrate that interviews are deeply dynamic, multi-faceted encounters during which agency keeps shifting between interviewer and interviewee (Mullings, 1999:340), according to the identities/positionalities that come to predominate in

different contexts of the research process (Cotterill, 1992:599; Phoenix, 1994:55). They also argue that the constant ‘unexpectedness’ characterizing fieldwork repeatedly undermines the researcher’s power (England, 1994), while partial or complete immersion “can render the researcher feeling unempowered and dependant” (Wolf, 1996:10). The frequent references to feelings of anxiety, discomfort, vulnerability, discouragement, and frustration that punctuate the pages of my field journal clearly demonstrate that, far from being ‘in control’ of the situation, my position/role as a researcher was always precarious and constantly needed to be renegotiated and re-asserted. Most of the time, *I* – not the research participants – was the ‘other’ (Price, 2001:144) and they rarely missed an opportunity to remind me of it. We all knew, tacitly, that my ‘survival’ in the community and the success of my research project relied almost entirely on their willingness to participate and help me. Yet, Wolf warns against correlating the feeling of powerlessness I describe here with “being a powerless person” (1996:22). She insists on the importance of distinguishing between “the power plays during the micro-processes of interpersonal dynamics, which render the researcher quite helpless, and her locationality and positionality within a global political economy” (ibid.).

In my view, we need to abandon conventional notions of power verticality between researchers and research participants and reconceptualize ‘the field’ as a site of complex power relations (Henry, 2003:12) in which power is not a fixed attribute of certain individuals. From such perspective, local individuals are no longer ‘passive victims’ trapped in patterns of domination and exploitative research relationships, but active participants (Long, 1992a:21). Individuals are capable of strategizing in their dealings with researchers, negotiating the ways in which they are represented (e.g., by choosing

what identities to perform and what information to share), and finding ways to cope, resist, or reinterpret constraining circumstances or abusive relationships. Privileging an understanding of power as a (negotiated) 'relation' between individuals (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983:219-221) allows for a richer analysis of researcher/researched interactions; it makes it possible to explore how their respective positions are continuously being negotiated, challenged, and reconfigured by and within shifting constellations of power. Such an approach accounts better for the ebb and flow of the research experience and recognize the active role played by local informants in the production of knowledge.

Similarly, I have certain reservations about the assumptions and potential outcomes associated with some researchers' urge to empower their research informants. First, such endeavour begs Wolf's very pertinent question: "Who are we to change or raise the consciousness of others?" (1996:26). Second, I think we should be cautious about assuming that differences of socioeconomic status between ourselves and our research participants systematically imply that we are involved in relationships of domination/exploitation. Doesn't such a view reproduce the same binary structures that most of us are committed to challenge in the first place? To what extent do research participants view *themselves* as less powerful than, or subordinate to, us? To what extent does our insistence on their marginality and subaltern condition serve to constitute and legitimize our position of authority and superiority? Cruikshank reminds us that "The object of empowerment is to act upon another's interests and desires in order to conduct their actions toward an appropriate end; thus 'empowerment' is itself a power relationship" (1999:68-69). Despite their good intentions, aspirations to change the

balance of forces always carry with them the problematic “notion of ‘powerful outsiders’ helping ‘powerless insiders’” (Long, 1992b:275). How do research participants feel about our desires for, and initiatives toward, more equal power relations? To what extent are relationships more ‘equal’ when researchers decide that this is needed and choose what form it may take? Gorelick warns us that such an endeavour “reintroduce[s] the notion of value free science in a new guise, obscuring the differences of their roles and the power complexities of their relationship” (1991:469, cited in Wolf, 1996:19).

### **2.3 Uncovering processes of othering in our constructions of ‘the field’**

Active resistance to processes of othering by researchers has led feminist scholars to turn a critical eye on the implicit assumptions underlying the concepts of ‘field’ and ‘fieldwork’. As Unnithan-Kumar and De Neve observe:

It is the ways in which we perceive, talk about and ‘construct’ the field itself (as ‘wild’, local, isolated, bounded, and so on) which generates and fixes the inequalities in our representation of other cultures (2006:4).

Considering that my research focuses on an indigenous group inhabiting what is commonly viewed as a ‘far-away, exotic’ place, uncritical constructions of my ‘field’ could easily reproduce the current fetishization of Emberá peoples and further authorize ‘geographies of otherness’ (Till, 2001).

The notion of ‘field’ has traditionally been understood in geography and other social science disciplines as a ‘physical assignation’, and fieldwork as “something geographically and temporally bound, something periodic and over there” (Hyndman, 2001:270). In addition, ‘the field’ had to be (preferably) located in some remote area, for “the purest form of ethnographic knowledge is to be obtained through experience of the unalloyed ‘other’ in a field site that is epistemologically and culturally, as well as

geographically, distant from home” (Coleman, 2006:32). Conceptualizing ‘the field’ in these terms commonly sanctions constructions of a homogenized, self-contained, coherent, and different ‘other’. In doing so, it ignores the fact that the remoteness of a place is always assumed in relation to a specific point of reference (Des Chene, 1997:85) – a position implicitly filled by the ‘West’: the core around which everything else revolves and is measured, while it remains invisible (Dwyer and Jones, 2000). Second, the dichotomy of ‘home’/‘field’ authorizes a view of the ‘world-as-exhibition’ (Hyndman, 2001:264-265), which works as a self-contained, closed system that fixes and essentializes objects within it – allowing the ‘truth’ about them to be revealed (Said, 1979:70). It also produces the world as a fixed, passive object ready to be scrutinized, deciphered, and made ‘intelligible’ through our research practices. Third, it rests on the naïve, unspoken assumption that the exotic, remote locales we call ‘the field’ lie immobile outside of history:

While time may pass at the same rate everywhere, change is variably distributed among social formations and portions of the globe. This belief...suggest[ed] to the aspiring fieldworker that, whenever research funds were acquired, visas in order, and porters arranged, ‘the field’ would be ready and waiting (Des Chene, 1997:68).

This sanctions ideas of ‘field sites’ as ahistorical, unchanging places that only gain full ‘humanity’ and meaning through the ethnographic gaze and through their incorporation into Western time/history:

One may note a feature of anthropological discourses in nearly every period: That the ethnographer has arrived just prior to momentous changes and things will never be the same again. But this trope itself is premised on treating the past as a homogenous period and the present as its final iteration. ...This view...rests precisely on awareness of change in the present, but assumes that change to be novel and unprecedented (Des Chene, *ibid.*).

This understanding of ‘the field’ rests on an intrinsic segmentation of the world, and a view of cultures and identities as emerging naturally within the boundaries of these autonomous and disconnected spatial entities (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997:14a). In this context, ‘home’ is always portrayed as natural and evident while ‘the field’ appears as inherently different and strange; in other words, such an approach legitimates the “unity of the ‘us’ and the otherness of the ‘other’” (ibid.). Theorizing ‘the field’ in this way is deeply problematic for it views cultural differences between groups and power differentials between researchers/researched as the natural outcomes of these spatial ruptures, rather than as the products of particular ‘topographies of power’ – i.e., specific spatial articulations and connections and existing socio-political hierarchies (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 1997a, 1997b).

In conclusion, acknowledging that ‘the field’ is an artificial construction allows one to pay attention to its connections with other places, the relations of difference, processes of exclusion, and constructions of otherness that are always involved in processes of spatial constructions. It alerts us to the fact that “the ‘field’ is politically situated, contextualized...and that its social, political, and spatial boundaries shift with changing circumstances or in different political contexts” (Nast, 1994:60).

### **3. The ebbs and flows of a research journey**

#### **3.1 Producing ‘the field’**

Here, I would like to focus on some of the processes through which a space becomes the ‘site’ of one’s fieldwork. What eventually became my ‘field site’ was produced through complex processes of negotiation, constellations of power relations and tensions, in which my own background played a significant role.

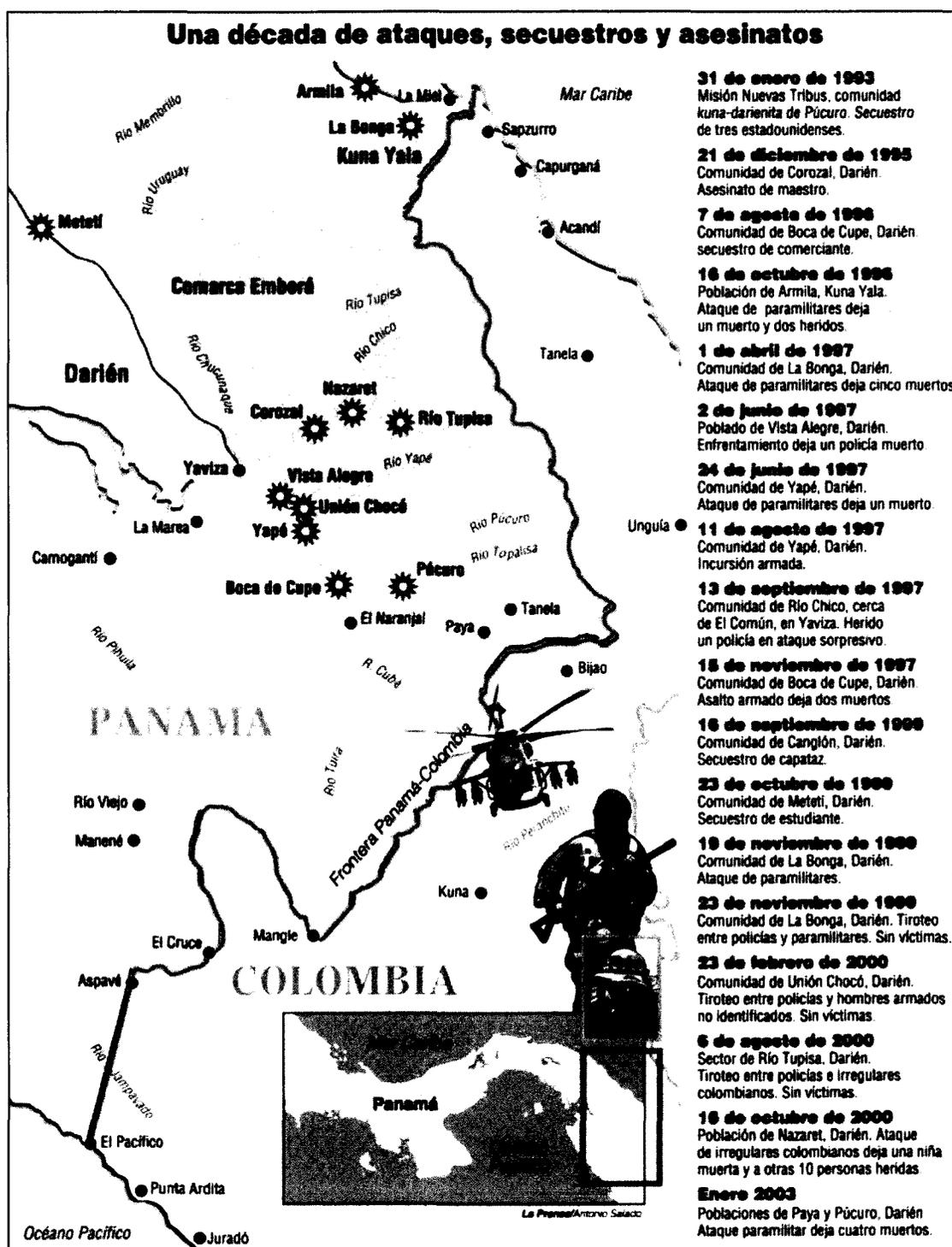
A number of multi-scale political factors strongly influenced the location and the conditions in which I was able to conduct my doctoral research. First, the sporadic incursion of Colombian guerrillas and paramilitaries within the borders of some areas of eastern Panama (see Redacción de La Prensa, 2005) had resulted – in the years preceding my arrival to the region – in the framing of the province as a ‘red zone’ (Illustration 1) and led many foreign embassies to strongly discourage their nationals from visiting the region. As such, I was unable to solicit the assistance or support of the French embassy to navigate my way in Darién. Similar reasons led the Panamanian frontier police to limit the presence of foreigners beyond the town of Metetí, on the Pan-American Highway. As a result, the entire south-eastern side of the region (where the Cémaco portion of the Comarca Emberá is located) was eliminated from consideration. The only option left to me was to carry out research in the district of Sambú, the south-western portion of the Comarca Emberá. While security here was better, the Sambú district is less accessible because of the almost complete absence of roads in south-western Darién.

Second, after my first encounter with who I thought was the recognized *Cacique General* – the primary political leader of the Comarca Emberá<sup>8</sup>, I learned that the traditional Emberá leadership was in crisis. Two individuals were claiming to be the legitimate head of the *comarca* government – a situation that clearly underscored the role of ‘unexpected circumstances’ (England, 1994) and ‘surprise’ (Mackenzie, 2007) when conducting fieldwork. The *cacique general* is normally elected every five years by the inhabitants of both Cémaco and Sambú Districts. The election takes place during a four-day general congress in which people vote *haciendo fila india* (lining up) in front of the candidate of their choice. Following the elections, the name of the winner is sent to the

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<sup>8</sup> That is, the highest traditional authority governing the two districts of the Comarca Emberá.

**Illustration 1:** A map of Darién published in the national Panamanian newspaper *La Prensa* to illustrate the violence in the region from 1993 to 2003 (Translated into English, the title reads, “A decade of attacks, kidnappings, and murders”).



Source: Redacción de La Prensa (2005, January 04). Los 18 ataques de los últimos 10 años. *La Prensa*. Retrieved from <http://www.prensa.com>

executive branch of the national government, which is bound to validate the vote. In practice, the government regularly refuses to recognize the legitimacy of the elected *cacique* (for instance, when he is known to support the opposition party) and typically appoints someone who espouses its political agenda and views – a situation also experienced in the Comarcas Ngöbe-Buglé and Kuna Yala (Wickstrom, 2003). Uncertain about whom to trust, I finally decided to negotiate my research agreement with the *Cacique General* that was supported by the *Cacique Regional*<sup>9</sup> of the Sambú District, given that the latter enjoyed strong recognition in the area. Both these representatives tacitly opposed the ruling party.

It is important to acknowledge that the ‘field site’ that was constituted as a result of these processes was neither fixed nor existed autonomously – i.e., outside of time and multi-scale political and social relations. ‘The field’ was continuously reconfigured over the course of my fieldwork, for the social relations shaping them were constantly being recreated and given new meanings. For instance, several political events – including the visit of President Martin Torrijos to Puerto Indio in June 2007 – appeared to greatly weaken local allegiances to the opposition party and, as a result, strongly undermined the leadership and legitimacy of the *Cacique General* I had negotiated my research agreement with. In parallel, the constant tensions within the traditional Emberá leadership forced the *Cacique Regional* of Sambú to step down in February 2007. His substitute was a socio-political figure suffering some discredit for residing outside the *comarca*, in the village of Atalaya. Although the inhabitants of Atalaya have always claimed that they belong to the *comarca*, in reality, the village is just outside the legally defined boundary.

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<sup>9</sup> Each of the two districts forming the *comarca* is headed by a *cacique regional* dealing with affairs at the level of his district, and working under the supervision of the *cacique general*.

In January 2008, after 25 years of futile legal battles to be officially included in the *comarca*, and fed up with their lack of political legitimacy and associated problems, the inhabitants of Atalaya decided to dismantle their houses piece by piece, carry them across the Jesús River, and relocate their village – now called Dai Puru – within the *comarca*'s boundaries. In the midst of these events, the social, political, and spatial boundaries of 'the field' I was researching were constantly being redefined and, with them, my positioning and identity as a researcher and my relationships with participants.

My fieldwork was initially marked by a profound sense of separation between places and 'dislocation' of my identities. Yet, with time, it became clear that the intense feelings of isolation I experienced in the early stages of my field research in Darién – as well as the feelings of distance upon my regular trips to Panama City and later to Canada – had little to do with the inherent spatial remoteness and disconnection of my 'field site'. They were primarily the product of my unfamiliarity with the specific social networks and spatial articulations through which these places were continuously being (re)produced and diversely connected. A multitude of encounters, events, and practices encouraged the slow dissolution of this initial sense of polarization between places and 'dislocation of self', and shed light on the *linkages* between my various physical and 'subjective' locations: travelling<sup>10</sup> in and out of Darién (e.g., peddling my bicycle, riding in the tractor of a *colono*, sitting in Emberá dugout canoes, motor boats, or buses and airplanes), listening to the stories of fellow travelers, buying *parumas*<sup>11</sup> imported from Japan to be worn later in Sambú, reading about Darién in national newspapers, lining up

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<sup>10</sup> Travelling here does not assume a kind of "voyaging across passive geography/space" for, as Massey (2005:121) aptly demonstrates, this would entail rendering 'others' as static and without history. My spatial locations were thus not only linked, but also actively produced through repeated encounters and relations.

<sup>11</sup> The colored sarong Emberá women wrap around their waist and wear as a skirt.

at police checkpoints on the Pan-American Highway, reflecting on my research in an air-conditioned café in Panama City, waiting for the arrival of the supply ship under Sambú's mango tree in order to refill my tank of gas, observing American traders buying expensive Emberá baskets in one of the city's hotels, interviewing civil servants and NGO representatives, conducting archival research at various Panamanian and Canadian institutions, acting as a translator between Western tourists and local Emberá guides in Puerto Indio, and so on. All these experiences recast 'the field' as neither "a place nor a people...but as a network of power relations in which I am a small link" (Hyndman, 2001:265). Insisting on the interconnections of space and on the artificiality of 'home'/'field' dichotomies recasts the researcher as always already in 'the field' (Hyndman, 2001:269; Katz, 1994) and "provides the opportunity to see the life of the [researcher] not as a series of 'normal' periods interspersed with 'abnormal' sojourns in 'the field' but rather as an intermingled set of reflections and experiences, drawing on different but linked contexts" (Coleman, 2006:35-6). These experiences also informed my understanding of the complex connections and uneven relations that Bayamón and Atalaya, and the people inhabiting these places, maintained with neighbouring areas, national trends, and the global economy.

### **3.2 Negotiating with Emberá traditional authorities**

Initial negotiations with Emberá authorities to get permission for my research took place in May 2006, in the house of the *Cacique General* in Puerto Indio. The *Cacique* was a retired primary school teacher who had completed his undergraduate degree in Mexico. He understood very well the challenges of living away from 'home' and was sensitive to the financial constraints associated with my student condition. As such, he

did not view me as a potential monetary contributor – as it is often the case when ‘First World’ researchers conduct research in places located in the global south. Yet, it was quite obvious that he did believe that as a white, European student from a North American university, I could play a positive role as an agent bringing ‘development’ to the *comarca*. In this light, far more important to him than the details of my investigation, were the English classes and cartography, GIS, and research methods workshops I was willing to teach during my stay in the area<sup>12</sup>. In the historical, political, and economic context in which we were situated, learning English is all the more valuable as it symbolizes access to ‘development’ and ‘modernity’: it connotes the ability to develop tourism in the *comarca* and potentially get a job in Panama City.

Although I had anticipated the process to be lengthy and painstaking, I was granted authorization to conduct research in the area after only two days of discussion. The selection of ‘suitable’ research sites involved tactful negotiations over the *Cacique General*’s demands (for instance, that I live close to Puerto Indio so he could ‘ensure my safety’) and my own requirements (e.g., living in villages where a majority of people was involved in agriculture and forest-related activities). The *Caciques Regional* and *General* and the directive of the Regional Congress of Sambú all gathered to sign the research permit. We agreed that I would come back early July to be formally introduced to the local population during the annual regional congress, and that I would start fieldwork immediately afterwards.

### **3.3 Producing and negotiating the ‘self’ in ‘the field’**

The idea that the positionalities of subjects are never set in advance nor fixed, but constantly changing in relation to others, works against notions of bounded identities and

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<sup>12</sup> In the end, people only showed interest in learning English.

the essentialism of place (Ingold, 2000:144). It offers a view of 'the field' as "always a place 'in-between'" (Nast, 1994:60) and a picture of 'field research' as relational (Hyndman, 2001). Such an approach privileges understandings of the researcher as an 'interlocutor' (Nast, *ibid.*) – i.e., someone always simultaneously positioned in a number of fields – over simplistic notions of 'insider'/'outsider'. It also recasts the research encounter as a 'dialogical process' (England, 1994:84), that is, a dynamic medium through which both the researcher and the researched are constituted (each one being constitutive of the other), rather than a process through which their pre-determined identities come to light (Birch and Miller, 2002:93). Finally, it emphasizes the processes of mutual production between ethnographers and 'field sites': while the researcher 'produces' his/her 'field site(s)' by defining artificial boundaries in order to tell particular stories (Katz, 1994:67), 'the field' also (re)creates us as ethnographers and 'produces' the identity of the researcher by "indicat[ing] the extent as well as the boundaries of [his/her] ethnographic expertise" (Coleman, 2006:34).

It is now well-accepted that despite researchers' conscious efforts and choices over what aspects of their identities to reveal during research, they rarely control how they and their project are represented and defined by participants (Mullings, 1999:344-346; Long, 1992b:269). This supports Hall's claim that our identities are always, at least in part, mapped and "told from the position of the Other" (1997b:49). This also reminds us that, as researchers, we are both participant observers and observed participants or, to borrow Kondo's (1986:75) insightful words, that the "ethnographer acts and is acted upon".

Far from being obvious to most research participants, my identity as a researcher had to be constantly (re)negotiated and (re)created. Similarly, I became acutely aware

that deciding on how to represent myself and what identity/ies to display in ‘the field’ were quite delicate and complicated matters, and not immune to power relations. First, having agreed to teach English as a way to ‘give back’ to the *comarca*, I was introduced to the regional congress (July 5-7, 2006) as an English teacher, not a researcher. My research project was not discussed during the event, and a number of expectations were created that were hardly compatible with my research agenda (e.g., the amount of time I was expected to devote to teaching every week). Having been portrayed in these terms clearly entailed greater difficulties in asserting my role as a researcher and convincing people to participate into the research. Most people understood my presence in terms of someone simply *paseando* (visiting/hanging out) and teaching English to occupy my ‘free’ time.

Second, as a white person, I was automatically cast as a *gringa* and my identity was framed based on specific historical, racial, and economic relationships and experiences that, through time, have produced a number of representations, ideas, and imaginative geographies about the ‘white other’ (Till, 2001). Most *gringos* who have interacted with the Emberá over the last decades have been mainly missionaries and occasionally tourists – that is, individuals involved in development or charity projects and having financial resources. In other words, being categorized as a *gringa* generated great expectations of access to material and economic resources and the high level of reciprocity occasionally expected was often frustrating (see Joseph, 1988, cited in Wolf, 1996:24). This situation was exacerbated by the fact that, having several university degrees, most Emberá primarily saw me as *una profesional* (a professional/expert), rather than a student. In their view, having completed any type of post-secondary education not only confers prestige

and respect, it is also assumed to automatically bestow power and economic prosperity. Although there is little doubt that I was financially more privileged than most of my research participants, neither my research project nor myself were in a position to provide any immediate, tangible material benefits. As such, I had to actively (re)negotiate meanings of 'race' in order to dissociate my whiteness from ideas of 'wealth' and 'development', and constantly (re)assert my student status over that of *profesional*, stressing for instance the fact that I was subsisting thanks to small academic grants and my parents' generosity. On various occasions, these clarifications about my identity meant that people 'lost interest' in the research project and myself.

Constructing myself as a researcher also conflicted with my other positionalities, such as my gender. The inherent nature of fieldwork (e.g., interacting with many people, accompanying informants in their daily activities, traveling back and forth between different locations, being social and outgoing, to name a few ) often clashed with Emberá conceptions of proper female behaviour and views concerning women's mobility. Local constructions of femininity mean that women avoid frequent or prolonged excursions outside their home, especially if unaccompanied. In addition, most Emberá women are reluctant to talk in public. In this context, my daily visits to various families and frequent forest outings initially caused great concern for my host family. My host mother repeatedly commented and frowned upon my "unruly habit of walking too much" and warned me of the 'dangers' associated with interacting with 'strangers' and venturing alone outside the house (such as being victim of the evil eye or of a spell). Similarly, my host father decided that the elected village representative of Bayamón, called the *nokó*, would join me on each of my trips outside the village – a situation that I found very

problematic. Over time though, I managed to escape from my chaperon under the tacit agreement that I would always have a research assistant, a friend, or one of my host family's children accompany me. In this context, meanings of femininity and female respectability had to be continually negotiated and (re)defined to allow me to be both a researcher and a 'decent' woman.

Moreover, in a society in which women's identity is strongly tied to motherhood, being childless greatly challenged my 'womanness' and my work as a researcher: it often limited the depth of interactions I was able to build with women and reinforced, to some extent, my 'strangeness'. As Price argues:

I'm not advocating some naive universality of motherhood. ...Nevertheless, I've found that being a middle-aged mother has made me more understandable and acceptable to the Latino communities...in which one of the principal roles of women is that of mother (2001:145).

As a result, I had to negotiate my presence among Emberá women by emphasizing other aspects of being a female (e.g., playing an active role in taking care of my host family's two-year-old son, buying and wearing *parumas*, weaving chungu baskets, and so on). Despite such efforts, I often felt like a 'little girl' who lacked the proper status that both marriage and motherhood confer on women (Donner, 2006:183). Interestingly, for most men, my education was more important than my marital condition in shaping my status and the way I was treated. In their eyes, I was not a 'little girl' but *la doctora* (the doctor), and they frequently consulted me on questions of tourism, development, or world politics.

My living arrangements also played a key role in defining the kind of identities I was able to perform within the community. They also deeply shaped the ways in which I encountered, experienced, and came to understand Emberá society, culture, and politics,

and greatly conditioned the social relations I was able to weave with the inhabitants of my research sites. My host family had been chosen by the *Cacique General* – after he had firmly rejected my desire to rent a house and live on my own. My hosts were one of Bayamón’s more prosperous families. My host father was a civil servant and a well-known political activist within both the traditional and official political systems.

Living with a family presented a number of clear advantages. First, as Price emphasizes, “being part of a household...is...more consistent with social expectations for women in Latin America” (2001:147). At first, many people were disturbed by the fact that I was alone, so far away from my family, and unmarried. A desirable effect of my affiliation with a family was that I quickly assumed the role of an older daughter. This positioning, along with my efforts to conform to local gender roles (e.g., taking care of children, cooking, collecting firewood), adopt appropriate female behaviour (e.g., leaving the house accompanied), and follow the local female dress code (e.g. wearing *parumas*) helped to (re)create me as a (almost) ‘normal’ and respectable woman. Second, because Emberá women tend to socialize mostly with close family members and rarely venture alone outside the household, opportunities to meet and interact with them are limited. In this context, residing with a family made introductions easier and offered many venues to meet women – for instance, when accompanying my host mother to visit or work with relatives, or attend church.

These advantages notwithstanding, my association with a family was also problematic in a number of ways. My positioning as a daughter sometimes left me with little time to conduct my research activities. Also, while local norms and values implicitly required that I “tie myself to the daily lives of women and their children” (Price,

2001:145), this was not always compatible with the kind of research activities I needed to perform (e.g., accompanying men on forest outings). In addition, my family's 'wealth' and political activism often fuelled envy and distrust within the village. While it is difficult to evaluate the extent to which, and ways in which, my association with this family impacted on my research, such influence is undeniable. The insights I gained were often shaped and coloured by our daily interactions, shared experiences, conversations, friendship, and differences, but most importantly by their personal understanding of Emberá society and their specific positionality within it: the fact that they were (1) more educated and better off than most other families, (2) greatly involved in local politics, (3) very active in the evangelical church, and (4) less reliant on agriculture and forest activities for their daily subsistence.

#### **4. Research methods**

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##### **4.1 Selection and training of local research assistants**

Working with research assistants was a key component of the research process. This was aimed primarily at encouraging a diversity of ways of knowing and creating spaces for shared production of knowledge through the continuous exchange of reflections and interpretations (De Neve, 2006:79). It was also meant to facilitate greater understanding of local practices and make introductions and interactions with community members easier. Finally, it also represented a way to 'give back', not only through the financial remuneration that local assistants received for their work, but also through the transfer of a number of skills.

The *Cacique General* and I had agreed that research assistants would be selected by their respective communities according to a number of criteria: being well respected by

their peers, able to speak both Emberá and Spanish, being literate and knowledgeable about their village and its surrounding forest lands. Yet, in both villages, the selection process did not really go as initially intended.

In Bayamón, the *nokó* appointed himself to the position with the blessing of my host family – who thought that, as the leader of the community, he was best suited to guarantee my ‘safety’ and assist me in my interactions with the community. I was not happy with the situation, as I had hoped the whole community to participate in the selection of the research assistants. Yet, being new in the village, I was not confident enough to oppose the decision. In response to my desire to work with both a male and a female assistant, the *nokó* introduced me, a few days later, to a woman in her early forties. According to everyone, she was the most suitable person for the position, for she had long, well-known experience participating in projects with NGOs and the Catholic Church. Also, being divorced, she had greater freedom to work outside her household and interact with everyone.

In Atalaya, the research assistant was elected during a village meeting. However, given that the *nokó* had failed to inform villagers of the meeting in advance, few individuals were present to appoint my research assistant. Still, everyone was unanimous about his good qualities, his sense of responsibility, his commitment and hard work, and his knowledge of the area and of Emberá history and culture.

Two one-day training workshops with the research assistants were held in Bayamón, in July and September 2006. The first workshop focused on clarifying the nature and various components of the research project, discussing my assistants’ responsibilities and mine, and explaining to them how to implement a population census.

Various aspects of the census (including issues of ethnicity, religion, subsistence activities, and income) were discussed in depth with the assistants, who provided valuable feedback and insider perspectives that greatly improved the final design of the census. In the weeks following the workshop, I accompanied each assistant to three different households to ensure that they understood how to proceed. We also had regular one-on-one meetings to discuss difficulties, clarify doubts, answer questions, and get feedback on their experiences. The second workshop focused on community sketch mapping and included training in the use of maps, cartographic representation techniques, and the use of GPS equipment. The research assistants also produced a sketch map of their respective communities to get a better grasp of the exercise.

After three months of fieldwork, I had to give up on my collaboration with my male assistant in Bayamón (i.e., the *nokó*): he had difficulties committing time to the research and lacked the support and respect of a large part of his community. In order not to embarrass him, I decided not to set up a community meeting to designate his substitute; rather, I personally chose someone whom I knew was appreciated in the village and known for his integrity and hard work. He also happened to be attending my English classes and, as an undergraduate student in education, was strongly interested in participating in a research project. A month later, my female research assistant suffered serious health problems that forced her to withdraw from the research. At this stage of my fieldwork, I decided not to replace her.

I developed strong, personal relationships with my research assistants and their families. We spent a lot of time performing land-based and household activities together, exchanging small gifts and favours, running errands for each other, or just hanging out.

All these activities were venues to share stories, exchange ideas and opinions, and inquire about each other's 'world'. It is thanks to their patient answers and repeated explanations that I slowly gained insights, corrected my interpretations, and gradually built knowledge. Their questions, reflections, and comments often reshaped my hypotheses, challenged my comprehension of an issue, pointed to a weakness in my analysis, or corrected an assumption. I thus strongly concur with De Neve's observation that reflexivity is:

...bound to reveal how rarely we are 'enlightened' on our own accord, but how the gradual and occasional insights we gain are usually achieved through repeated observations, multiple interactions and relentless explanations generously offered by informants and friends in the field (2006:68).

My awareness of the sometimes secondary and accidental role I played in producing the knowledge presented here is a prime reason underlying my determination to include my research assistants as co-authors of the articles that will be published from the present thesis.

#### **4.2 Study area population census**

We carried out a population census in Bayamón and Atalaya during the first two months of fieldwork. My objective was to collect demographic and socioeconomic information about the study population to assess social characteristics and differentiation among villagers. The census included questions on age, sex, ethnicity, languages spoken, level of education, place of birth, length of residence in the community, livelihood activities, income, as well as a brief description of the residence (e.g., access to latrines, electricity, hearth or gas stove, and thatch or zinc roof). It also included a question about the frequency of forest outings (i.e., for cultivation of crops, collection of forest resources, hunting) in order to identify different groups of forest users and help identify

suitable participants for sketch mapping activities and in-depth interviews. In Atalaya, the census of the 34 households was administered by my research assistant. In Bayamón, the work was shared between the two research assistants and myself. Ninety households – i.e., the entire community – were included in the study.

### **4.3 Individual interviews**

I conducted a total of 34 individual interviews: 10 in Atalaya and 24 in Bayamón (this difference reflects the difference in population size between the two villages), which once transcribed resulted in 480 pages of qualitative data.

I adopted a loosely structured interview protocol, which means that although I addressed the same topics with all participants, the ordering, phrasing, and depth of questions varied in accordance with a number of factors, such as the participants' social identities, styles, interests, and willingness to share knowledge; the degree of familiarity between us; as well as the context of the interview (e.g., the presence of other people, time constraints). Interviews ranged from 40 minutes to two and a half hours in length (the average being 70 minutes). Questions focused primarily on socioeconomic changes, agricultural practices, forest activities, the gendered division of labour, rights of access to and use of land and forest resources, and issues surrounding the *comarca* and traditional leadership.

At the beginning of each interview, I asked permission to use a digital voice recorder (all but two interviewees accepted to have the conversation recorded) and briefly outlined the purpose of the interview, insisting on the confidential nature of our discussion. Considering the high rate of illiteracy revealed by the population census among adults, I decided to give preference to oral consent. Similarly, although I had

committed myself to submit a written copy of the interview to participants – i.e., so that they could review and agree on its content – after two attempts, I realized they were not interested in this procedure.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling – that is, according to particular characteristics, including their gender, age, socioeconomic status, main livelihood activities, affiliation(s) with the traditional and official political systems, and level of education. My objective was to ensure the visibility of diverse experiences, practices, and views based on people's social positionings.

I gained access to participants in several ways: through my host family, my research assistants, and the weekly English classes I instructed, but also by just hanging out in the community and getting to know people informally. In Atalaya, my research assistant played a key role in selecting the participants, as I spent less time in that community and was less familiar with people there. Given their long-standing presence in the area and the small size of their respective communities, the research assistants were able to provide me with plenty a considerable amount of background information and significant insight in terms of peoples' political affiliation, degree of involvement in agricultural work and forest resource use, knowledge of Emberá culture and history, and so on. As such, they played important roles in ensuring that I would have access to knowledgeable people, as well as to individuals representing a variety of points of view. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that in doing so, they most likely selected individuals that they knew or got along with better, or individuals with whom they shared particular interests. In this way, the selection of participants was not random or free from potential

bias. Nevertheless, the selection process attempted to reflect a wide range of social identities and standpoints.

Initially, research assistants were supposed to act as translators for interviewees who did not speak Spanish. However, by the time I started the interviews, it was clear that participants felt more comfortable having a close relative (usually a grandson or granddaughter) translating, rather than my assistant. In such cases, I usually met with that person prior to the interview to discuss the nature of the exercise and provide a few guidelines.

In-depth interviews took place during the last five months of fieldwork, after I had built stronger relationships and had acquired a better understanding of cultural practices, social norms, and local politics. My informal conversations with neighbours and friends, in the first couple of months of fieldwork, clearly validated Bodenhorn's observation that:

...without a significant fund of cultural understanding...it is very easy to ask questions that are nonsensical to the audience and therefore will generate either a sense of general bemusement and baffled silence, or equally nonsensical answers (2006:22).

Finally, I did offer some compensation to interviewees, which consisted in a small bag of food supplies. I view this compensation as a gesture of gratitude for the time people accepted to spend answering my questions at the expense of conducting their daily productive activities.

#### **4.4 Focus group discussions**

Two focus group sessions were held in Bayamón, but for logistical reasons (e.g., frequent absences of my research assistant) none were carried out in Atalaya. Each focus

group drew together five male individuals for a two-hour conversation in one of the classrooms of the local elementary school, and was intended to generate detailed knowledge about Emberá history and politics, as well as about land and development issues in the *comarca*. I decided not to organize focus group discussions with women for two main reasons: first, their difficulties in leaving the house for a whole afternoon and, second, their discomfort and reluctance to share information in front of an audience.

The two focus groups were primarily differentiated according to participants' political affiliation – that is whether they belonged to the ruling party (*Partido Revolucionario Democrático* – PRD) or to the opposition – for, after several months in 'the field', I realized that political affiliation constituted an important axis of differentiation, commonly transcending other axes such as socioeconomic status and age, and I was interested in seeing how this particular element influenced participants' views and practices.

Focus group activities present a number of advantages, including the possibility of exploring how meanings, beliefs, and experiences are produced, negotiated, and contested among participants (Valentine, 2001:44). In doing so, these activities make possible learning about the social, cultural, political and personal dimensions of an issue (Bedford and Burgess, 2001:124). Yet, my experience using this data collection method also suggests some limitations. First, in a socio-cultural context where setting up 'formal' meetings (i.e., on an *exact* day at a *specific* time) is not necessarily part of local, daily routines, planning a group discussion can be quite difficult, especially when there is no tangible benefit to the participants. Second, in small communities – i.e., where everyone knows and/or is, to some degree, related to everyone else – group discussions might

appear intimidating and might not always be conducive to open sharing of personal beliefs/ideas. So while the focus groups were useful, for this research, I found it easier and more fruitful to focus on individual interviews.

#### **4.5 Participant observation**

On average, I usually spent about two months in my 'field site' followed by two weeks in Panama City. As a result, between July 2006 and June 2007, I stayed a total of twelve months in Bayamón and Atalaya, during which I continuously conducted participant observation.

As an ethnographic method, participant observation involves observing people in the context of their everyday lives, making notes about events, activities, and community members' behaviours and relationships (Valentine, 2001:44). It also entails, to various degrees, the researcher's participation in the community's daily activities. One of the greatest benefits of this approach lies in the possibility it offers to produce rich details and descriptions about people's lives, and to observe phenomena that people may disregard during interviews. Through participant observation, the researcher seeks to understand the world through the eyes of local participants, paying particular attention to the construction and negotiation of meanings, beliefs, and perceptions. As such, this method offers a great venue for a deeper understanding of human societies (Hoggart et al., 2002:253). However, participant observation also entails a number of challenges, such as negotiating access to the community, the lengthy process of immersing oneself, and the difficulty in dissociating observation from interpretation.

Conducting participant observation among the Emberá meant performing daily reproductive activities with the female members of my host family (e.g., cooking,

watching children, feeding hens, doing laundry), working alongside villagers in their fields (e.g., planting and harvesting rice, corn, or sugar cane, weeding, and collecting firewood), going to local and regional congresses, attending mass at various evangelical churches, participating in social gatherings, sewing *chunga* baskets with female friends and neighbours during leisure time, running errands with family members, and so on. These different activities represented unique opportunities for direct observation and informal conversations that provided considerable insight into intra-household gendered politics, construction of identity and difference, changing meanings of femininity and masculinity and of nature/place, the resistance strategies of socially differentiated individuals, the complexities and micro-politics of everyday experiences, among other things. The English classes I taught once a week to adults and high school students in Bayamón and Puerto Indio also provided opportunities to meet and interact with people in a different environment and share casual conversations about other issues, including access to education, the role of schools in introducing new cultural values, and migration to the city. Upon request, I also offered help with homework to high-school and undergraduate students. The classes offered an informal setting to build friendships and share stories with many villagers. The qualitative data collected through participant observation were regularly recorded on my computer and resulted in 135 pages of qualitative data.

#### **4.6 Sketch map exercises and GPS field mapping**

In October and November 2006, sketch map exercises were conducted in both Bayamón and Atalaya, in order to generate cartographic information about the main physical landscape features and their corresponding *Emberá* or local names, the spatial

extent and location of various forest activities (e.g., hunting, farming, collection of medicinal plants or firewood, fishing) and subsistence areas, the location of human settlements, and areas of overlap and/or conflict with neighbours or outside organizations other forest activities (e.g., conservation activities, colonist farmers). These maps provided a means to better understand access to land and forest resources, the challenges facing land-related subsistence activities, the changing relationships of Emberá people with their territory, and the pressure of *colono* farmers on *comarca* lands.

In each community, sketch mapping sessions were carried out with three groups of forest users differentiated according to gender and age: one group of middle-aged women, one group of elderly men and one group of much younger men. The rationale for working with mid-age women – rather than splitting women into two groups (i.e., elderly vs. young women) as in the case of men – was that few young women still participate in forest-related activities. Also, older women were uncomfortable with the idea of drawing maps.

Each mapping session included from four to six individuals and lasted about three hours. Participants were provided a large blank sheet of paper and coloured pencils and were free to decide what symbols to use to represent different features. Depending on the group, one person drew and others helped locate features and names, or they took turns. Although I attended each mapping session, the local research assistants facilitated the exercise and I only intervened when clarifications about the purpose of the exercise were needed.

The information provided by the resulting sketch maps was complemented by field mapping outings with a GPS to document the geographic coordinates of a number of

physical and cultural features. Locations were also documented while accompanying villagers to work in their fields or during special trips with my research assistants or other local guides. These outings also provided opportunities to ask questions about forest resource use, land tenure, and agricultural methods. About 250 waypoints for rivers, trails, human settlements, roads, *comarca*'s boundaries, agricultural fields, and other special features were recorded. I also measured the size of cattle pastures in Bayamón. Upon my return to Canada, I created a GIS database and produced a series of geo-referenced maps of the study area using ArcGIS software. I showed these maps to local participants during a follow-up visit to Darién in May 2008 and they provided a few corrections.

#### **4.7 Archival research, data interpretation, and discourse analysis**

Another key component of my research involved the collection of written documents and reports at the libraries and archives of various governmental institutions, local NGOs, international donor agencies, and research institutions in Panama City, as well as at the office of the Regional Congress of the Comarca Emberá in Puerto Indio. The purpose of archival research was to obtain documents that would provide information on the history of the Emberá, the creation of a *comarca*, the legal and political aspects of land use and management in Panama, the positioning and meaning of the Darién region within the national context, as well as current socioeconomic, political, and institutional situations.

I organized and codified my qualitative data using Atlas/ti. This software allows highlighting text and selecting a category or code in a one-step process. It also makes it possible to represent these codes and categories graphically in free form patterns,

drawing links and defining relations between them. In my case, this was an iterative process since, as I coded the findings, new insights emerged, leading to periodic revision and adjustment of the categories that I had defined.

The 'codes maps' (Crang, 2001:226) produced through the arrangement of categories in various ways and the drawing of links between them helped to delineate specific themes and narratives, identify silences, and distinguish between people's diverse positions with respect to specific themes. That phase was often marked by the fear that nothing 'special' or 'worth telling' would come out of the data collected. Crang recounts similar feelings and writes that he "spent hours trying to think of ways that would enable something previously unnoticed to appear. By and large, no such moment of revelation occurred. ...There were no magic moments where 'the interpretation' appeared" (2001:226). Rather, interpretation was both iterative and incremental. It was slowly built through counterposing in different ways abstract patterns and categories with the voices and comments of my informants and other primary sources. Going back and forth between these various elements allowed me to amend categories, refine hypotheses, and fine-tune or alter explanations; at other times, it helped reveal new evidence or weed out threads of stories that no longer seemed relevant. The pieces of material that emerged from these lengthy exercises were then carefully woven together so as to "fabricat[e] plausible stories" (Crang, 2001:215) – stories that attempt to both construct a 'coherent' narrative while simultaneously conveying a sense of people's shifting positions, differing ideas, and heterogeneous experiences.

The examination and interpretation of my qualitative data were deeply informed by a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis. Central to this approach is the idea that

meaning does not lie in one word, sentence, or text but hinges on intertextuality. In other words, “Individually, texts are not meaningful. Texts are made meaningful through their interconnections with other texts, their different discourses, consumption, circulation, and production” (Waitt, 2005:171). A primary goal of discourse analysis is to investigate how discursive practices “articulate regimes of truth that naturalize particular ‘ways of seeing’ social difference (gender, ethnicity, class, or sexuality), places, or bio-physical environments” (2005:176). This method focuses on the rules about the production of knowledge and the social effects of knowledge over our practices. Using a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis, one investigates how specific accounts, ideas, knowledge, or subjectivities are privileged and made to appear ‘real’, ‘natural’, or ‘truthful’. Discourse analysis thus provides a critical tool to “demonstrate questions of social justice by identifying how processes of inclusion/exclusion operate through discourse” (ibid.).

##### **5. The research site**

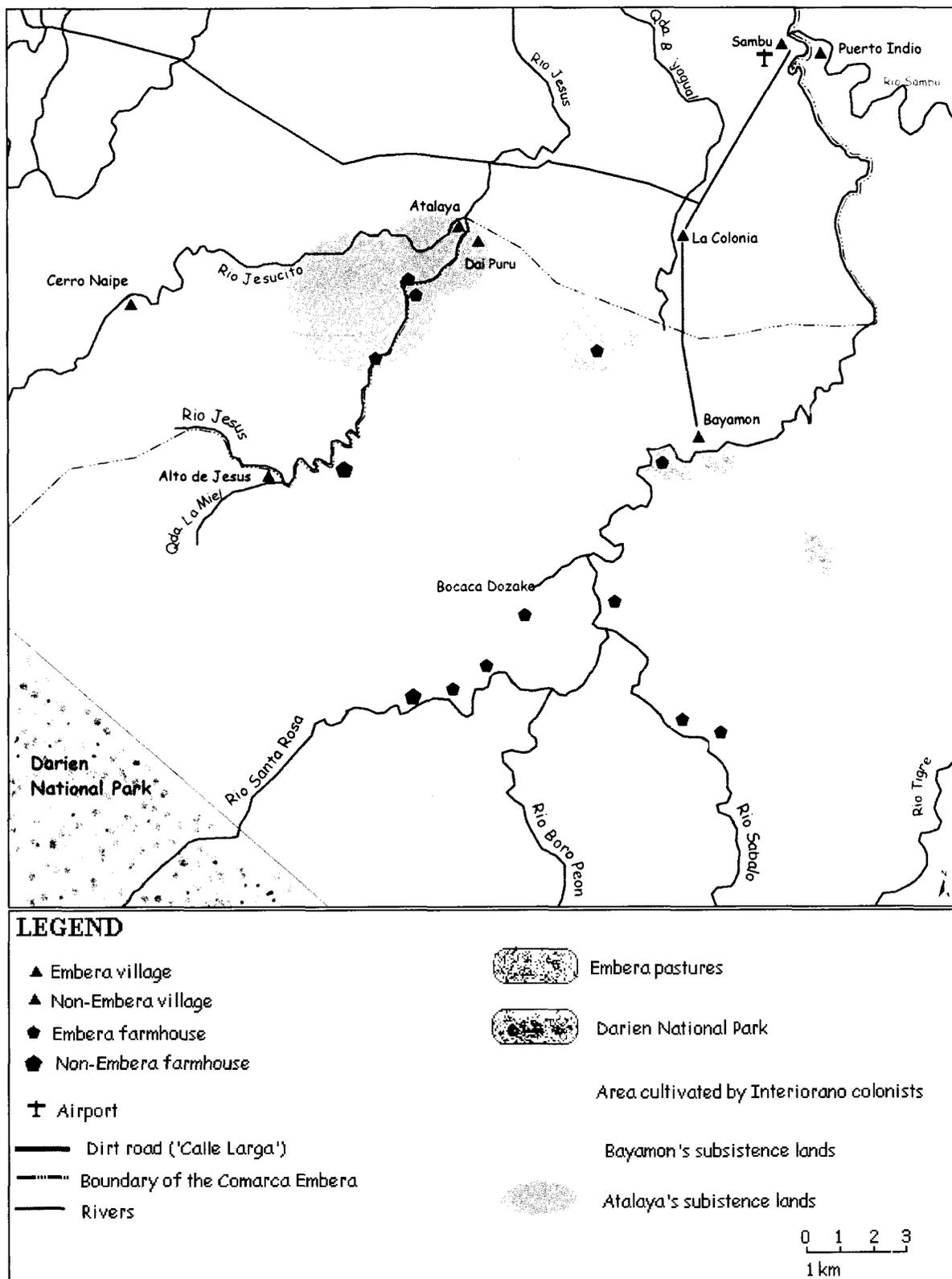
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The present research was conducted in two villages of the Comarca Emberá located in the Darién region in eastern Panama near the Colombian border. The Darién region, including both the *comarca* and the surrounding province that it used to be a part of, is relatively large, covering 16,671 square kilometres, and is Panama’s least-developed region – one that continues to be predominantly seen, up to this day, as backward, unruly, and empty. It is also considered a resource-rich area and occupies a privileged and strategic geographical location. As a biological corridor and land bridge between North and South America, it constitutes one of the major centres of plant diversity of the Americas, with some of the highest levels of endemism of both flora and fauna (Giro, 1998:3). It also retains one of the largest remaining stands of rainforests in the Latin

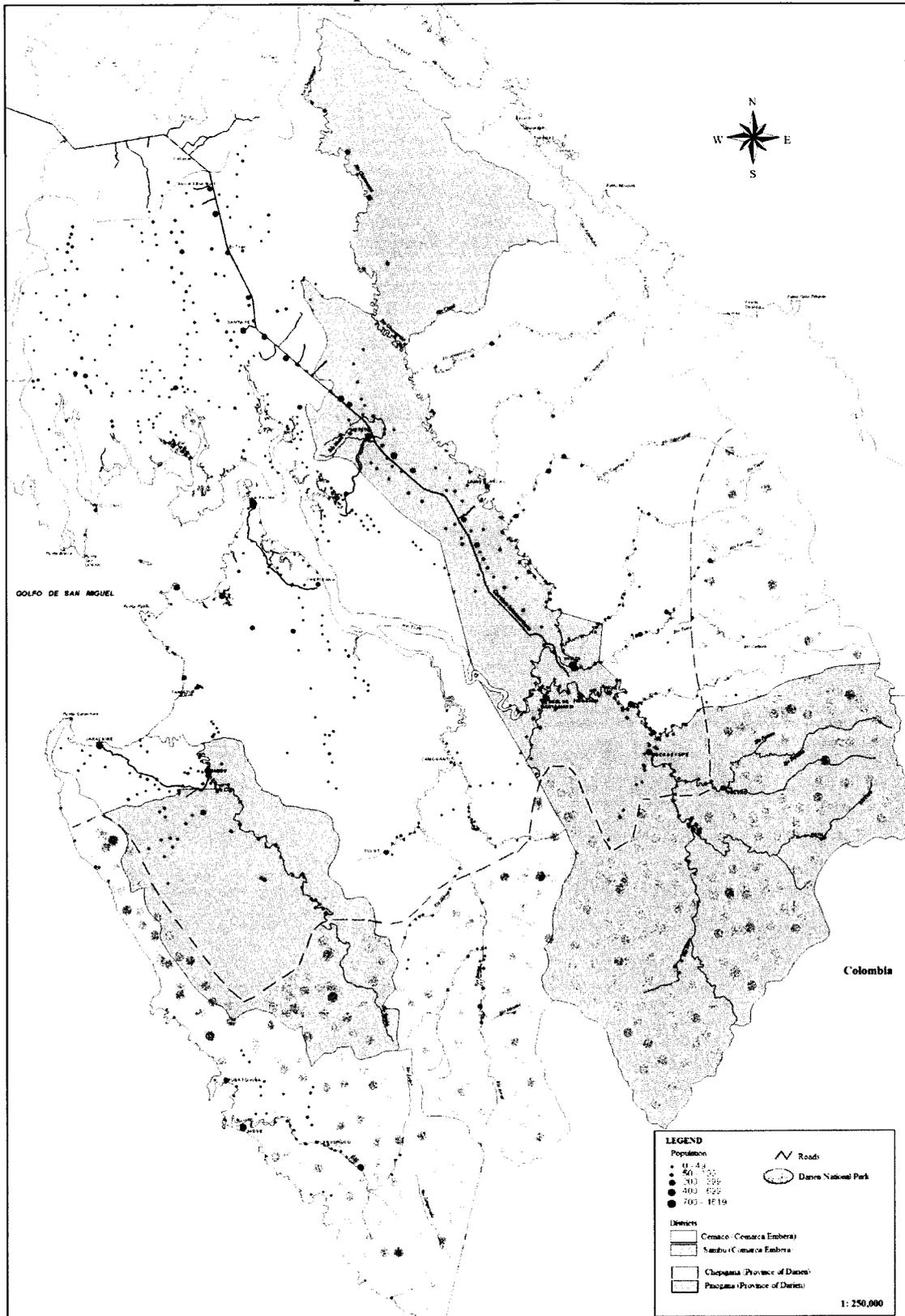
American tropics, and as such represents one of the best prospects in Central America for conserving tropical rainforest environments (IUCN, 1981:1). Second, the province houses three transboundary indigenous groups (Emberá, Wounaan, and Kuna), which, along with the descendants of African slaves (i.e., the *Afrodariénitas*), have occupied the forested lands of eastern Panama and northern Colombia for centuries. Indigenous groups have been highly successful in securing semi-autonomous territories over the past three decades. Third, Darién's forests serve as a 'natural' buffer zone to counter the northward spread of agricultural and livestock pests from South America into Central and North America and also hinder the illegal immigration of Colombians – and to a certain extent, the spread of drug-trafficking – into Panama (Herlihy, 1989:41). This buffer zone also houses the famous 'Darién Gap' – the last missing link in the Inter-American system of roads that stretches from North to South America. Yet, with the creation of continental trade blocks and the multilateral and bilateral free trade agreements, there are compelling macro-economic forces and geopolitical pressures to open the 'Darién Gap' – which some claim would stimulate Darién's slumbering economy (Giroto, 1998:3, 24).

The Comarca Emberá carved out of the Darién Province in 1983 is composed of two separate districts: District 1 or Cémaco (3,089 square kilometres) and District 2 or Sambú (1,294 square kilometres) (Maps 2 and 3), which represents 25 percent of the province's former size. According to Panama's 2000 national population and household census, a total of 8,246 Emberá and Wounaan individuals were living in the *comarca* – but most of the Wounaan population resides in the Cémaco District. La Chunga is the only village of the Sambú District with a mixed Emberá-Wounaan population, and only

Map 2: Study Area



Map 3: The Darién Region



Source: Government of Panama, 2007

one person declared being of Wounaan ethnicity in the two villages surveyed as part of this research.

Twelve villages are located in the Sambú District totalling 1,954 individuals and having a population density of 1.9 inhabitants per square kilometre. Each village of the *comarca* is headed by an elected, 'traditional' authority called *nokó* (plural *nokora*). Considering that the current Emberá political structure did not exist prior to the 1960s and that it is an adaptation of the Kuna model of chieftainship (Herlihy, 1986), these authorities are only 'traditional' in the sense that they are unpaid and derived legitimacy from family settlement history and their participation in the movement for the establishment of a *comarca*. The *nokora* administer and represent their communities together with the members of the *junta directiva* of the local congress – a 'traditional' body or committee of people who make various decisions on behalf of the community. In addition, each district of the *comarca* is headed by a *cacique regional* who administers his area in cooperation with the board committee of the *Congreso Regional* (i.e., Regional Congress). Finally, the *comarca* is represented at the highest level by a *cacique general*, common to both areas. All traditional positions and bodies are elected by the residents of the *comarca* for a period of five years. Since the *comarca* is divided into districts and *corregimientos*, it is also subject to the national municipal regime. Hence, the residents of the *comarca* are also represented by mayors and *corregidores*, who act independently from traditional authorities (Guionneau-Sinclair, 1991:28).

The Sambú District covers most of the Sambú River basin, located in the southwestern part of the Darién. It forms a long and flat valley fringed by several three mountain ranges and the Bay of Garachiné on its northern side, and is dominated by

tropical wet forests. Forest clearance and habitat modification occur around village settlements and along the main rivers of the valley. In these areas, the landscape is dominated by a combination of cultivated fields, grasslands, fallows, and patches of secondary forest in various stages of regeneration. Average annual temperatures vary between 18°C and 26°C, and the area receives up to 4,000 millimetres of rain per year (Louis Berger Group, 2004:17).

To access my two study communities of Bayamón and Atalaya from Panama City, one can take, three times a week, a one-hour flight to Sambú – a village located on the Sambú River, at the mouth of the Sábalo River, and inhabited by a mixed population of Emberá, Blacks, and *Latinos*. From Sambú, during the dry season the two villages can be reached by a 45-minute bike ride or a two-hour walk on a mud road. Most Emberá individuals cannot afford the cost of air travel. The more common way to get to the capital is to travel to La Palma, on the Gulf of San Miguel, on a boat or dugout canoe with an outboard motor. The trip usually lasts between three and six hours, depending on the size of the motor. Transportation between Sambú and La Palma is irregular and it is not unusual to have to wait two or three days before finding a boat travelling in that direction. Because of the absence or irregularity of schedules, difficult environmental conditions (e.g., heavy rains, tides, strong ocean waves), and other constraints (e.g., scarcity and high cost of gasoline in Sambú), travelling in and out of Sambú is rarely a smooth experience. In La Palma, boats with outboard motors take travellers on a 30-minute trip to the port of Puerto Quimba, where one takes a *chivita* (small bus) to the town of Metetí, on the Pan-American Highway. The last part of the trip consists of a six- to seven-hour bus ride from Metetí to Panama City.

My first study village, Bayamón, was founded in 1967 along the banks of the Sábalo River. Several Emberá clans who were living upstream along the Sábalo and Santa Rosa rivers joined together after the construction of a school. In 1975, the village had 58 households and 298 inhabitants (Bilbao et al., 1979:36). The household census we conducted in the summer of 2006 shows today a settlement of 90 households and 530 individuals, and an average of five members per household. Bayamón is the second largest settlement in the *comarca* and along with Puerto Indio – the headquarters of the Sambú District of the Comarca Emberá – one of only two with access to electricity. Yet, while 84 percent of households in Bayamón have electricity, 58 percent do not possess a single electrical device (aside from lighting).

My second study village, Atalaya, was founded in 1976. A settlement had been initially established downstream along the lower Jesús River in 1970. However, as the struggle for the creation of a *comarca* developed and the boundaries of the future Emberá territory were becoming defined, it became obvious that the initial settlement would be outside of the *comarca*. In 1976, families thus relocated upstream to the confluence of the Jesús and Jesucito rivers, about five kilometres northwest of Bayamón. Until 2007, however, the village was still technically just outside of the Comarca Emberá since it was located on the western bank of the Jesús River – one of the *comarca*'s natural boundaries. Nonetheless, the inhabitants of Atalaya have strongly identified as *comarcanos*. In 1987, there were 31 households with 195 inhabitants (Herlihy, n.d.). The census we conducted in the summer of 2006 counted 32 households and 143 inhabitants, with an average of four and a half individuals per household.

Villages in the *comarca* are typically equipped with a community house – where meetings and congresses are held, a solar-powered public phone (this is not the case for Atalaya, however), and a primary school with a small dining hall. There, children attending school receive free breakfasts and lunches donated by the *Fundación Pro Niños de Darién*<sup>13</sup>. Students who want to pursue secondary education must go to Sambú or to Puerto Indio, where the *Unandrucia* Technological Professional Institute created in 2001 offers training in agronomy, forestry, and tourism. Villages also typically have a soccer field and a basketball court where male teenagers and young adults train in the afternoon, as well as several *tiendas* (small convenience stores) selling basic items like salt, sugar, canned foods, and manufactured goods that are shipped from Panama City to Sambú, and later transported by dugout canoes to upriver villages or by tractor to villages accessible by road. As the second largest settlement in the area, Bayamón has three evangelical churches and a health post with a permanent Emberá health promoter paid by the government. But, to see a nurse or a doctor, one must attend at the health centre in Sambú.

The 2006 village census reveals that 83 percent of households in Bayamón and Atalaya are equipped with fibreglass, outdoor latrines – a recent donation of the *Ministerio de Salud* (Ministry of Health). In addition, running water is available in every house thanks to the recent construction of an aqueduct. Regardless, 75 percent and 25 percent of households in Atalaya and Bayamón respectively still bathe in the nearby river and almost all women wash clothes there. Three quarters of the houses have corrugated

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<sup>13</sup> A non-profit organization established in 1990 under the leadership of Msgr. Emiliani, former Vicar Apostolic for Darién, and whose objective is to improve the nutrition of children in the Darién Province through the provision of a balanced diet and a special focus on health, education, and training in the area of sustainable agricultural production.

steel roofs (as opposed to palm-thatched roofs), which, in many cases, were supplied for free by the *Programa Mejora de Viviendas* (Housing Improvement Program) of the *Ministerio de Vivienda* (Ministry of Housing). Finally, 87 percent of households still cook with firewood. Gas stoves are typically the first household appliance that is acquired as a household's purchasing power increases.

Almost all Emberá families in the *comarca* rely on subsistence agriculture, complemented by hunting, the collection of forest resources, fishing, and animal husbandry. As a result of important cultural, socioeconomic, and environmental changes, Emberá households are also increasingly relying on other activities such as occasional wage work and handicraft production to meet their cash needs (see Chapter V and VI). In 2000, the average monthly family income in the Sambú District of the Comarca Emberá was reported to be US\$60 (and US\$72 in the Cémaco District) (Alvarado, 2000:28).

Bayamón's subsistence lands run alongside the Sábalo River and the Santa Rosa and Boro Peón tributaries. It is bordered on the eastern side by the *rastrajos* (fallows) and cultivated fields of the Emberá community of Villa Keresia and, on the western side, by the *comarca's* boundary. On the other side of this boundary, *Interiorano* colonists established the village of La Colonia de Bijagual on what were the lands of Black and Emberá families. This settlement was founded around 1961 by a family from the Province of Chiriquí, and expanded throughout the 1960s as several relatives of this initial family came to the area. The bulk of *colono* immigrants arrived to the village between the late 1960s and 1975 (Bilbao et al., 1979:96), anxious to clear national lands and climb the social ladder (Hernández, 1970:85). In the year 2000, La Colonia had a total of 129 inhabitants. Other colonist villages were founded in the region during that

time, particularly along *Calle Larga* – the mud road connecting Sambú to the coastal town of Garachiné, on the Gulf of San Miguel.

The agricultural lands of Atalaya's villagers are found between the Jesús and Jesucito rivers, and are bounded on all sides by a landscape of young *rastrojos* and *potreros* (livestock pastures) owned by *Interioranos*. Villagers must walk three to four hours to reach the primary forest, a situation that puts great constraints on land-based subsistence activities.

Colonist families have been encroaching on Emberá subsistence lands for decades. Article 5 of Law 22 recognizes usufruct rights to land held by the non-indigenous families that settled in the area before the delimitation of the Comarca Emberá in 1983. On the other hand, Law 22 prohibits them from clearing new lands within the *comarca*. Nonetheless, these established families – along with additional, more recent newcomers residing in La Colonia – are repeatedly clearing new patches of forest in the *comarca* to grow grains and raise cattle. During my time in 'the field', a few *colono* men crossed the Santa Rosa River and cleared land near the Boro Peón River to plant corn. For local Emberá residents, this incident epitomized *Interioranos'* complete denial of the *comarca's* existence, as the corn field was located at the centre of Bayamón's subsistence zone. *Interiorano* colonists also participate in illegal logging operations – often with the tacit agreement of an Emberá traditional leader or villager eager to take advantage of this as an economic opportunity. The improved grasses *colonos* sow in their *potreros* (i.e., pastures) are also slowly invading Emberá fallowed lands and fields, thus making weeding more difficult and decreasing soil fertility and crop yields. These processes are

fuelling repeated conflicts and tensions between the inhabitants of Bayamón and La Colonia.

## Chapter IV – Exposing the ‘unseen evidence’: Dismantling contemporary discourses of indigenous places and identities

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*“If one begins, as I do, from the premise that thinking is as ‘real’ an activity as any other, and that ideas and discourses have important and very real social consequences, then in analyzing systems of ideas one cannot be content with interrogating them for their truth value. For a social scientist, there is always another question: what do these ideas do, what real social effects do they have?”* (Ferguson, 1990:xv).

### Introduction

In March and April 2007, *La Prensa* – one of Panama’s main national newspapers – published a series of articles on Darién as well as a special issue entitled *The forgotten people of Darién* (my translation). This intense and unusual media coverage of the region was motivated by the deaths of three children from hunger in two Emberá communities in the Tuirá River region (Morales, 2007a). One article argued that the loss of these children rendered “visible the invisible”. It stated:

For these deaths to have occurred, various phenomena had to be combined. The first one is the invisibility. Those who do not exist, cannot claim rights; they barely survive in a limbo that only allows them to breathe, without providing them anything else than a piece of land and a sky to look at. Many Panamanian indigenous peoples...do not exist (Gómez, 2007; my translation).

Arguing that indigenous peoples in Panama are invisible may seem quite surprising, considering the important rights, special programs, and policies they have benefitted from following the creation of *comarcas*. In this chapter, I demonstrate that the issue is not so much one of ‘invisibility’, but that indigenous peoples are ‘made visible’ in very problematic ways.

The regimes of representation through which the ‘other’ is produced are inseparable from what Rajchman (1991:82) calls ‘spaces of constructed visibility’ – a concept he derives from Foucault’s ‘art of seeing’. Rajchman demonstrates that, for Foucault, ‘visibility’ has to do with the problem of “how spaces [are] designed to make things

seeable, and seeable in a specific way” (ibid.). As I explain in the second chapter of this dissertation, such spaces as the clinic, the prison, or the confessional, Foucault argues, entail particular spatializations of individuals – that is, specific ways of making us, and certain things within us, visible. As such, spatialization plays a fundamental role in the constitution of the subject (Rajchman, 1991:82). The problem is thus no longer a matter of “what is seen” but of “what *can* be seen” (1991:70; emphasis in original). This alerts us to the historical, geographical, and cultural conditions of production of particular modes of visualization. In other words, these theoretical insights underscore the fact that our representations of the world are always deeply constrained by what one historical epoch allows to be seen, experienced, and said. The particular spatializations and regimes of representation through which individuals – and the world in general – are given to be seen and are simultaneously constituted, are thus deeply embedded in the operation of specific constellations of power/knowledge. They are disciplinary tactics and have profound material implications. As I mention in Chapter I, the visuality that predominates today in Panama is profoundly shaped by the country’s colonial past. The discourses of indigenous peoples I examine in this chapter take place in the context of a long history of marginalization of and indifference towards indigenous places and societies on the part of the Panamanian state. Some key features of such history of state-indigenous relations are exposed in Chapter V, as I retrace the historical construction of the Panamanian nation and analyze the state’s ‘conquest’ of Darién in the 1970s.

In this chapter, I examine several key government reports, as well as documents from international donor agencies, academics, and Panamanian NGOs, from the 1970s to the present. Pertinence, significance, and access formed the basis on which these

documents were chosen for analysis. Compared to other regions of Panama, there are still few data available on Darién. In addition, as my archival research showed, the narratives being produced today tend to reproduce (sometimes word for word) the same descriptions and analyses released 20 or 30 years ago, providing few new insights and understandings of the region. When possible, I provide concrete examples grounded in the Darién region, but I also focus on the state's representations of Panamanian indigenous spaces and peoples in general, rather than on the Emberá in particular.

As highlighted above, I draw on theoretical contributions from poststructuralism and postcolonialism to show how spatial understandings of *comarcas* (and other 'indigenous places') as disconnected, autonomous enclaves occupying blurry locations make indigenous peoples visible as homogeneous, vulnerable, and static – in sum, as people without their own trajectories, with no history. I pay particular attention to a common spatial and social classificatory scheme (i.e., 'rural', 'urban', and 'indigenous') used in current government literature and demonstrate that despite its apparent naturalness, this scheme does not objectively reflect a pre-existing spatial order: it is the product of specific power relations that, while attempting to increase the visibility of indigenous peoples, consolidate mental maps of 'us'/'them'. Next, I examine the dominant discourse of indigenous poverty in Panama and show how it further cements the essentialization of indigenous peoples. These various tropes strip indigenous individuals of agency: they lead us to see them as unable to negotiate change and initiate actions – that is, as the passive recipients of 'external' initiatives designed to 'rescue' them and 'improve' their conditions or as helpless victims of marginalization. These

representational and discursive practices thus play a critical role in both the constitution and consolidation of contemporary postcolonial power relations.

### **1. A postcolonial visuality**

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Recent governmental literature exhibits a socio-spatial division of Panama into three zones: rural, indigenous, and urban. This classification has become so ‘natural’ and ‘evident’ that several social phenomena are now framed according to this spatial scheme. For example, in the *Policy and Strategy for Social Development 2000-2004* report released by the *Ministerio de Economía y Finanzas* (MEF, the Ministry of Economy and Finances), poverty is examined through the three categories of ‘rural poverty’, ‘urban poverty’, and ‘indigenous poverty’ (MEF 2000a). Paying attention to such categorization is critical because, as Natter and Jones remind us, “the meaning content, truth value, and objectivity assignable to any spatial object/sign system rely upon its naturalization” (1997:151). In other words, the production of any spatial coherence or permanence is *achieved*, rather than *found* (Harvey, 1996). This means that the classificatory system examined here is produced through the iterative meeting and weaving of particular power relations rather than being the objective reflection of a pre-existing spatial order. It requires the erasure of many ‘relational complexities’ (Murdoch, 2006:12), which I examine below.

#### **1.1 ‘Indigenous areas’: Blurry locations and ambiguous identities**

First, the spatial and social classification scheme described above assumes that both the identity and location of ‘indigenous areas’ are evident/straightforward. Yet, a closer examination reveals many ambiguities regarding what exactly should be included in the

category 'indigenous areas'. In a recent MEF report entitled *Poverty and Inequality in Panama*, the category 'indigenous areas' encompasses "the population residing in both the territories formed by indigenous *comarcas* and the indigenous areas outside *comarcas*" (2006b:45). These indigenous areas outside *comarcas* correspond to "the areas of the provinces of Bocas del Toro, Darién, Chiriquí, Panamá, and Veraguas inhabited by a majority of indigenous groups" (2006b:47). But what does a 'majority' of indigenous groups mean exactly? In fact, the proportion of indigenous peoples may vary widely depending on the spatial unit being considered. It may be very high at the *corregimiento* level but negligible at the district level. Herlihy (1986:96) notes, for instance, that in the 1960 national census, places inhabited totally by an indigenous population were categorized as 'indigenous settlements', while those with a mixed population were classified as 'mixed settlements'; yet, this last category was misleading because as soon as a one or two Black families were present in an indigenous settlement, this one was classified as 'mixed'.

Besides, when it comes to mapping these so-called 'indigenous areas', only the *comarcas* are represented (MEF, 2006b:46). As a result, all the indigenous regions outside of the *comarcas* are lost from view, and indigeneity becomes equated with – and restricted to – *comarca* spaces. This is significant because when the Comarca Emberá was created in 1983, 51 percent of the Emberá population residing in Darién was left outside of its boundaries (Perafán and Nessim, 2002:3). Today, an estimated 139,591 indigenous persons or 49 percent of Panama's indigenous population live outside *comarcas*, mainly in Panama City but also in the urban areas of the Provinces of Coclé, Herrera, Los Santos, Panamá, and Colón (IDB, 2005:36).

In a more recent report released by the *Ministerio de Desarrollo Social* (MIDES, the Ministry of Social Development), the analysis is no longer conducted according to the “rural, urban, and indigenous areas” scheme but based on a “rural, urban, and *corregimiento comarcal*” classification (MIDES, 2008a:4). Here, only the people in the last category are explicitly recognized as indigenous while the indigenous population outside the *corregimiento comarcal* is incorporated into the ‘rural’ category. Yet, although the category *corregimiento comarcal* is more specific and narrow than the term ‘indigenous areas’, the report uses the two interchangeably, oblivious to the material implications of these spatial representations – that is, the role of spatial constructions in defining the boundaries of identity.

Another issue inherent to this classificatory scheme is the problematic relationship between ‘rural’ and ‘indigenous’. In recent governmental documents, the term ‘rural areas’ gives way to ‘non-indigenous, rural areas’. The need for such clarification seems to indicate that some other rural areas are, conversely, indigenous, and that, as such, ‘indigenous areas’ also belong to ‘rural areas’. The following passage argues in that direction:

When it is necessary to group the different categories according to which the rural area is subdivided (non-indigenous and indigenous rural areas), the category ‘Total Rural’ will be used – which, in other words, [refers to] the sum of the non-indigenous rural area and the indigenous rural area (MEF, 1999:x; my translation).

Yet, immediately after having asserted that ‘indigenous areas’ are part of ‘rural areas’, the dichotomy between ‘indigenous’ and ‘rural’ is reinstated:

In the statistical charts that are presented in this document, information is classified independently according to two categories: rural and indigenous. The category ‘rural area’ includes the rural areas per se as well as the areas of difficult access, but does not include the geographical areas in which

indigenous communities reside. In other words, the rural areas considered here are non-indigenous rural areas. The geographical areas in which the inhabitants of indigenous communities reside are grouped under a *separate* category denominated 'indigenous area', or 'Indigenous' in its summarized version (ibid.).

The need to repeatedly re-introduce a clear divide between 'indigenous' and 'rural' areas conveys the impression that indigenous areas are not, after all, *really* rural, or that they are somehow very different from the common understanding of what rural areas are. If 'indigenous areas' are neither *fully* rural nor urban then what *kind* of spaces are they? Where do they belong exactly? In other words, the inconsistencies of these classificatory practices participate in rendering 'indigenous areas' as some kind of indeterminate space, an undefined 'other' that does not *properly fit* in any of the conventional spaces defined by the classical urban/rural binary, and that, as such, remains floating on the edges of the national territory. While the classificatory scheme produced here attempts to 'tame' confusion and to produce a sense of coherence and totality, the inconsistent use of spatial categories alerts us to the impossibility or, more accurately, the unsustainability of this kind of spatial order. Despite the apparent 'neatness' of the classificatory scheme, each spatial category/division contains the traces of its constitutive outside (i.e., the 'other' it tries to break away from to assert itself).

## **1.2 A dichotomous racial landscape**

This classificatory scheme is problematic in a number of other ways. The terms 'rural' and 'urban' typically define and differentiate space in terms of population density, types of activities, and nature of the physical landscape. Urban areas correspond to densely populated, built environments, in which secondary and tertiary activities prevail. In contrast, rural areas are less intensively settled and are mainly characterized by

agricultural landscapes, and, to a lesser extent, ‘natural’ environments. ‘Indigenous’, on the other hand, defines space in terms of a particular ethnicity. Ethnicity is understood here as an obvious and innate marker of social differentiation, as illustrated in the following statement:

The indigenous populations differ from urban and rural populations because of their ethnic dimension (Moreno, 1997:4, cited in Government of Panama, 2005:3; my translation).

The category ‘indigenous areas’ thus refers to those regions exhibiting:

...clear patterns of cultural (customs, traditions) and ethnic (a communal dialect) identification, and specific forms of organization (*congresos*) (MEF, 1999:88; my translation).

An obvious issue here is: *who* holds the power to define the terms of indigeneity – in sum, who has the authority to seize upon a number of particular traits and make it into a system of social differentiation (Natter and Jones, 1997:147)? Who determines whether or not the customs and traditions exhibited by a group are distinctly or ‘authentically’ indigenous? These are critical questions. When the 1990 national census allowed, for the first time, individuals themselves – rather than the census ‘experts’ – to determine ethnic belonging, a ‘new’ indigenous group – the Bokotas – was identified. Similarly, the 2000 national census revealed that the individuals that the national society had been calling ‘Guyamies’ for decades were, in fact, composed of two ethnic groups (Carrasquilla, 2005:72; IDB, 2005:28): the Ngöbe and the Buglé, who speak mutually unintelligible languages<sup>14</sup>.

The demarcation of specific geographical areas as ‘indigenous’ implies that what falls beyond or outside these areas is, by opposition, the locus of the ‘non-indigenous’: rural and urban areas are, in other words, the sites of the ‘national culture’ (Dir. General

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<sup>14</sup> Although many Buglé in particular are bilingual (pers. com. Derek Smith).

Planificación, 1972a:2, Heckadon, 1985:46, Herrera, 1971:349). Horton (2006:835) notes that, from the time of Panama's independence to the 1940s, the Panamanian elite were very concerned with maintaining a 'white' nation, which translated into the marginalization of indigenous peoples, Asians, and Blacks. While these groups continued to be largely ignored, she notes that, "By the 1940s, a second elite nationalist project had emerged which linked national identity to the Hispanic as embodied in the dress, music and traditions of mestizo *Interioranos*" (Ropp, 2000, cited in Horton, 2006:836). Although the content of Panamanian identity was later 'stretched' to include ethnic and racial diversity – particularly during Torrijos' regime in the 1970s – the tendency to define the national identity/culture through the exclusion of a number of 'others' (especially Blacks and indigenous peoples) is still very much alive today. The urban, rural, and indigenous classificatory scheme thus produces a 'structured coherence of space' that plays a critical role in 'organizing alterity' (Natter and Jones, 1997:150). It actively territorializes ethnicity/culture by allocating them to distinct geographical zones. Two spaces are created: one for indigenous peoples and the other for everyone else – an argument Harris (2002:265) also makes for indigenous reserves in British Columbia, Canada. In sum, the spatial classification running through most current government documents legitimizes the idea that "every identity has its place" (Natter and Jones, 1997:153). The "ordered, systematic and differentiated assignment of *place*" (Gregory, 2004:17; emphasis in original) resulting from these practices of cultural territorialization reveals that performances of space are always performances of power. They actively create a "familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space beyond 'ours' which is 'theirs'" (Said, 1979:54). This also demonstrates that if indigeneity (as much as any other

racial identity) was, to a certain extent, a precondition for the division of space, it is also, at the same time, an outcome of such a division. In short, space and spatiality produce indigeneity by separating people into different groups, in the same way that the creation of separated spaces during Apartheid in South Africa was central, as Mitchell (2000:251-2) demonstrates, to the construction of ‘black’ and ‘white’ races.

The practice of territorializing cultures and identities hinges on a conceptualization of space as “geometrically divisible into discrete bits” (Smith and Katz, 1993:75). It sanctions a rigid geographical grammar of inbuilt disconnections, natural boundaries, innate differences, and fundamental isolation and remoteness. This is manifest, for instance, in the systematic emphasis on the so-called ‘difficult access’ of indigenous areas:

In their majority (54%), indigenous communities believed that their living conditions remained the same [compared to the last survey], which is understandable given that, in general, these communities are located in areas of difficult access, with limited services and weak communication to meet their needs (MEF, 2006a:21; my translation).

What is called the ‘geographical factor’ – which refers in particular to the remoteness and difficulty of access of the communities in which indigenous peoples live – is without doubt one of the factors of exclusion (MEF, 2000a:29; my translation).

Interestingly, no one seems to wonder *why* indigenous territories are ‘difficult to access’ to begin with. *How* did these territories *come to be* located where they are today? In sum, ‘difficulty of access’ (and the poverty associated with it) is framed as a ‘natural’ outcome of geography, sweeping aside – as Ferguson (1990:62-62) convincingly argues in a study on Lesotho – history and politics.

This grammar of innate disconnections is also evident in the continuous framing of indigenous peoples’ spatial location and mobility in terms of dwelling *inside/outside* and

movement *in/out* of indigenous areas – binary constructions that suggest the crossing of limits or frontiers between neatly demarcated spaces:

One out of two indigenous children – living in their territories – is malnourished as opposed to one out of four who lives outside indigenous areas (Government of Panama, 2005:23).

In addition, the habit of designating indigenous territories as ‘traditional’ and/or ‘natural’ reinforces the taken-for-grantedness of both the existence and seemingly ‘innate’ spatial boundaries of such territories:

...the insertion of the indigenous population in the market economy is being reflected in the employment of workers outside their natural environment or territory (Alvarado, 2000:33; my translation).

Almost half of the indigenous population lives outside its traditional areas (Government of Panama, 2005:26; my translation).

To define a spatial entity as the ‘natural’ or ‘traditional’ place of a human group is to subscribe to a view of space as an inert substratum existing in its own right. In other words, space is viewed here as an empty container that pre-exists social relations: a mere surface to be occupied (Ingold, 2000:133) and upon which social behaviours and actions simply occur. It erases what Gupta and Ferguson (1997a) aptly call the ‘topography of power’ through which space is continuously (re)produced – that is, made into specific places and localities – and through which it acquires meaning. The ‘boundaries’ delimiting the territories and regions that we commonly designate as the ‘traditional’ homes of indigenous peoples are no more ‘natural’ or ‘innate’ than Panama’s current national boundaries, for instance. There is a pervasive tendency to forget that what we recognize today as ‘traditional’ indigenous territories are both colonial and contemporary artefacts: the products of a long history of often violent encounters and complex power relations between indigenous groups and European colonizers and their descendants.

Hence, the division of Panama into ‘rural’, ‘urban’, and ‘indigenous’ is not ‘natural’ at all. Such spatial divisions are, as Mitchell puts it, “the power to define, the power to reify, the power to make the social into the natural” (2000:256).

## **2. The politics of identity**

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### **2.1 Collapsing indigenous peoples in place/nature**

A recent publication of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) on the successes and challenges of building the Comarca Ngöbe-Buglé in western Panama states that:

...the setting up of the *comarca* has helped the Ngöbe-Buglé population to feel that it belonged to a people clearly enclosed in a territory (IFAD and PREVAL, 2004:93; my translation).

Of interest to me in this statement is not so much the question of what the Ngöbe and Buglé populations felt; rather, I think this statement illustrates very well the practice of cultural territorialization that I examined above – a practice that consists in taking for granted human groups’ belonging to place. In addition, it corroborates my belief that the creation of indigenous *comarcas* gives further legitimacy to ideas of ‘resolute correspondence’ between identity and space (Natter and Jones, 1997:153): the belief in a natural, inherent bond between particular peoples and places. Such assumption underlies, for instance, the practice of ‘slotting’ indigenous cultures in their natural environment. This is reflected in a brochure published by the *Asociación Nacional para la Conservación de la Naturaleza* or ANCON<sup>15</sup> (National Association for the Conservation of Nature), which states:

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<sup>15</sup> *Asociación Nacional para la Conservación de la Naturaleza*, a leading and influential Panamanian non-profit, private organization that works to conserve Panama’s biodiversity and natural resources.

Darién: the word only evokes majestic virgin forests, infinite woods, the most exuberant fauna and flora, natural places of incomparable beauty, ocean-like rivers and millennial indigenous cultures (ANCON, 1994:32-34; my translation).

Similarly, a book by the Group Bavarian Motors that pays tribute to the action of Monsignor Rómulo Emiliani, Bishop and Vicar Apostolic for Darién between 1988 and 2001, reports:

The Emberá know how to locate themselves within nature...as the sons of the forest. They know how to live in harmony with that habitat (GBM, 1992:8-10; my translation).

Both statements unequivocally collapse indigenous societies in nature and naturalize indigenous peoples' relationships to place: while the first one does so by recasting indigenous cultures as one of Darién's many natural elements, the second statement achieves the same result by portraying indigenous peoples as the offspring of the forest. This view is so pervasive that, for most people in Latin America, the term 'indigenous' has become synonymous with 'forest dweller' (Martinez, 2007:441) and, reversely, 'indigenous areas' typically evoke spaces of 'untouched nature'. This is evident in the practice of systematically correlating indigenous settlements with the location of forested lands:

In Panama and in the rest of Central America, there is a close relation between the areas of virgin forests and the settlements of indigenous populations; in other words, the regions with tropical forest cover coincide with the presence of territories occupied by indigenous peoples (Government of Panama, 2005:9; my translation).

Such practices are striking in stories about Darién. As I show in Chapter V, the initiative launched by the Panamanian government in the early 1970s to 'conquer' Darién fostered important demographic, social, and environmental changes – notably, high rates of deforestation and the expansion of cattle ranching. From the 1980s onwards,

international donor agencies and local NGOs repeatedly portrayed the province as a 'threatened landscape' (Velásquez, 2005; Wali, 1995). The following statement by ANCON provides a vivid example of this discourse:

The drama goes on and every day I see hundreds of trucks with trunks, taking away thousands of trees in pieces or planks. ...My heart is in pain because of that haemorrhage of life that leaves our forests without their best trees. ...Hundreds of farmers, using archaic methods, are decimating our forests with fire and pastures. ...Slowly they are attacking our mountains, converting them into bare landscapes. ...In short, Darién only has a few years left to live and this lung of Central America...is in agony (ANCON, 1994:16; my translation).

In the face of this environmental 'haemorrhage', indigenous areas stand out as places of undisturbed nature: "the indigenous *comarcas*", a government report contends, "have demonstrated being the most effective barriers against the exploitation of the forest" (MIPPE, 1998:12). Central to the representation of Darién as a 'threatened landscape' is thus the framing of the province as a dichotomous space counterposing the 'pristine' forests of indigenous *comarcas* – a zone of 'pure nature' – with *colonos*' pastures – a zone of (agri)culture and ecological destruction. While this dichotomy (cultivated/degraded landscapes versus 'natural' landscapes) attempts to protect the forest from the encroachment of the agricultural frontier, it also reinstates problematic boundaries between 'nature' and 'society'. This framework reinforces the position of *colonos* as *the* representatives of agricultural Darién and as *the* agents of local deforestation (Wali, 1995:150), and collapses simultaneously indigenous peoples into nature. If indigenous peoples are part of 'rural areas', it is *only* as the marginal inhabitants of lands that are yet to be fully incorporated in (agri)culture or protected from the destructive forces of 'modernity'.

These representations are far from trivial; they have important consequences for policies affecting indigenous regions. In fact, they produce what could be called a spatial hierarchy of progress. In a context where forests continue to connote underdevelopment and backwardness, indigenous spaces – as places of ‘untouched’ nature and raw natural resources – are implicitly relegated to a stage preceding the unfolding of progress and modernity. This is all the more evident in the contemporary discourses of indigenous poverty I examine below. Moreover, in making ‘nature’ visible as a strictly biophysical entity, the social and cultural histories and practices embedded in it are erased, sanctioning powerful discourses about indigenous peoples being ‘lazy’ and owning ‘too much land’.

Finally, as I explain in Chapter II, dominant constructions and understandings of indigenous identities continue to be largely informed by a view of time and humankind’s place in nature that shares strong analogies with the ‘genealogical tree’ (Ingold, 2000:135). As Ingold demonstrates, within this framework, ‘people *of* the land’ (i.e., our ancestors and contemporary indigenous peoples – those who maintain strong ties with land) are positioned at the foot of tree – that is, at the ‘roots of history’, while ‘people *on* the land’ (i.e., the ‘modern’ people who emancipated themselves from nature’s laws and mastered it) occupy the upper branches of the tree. This entails a conception of history and culture as both rising up from the land/nature to eventually dominate it. It follows that, on the one hand, collapsing indigenous peoples with nature encloses them in a timeless past, outside history (issues that I come back to in a subsequent section). On the other hand, it legitimates the “[colonists’] domination of indigenes, just as culture is bound to dominate nature” (Ingold, *ibid.*).

Mapping identity in terms of rootedness in place – as illustrated by the literature examined here – is also highly problematic for it creates a dichotomy between places in which indigenous peoples' belonging is deemed 'genuine' and 'proper' and, conversely, other spaces (i.e., spaces of 'national culture') in which indigenous presence becomes 'out of place' and illegitimate (Peters, 2002, cited in Wilson and Peters, 2005:399). In this light, any territorial displacement/transcending on the part of indigenous individuals is viewed as somewhat 'odd', 'suspicious', and 'pathological' (Malkki, 1997:61-62). This is evident, for instance, in the enduring construction of urban areas as 'non-indigenous spaces'. In Panama, until the 1990 national census, only the individuals residing in designated 'indigenous zones' were registered as being 'indigenous' (Carrasquilla, 2005:72). Today, although the literature emphasizes the growing migration of indigenous peoples to urban areas in Panama and throughout Latin America (Government of Panama, 2005; McSweeney and Jokish, 2007; MEF, 2006a), statistics are rarely disaggregated to reflect indigenous presence in cities<sup>16</sup>.

Tying indigenous identities to particular environments also means that, as soon as the physical connection between indigenous groups and their 'natural' territory is in any way altered (e.g., through migration), indigenous cultures/identities are almost immediately portrayed as vanishing or as losing their 'authenticity' through processes of 'contamination' and alteration:

Almost half of the indigenous population lives outside its traditional areas, escaping from poverty through the search of better living conditions, education

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<sup>16</sup> A notable exception can be found in a recent report by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) entitled *Los Pueblos Indígenas de Panamá: Diagnóstico sociodemográfico a partir del censo del 2000*. This report provides a table illustrating the number of indigenous peoples (per ethnic group) living in urban versus rural areas (2005:37). It also acknowledges the growing migration of indigenous peoples to urban areas in Panama and throughout Latin America (ibid., 46).

and employment, at the cost of rootlessness and loss of their identity (Government of Panama, 2005:26; my translation).

The indigenous population residing in urban areas takes on positions specific to these areas, which, combined with the growth of the tertiary and informal sectors, could cause changes in the cultural and social patterns specific to this ethnic group and engender, in the future, a greater process of acculturation (IDB, 2005:78; my translation).

This clearly exemplifies how the ‘assignment of place’ (central to practices of cultural territorialization) as well as ideas of ‘innate’ geographical belonging (inherent to the rooting of people in soil), mutually produce each other and both intensify the “unity of the ‘us’ and the otherness of the ‘other’” (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992:14). It legitimizes a view of cultures as ‘impermeable’, and mutually incompatible/exclusive:

...indigenous cultures form systems that, until now, have not been considered compatible with the cultural systems of the so-called societies of national culture, which, in Darién, expressed themselves through the *colonos* and *darienitas* (Dir. General Planificación, 1972a:18; my translation).

This means that indigenous peoples are always portrayed as being caught up in seemingly irreconcilable identity dilemmas:

In a globalizing society made of markets and blocs, the indigenous communities are struggling between maintaining their local processes and cultural identity and adapting to new realities and social needs (Alvarado, 2000:28; my translation).

These narratives ignore the fact that ‘self’ and ‘other’ *require* each other and that “all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure” (Said, 1993:xxv). Identities and cultures are hybrid assemblages formed through interconnections, appropriations, and common experiences (1993:217). They always emerge partly through ‘self-production’ and partly through ‘categorization by others’. They are a sort of ‘bricolage’ involving multiple and complex processes of negotiation, borrowing, resistance, and transformation (Malkki, 1997:71; Said, 1993:217). *Parumas*, *chunga*

basketry, or the ‘traditional’ pieces of jewellery worn by both Emberá men and women are all telling examples of this ‘bricolage’. Although these elements are commonly viewed as emblematic of an ‘authentic’ Emberá cultural identity, all of them are deeply hybrid cultural productions. *Parumas* are designed and fabricated in Japan. Emberá jewellery is primarily made of plastic beads and silver coins. While many of these coins are Panamanian, I was shown during my fieldwork, necklaces using Colombian and Ecuadorian coins dating back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, what we call today ‘traditional’ Emberá *chunga* baskets are mostly copied from Wounaan handicrafts, whose shapes and designs were greatly influenced by a variety of non-indigenous actors and processes (see Velásquez, 2001). All these cultural artefacts are vivid examples of Emberá and Wounaan peoples’ continuous historical interactions with, engagement in, and adaptation to, their surrounding environments. While these interactions have shaped their culture, they have not eliminated them as a distinct people.

## **2.2 Enduring essentialist narratives**

I would like to start this section with two quotes. The first one is from a government report written in 1972 that provides a brief overview of the different human groups inhabiting the Darién region:

The concept of human groups, differentiated by race, culture, and historical background, has strong validity in the Darién. Each group forms a sociological entity with cultural frontiers well differentiated and with the desire to maintain their cultural independence, for the moment. ...The traditional economic patterns of the [Chocó] group revolve around shifting cultivation, and complementary activities such as hunting and fishing. ...The Chocoes are increasingly more connected to the cash economy through the commercial cultivation of plantains and bananas, followed by rice and corn (Dir. General Planificación, 1972a:1-7; my translation).

The second quote is from an academic article published in 1998 in the Panamanian *Revista Cultural Lotería* and which focuses primarily on the colonization process of the Darién Province. Pastor, the author, writes:

The concept of human groups, differentiated by ethnicity, culture, and historical background, has strong validity in the Darién. Each group forms a socio-cultural entity well differentiated and with strong interests in maintaining their current social and cultural independence. ...The traditional patterns of the economy of the [Emberá-Waunana] group revolve around shifting cultivation, and complementary activities such as hunting and fishing. This group is every day more connected to the cash economy, initially through the commercial cultivation of plantains and bananas, then rice and corn (1998:53; my translation).

These two texts speak for themselves in terms of Pastor's blatant plagiarizing. Yet, even more appalling to me than the poor scholarship ethics displayed here, is the fact that, despite the 26 years that separate these two accounts, someone believes that an ethnographic account from the early 1970s can provide a legitimate description of the situation of the Emberá in the late 1990s (and that the description was published as an expert analysis in Panama's leading social science journal). Despite the profound political, social, and environmental transformations that the Darién region and its Emberá population have experienced in recent history, according to Pastor, nothing has changed. Darién and, most specifically, its indigenous inhabitants, are irremediably stuck in the past, impassive to the passing of time, remaining outside historical and social changes. Incidentally, a recent press article quotes a catholic missionary in Darién arguing that, "many Emberá and Kuna communities 'are like they were in the first day of the Creation'" (Benjamín, 2008). Clearly, Pastor is far from being the only one to remain under the grip of such essentialist thinking.

As I explain in Chapter II, theorising identity/culture in essentialist terms means equating them with a set of pre-given, fixed, and unalterable characteristics that form a coherent, homogenous, and unchanging ‘wholeness’. Essentialism is clearly at play when indigenous groups are described as displaying ‘millennial’ cultures. Indeed, behind its seemingly romantic connotation, the term ‘millennial’ hints at something that goes back to the dawn of history and that is both inalienable and non-evolutive (Malek, 1963:107-8, cited in Said, 1979:97). It denotes cultures undisturbed by the passing of time. Representations of indigenous areas often connote a journey backward through history. In the following extract, a journalist describes the Emberá community of Yapé, Darién, where Colombian civilians have taken refuge:

...in this piece of forest, where there are no cars, where roads are just a dream, where electricity is an utopia, and where the only means of transport is the dugout canoe that has been used since colonial time, Colombian refugees are treated as ‘second-class’ citizens (Morales and López, 2007; my translation).

While the expression ‘In this piece of forest’ creates a biophysical distinction that sets the community apart geographically, counterposing cars, roads, and electricity (i.e., all overt symbols of ‘progress’) with an indigenous dugout canoe unmistakably positions Yapé in an earlier historical epoch. The implicit idea here is that almost nothing has changed since the conquest. Going to Yapé, one does not find – as Massey would say – “contemporary stories, but the past” (2005:123), a place stripped of history and still awaiting for ‘modernity’ to unfold. These essentialist lenses sanction imaginative geographies of ‘anachronistic spaces’ (i.e., backward, atavistic), in which “geographical difference across space is rendered as a historical difference across time” (McClintock, 1995:40). This sanctions another dichotomy: one that opposes a seemingly ahistorical indigenous experience, to a dynamic western history (Braun, 2002:102-103). In sum,

there is a sustained incapacity to accept that, no matter how unequal the terms of our encounters with the inhabitants of places like Yapé, such encounter is the “meeting-up of two stories” (Massey, 2005:120).

This partly explains why most texts on indigenous peoples – no matter when they were written – systematically recount the occurrence of some significant, *unprecedented* changes disrupting stable indigenous societies (Des Chene, 1997:68):

Indigenous peoples are currently experiencing a transition process between a subsistence economy and an incipient insertion in the market economy (Government of Panama, 2005:28; my translation).

The Chocoos are every day more closely linked to the market economy through the commercial cultivation of plantain and banana, followed by rice and corn (Dir. General Planificación, 1972a:7; my translation).

Again, although 33 years separate these two accounts, both describe the Emberá’s participation in the market economies in the 1970s and 2000s as an *incipient* process. Yet, a look at Emberá history reveals that they started to grow bananas as a commercial crop as early as the 1930s, after a Swedish man, Captain Hans Elliot, created a demonstration plantation in the area of the Yapé River (Méndez, 1979:355). In fact, commercial exchanges between the Emberá and Wounaan and the Spanish and Blacks occurred even earlier – during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – as a result of the high demand for agricultural and natural products such as wood, rubber, *tagua* nuts (*Phytelephas macrocarpa*), and ipecac plants (*Psychotria ipecacuanha*) (Evandro, 2007:15; OAS, 1978:143).

In addition, insofar as contact between indigenous and western societies is understood as ‘rupture’, the changes occurring in indigenous societies are synonymous with degeneration, contamination, corruption, and loss (Braun, 2002:104-105). In short,

cultural change within indigenous societies is harmful while, in contrast, change in the rest of society is commonly interpreted as a sign of dynamism, adaptability, and ‘progress’. Emblematic of such view is the following extract from an article published in the Panamanian academic journal *Tareas*:

The implementation of a European-style development theory [in Amerindian communities will] cause what Stavenhagen has called an economic – and eventually cultural – ethnocide (Guionneau-Sinclair, 1996:112; my translation).

Given that the socio-cultural and economic changes experienced by indigenous societies can only be understood in opposition to what was there before – rather than as part of continuous processes of adaptation and reworking of indigenous cultures and identities – one cannot help but contrast a ‘pure’, ‘innocent’ past to a ‘corrupted’, ‘contaminated’ present, as exemplified in the following governmental report:

...the Chocoos are in a situation of constant contacts with other groups, not only at the regional but also national levels. This has resulted in a growing rate of acculturation that translates into the adoption of a large number of [foreign] material elements and the fact that almost 75% of men speak the official language of the country (Dir. General Planificación, 1972a:10; my translation).

As argued by Braun, “contact becomes rupture, and hybridity equated to inauthenticity” (2002:104) – a correlation that further evidences our incapacity to conceive indigenous cultures and history as equally complex, dynamic, and inventive as western ones. I emphasize in Chapter II that this not only drives indigenous peoples to be selective in the ways they represent themselves; it also inhibits their ability to adopt other positions, and, therefore, limits their capacity to adapt to changing circumstances (Keith and Pile, 1993:35). In other words, essentialism ‘petrifies’ identities/cultures: it sets the proper boundaries of what is accepted as legitimate and right (Pickering, 2001:xiii).

This ‘petrification’ of identities plays a critical role in the creation of ‘myths’ (Pickering, *ibid.*) and ‘symbols’ (Barron, 2000:104) manifest in the pervasive portrayals of indigenous peoples as protectors of the Earth and custodians of ‘nature’. These narratives, often adopted by indigenous leaders themselves, can impose strong constraints on indigenous groups’ leeway and ability to engage in new activities. As I show in subsequent chapters, the refusal to see indigenous peoples as anything else but the natural guardians of ‘virgin forests’ greatly impedes an adequate engagement with, and comprehension of, the diverse livelihood strategies they are adopting to cope with the increasingly complex challenges they face to make a living, feeding controversies over ‘proper’ performances of indigeneity. In sum, such politics of identity sanctions what Massey calls a ‘will to closure’ that, she argues, “must be prised open...to enable a way out from present-day Eurocentrism” (2005:121).

Conceptualizing identity in essentialist terms also means viewing the bearers of such identity or culture as homogeneous – that is, as forming a cohesive, uniform body of individuals sharing the same interests and equally positioned with respect to a variety of rights, responsibilities, and rules. Such an assumption often underlies, for instance, the ‘community-based’ approach informing many development projects targeting indigenous groups. Yet, this concept of ‘community’ is not necessarily significant or meaningful in all indigenous societies. As I show in Chapter V, life in nucleated settlements is a very recent phenomenon among the Emberá – one many individuals feel ‘uncomfortable’ with. In fact, Emberá families dislike being watched and observed by neighbours and prefer the privacy and space associated with dispersed households (Faron, 1962:21). In addition, until recently, the Emberá were organized in autonomous household groups.

Continued allegiance to the household over the community is discernable in the widespread scepticism numerous Emberá informants expressed to me towards political and decision-making structures at the village and *comarca* levels. It is also evident in their common reluctance to work cooperatively on village projects.

Assumptions of a prevailing homogeneity among Panamanian indigenous peoples also authorize romantic claims about indigenous societies' social cohesion and inherently democratic political structures, as illustrated in the following government report:

Indigenous communities have greater social capital than non-indigenous ones, since 4/5 participate in some type of organization as opposed to 3/4 of non-indigenous, rural communities and half of urban communities. In addition, indigenous communities have greater capacity for internal, horizontal communication both within each community and between various communities (Government of Panama, 2005:6; my translation).

A majority of the reports and projects targeting indigenous communities continue to treat them as monolithic entities and fail to recognize the various axes of social differentiation through which they are structured. For example, in 2004, the Louis Berger Group published the results of a consultancy to assist the Emberá-Wounaan General Congress in the formulation and implementation of a territorial plan for the Sambú District of the Comarca Emberá. On the first page of the report, the authors explain that the evaluation methodology had to be adapted because of "the condition of the indigenous *comarca* [which has] socio-cultural patterns and an economic model that are homogeneous" (LBG, 2004:1). This claim subsequently informs every step of the analysis. In sharp contrast with such approach, my research findings demonstrate that gender, age, socio-economic status, education, political membership, and life-cycle positioning shape people's access to land, cash income, or power in different ways and trigger many conflicts within indigenous communities. Ironically, the same governmental

survey praising the existence of more horizontal social relations in indigenous areas also reveals that it is in these communities that social differences are the most strongly felt. As Table 1 indicates, there are more conflicts along lines of life-cycle position, socioeconomic status, ethnic identity, and notions of belonging in indigenous communities than in those classified as urban or rural.

**Table 1:** Typology of problems existing between individuals and between groups in Panama's urban, rural, and indigenous communities

Existence of serious problems	Total (%)	Urban (%)	Rural (%)	Indigenous (%)
Between people with more and less education	11.1	12.4	7.5	22.5
Between the poor and not poor	10.9	12.4	6.7	24.3
Between long-time residents and newcomers	10.9	12.4	6.7	24.3
Between people of different races	6.6	6.0	5.7	13.2
Between older and younger people	14.9	18.8	8.9	25.0

Source: Formularios de Reuniones con la Comunidad, Encuesta de Niveles de Vida, 2003 (In: MEF, 2006a:43)

Similarly, a recent governmental survey notes that 14 percent of indigenous communities – in contrast to 0.8 percent and 3.8 percent of rural and urban communities respectively – identified the ‘lack of organization in the community’ as one of the main reasons for the lack of improvement in their living conditions (MEF, 2006a:25).

### **2.3 Indigenous poverty: Homogenization, normalization, and ‘empowerment’**

Today, the homogenization of indigenous groups and the contrasts between them and other sectors of Panama are exacerbated and consolidated through the discourse of poverty.

The 2006 government report *Poverty and Inequality in Panama* provides a critical example. Here, as in many other documents, statistics about indigenous peoples' poverty are rarely disaggregated. While, for the sake of analysis, the (non-indigenous) national space is disaggregated into four regions ('metropolitan', 'central', 'western' and 'eastern'), the five indigenous *comarcas* and the indigenous areas outside *comarcas* are all grouped together under the single category 'indigenous area' (MEF, 2006b:47). While disaggregating Panama's non-indigenous space in four categories clearly obscures many internal differences, the grouping of seven indigenous groups with very distinct socio-cultural and historical experiences, political situations (some of these groups have *comarcas*, others do not), and geographical locations<sup>17</sup>, in one single category, clearly assumes that they share one same 'culture of poverty'. In addition, although the examination of poverty among non-indigenous peoples is explored through four categories (i.e., 'extreme urban poor', 'urban poor', 'extreme rural poor', and 'rural poor'), when dealing with indigenous peoples, most governmental documents and other reports (from international donor agencies, for instance) simply use the category 'indigenous poverty' and, occasionally, 'extreme indigenous poverty'<sup>18</sup>:

Electricity remains an unattainable luxury for more than 60% of the poor who live in rural areas and for more than 90% of the indigenous population (MEF, 2000a:16; my translation).

58% of the rural population living in conditions of extreme poverty own land (and around 70% of indigenous peoples) (2000a:23).

Yet, questioning the homogenizing effect of identity categories and highlighting, conversely, the diversity of identities that such categories contain is not sufficient, for, as

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<sup>17</sup> For instance, some groups live in Darién's tropical forests, other groups on the Caribbean islands of the Province of Bocas del Toro or in the temperate highlands of the Province of Chiriquí.

<sup>18</sup> It is also important to remember that the notions of 'poverty' and 'extreme poverty' used in these reports are based on western notions of human development and well-being, not indigenous ones.

Natter and Jones argue, “Though this may achieve a more precise encapsulation of identity...it leaves intact the system of boundaries used to collect alterity in the first place” (1997:144). As I emphasize in Chapter II, an important insight of poststructuralist theory is that “identity is the product of categorization rather than its raw material” (ibid.). As a result, it is critical to focus primarily on the processes through which identity categories and boundaries are constructed in the first place – that is, “how differences arise, are amplified and maintained through power, *and* toward what effect” (1997:147). The use of an essentialist framework causes ‘difference’ between groups (e.g., ‘indigenous’ versus ‘non-indigenous’) to be understood in a “purely cognitive way” (Pickering, 2001:70) – in sum, it conveys the illusion that the differences emphasized by essentialist identities are, in fact, what is objectively “visible and palpable” (ibid.). Difference is conceived as a natural, unquestionable condition, rather than a social and political production (Smith, 1999:129) tied to particular systems of representation and vision. A poststructuralist approach, on the contrary, alerts us to the fact that constructions of difference are always about the exercise of power (1999:130).

Prior to the mid-1970s, the literature did not explicitly or systematically refer to indigenous peoples as ‘poor’. For instance, in *The Indians of the Darién*, Meléndez (1947) described the Emberá in quite negative terms – as irrational, ignorant, uncivilized, lazy, and amoral – yet, he did not define them as ‘poor’. References to poverty are also absent from Torres de Araúz’s (1958, 1967) descriptions of Emberá society. In one of her earliest anthropological studies, she wrote:

Their forest outings are productive and they often come back with more food than they can consume. ...They sell their plantains to the boat through an intermediary. With their earnings, they go to local stores to buy the clothes, adornments, and cosmetics they need. They also provide themselves with salt,

sugar, soaps, combs, etc. And if they earn enough money, they go to the local jeweller to commission the making of silver pendants (1958:172; my translation).

In a piece examining the future of indigenous reserves, Heckadon (1971) talks extensively about indigenous peoples' marginality; yet, again, no reference is made to their poverty. It seems that marginality had more to do with indigenous peoples' unequal positioning with respect to economic and political processes. I am not denying the fact that indigenous peoples' living conditions were difficult. Yet, as I have already stressed, and further exemplify later in this section, present-day narratives underlining indigenous poverty do not simply reflect a pre-existing condition, as much as they constitute this condition through the production of a set of specific representations, knowledges, practices, statistics, and solutions that are deeply colonizing. Today, poverty has become *the* privileged trope through which indigenous peoples and places are seen, talked about, and dealt with in government literature as well as in the national press:

Indigenous poverty is massive and profound. ...[T]he category 'not poor' is almost nonexistent in indigenous regions: it represents hardly 5% of the population. ...The immense majority of the inhabitants of indigenous areas – 86% – are extremely poor. This is the category that best defines them (MEF, 2000a:29; my translation).

“Poverty dominates in every corner of [indigenous] communities. Not a single indigenous person escapes from this situation. In sum, they are everyday poorer” (Zárate, 2001)

Recast as *the* archetype of 'the poor', it becomes impossible to view indigenous peoples as anything else but desperate, defenceless, accepting, and passive victims who live in 'darkness', "isolate themselves as if they had remained trapped in the past", and who "have lost hope" (MIDES, 2007b). These individuals are primarily defined and recognized for what they *lack*:

If we do not act with the *Red de Oportunidades* [Network of Opportunities Program], we will lose a generation, because the situation of extreme vulnerability in which these families find themselves requires the same attention as an emergency room (MIDES, 2007c; my translation).

This statement, equating the situation of poor families with an emergency room constructs these families as ‘sick’ and powerless, unable to deal with their own problems and, as a result, requiring the assistance of ‘experts’ and government agencies to help, ‘treat’, and ‘cure’ them. It suggests that indigenous peoples are unable to either resist or instigate change: they are stripped of the agency needed to negotiate and build alternative futures. They are condemned to remain the victims of changes and the inert receptacles of projects initiated elsewhere and over which they have no control:

...we decided to work to make [the poor] visible, to give back to them the rights that slowly were robbed from them (MIDES, 2007b; my translation).

[Social justice is] a legitimate right that we have offered to guarantee, breaking the vicious and pernicious circle of social inequalities that the poor suffer even before they are born (ibid.).

Such images are abundantly relayed by the Panamanian press. In the various articles reporting the deaths of three Emberá children in Darién in March and April 2006 (see this chapter’s introduction), Emberá villages were repeatedly constructed as places crushed by poverty, plagued with hunger and disease, and suffering a permanent state of abandonment. Counterposing these representations with common references to Panama City’s booming skyscrapers, modern trans-isthmian canal, and international money flows (that is, images evocative of power, domination, and authority) deeply exacerbate indigenous peoples’ oddness and belittled their agentive capacities. In this light, it is no accident that a majority of articles on the Emberá are illustrated with pictures of half-naked children or of women executing traditional dances – rather than of men and women actively engaged in the performing of productive and reproductive tasks. The deeply

ingrained assumption that indigenous societies are more ‘vulnerable’ and less adequately prepared to cope with life’s challenges translates into repeated calls to “minimize the dangers of the market economy on indigenous communities and cultures” (MEF, 2000a:30). Although the market economy is described as ‘threatening’ and ‘dangerous’ for indigenous peoples in a key government report, for example, the document argues that it is the only way to solve the issue of rural poverty affecting *Latino* farmers:

The cultural specificity of indigenous peoples must be acknowledged in public policies as well as...in the programs and projects targeting or affecting this sector of the Panamanian population. Spaces of participation and relations of mutual trust must be created to initiate a development process that does not affect [indigenous] identity (Plan Panamá Rural del MIDA 2000, cited in Government of Panama, 2005:36; my translation).

Moreover, while the literature reviewed here identifies lack of employment, access to credit, and basic services (Alvarado, 2000) as well as inequitable economic policies and development models (MEF, 2000a) as the causes of poverty, it is also clear that, at the same time, indigenous poverty continues to be understood as the product of indigenous peoples’ own, intrinsic ‘incapacities’ and culture. In other words, because of the underlying conceptualization of space in absolute terms, socioeconomic differences between ‘indigenous’ and ‘non-indigenous’ areas are understood as the ‘natural’ outcomes of their inherent spatial disconnection rather than as being *produced* through spatial articulations and connections (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997a:14-16):

Today, it is accepted that [traditional methods of production and traditional medicine] are not the elements that define a culture, because cultures are dynamic: the essence remains, but the ways in which things are done constantly change. The question then is: what defines the culture and identity of indigenous peoples and what is auxiliary? It is on this basis that the future of indigenous peoples must be built, preserving their identity and transforming those elements that, precisely, have reproduced their historical poverty for more than half a millennium (MEF, 2000a:30; my translation).

Discourses of poverty, Cruikshank argues, provide a new slot in which to “fit and enumerate people” (1999:65). The statistical data on poverty, the ‘counting’ of ‘the poor’, are not – again – just the inscription of a pre-existing reality; rather, “accounting practices constitute the very ‘realities’ they supposedly count” (2006:111). Put differently, categories, statistics, and other discursive practices of poverty do not just mirror a pre-given order; they actively produce the conditions they purport to describe. They “link new knowledge to new ways of being” (Hacking, 1986:223, cited in Cruikshank, *ibid*). Discourses of poverty not only *place* indigenous people vis-à-vis other social groups – arranging social relationships in particular ways and structuring indigenous peoples’ fields of actions – they also, as I have already emphasized, become a privileged mode through which indigenous subjects define and construct themselves and experience life (Escobar, 1992:133). As a result, such discourses play a critical role in both the consolidation of colonizing power relations and the strengthening of mental maps of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

The systematic equation of indigenous peoples and places with discourses of poverty is also problematic because these discourses are deeply normalizing: they contribute to the construction of aberrant behaviours and deviant subjectivities, thus producing the necessary setting for the spread of technologies of ‘bio-power’ to administer, correct, and reform these abnormalities (Sharp et al., 2000:14). As I explain in Chapter II, the term ‘bio-power’ was coined by Foucault to designate a new technology of power over life associated with the transition from sovereignty to ‘government’ – that is, a disciplinary rather than repressive force seeking to increase the docility and productivity of human beings (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983:195-96) through

the internalization of 'self-discipline' (Sharp et al., 2000:14). Here, human conduct is primarily understood as "something that can be regulated, controlled, shaped and turned to specific ends" (Dean, 1999:11) and individuals play an active role in their own self-government. Defining and producing a category of people lacking certain qualities (e.g., human capital) and requiring 'help' and 'empowerment' thus opens up a new "territory upon which it is possible to act" (Cruikshank, 1999:40). Yet, strategies to 'empower' 'the poor' often authorize and exacerbate paternalistic and unequal power relations. The state's program *Red de Oportunidades* (Network of Opportunities), which was implemented in April 2006, alerts us to some of these issues.

*Red de Oportunidades* is a national strategy designed by the government of Martin Torrijos (2004-2009) to eradicate poverty. One of its cornerstones is the empowerment of female heads of households residing in Panama's poorest *corregimientos* (MIDES, 2008c). Beneficiaries were identified through a survey on 'social vulnerability' (MIDES, 2007a) and indigenous peoples were, unmistakably, a main target of the program. This is evidenced by the numerous references to the program's coverage of 100 percent of *comarcas* (MIDES, 2007c; 2008d) and the pervasive descriptions of *comarcas* as places where poverty "whips with greater strength" (MIDES, 2007b). In January 2008, 50,889 households had been included in the program, 45.1 percent of which were located in the five indigenous *comarcas* (MIDES, 2008b:3-4). By the end of 2008, 70,599 households were benefitting from the program, 35.3 percent of which were indigenous (2008b:7). By December 2008, the *comarcas* had received 42 percent of the US\$43 million that had been invested in the program (2008b:12). These represent high percentages considering

that *comarca* populations make up only five percent of the national total (Carrasquilla, 2005:84).

The ‘empowerment’ of the ‘poor’ female heads of households targeted by the program primarily takes the form of ‘conditional money transfers’ of US\$35 per month<sup>19</sup> in exchange for which women must commit themselves to comply with a number of ‘co-responsibilities’, particularly in the domains of health and education – e.g., to ensure that their children attend school and receive proper medical attention, to undergo pre-natal visits, and to take gynaecological tests, among other things. Several elements are significant here. First, the practices and policy statements of the *Red de Oportunidades* program manifestly essentializes women in assuming that, by nature of their maternal responsibilities, women have a ‘natural’ willingness to undertake health responsibilities and work in the interests of family and community. Women are further essentialized through their systematic amalgamation with the ‘household’. In fact, a significant feature of MIDES literature is that although women are the main beneficiaries of *Red de Oportunidades*, the program’s outcomes are always framed through the trope of the ‘household’, thus clearly assuming an inherent equivalence between women’s interests and those of the household. The program thus relies on a view of the household as a unit of harmonious social relations in which individuals – and, more specifically, women – always behave altruistically. There is also a strong presumption that all female beneficiaries share similar conditions. No attention is paid to how women’s distinct geographical location, marital status, ethnicity, and life-cycle positioning shape their respective situation, affect their control over and use of money transfers, and condition in various ways their ability to meet their co-responsibilities. The program thus disguises

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<sup>19</sup> This was increased to US\$50 in 2008 (MIDES 2008b).

the micro-politics of negotiation and resistance in which women are embedded, displaying a remarkable disinterest for the uneven stage upon which its interventions occur. Third, the *Red de Oportunidades* program also takes for granted that increasing women's income systematically translates into greater empowerment and well-being, as illustrated, for instance, in the following extract:

With their money transfers, Rosa Saldaña and Rosa Pascasio, two enterprising women from the *Corregimiento* of Alto Caballero, started a chicken husbandry project that now benefits 64 women. In Chiguirí Arriba, 21 women founded the women's organization of Palmilla and produce construction blocks to improve and build houses. It is admirable to see the efforts and creativity of these women and what they are able to do with their \$35. Our female friends of Kuna Yala are also organizing themselves to sell plantains and kerosene and generate – with their \$35 – an additional income for their families (MIDES, 2007b; my translation).

As I demonstrate in Chapter VI, greater incomes do not necessarily result in more autonomy or authority for women who must deal with a wide range of factors in their daily lives. Moreover, in some cases, women's ability to generate more cash than their husbands puts additional strain on conjugal relations and creates the potential for retaliation. Finally, the co-responsibilities of the program enunciated above clearly echo and reproduce the neoliberal logic that has dominated development interventions in Panama since the 1990s. This logic seeks to produce healthy bodies and competitive, efficient individuals able to make use of, and contribute their full productive capacities to the national economy (MIDES, 2007c). In sum, the co-responsibilities are clearly about the 'crafting of the self' (Sharp et al., 2000:17), imprinting on women self-governing qualities (e.g., enterprise, autonomy) and helping them to bring their ways of conducting and evaluating themselves into alignment with political objectives (Rose, 1996:155). As Rose explains, "The enterprising self will make an enterprise of its life, seek to maximize

its own human capital, project itself a future, and seek to shape life in order to become what it wishes to be” (ibid.). As a result, the national strategy for poverty eradication actively reconfigures the identities of the women it targets. Yet, these new identities are not necessarily as empowering as local program experts allege.

The program’s specific focus on women reflects the recognition, within international development arenas, of their roles as efficient producers and managers of the household and community (Simon-Kumar, 2003). The critical importance of women’s productive role in overcoming poverty is stressed over and over in MIDES literature:

María Roquebert León, head of the MIDES, [delivered] the first Conditional Money Transfer to 512 female heads of households in the Comarca Kuna of Madugandí, so that these women are able to develop their capacities and guarantee the social well-being of the *comarca* (2008d).

As Simon-Kumar argues, “women’s productive role is not just recognized under neoliberal discourses, it is actively prioritized” (2003:80). What is significant about the *Red de Oportunidades* program is the fusion of women’s productive role with their reproductive activities. In other words, while MIDES literature primarily constructs women as mothers, motherhood is only significant here to the extent that it ties into the developmental efforts of the state – i.e., ensures the upbringing of children that can contribute to the nation. As Simon-Kumar demonstrates in her study of state reproductive health policy in India, “Women as mothers are also economic and developmental agents [and]...to be a mother *is* to be a productive worker in nation building” (2003:84; emphasis in original). Similarly, although the *Red de Oportunidades* program claims to ‘empower’ women, it only values the identities of women that have economic significance within the state’s overall development scheme. On the one hand, the

construction of a new group of ‘vulnerable’ women enables the expansion of the state’s gaze and ‘bio-power’ into a new domain – that is, motherhood. On the other hand, the state’s narrow representation of women as ‘efficient mothers’ limits possibilities for their empowerment, as this trope offers limited opportunities to challenge the (patriarchal) power relations that constrain women’s experiences of well-being.

Finally, the government made repeated efforts to frame the *Red de Oportunidades* program as apolitical. As a government official declared during a press conference:

I have told our brothers on repeated occasions that they do not represent votes; they are people with rights. We are here neither to do politics nor to use the poor for political ends. ...Us[ing] poverty for electoral reasons is a disgrace. That is why we do not ask anyone what political party s/he belongs to in order to be included in these social programs (MIDES, 2007b; my translation).

By narrowly equating ‘politics’ with electoral campaigning, this statement represents an attempt to conceal the fact that there are indeed political motivations behind the program. This was abundantly clear in the Sambú District in June 2007, when Martin Torrijos’ party (PRD) launched its membership recruitment campaign in the *comarca* just two days after the program’s first remittance of funds to women in the region (Photo 1). In Bayamón alone, 75 people were added to the PRD’s membership list, and each inscription was ‘remunerated’ with three pounds of fish. One woman who had just registered as a member reported to me her comments after she had received her first cheque from the *Red de Oportunidades* program. She told the president: “No one had ever given me US\$70 in my whole life. I have a father now”. In addition, as I already stressed in Chapter II, development discourses are never free-floating, neutral constructions. As any other discourse, they are *situated* in particular institutional, historical, geographical, and socio-cultural contexts and, as such, reproduce/cement

**Photo 1:** President Martin Torrijos and the head of the Ministry of Social Development, María de Roquebert León (Top right corner), delivering the first cheques from the *Red de Oportunidades* Program to an Emberá woman in Puerto Indio, Emberá *Comarca*, Sambú District in June 2007 (France-Lise Colin, June 2007)



specific power relations (Crush, 1995:6). The ability to both define a group of people as 'in need' of assistance and control the terms of development – i.e., how poverty is defined, how 'the poor' is framed, and so on – is inseparable from the exercise of certain modes of expertise, authority, and interventions, as exemplified above. The will to 'make the poor visible' and 'empower' 'vulnerable' others is thus, inherently, a political act through and through (Cruikshank, 1999:2). Moreover, by targeting poor, indigenous female heads of households, the program reinforces the gendered, classed, and racialized social order of Panamanian society that it initially claimed to combat.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I examine the particular conceptualizations of space and identity informing a number of reports, articles, and plans produced by government institutions, NGOs, international donor agencies, and academics, providing a valuable window into the postcolonial visibility prevailing in Panama. I demonstrate that both space and identity, in these documents, are understood in essentialist terms. On the one hand, this promotes notions of inherent disconnections and natural boundaries, mapping Panama as an unproblematic, ordered, and coherent space of naturally isolated ethnic groups, places, and cultures. Moreover, these discourses legitimize ideas of resolute correspondence between peoples and places, innate differences, and mutually exclusive cultures. The general mental map that has been created is one of a naturally dichotomous racial landscape in which indigenous spaces occupy uncertain – but clearly distinct – locations on the margins of the 'national' space. In sum, the postcolonial visibility informing these documents sanctions a systematic construction of Panama according to 'us'/'them' binaries, oblivious to the porosities and interdependences that

necessarily – although unequally – unite these two entities. This is a visuality in which the ‘topography of power’ – the sets of social and political relations and interconnections through which space and identity are *necessarily* produced – is completely absent, perpetuating deeply colonial relations in the present. In fact, this imaginative geography is not an unproblematic reflection of an unmediated reality. It is a discourse, which, as a practise (Foucault, 1971, 1973), has real material and political effects that do more than simply ‘mystify’ indigenous ‘others’. The discourses of space and identity highlighted here not only construct indigenous areas as innately remote, deficient, bounded, and disconnected; they also produce their inhabitants as living in a timeless past, stuck outside history, vulnerable to capitalist expansion, and uniformly poor. In short, these discourses make it impossible to conceive indigenous peoples as diverse and dynamic individuals equipped with agentive capacities and producing stories and trajectories of their own. They immobilize indigenous peoples, “hold them still...while we do the moving” (Massey, 2005:122). The various elements of this postcolonial visuality have crystallized today into a new hegemonic trope – indigenous peoples as ‘the poor’ par excellence – that underwrites the shape and direction of state policy towards these groups. An analysis of the *Red de Oportunidades* program designed to eradicate poverty demonstrates how the desire to ‘empower’ poor, (mostly indigenous) female heads of households re-inscribes unequal and patriarchal power relations through the pervasive essentialist assumptions about poor women and narrow representation of women as ‘efficient mothers’.

In sum, by engaging in this analysis, I have attempted to produce what Massey calls a ‘situationist cartography’, which seeks:

...to *disorient*, to defamiliarise, to provoke a view from an unaccustomed angle...expos[ing] the incoherences and fragmentations of the spatial itself. ...Here there is exposure rather than occlusion of the disruptions inherent in the spatial. Here the spatial is an arena of possibility. ...It is a map (and a space) which leaves openings for something new (2005:109; emphasis in original).

In the following chapter, I recount the historical construction of the Panamanian nation, stressing the sharp contrast between a superseding centre made up of the trans-isthmian zone and the Interior (i.e., Panama's historical agricultural heartland) and several peripheral forested/indigenous areas – a situation that motivated the Panamanian government to launch the 'Conquest of Darién' in the 1970s. In paying attention to these processes, I shed some light on the historical and contemporary relations between the state and indigenous peoples, thus adding further insights and replacing into their socio-historical contexts the discourses I examined in the present chapter. I also emphasize the various connections and multi-scale processes, material conditions, and policies through which the uneven 'social' and 'physical' landscapes of the Comarca Emberá are continuously being produced and re-signified through time.

## Chapter V – Setting the scene

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*“For the engineers of the Pan-American Highway of the 1960s, the [Darién] region was an obstacle to cross. ...For the investors, the province has always represented a source of primary resources...that were waiting to be exploited. ...For the government’s planning experts, this [was] a region marginalized from the centre of the country, with the lowest population density, services, and transportation infrastructures. ...For the colonos, the region [was] an unlimited forest, an opportunity to cultivate new land and to become more economically independent. For indigenous peoples and the darienitas, the region is their home. ...It is a region that is now changing rapidly, uncertain of its role in the future” (ANAM<sup>20</sup>, 2000:24-25).*

### Introduction

As I emphasize in Chapter II, political ecologists have long stressed the importance of looking beyond a single geographical scale of analysis (e.g., ‘the village’) and examining the larger, multi-scale political-economic, social, and ecological processes in which rural livelihoods are embedded (Zimmerer and Bassett, 2003:288). In this chapter, my objective is to assemble a picture of the broader networks of historical connections and spatial articulations out of which the Comarca Emberá was produced and in which the subjective, lived experiences of contemporary Emberá individuals are embedded. In doing so, I try to offer a window into some of the ‘global’/‘local’ connections through which the *comarca* was established and is remade through time. I espouse here Gezon and Paulson’s conceptualization of the ‘global’ as “one aspect of a localized site, to the extent that people in any give zone of interaction act within the parameters of policies, authorities, and material conditions that have sources outside the reach of immediate local networks” (2005:10).

As I also explain in Chapter II, the notions of ‘global’/‘local’ or ‘macro’/‘micro’ that I use, do not refer to an *a priori* classification of the social world into distinct spatial

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<sup>20</sup> Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente (National Authority for the Environment)

containers allowing pre-given levels of analysis. Space, spatial scale, and spatial entities (e.g, 'the community', 'the region') are produced through networks of relations. They are, in other words, produced through social practice, 'materializing' themselves out of self-other relations rather than through essence (Massey, 1999, Perreault, 2003, Rose, 1999).

The first section of this chapter draws on existing literature and briefly highlights the historical and spatial construction of Panama, emphasizing the existence of long-lasting regional disparities between an overriding centre made up of the trans-isthmian zone and the 'Interior' – Panama's historical agricultural heartland – and several peripheral forested/indigenous areas. By providing a brief description of the important changes experienced in the Interior region during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I expose some of the 'extra-local', historical roots of contemporary changes in Darién's socio-cultural, political-economic, and natural landscapes. I then examine a key report published in 1978 by the Organization of American States (OAS). As a blue print for the integration of Darién to the national Panamanian society and territory, the OAS report marks also the institutionalization of the state's ideologies of progress, modernization, and development in the province. As I underscore in Chapter II, these discourses work as powerful 'political technologies' – that is, they operate through an apparent neutrality and rationality that normalize and depoliticize certain knowledges, identities, and ways of understanding – typically western ones – while dismissing or stigmatizing other views and experiences. I show how the report's scientific and technical representations of Darién as a resource-rich, disorganized, and under-populated territory and a pervasive nature/society dichotomy weakened the visibility of indigenous groups and legitimized

plans and interventions aiming at restructuring, settling, and ‘rationally’ exploiting the region. These processes have had dramatic ecological, demographic, socio-economic, and political consequences in the region, which catalyzed, in part, the mobilization of Emberá peoples to seek recognition of their territorial rights and the creation of a *comarca*. As part of this mobilization, the Emberá adopted new settlement patterns that have deeply altered their relationship to the land. Against these ‘national’, ‘regional’, and ‘local’ backdrops, I use ethnographic data from my field research to describe the important transformations undergone by Emberá livelihoods and household economies in the last 40 years – paying particular attention to the crisis of land-based subsistence activities, the collapse of commercial agriculture, shifting livelihood strategies, and changes in gendered agricultural labour relations. In doing so, the present chapter offers important elements to contextualize and deepen the understanding of the state’s representations and discourses of indigenous peoples I analyze in Chapter IV. It also provides the context for, and preliminary insights into, the topics I examine in the subsequent chapters of the dissertation.

## **1. Building the nation: Producing ‘centres’ and ‘peripheries’**

### **1.1 Panama’s historical ‘centres’: the trans-isthmian zone and the ‘Interior’**

Spanish colonization, which began in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, produced two main historical regions in Panama: the trans-isthmian transit zone and ‘*el Interior*’ (the Interior). Until the mid-twentieth century, these two regions were unable to incorporate the rest of the country (McKay, 1984:45-46) – i.e., a landscape of open savannah that, with the rapid collapse of the native population reverted to forest (Jones, 1989:71) and remained of little interest to the colonial powers for four centuries. Following the

conquest of the mining regions of South America, the area that is now known as Panama quickly became a key passageway and relay for international trade. The region was thus only equipped with the infrastructure necessary to fulfil these goals and other productive activities, including agriculture and mining, long remained of secondary importance (ibid.). Although a few large cattle ranches existed around Panama City, they did not provide sufficient impetus for the establishment of a significant, growing population. The lack of articulation between the two zones meant that, for a long time, other countries played a greater role than the Interior in supplying the transit zone with food and other supplies. This has had long-lasting repercussions on the economic structure and spatial organization of Panama, which are still visible today in the strong division between, on the one hand, the modern capital and Canal Zone, and, on the other hand, a much less developed countryside (McKay, 1984:45-46).

With the waning of Spanish domination over the Panamanian isthmus in the early nineteenth century, France and, more significantly, the United States, began pursuing their geopolitical and economic interests in the area (Frenkel, 2002:87). The construction of the trans-isthmian railroad in the 1850s, followed by the building and management of the canal by the United States<sup>21</sup> in the early 1900s, played a decisive role in reinforcing Panama's spatial division. The Canal Zone competed with Panama City and Colón – the two main cities of the historical transit zone – preventing them from playing an active role in supporting a process of regional organization (McKay, 1984:46). Frenkel (1992:146; 2002:94) shows, for instance, how the American administration of the Canal Zone

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<sup>21</sup> The Hay-Bunau Varilla Treaty, signed on November 18, 1903, approved the right for the United States to build an interoceanic canal and granted that country, in perpetuity, the control of a five-miles-wide zone on either side of the canal route (referred to as the Canal Zone), in exchange for which Panama received a modest cash payment and promises of annual rents (Frenkel, 1992:146).

repeatedly framed Panamanian cities as strange and alien environments overwhelmed with filth, disease, and danger. This provided the rationale for the continuous sanitization and segregation of the Canal Zone from what was perceived as an alien jungle landscape that not only harboured disease but also unknown cultures, an unhealthy climate, and threatening and impinging forests (Frenkel, 1996:329). Nonetheless, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the development of several activities (e.g., light industries, banking activities, administration, and trade) fostered the economic growth of both Panama City and Colón. This process resulted in a greater role of what became known as the Metropolitan Area in the Panamanian economy (McKay, 1984:47). A new region known as the Metropolitan Area started to structure itself around Panama City and Colón. As McKay explains, this region stopped “functioning exclusively as a transit zone to become an economic nucleus, organizer of relation flows that run through the Panamanian space” (ibid.). Through time, the Metropolitan Area has come to be home to the majority of Panama’s population and economic activity, consolidating the trans-isthmian zone as the backbone of the country and marginalizing the rest of the territory.

The second historical region of Panama, the ‘Interior’, is located west of the ‘Metropolitan Area’, on the low lands of the isthmus’ Pacific slope. It includes the coastal areas, plains and foothills of the western Province of Chiriquí (bordering Costa Rica), and the central Provinces of Coclé, Herrera and Los Santos and southern Veraguas (Map 4). The open savannas and relatively flat lands offered favourable conditions for agricultural activities – notably cattle ranching, leading to the displacement of the existing indigenous populations. From the third decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the region experienced



gradual agricultural colonization and population growth and, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, it had become a densely populated rural area (McKay, 1984:47).

Until the 1940s, the Metropolitan Area and the Interior formed the two main components of the Panamanian territory. Conversely, in a fashion similar to other Central American nations like Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala (Pasos et al., 1994:14), the rest of Panama (in fact, the major part of it, since 60 percent of Panama was still in a process of being settled in the mid-1970s) existed primarily as ‘wilderness’ and continued to be largely ‘unimagined’ and ignored, for it had no concrete contribution to make to the national economy, or was simply considered as a reserve for the future (CATIE, 1977:2). Darién, for instance, was used very sporadically by the Spaniards from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The region was the site of some of the earliest Spanish settlements. Santa María la Antigua del Darién (on the Gulf of Urabá, bordering what is today the Colombian frontier) was founded in 1510 and was the first successful European settlement on the mainland of the Americas<sup>22</sup>. This and other subsequent settlements became launching sites for military expeditions and missionary campaigns (Parsons, 1967). Between the early 1600s and 1727, the exploitation of Santa Cruz de Cana gold mines temporarily put Darién at the ‘centre’. Missionaries tried to bring together Darién’s indigenous population into new settlements, but were met with little success. Concomitantly, the *conquistadores* were leading frequent raids into indigenous areas as they looked for gold and slaves, decimating the indigenous population in the process. According to Mendéz (1979:115), Darién’s population was about 1,500 in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. In 1789, following numerous attacks by pirates and buccaneers – often helped by the Kuna population –the

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<sup>22</sup> It is from Santa María la Antigua that Vasco Núñez de Balboa launched his march across the isthmus and ‘discovered’ the Pacific Ocean in 1513 (Mendéz, 1979:7).

Spanish Crown released a *cédula real* (royal letters patent) ordering the abandonment of the region and the dismantlement of local fortifications (1979:122). The region was left in relative isolation until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Darién's resources (notably timber, gold, and rubber) attracted foreign interests (Giro, 1998:5-6). For example, the Darién Gold Mining Company – an Anglo-French enterprise – reopened the Cana gold mines in 1887, exploiting them until 1912 (Méndez, 1979:413). The region returned more or less to the periphery until the 1950s, when renewed interest in alternative trans-isthmian routes led to several expeditions in the province (1979:107-110).

To a certain extent, the 'neglect' of peripheral areas (combined with the country's low population density) had a positive outcome on the indigenous population, for the historic economic concentration on commerce and activities related to the trans-isthmian crossing lessened economic and integrationist pressures on indigenous groups (Herrera, 1989:2; Horton, 2006:836). Velásquez (2005:37) demonstrates that eastern Panama has been primarily known since the colonial period through the myth of the 'wild Darién'. This narrative (which centred on such elements as 'wild' nature, 'primitive' peoples, infectious disease, and violence) was partly grounded in ideas of geographical remoteness and spatial distance. As the prominent Panamanian anthropologist, Torres de Araúz, states in one of her early articles on the indigenous peoples of the Darién Province:

In this particular occasion, we have turned our attention to this part of the Panamanian Republic that is referred to as a sort of "Amazon": the Darién, a region of thick jungle and forest, rivers and streams, lush vegetation, and home to the Chocoe Indians (1958:167; my translation).

## 1.2 Crisis of the 'Interior' and emergence of the 'forested frontiers'

A number of processes profoundly restructured the Interior in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – processes that subsequently had far-reaching consequences on Panama's territorial organization. First, soon after independence from Colombia in 1903, the government of the new Panamanian Republic eliminated the communal land system, leading to the expropriation and sale of land properties to individuals as well as national and foreign companies and, consequently, leaving a great number of small farmers without land (Heckadon, 1984a:23). Second, with the construction of the canal, the terminal cities of Panama and Colón experienced a rapid urbanization and population increase that enabled the formation of an internal market for agricultural products, particularly beef (Joly, 1989:90). This provided strong incentives for the modernization of traditional cattle ranching activities (e.g., the introduction of improved pastures, barbed wire, and new cattle breeds), leading to a significant expansion of the number of animals and encroachment into areas of crop production. Heckadon (1984b:136) notes that while there were 12,000 head of cattle in the Tonosí District (Province of Los Santos) in 1950, there were 60,000 in 1970. In addition, the introduction of modern medicine and public health led to a phenomenal human demographic explosion (Heckadon, 1984a:23). The population of Los Santos, for instance, doubled between 1920 and 1950 to 60,000, which intensified pressure on natural resources and led to the rapid fragmentation of land holdings (1984a:25). Finally, the intensification of land use in a context of unequal land distribution and multiplication of *minifundios*, as well as the growing size of the cattle population, fuelled an acute ecological crisis in all the provinces of the Interior (Heckadon, 1985:46).

The interaction of these processes contributed to the growing impoverishment of many families of the Interior, encouraging the emigration of thousands of marginalized farmers. The Province of Los Santos lost almost 30 percent of its population between 1940 and 1960 (Heckadon, 1984a:25). Farmers first expanded into the last remaining unoccupied lands of the Interior and, when new lands were no longer available, subsequently headed towards the “more remote regions situated at the north, along of the Caribbean coast, and to the east, the provinces of Panama and Darién” (ibid.). Others resettled in the Metropolitan Area.

It is through the initiation of this large-scale emigration that the areas outside Panama’s ‘historical regions’ became visible and took on a ‘concrete’ identity as ‘forested fronts’ or ‘frontiers’. Many scholars have showed how the ‘frontier’ constitutes a powerful trope in the process of nation-making, for it recasts the so-called ‘frontier’ region as a place suspended in time (Waite, 2005:184). Such a trope reframes entire areas as not being owned or as places for history to be made and civilization to triumph over ‘darkness’ (Slotkin, 1998:11-12). Waite explains that the concept of ‘frontier’ serves to construct certain places:

...not as the home of indigenous peoples, but as wild, untouched, and unknown. ...The regime of frontier truths that silences the presence of indigenous peoples draws upon linear interpretations of history that employ evolutionary narratives to demarcate the colonisers as bringing civilisation, domestication, and productivity (2005:184).

In the case of Panama, this view is well-summarized, by McKay, who, for instance, writes in an essay on the colonization of new forested lands: “The forests without particular owners of these under-populated regions invite[d] colonization” (1984:50). Claims of this kind seemed all the more legitimate when for instance, in the case of

Darién, indigenous settlements were not 'on the map' until the 1990s. Their homelands were represented as large, unoccupied spaces. Home to three indigenous groups and two *comarcas*, and one of the most active colonization fronts of Central America throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Darién was, until recently, the most inaccurately mapped province in Panama<sup>23</sup> (Herlihy, 2003:315).

In the development ideology that prevailed in Panama since the 1950s (and that continues today, although to a lesser extent), the tropical forests of these frontier regions were seen as symbols of underdevelopment and backwardness and as resources that, in their natural state, did not bring any economic benefit to the country. The prevailing ideology thus promoted the conversion of forests into different land uses (Heckadon, 1984a:19; 1985:45). At the same time, the Panamanian constitution continues to stipulate that one can only obtain ownership over a piece of land after its forest cover has been cut down. Hence, for non-indigenous farmers, working and owning land are strongly associated with its transformation into pastures (Chapter VII).

The tall, old-growth forests outside the transoceanic canal region and cattle ranching areas marked frontier regions as places of radical otherness and simultaneously constituted the Interior and the Metropolitan Area as the centre of the country. Conceptualizing forests as 'other' is a recurrent manoeuvre that serves to map the space between 'centre' and 'frontier' as a "surface of difference" (Stepan, 1991:496-7), helping to establish the 'superiority' of the former over the latter (*ibid.*). In sum, the 'backwardness' of these forested peripheries guarantees the 'modern' identity of the

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<sup>23</sup> A major participatory research mapping project was thus conducted in 1993, with the objective of documenting all indigenous subsistence lands in the entire Darién region (see Herlihy 2003; Herlihy and Knapp 2003). For the first time, the ancestral lands of the indigenous groups inhabiting eastern Panama were represented on a map.

‘centre’ and ensures its expansion – a process Horkheimer and Adorno summarize as follows: “Assignment to the periphery ‘provides a home’... for ‘the other’, the mere existence of which was both a provocation to, and the *raw material for, the center*” (1991:183, cited in Natter and Jones, 1997:150; my emphasis).

The frontier also constitutes a powerful spatial trope, as it exacerbates impressions of disconnection and turns distance in space into difference in time. It reifies boundaries and intensifies differences. Through this trope, Darién is rendered backward, primitive, and truly of a ‘different nature’. A report from the early 1970s, prepared by the *Dirección General de Planificación and Administración* (the General Office of Planning and Administration), to better understand the structural factors that held development processes back in the Darién Province, states that:

...during our visit [to Darién], we observed negative aspects of the past that still powerfully influence the spirit of Darién’s inhabitants and impact unfavourably on the region’s development process. We can cite as an example...communities overwhelmed with health problems and deficiencies of basic services and entire communities without faith and without hope regarding their future. ...To a large extent, Darién’s inhabitants have extended the Nation’s frontier to zones where survival is considered an accomplishment. Therefore, by initiating the conquest and development of the Eastern Region, the Revolutionary Government is not only stretching the physical frontiers but also social welfare for all the inhabitants of the country (1972b; my translation).

Imaginative geographies of Darién as a ‘frontier’ also gained considerable momentum from the mid-1960s onwards as a result of the emerging narrative of the ‘Darién Gap’. The ‘gap’ refers to the missing section measuring 100 kilometres in the Pan-American Highway – a system of roads that extends about 48,000 kilometres through North, Central, and South America. The so-called ‘gap’ comprises a region of marshlands and forests between the town of Yaviza, Darién, and the area of Lomas

Aisiadas on the Colombian side. The term 'gap' exacerbates ideas of wilderness, untouched nature, and dangers (Méndez, 1979:286). It also obscures the fact that the region had long been inhabited by various indigenous groups (Velásquez, 2005:116), and erases the region's long history as a site of continuous flows, exchanges, and passage (Evandro, 2007). Finally, it is somewhat ironic to call Darién's border with Colombia a 'gap', considering that the Panamanian isthmus is customarily described as of vital importance in *linking* southern and northern hemispheres.

### **1.3 Symbolic and material 'conquests' of Darién**

In 1968, General Omar Torrijos removed the elected president Arnulfo Arias through a military coup d'état. His accession to power marked the beginning of a multifaceted 'development' strategy designed to both modernise and expand the national economy (Gandasegui, 1993:2; Herrera, 1989:96) and shift it away from its canal-centred service sector orientation (Wali, 1993:116). In this context, the whole eastern region of Panama was targeted for intensive development: it came to be viewed as a potential source for valuable timber, oil, gold, and other minerals, which could be exploited to earn the foreign exchange needed for debt service payments (1993:120). In fact, although Panama's gross national product had doubled between 1960 and 1970, and exports of goods and services had tripled in the same period, the various development projects implemented by the Torrijos administration during the 1970s (e.g., the Bayano Hydroelectric Complex) were responsible for a growing deficit in the balance of payments (Elton, 1997:23). This deficit was increasingly met by direct and indirect foreign investment, U.S. government loans, and foreign bank loans (Priestley, 1986:21-22; Wali, 1995:139). In July 1971, the revolutionary government thus launched the

'Conquest of Darién' and its counterpart, the 'Conquest of the Atlantic' (Dir. de Planificación, 1972b; Heckadon, 1984:18-19).

In the early 1970s, literature on Darién remained fragmentary and the region was still perceived as a 'vast', 'complex' space with "enormous natural resistances", still "unknown, virgin, inexhaustible, and inhospitable" (OAS, 1978:1432), and exhibiting "one of the most complex problems of regional development" (Dir. de Planificación, 1972b:1). Darién's highly dispersed and mobile indigenous population as well as the lack of 'modern' transportation and communication systems were argued to hamper a thorough understanding of the region (ibid.). As with many other state development schemes throughout the world, the conquest, integration, and 'development' of Darién thus required governmental agents to "overcome [its] spatial unintelligibility" and make it "transparently legible from without" (Scott, 1998:55). The Panamanian government requested technical assistance from the General Secretary of the Organization of American States (OAS). In 1975, a technical unit made up of Panamanian experts and technicians from the OAS' Regional Development Program initiated a series of investigations in the area. Three years later, the OAS published the *Project for the Integrated Development of the Eastern Region of Panama-Darién* – the first comprehensive study on the region and a key platform for government policy. This report is significant at several levels. Its representations of Darién as an isolated, resource-rich, empty region in need of proper planning and organization continue to resonate to this day in most contemporary development schemes for the region – including the *Programa de Desarrollo Rural Sostenible de Darién* (PRO-Darién, Darién Sustainable Rural Development Program) (1996-2003) and the *Programa de Desarrollo Sostenible de*

*Darién* (PDS, Darién Sustainable Development Program) (1999-2004)<sup>24</sup>. These representations also continue to echo in the national imagination. Articles on Darién in the national press rarely forget to stress the province's large size, 'under-population', and/or abundance of natural resources (Benjamín, 2008; Sucre, 2002). Second, the representations promoted by the OAS report have enabled a series of material practices with far-reaching implications on Darién's social and natural landscapes – which I explore later in this section. ANAM noted in a recent report that:

One of the most important threats to the protection of the remaining forests [of Darién] and of the Darién Biosphere Reserve is the continued perception on the part of planning experts, economists, and *Interioranos* that the region is an unlimited forested frontier capable of accommodating extensive colonization (2000:28; my translation).

A key objective of the report was to develop a number of recommendations and programs so the province could “offer the fruit of its soil and human resources to the benefit of the country” (OAS, 1978:xx). Darién was to perform three main functions. First, to facilitate the expansion of the national agricultural frontier and provide untapped natural resources: 26,000 hectares of new land were to be converted by the year 1985, followed by another 47,000 hectares by the year 2000. Second, the region was to absorb many of the marginalized families from the Interior. The report recommended increasing the local population from 22,750 in 1975 to 38,000 by 1985 and 105,000 by the year 2000 (OAS, 1978:8). Finally, Darién was also to function as a reserve of natural resources for future use (1978:7-8).

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<sup>24</sup> PRO-Darién represented an investment of US\$10.6 millions funded thanks to a loan from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). The implementation of the program was executed by the MIDA. The US\$88 million PDS program was funded by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and administered by the MEF (UNDP and MEF, 2003b:12).

The OAS report conveys the impression of being *simply* a factual enumeration of Darién's natural and human resources, challenges, and potentials. In other words, it is presented as an objective documentation of a pre-given reality – a “simple recording [of] the truth” (Braun, 2002:46). This is clearly expressed in the introductory section:

The survey of the Province of Darién constitutes the interpretation of the regional reality, exploring the causes of the main problems and identifying the potential and possible tendencies of evolution through time. This interpretation is based on the objective description of the province (OAS, 1978:1; my translation).

Yet, as I have argued in previous chapters, far from being objective and neutral, representational practices are always infused with, at the same time as they consolidate, particular power relations. ‘Legibility’, Braun reminds us, “is not something *in* nature awaiting discovery by the disinterested observer” (2002:46). To produce a comprehensive description of Darién – i.e., a description allowing government and ‘development’ agents to ‘see’, ‘read’, and ‘grasp’ the province, the different elements of its territory had first to be *constituted* as ‘intelligible domains’ (the phrase is Braun’s, *ibid.*) and a number of erasures had to be performed by the authors of the report. The first step in that direction was the spatial ordering of the region. As the report explains:

In order to provide an objective description of the province and for analytical reasons, the province was divided in the following ‘zones of survey’: Zone 1 – Chucunaque, Zone 2- La Palma-Sambú, Zone 3- Balsas River, Zone 4- Jaqué River, Zone 5- Congo River, Zone 6- Frontier Area (OAS, 1978:1; my translation).

Several elements were taken into account to produce this spatial division, including the distribution of human settlements, location of economic activities, large geomorphologic units, politico-administrative divisions, resource development potential, and socioeconomic level and location of ethnic groups (1978:13). What is compelling here is

the extent to which the seemingly indisputable obviousness of this spatial division works to normalize certain truths and knowledges about the region while erasing other understandings and marginalizing other experiences – especially indigenous ones. In fact, the significance of the report lies, in part, in its ability to literally recreate the local stage of its intervention, transforming the region into a number of technical problems (e.g., lack of transportation infrastructures, lack of markets, under-population, isolation, low productivity) thus constituting Darién – as in the case of Lesotho – “as a suitable object for the apolitical, technical, ‘development’ intervention” (Ferguson, 1990:87).

A central feature of this process was the construction of Darién as ‘under-populated’ and ‘underutilized’, a representation made possible through a pervasive dichotomy between humans and nature: each of Darién’s components was examined in isolation from the various cultural, historical, social or ecological contexts. Darién’s indigenous groups, for instance, were considered separately from the natural environments they depended on (i.e., ignoring their extensive use of the forest). This made it possible to claim that the region was under-occupied because the population density was below two inhabitants per square kilometre (OAS, 1978:246). The pervasive nature/society dichotomy informing the construction of Darién as an object of ‘development’ sanctioned the idea that the region was “still awaiting to be colonized” (OAS, 1978:xx).

Small, impoverished farmers from Panama’s Interior provinces played a critical role in the colonization of the region. As one of the archetypes of national culture since the 1940s, *Interioranos* were to advance the agenda of the nationalist project “both in cultural terms and by developing new economic activities” (Horton, 2006:838). For the

governing elite<sup>25</sup>, the migration of *Interiorano* farmers to Darién would bring ‘proper’ culture and ‘civilization’ to the region. This belief is exemplified in a scholarly article published in 1970 in the Panamanian journal *Hombre y Cultura*:

The regions used for the settlements of colonists are starting to show important physical and cultural changes. ...Areas that did not know before our folk expressions today dance our *típica* music or know the typical dress; areas that used not to raise cattle, are starting today to build small ranches and consume dairy products. We consider that the cultural, economic, and social contributions made by the *Interiorano* colonists to Darién mean a significant step forward for the region (Hernández, 1970:95; my translation).

Moreover, the strong reliance on the disciplines and techniques of western science (i.e., statistics, geology, forestry, hydrology, cartography) secured the ‘exactitude’ and ‘truth’ of the report’s representations of Darién’s landscapes and people. Maps and surveys, Braun demonstrates, “actively displace and resituate landscapes within new orders of visions and visibility” (Braun, 2002:61), subtly dissolving the legitimacy of any other ‘ways of seeing’ – notably indigenous ones. Emptied of its inhabitants and incorporated into the new development logic, Darién’s nature was reconfigured as unclaimed ‘natural resources’ and ‘species’ of important economic and industrial value (OAS, 1978:150). Darién’s forests were, in sum, measured, quantified, and commodified:

...the forests of Darién have a surprising quantity of species with industrial value – species that are particularly essential to the necessities of modern life. ...The inventories and technological studies conducted in Panama reveal a large number of species that are not used yet and with great timber potential that will bring economic benefits immediately. ...Currently, it is possible to incorporate, as raw material, the palms that abound in the undergrowth of tropical forests. Studies conducted in other tropical areas show a satisfactory profitability of the installation of industrial complexes (OAS, 1978:155; my translation).

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<sup>25</sup> The General Torrijos was himself an *Interiorano* since he was born in the town of Santiago in the Province of Veraguas.

These scientific forestry inventories and technological studies work as powerful devices authorizing certain 'truths' and ways of seeing local 'nature' at the expense of others. Here, making Darién's landscapes intelligible as 'resources' to be technically exploited entailed seeing them strictly in terms of their future contribution to national development. This way of seeing, Braun argues, displaces local resources "into systems of knowledge and forms of economic and political calculation unrelated to the practices of local inhabitants" (2002:48). It obscured the significance that local populations attached to, and the knowledge and use they had of, Darién's trees and palms. For instance, the report's emphasis on the great potential of palm species for the production of cellulose and paper (OAS, 1978:146) dismissed simultaneously the critical role these palms played in indigenous livelihoods – notably as essential materials for house construction and the weaving of household objects (e.g., baskets). In sum, the report constructed a space that erased the cultural geographies of Darién's forests: both their places in local economies and histories, and their roles in people's social and symbolic systems disappeared from view (Pratt, 1992:31, cited in Braun, 2002:48). Taking into account these relationships would have revealed a very different picture from that of an empty, under-utilized place. For instance, in the late 1960s, various watersheds of the province were already experiencing severe game depletion and, by the early eighties, game had been removed from many of Darién's lower rivers (Herlihy, 1986:158, 224). In addition, by the time the report was published in 1978, the Emberá and Wounaan populations had been organizing themselves politically and forming villages to obtain a *comarca* for over ten years, playing an active role in the reconfiguration of the social, spatial, and political landscapes of Darién.

Representations of Darién's landscapes, far from being detached descriptions, were – as with all representations – “material practices that engaged material worlds” (Braun, 2002:61). In other words, the authors of the report did more than just describe, observe, and map a pre-existing reality. Similarly to other builders of modern nation-states described by Scott, the ‘experts’ who investigated Darién's population, forests, and natural resources and compiled the OAS study “strive[d] to shape a people and landscape that [would] fit the techniques of observation” (1998:82). This illustrates the performative and deeply colonizing power of ‘development’ discursive practices, and simultaneously alerts us to the fact that the marginalisation or dispossession of indigenous peoples does not hinge so much on ‘simply’ ignoring or erasing their presence, as it depends on the particular processes through which they are made visible and characterised (Braun, *ibid.*).

I now focus on some of the important changes fostered by the ‘Conquest of Darién’. Central to the ‘development’ strategy laid out by the OAS blueprint was the extension of the Pan-American Highway to the town of Yaviza. The highway was to improve the accessibility of the region, raise the value of its resources, and redistribute Darién's population (OAS, 1978:6), and thus help ‘fix’ Darién's ‘technical’ problems. The highway reached Yaviza – 49 kilometres from the Colombian border – in 1980, and profoundly transformed the spatial organization as well as the natural and social landscapes of the province.

First, the highway deeply altered the traditional settlement patterns and transportation systems of the region. Prior to the road, Darién's cultural landscape was characterized by various river towns dominated by Blacks, and Emberá-Wounaan settlements typically located up-river (Giro, 1998:6). As this author observes:

Many of these river towns functioned until the late 20th century as the essential links between the Darién and the outside world, as ocean-going cargo ships would carry manufactured goods in and ship raw materials and timber from the hinterland (ibid.).

Black riverine and coastal towns and indigenous up-river settlements formed a region locally referred to as the 'old Darién' administered by La Palma – the historical capital of Darién and traditional point of entry into the province, located at the mouth of the Tuira River that empties into the Gulf of San Miguel. Transportation in the 'old Darién' relied chiefly on coastal waters and navigable rivers. The opening of the highway marginalized La Palma and favoured Metetí – a *Latino* town located directly on the road, rendering river and sea transportation systems obsolete, and leading to major shifts in population distributions. Today, the majority of Darién's population is concentrated along the road between the towns of Chepo and Yaviza, forming a region locally known as the 'new Darién' (MIPPE, 1998:6-7). These areas have greater access to technical assistance, credit, land titles, and technological improvements, and have the highest per capita incomes and levels of agricultural production (UNDP and MEF, 2003a:8). The province thus displays important inequalities with economic activity concentrated in eight<sup>26</sup> of the province's 29 *corregimientos* (ibid.). At the same time, the most isolated settlements of Darién have experienced negative demographic growth rates and outmigration (Giro, 1998:7). Today, the highway unquestionably forms the 'modern' backbone of the region (Map 4).

Before the 1960s, Darién was predominantly inhabited by indigenous groups (i.e., Emberá, Wounaan, and Kuna) and Black peoples. The Blacks are descended from African slaves brought by the Spaniards to replace the decimated indigenous population

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<sup>26</sup> The eight most economically active towns of Darién include: Metetí, Santa Fé, Yaviza, Agua Fría, Río Iglesias, La Palma, Río Congo, and Río Congo Arriba (UNDP and MEF, 2003:8).

and work in the gold mines of northern Colombia and Darién (Hernández, 1970:82, Méndez, 1979:125). The Black population, commonly referred to as the *Afrodariénitas* includes two sub-groups: the *Dariénitas* born in Darién and the *Chocoanos* who were born in Colombia, mainly in the Department of Chocó (and to a lesser extent, in the Departments of Sucre, Córdoba, and Bolívar) (Dir. Planificación, 1972a:3). A majority of the *Afrodariénitas* living in Darién today migrated from Colombia during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, attracted by the region's extractive and agricultural activities (Perafán and Nessim, 2002:4). Black people combine various livelihood strategies, including land-based activities (agriculture, fishing, logging, and mining) and occupations as merchants, service providers, and officials in town (Kane, 1994:4). In 1970, they were the largest ethnic group, comprising 70 percent of Darién's population versus indigenous peoples who accounted for 20 percent and *Interioranos* who made up 10 percent (OAS, 1978:4). Until recently, Blacks were also the dominant political and economic group in the province and, as such, were the main recipients of the national government's educational, health, and socio-economic benefits (Herlihy, 1989:45). Although the Emberá and Blacks have always maintained racial and cultural differentiation, they have built, for centuries, extensive economic, social, and magico-religious relations (Stipek, 1974:87). For decades, Emberá farmers have traded their agricultural produce to the cargo boats and stores owned by Black merchants (Kane, 1994:6). Emblematic of the social structure of reciprocity existing between Blacks and Emberá is the *compadrazgo* relationship in which Emberá parents choose Black males they trust as godfathers of their children. This relationship involves rights and obligations and operates as a critical site for numerous economic and social exchanges (1994:90), underscoring the fact that, contrary to

dominant discourses, the Emberá have not been living in geographical isolation since at least the time of Conquest (Stipek, 1974:92).

For decades, the Blacks controlled regional trade and politics in Darién (Bilbao et al., 1979), but this control has been fading recently, as a result of the state's focus on indigenous peoples (Kane, 1994:8). In addition, the migration of *Latino* farmers from the Interior to Darién (where they become known as *colonos*) "has disrupted the balance of relations historically developed between the Blacks and Indians" (1994:6). It has also shifted the ethnic equilibrium of the province: today Blacks represent only 23 percent<sup>27</sup> of the local population, versus 30 and 47 percent for the indigenous and *colono* groups respectively (Perafán and Nessim, 2002:3-4). At the same time, the population of the province doubled in thirty years, increasing from 22,865 individuals in 1970 to 43,832 in 1990 and 48,530 in 2000 (Contraloría General, 2001). As such, Kane notes that "Torrijos' development strategy, whether intentional or not, served to weaken the links that connect the past and peoples of Darién to each other" (1994:8). The *colonos* fostered significant changes in the region's production systems and land use, in particular a dramatic increase in cattle ranching. This has been responsible for major processes of deforestation<sup>28</sup>, land degradation and erosion, and land speculation (MIPPE, 1998). A number of measures were implemented to protect Darién's natural heritage. One of the most significant conservation initiatives implemented in the area was the creation of

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<sup>27</sup> Several factors – aside from the important immigration of *colonos* – explain the diminution of the black population in Darién, including the crisis of the extractive economy (gold, wood, ipecac), the collapse of banana cultivation, the ending of state subsidies for agricultural produce, decreasing fishing resources, lack of employment opportunities, and migration to urban areas (Perafán and Nessim, 2004:5)

<sup>28</sup> The province lost 14,000 hectares of forest per year between 1980 and 1992 (MIPPE, 1998:15) and 17,200 hectares of forest between 1992 and 2000 (ANAM, 2004:37). As a result, Darién – together with the Province of Panamá and the Comarca Ngöbe-Buglé – exhibit the highest rates of deforestation in the country (ibid.).

Darién National Park<sup>29</sup> in 1980. The following year, the park was designated a world heritage site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and became a biosphere reserve in 1983. Covering 579,000 hectares, the reserve encompasses a third of the Darién region, and is Central America's largest national park (IUCN, 1981:5). Remarkably, 44 percent of the Comarca Emberá is contained within the Darién Biosphere Reserve (roughly one quarter of the reserve), creating many ambiguities and jurisdictional dilemmas with respect to land use and management. It is also one of several examples of how protected areas have been established in Central America with little to no consultation with local indigenous populations that are affected by them (Herlihy, 1997).

Out of all the ethnic groups present in the region, Black people have the weakest control over land as they do not possess any type of territorial protection (Perafán and Nessim, 2002:26). In a context where the indigenous *comarcas* together with the various protected areas have come to represent today 71 percent of the province, many Blacks are starting to feel marginalized and to resent a situation they feel confers indigenous peoples an unfair advantage. I explore this issue in greater detail in Chapter VII.

#### **1.4 Village formation and creation of the Comarca Emberá**

Historically, the Emberá and Wounaan were identified as a single ethnic group under the term Chocó Indians. Although this denomination still persists today, the Emberá and Wounaan form two distinct groups. As Velásquez et al. observe, they “speak related, but mutually unintelligible, languages and have similar, but distinct, material culture, myths and legends, interpersonal styles and histories” (2007:94). Originally from

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<sup>29</sup> The park was also created to prevent the spread of hoof-and-mouth disease from Colombia into Panama (Chapter VII).

the Chocó region of northern Colombia, the presence of Emberá peoples in Panama is relatively recent. Guionneau-Sinclair (1990:53) argues that the migration of Emberá peoples from Colombia to Panama was sporadic during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Although they may have been present in Darién at the time of the arrival of the Spanish *conquistadores*, Emberá migrations really began at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – and became more significant in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – as a result of several factors, including the Spanish conquest, game depletion in settled areas, and, more recently, mistreatment meted out by Colombian colonists (Faron, 1962:14; Guionneau-Sinclair, 1990:55). These factors forced Emberá families to migrate northward. They settled the tributaries of the Tuira, Chucunaque, Sambú and Balsas rivers, thereby displacing the Kuna farther into headwater areas and towards the Archipelago of San Blas, along the Caribbean coast (Herlihy, 1986). The migration of Emberá families from the Colombian Chocó was very gradual, however. Herlihy notes for instance that the Emberá did not occupy the upper Chucunaque River until the mid-1960s (1986:86). According to Panama's 1960 national census, the Emberá numbered 5,777 people. Today, they form a group of 22,485 individuals (i.e., eight per cent of the Panamanian indigenous population), of which 8,246 live in the two districts of the Comarca Emberá and 11,437 live in nearby areas in the Province of Darién (Table 2).

Prior to the 1950s, the Emberá commonly settled along Darién's rivers in a pattern of dispersed household units (Torres de Araúz, 1958:168), following the rule of virilocal residence (Faron, 1961:100). Faron (1962:15) observes that although the Emberá were not nucleated into hamlets nor organized into villages, the riverine populations formed loose clusters of closely related households, known as sectors. The locations of

**Table 2: Indigenous population in Panama and in Darién**

<b>Panama</b>		<b>Darién (excluding comarcas)</b>	
<b>Indigenous affiliation</b>	<b>Total population</b>	<b>Indigenous affiliation</b>	<b>Total population</b>
Ngöbe	169,130	Ngöbe	216
Kuna	61,707	Kuna	1,878
<b>Emberá</b>	<b>22,485</b>	<b>Emberá</b>	<b>11,437</b>
Buglé	17,731	Buglé	55
Wounaan	6,882	Wounaan	2,430
Naso (Teribe)	3,305	Naso (Teribe)	35
Brí-Brí	2,521	Brí-Brí	44
Bokota	993	Bokota	109
<i>Total indigenous</i>	285,231	<i>Total indigenous</i>	16,204
<i>Total Panama</i>	2,839,177	<i>Total Darién</i>	48,530
<b>% Indigenous</b>	10	<b>% Indigenous</b>	33.4

**Source:** Contraloría General: Dirección de Estadística y Censo 2000.

households were largely determined by the availability of land suitable for the cultivation of plantains (i.e., sandy alluvial soils). As the population of riverine sectors increased, Emberá households did not “move laterally into the jungle; they expand[ed] along the rivers up to or near their headwaters” (Faron, 1962:14). In addition, although Emberá families were linked to one another by kinship, they did not possess a formal, organized political structure with an individual explicitly exercising power and authority (Herrera, 1971:355). Only during warfare would some individuals be chosen to lead the group (Torres de Araúz, 1981, cited in Herrera, 1989:91).

In the 1950s, missionary activities and the desire to get access to formal education encouraged the formation of villages. By 1960, six communities had been created (Herlihy, 1986:164). The process accelerated during the 1960s under the influence of a ‘mysterious explorer-adventurer-turned-missionary’, Harold Baker Fernandez (nicknamed Perú by the Emberá), who convinced them that literacy was key to tackling their socioeconomic problems, including their economic exploitation by the Blacks who controlled commerce (Bilbao et al., 1979; Herrera, 1989:92). He also instructed the Emberá about the need to secure land rights in order to resist both the encroachment onto indigenous lands by *Interiorano* agricultural colonists. In fact, conflicts with colonists claiming indigenous lands were growing quickly from the 1960s onwards (Loewen, 1972:160). Land conflicts were very much present in the area of Sambú in the early 1970s, particularly between the Emberá community of Bayamón – created in 1970 – and the neighbouring *Latino* village of La Colonia (Bilbao et al., 1979). For Perú, the creation of village settlements was critical for securing land and accessing education (Herlihy,

1986:165). Seventeen new villages were created during the 1970s. An Emberá man in his mid-forties described the role of Perú to me as follows:

I heard that Perú came and started to talk with the elderly. In those times, there was no village, only *caseríos*<sup>30</sup>. We lived in dispersed households near the river. I was upriver when I heard there was a meeting taking place with Perú. He came to tell us that we should join together so later we could get a *comarca*. If we remained dispersed – one here, one over there – then how would the government see our problems? He advised the elderly to establish villages so as to have more power. So people started to join together, and this man would give us much advice about how to elaborate laws and how things should be. He told us that one day we would self-govern (Interview March 18, 2007; my translation).

Initially, the process of village formation was primarily an indigenous effort. General Omar Torrijos then added new impetus to the movement throughout the 1970s (Herlihy, 1986:167). Torrijos empathized with the plight of Panama's rural poor. He also wanted to expand Panamanian national identity and improve the position of indigenous peoples within the national society. An important component of the revolutionary government was to give power and representation to the lower classes (Priestley, 1986:28) – with the expectation that they would in turn support the ruling military party, the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), in electoral processes. A local informant reported to me how, in fact, all the Emberá *comarcanos* were members of the PRD in the early 1980s. Torrijos enlisted Estanislao Lopez, a Kuna *Cacique*, to help the Emberá organize – albeit, as Horton states, “within the limitations of an integrationist and authoritarian state” (2006:837-8). In 1968, Torrijos also set up the first national indigenous congress in Alto de Jesús, in the Province of Veraguas (Herlihy, 1986:168-170). These two processes led to the establishment of a pan-Chocó political organization, resulting in the nomination of four Emberá leaders called *caciques generales*. The new

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<sup>30</sup> Farmhouses

political organization and the strategy of village settlement were formally adopted in 1970<sup>31</sup>. In the following years, the government also began to provide infrastructure to support indigenous affairs (Herlihy, 1986:184). The regime's "corporatist multiculturalism" (Horton, 2006:837) was reflected in several articles of Panama's 1972 constitution<sup>32</sup>. An extraordinary meeting was held in 1978 during which Torrijos announced a "national plan to demarcate indigenous regions" (Guionneau-Sinclair, 1996:104-5). This accelerated the formation of larger settlements, and 30 new villages were formed in the 1970s. As exemplified here, the processes of community formation entailed a drastic spatial restructuring of settlement patterns and the simultaneous development of institutional relationships that, from then on, have linked Emberá peoples to a variety of extralocal organizations: regional and national indigenous organizations, state agencies, and national and international NGOs. The formation of villages has also enabled a greater penetration of the integrationist Panamanian state (Guionneau-Sinclair, 1990:62).

The government's position was, however, contradictory, encouraging the politicization of the indigenous population, its regrouping into villages, and the recognition of traditional land rights, while at the same time fostering the settling of *Interiorano* colonists and promoting cattle ranching and timber exploitation – as I discussed in the analysis of the OAS report. This situation underscores, in part, the fact that the 'state' is never a monolithic entity but the site of competing "authorities with

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<sup>31</sup> This happened during two regional congresses held in Boca de Trampa, in the Sambú area (February 12-13, 1970), and in El Salto, on the Chucunaque River (February 23-24, 1970) (Herlihy, 1986a:172 and personal interviews in Bayamón in 2006-2007).

<sup>32</sup> Although not using explicitly the term of *comarca*, Article 5 mentions the possibility of special political divisions, stipulating that "The law may create other political divisions, whether to hold them under special regimes or for reasons of administrative convenience or public service". In addition, article 123 stipulates that the State will guarantee indigenous communities the lands and collective rights necessary to their social and economic wellbeing (Guionneau-Sinclair, 1996:100-101).

differing ideological visions about the meaning of development and use of land” (Wali, 1995:157). In this vein, it is difficult not to notice the strong coincidence between the regrouping of Emberá households into villages and the simultaneous intensification of immigration and appropriation of land by *colonos*:

In the case of the [*colonos*], the dispersion [of households] has increased without any governmental intervention to control this tendency; in the case of the Emberá, on the contrary, the regrouping has been encouraged officially. Although there does not seem to have been any intentionality in these simultaneous, opposite processes, some have suspected that [indigenous] regrouping was a step to facilitate the occupation of lands previously defended in situ by their indigenous inhabitants ((Bilbao et al., 1979:94; my translation).

These contradictions also underscore the fact that indigenous policies and programs in Panama have always been largely conditioned by national interests and capitalist development (Blanco, 1984:130). As Herrera (1989:95-97) explains, although Torrijos was committed to both foster the political participation of different ethnic groups previously ignored or neglected and end the paternalism and political profit typically characterizing Panamanian government’s relationship to the indigenous population, he also believed that it was legitimate for the minority to make sacrifices in the name of ‘development’ that benefitted the majority.

During the XXIV Emberá congress held in 1980 in Unión Chocó, the Emberá expressed discontent about the inaction of the *Oficina de Política Indigenista* (the Office of Indigenous Policy). Some Emberá representatives were appointed to “act as ‘ambassadors’ between the ‘nation of Chocó’ and the ‘nation of Panama’ and soon drafted the bill defining the prerequisites for the *comarca*, thereby legally beginning the *comarca* effort” (Herlihy, 1986:185). Law 22 finally established the Comarca Emberá in November 1983. At that time, Herlihy notes that “over three of every four Chocó had

been relocated into 53 villages” (1986:161). In 1999, the Emberá Charter was adopted to establish the administrative organization of the territory. In the next fifteen years after the creation of the Emberá territory, three other *comarcas* were established<sup>33</sup>, two of them in eastern Panama. Such effort was not entirely new since various indigenous reservations<sup>34</sup> had been created in the past (Alvarado, 2000:45). However, these ‘paper reservations’ never really had much meaning on the ground (Medina, 1972:74). From a jurisdictional point of view, the *comarca* implies the recognition of both a territory and a specific and autonomous politico-administrative structure (Alvarado, 2000:45). As Alvarado explains, “In legal terms, the *comarca* has its foundations in the geographical, historical, and cultural characteristics of a particular region; it has natural origins tied to the original settlement of a people, and it implies the maintaining of its own features” (2000:45; my translation). In sum, the creation of *comarcas* formalized the delimitation of distinctly ‘indigenous spaces’ with the aim to uphold ‘authentic’ indigenous cultural heritages and ways to relate to the land. As I demonstrate in Chapter VII, this discourse sanctions frozen performances of indigeneity that are increasingly difficult to reconcile with indigenous peoples’ changing local circumstances, daily experiences, and own aspirations.

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<sup>33</sup> The two Kuna Comarcas of Madugandí (Law 24 of January 12, 1996 and Executive Decree of December 3, 1998) and Wargandí (Law 34 of July 25, 2000), and the Comarca Ngöbe-Buglé (Law 10 of March 7, 1997 and Executive Decree 194 of August 25, 1999).

<sup>34</sup> Decree 44 of 1914 created the Toabré reservation in the Province of Coclé. In 1934, Law 18 established the Cricamola, Cusapín, and Bluefield reservations, located in the Province of Bocas del Toro, as well as the indigenous reservation of Alto Bayano in the Province of Panama. Law 2 of September 16, 1938 created the Comarca of Barú, in the Province of Chiriquí (regulated through Decree N°70 of 1938), and the Comarca of San Blas (regulated through Law 16 of February 19, 1953).

## **2. Contemporary changes in Emberá livelihoods and household economies**

The spatial relocation of Emberá families into nucleated settlements and a number of socio-cultural, environmental, and economic trends tied to the 'regional' and 'national' processes highlighted above have profoundly reshaped 'local' Emberá livelihoods and household economies over the last four decades.

### **2.1 The crisis of subsistence activities**

The formation of village settlements from the 1960s onwards has had important implications for subsistence strategies such as hunting, fishing, and the gathering of plant products. The permanent nature of contemporary villages and their growing populations have greatly increased Emberá pressure on local game resources. This was exacerbated by national and international restrictions on the raising of domestic cloven-footed animals in Darién, as the region was to serve as a buffer zone against the north-westward spread of hoof-and-mouth disease from Colombia into Central America (CATIE, 1977:4-5). These measures compelled Emberá households to rely increasingly on wild animals as sources of fresh meat, leading to the rapid depletion of game around villages (Herlihy, 1986:273-281). Similarly, the decreasing importance of the dooryard orchard-gardens traditionally grown around dispersed households meant the loss of a number of readily available plants, fruits, and condiments that played an important role in complementing daily diets (1986:256). With the depletion of wild game and plant products and the decline of riverine resources, Emberá households have become more reliant on canned meat, frozen seafood (caught by Black fishermen in the nearby coastal communities), and other imported foodstuffs sold in local stores.

The creation of villages also entailed the removal of large areas of forest around the villages. In the mid 1980s, Herlihy (1986:277) calculated that, depending on settlement size, the forest was located two to six kilometres away from villages. Today, the situation has worsened. In Bayamón and Atalaya, farmers have to walk several hours in order to find an area of mature forest. As a result, hunting, fishing, and forest-resource gathering activities must occur at increasingly greater distances from settlements, as exemplified in the following statement by an Emberá woman in her mid-thirties:

Look, today, there aren't any fish in the river...One has to look *far* for that little fish. In the past, when I was a little girl, my dad would go briefly to the *monte* [forest/cultivated fields] and there was a lot of fish and deer. We had extra food. Today, it's not like that anymore. There aren't any fish in the river, nor deer or rabbit. If you want to get one, you have to hunt it very far away (Interview, May 08, 2007; my translation).

Most lands within reasonable walking distance are already under cultivation or in fallow. This situation forces younger Emberá generations currently entering agriculture (as well as older farmers who want to clear new patches of primary forest to increase their existing land portfolio) to undertake cultivation at a considerable distance from the village (Ramnek, 1999:8; field interviews). An old Emberá man in his mid-sixties provides a vivid account of these changes and the disincentives they represent:

In the past, since there was no village, things were easy for our grandfathers: the forest was right there, at the bottom of the stairs. But now that people have grouped together, no one wants to go there. Think about what it means to have to get over there from here, when your fields are upriver! So you'd rather be here, without land. Those who arrived first have already hoarded everything. If you were lucky maybe you arrived early enough and managed to get a little piece of land and you can work it. But you work it, you work it, and then, where do you go when the land is tired? You have to go over there, but you don't want to! This is what is happening nowadays; this is why people quarrel about land. But over there, upriver, there is land! All along this river, all the way to the top of the mountain, these are Emberá fallowed lands. And no one wants to go...Young people? They don't want to go. Because you can tell it's pretty far. Walking to the last *rastrojo* from here takes over two hours, plus

another two hours to return. So what kind of work are you going to do? You'd have to go live there, like we used to, so you can get on with your work (Interview, June 12, 2007; my translation).

As suggested here, growing distances between houses and cultivated fields are discouraging many individuals to work the land. The growing disconnection between places of production and places of residence renders the transportation of agricultural produce everyday more problematic and often results in decreased yields because of thefts and animals' incursions into cultivated plots<sup>35</sup>. It also means that farmers are spending more time away from home and yet, less time working in their fields. These processes thus increasingly threaten the long-term viability of subsistence agriculture.

The adoption of villages has also been responsible for the intensification of land use – a process evidenced by the shortening of the long fallows typical of Emberá traditional agricultural system. This process no longer allows for the regeneration of old secondary forest and, because of repeated cutting and burning of agricultural lands, exotic grasses and drought-resistant pyrophytic plants typical of savannas are proliferating (Herlihy, 1986:277-278), agricultural yields are decreasing, and more time must be invested in weeding. In this context, competition and conflicts over land and forest resources are multiplying, as illustrated by the following account from an Emberá woman in her mid sixties and translated by her thirty-year-old granddaughter:

*F.L.: In the past, in the time of grandma, did people fight for a piece of land too?*

She says they didn't.

*F.L.: So why do they fight today?*

Because all the land has been claimed and some want to take that land away.

*F.L.: Is that why people fight?*

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<sup>35</sup> The destruction of crops by domesticated pigs wandering freely was a common source of conflicts between farmers during my stay in Bayamón.

Yes. I believe because of these land conflicts some people are going to die, because my grandpa is not the only one to have problems of that kind. Flor's father has problems too. Many people have similar problems to my grandpa.

*F.L.: Really? I hadn't heard of them.*

It's because people don't want to comment. Humberto's father, for instance, they say that this is how he died. He didn't die because he was sick or because he had a heart problem. He died because of an evil deed (Interview, June 09, 2007; my translation).

In addition to the land scarcity caused by the formation of villages, Guionneau-Sinclair (1990:62) argues that the commercial production of plantains partly displaced traditional subsistence agriculture, giving Emberá households the incentive to buy manufactured products with the money they generated from plantain sales.

According to the population census we conducted in Bayamón and Atalaya in 2006, 85 percent of Emberá villagers over the age of 15 practice subsistence agriculture. Yet, even though this activity still represents an important component of the livelihood strategies practiced by a majority of Emberá households, today, fewer families produce enough rice and plantains to cover their subsistence needs. Young children or women walking from house to house to enquire about the availability of a few plantains to buy for breakfast were a frequent scene in both villages. In addition, while many households in Bayamón and Atalaya had sold some rice to local stores at the end of the harvesting season in September-October 2006, few households had enough rice to subsist until the next harvesting season. By May 2007, a majority of households in both villages had used up their rice supplies and had to buy the same rice they had sold to local stores a few months earlier, this time at a greater cost<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> The price of rice was higher for two reasons: first, because demand was high and supply low, and, second, because while farmers sell unshelled rice to local stores during the harvesting season, the stores only sell shelled rice.

The creation of schools – one of the primary impetuses for village formation – also altered indigenous subsistence activities. Schools have modified the “daily geographies of children” (Valdivia, 2005:297) and fostered their ‘deskillment’ with regard to forest knowledge (Rival, 1997:142). Since children attend school every day, they no longer accompany their parents to the *monte*: children are increasingly disconnected from the realities of agricultural work and have little practical engagement with the forest during their upbringing. Schools also diffuse new cultural values and social norms embedded in dominant notions of ‘modernity’ and betterment<sup>37</sup> (Valdivia, 2005:297) and encapsulated in an economy of binary oppositions – rich/poor, educated/illiterate, professional/farmer, and modern/traditional – that runs deep into the psyche of younger Emberá generations. Working in the *monte* jeopardizes children’s academic performances and chances of “improving themselves”, teachers say. A growing number of parents now believe that agriculture is not a proper occupation for their children and push them to become, instead, professionals, and getting jobs in the capital city and climbing the social ladder. An old Emberá man summarizes these changes:

The arrival of schools and education made the Emberá lazy. The teachers started to say that kids that are attending school should not go to the *monte*. They say that children should not be working in the *monte*, even to plant a bit of rice, because they are studying and otherwise they fail. Parents too began to say, ‘my son is studying, he can’t work’, not even to carry some water. That’s how the Emberá got lost, and the youth today is failing (Interview, June 12, 2007; my translation).

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<sup>37</sup> Many local informants also shared with me memories of a time when teachers prohibited students from wearing traditional Emberá clothing and jewelry and from speaking Emberá.

A growing proportion of individuals among the younger educated generations is thus no longer interested in practising agriculture<sup>38</sup>. Their recurring references to the relentless biting of mosquitoes and ants, scorching sun, and tallness of trees reflect their perception of the *monte* as a hostile, unpleasant, and intimidating environment, and their view of agriculture as a difficult, strenuous, and unpromising activity. For them, land-based activities connote working “in the hot sun”, as opposed to enjoying the comfort and shade of an office. Being a farmer means being impoverished, ignorant, and living an unrewarding existence. In their views, farmers are, as I often heard, “*come padachuma*” – i.e., people who have to eat boiled, green plantains because they cannot afford to buy cooking oil to deep-fry their food. As articulated here by an Emberá man in his early twenties, many young adults thus prefer to migrate to urban areas in search for what they consider to be better opportunities and living conditions:

I have to take refuge, look for a way to study or a way to make a living. That’s what people do these days. They go to the city, to live there, because no matter what, it’s better than here. People my age, they don’t like to work in the *monte*. They don’t want mosquitoes to bite them. And now they are graduating, becoming professionals, these people are not going to work in the *monte* (Interview, April 18, 2007; my translation).

Mounting environmental constraints and new socio-cultural aspirations are thus increasingly limiting the viability and attractiveness of subsistence agriculture. Meanings of land are reworked and new identities are asserted that challenge conventional views of indigenous identity, challenging the very foundations upon which territorial rights were granted.

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<sup>38</sup> This trend is not only true for indigenous communities; it is also visible at the regional level. During the 1990s, the participation of individuals under 21 in agriculture decreased by 61.1 percent. It decreased by 24.5 percent for individuals aged 21 and 24 during that same period (UNDP and MEF, 2003:32).

## 2.2 The booms and busts of Emberá commercial agriculture

The Emberá have been involved in commercial agriculture since at least the 1930s, when bananas, then grown for subsistence, started to be cultivated as a cash crop (Icaza, 1977:429). However, commercial agriculture in Darién was marked by a number of ‘boom and bust’ cycles throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the 1950s, the production of bananas was increasingly affected by the ‘sickness of Panama’ – a phytosanitary disease caused by a fungus (*Fusarium oxysporum*). Plantains, which were already cultivated as both a subsistence and cash crop, took over. Two brothers in their late sixties recalled with me the heyday of plantain commercialization:

*F.L.: Did you sell plantains at that time?*

Plantains, yes...Oooh! In those days, we’d harvest a lot of plantains. We’d fill up four boats! And we had to leave plantains in Sambú, piling up on the ground. The boat would leave, unload the plantains in Panama, come back, and leave again.

*F.L.: How many plantains would you sell?*

2,000 or 3,000 per week.  
Some people sold even more.

*F.L.: And your parents sold plantains too?*

Yes, they did.  
They sold bananas.

Oooh! Those days were quite something!

*F.L.: Did they sell other products?*

No, no.  
Plantains and bananas, that’s all (Interview, May 19, 2007; my translation).

In 1970, Darién was the main producer of plantains, accounting for 45.5 percent of the national production. Fifty-eight percent of that production occurred in Darién’s indigenous areas and plantains became, as a result, the most important crop cultivated among the Emberá in the region (Government of Panama and OAS, 1976:9; Guionneau-Sinclair, 1990:59). In the mid-1980s, plantains were still the dominant cash crop in 64 percent of the Emberá villages surveyed by Herlihy (1986:240). Concomitantly, the

arrival of *Interiorano* farmers from the 1950s onwards, together with the implementation of guaranteed prices and government credit, provided the incentive for the commercial production of rice (Government of Panama, 1976:11; Mendéz, 1979:349). In 1970-1971, Darién's indigenous areas produced greater quantities of rice and plantains (as well as pigs, coffee, and cacao) than non-indigenous areas (OAS, 1978:260). In addition to bananas, plantains, rice and corn, the Emberá also sold small surpluses of other crops, such as yams and avocados, at local markets and to intermediaries. Emberá farmers derived important cash incomes from commercial agriculture – a situation that was reflected in the acquisition of numerous manufactured products, such as sewing machines, grinding machines, rifles, and outboard motors (Mendéz (1979:357; Loewen, 1972:166; Faron, 1962:20).

However, since the mid-1980s, Emberá commercial agriculture in the Sambú area has experienced significant declines. In the late 1970s, the combination of deteriorating prices for plantains, environmental factors (e.g., flooding, damaging winds), and pests and diseases including, the banana stem weevil (*Odoiporus longicollis*), led to declining plantain yields and fostered the progressive aging and abandonment of plantations (Government of Panama and OAS, 1976:1; Icaza, 1977:429). In the 1980s, the black sigatoka fungus (*Mycosphaerella fijiensis*) destroyed 75 percent of Darién's plantain production (Heckadon-Moreno, 1997:210). By 2000, Darién's plantain production had dropped to 4.1 percent of the national production (UNDP and MEF, 2003a:1).

Producers in Sambú are also experiencing chronic problems accessing markets for their produce. What is interesting though is that if the opening of the Pan-American Highway in 1980 greatly improved the situation of the communities close to the road,

transportation conditions – and as a result, market access – worsened in the Sambú sector largely as a result of it. While it was presented as the ‘solution’ to Darién’s ‘lack’ of transportation infrastructures, the highway greatly marginalized the fluvial and maritime transportation systems that, for decades, had provided Emberá farmers effective access to regional and national centres for their products. Although as many as eight or nine cargo boats used to travel to Darién to buy plantains in the 1960s, today, only two boats operate between Sambú and Panama City and they no longer buy agricultural products on a regular basis<sup>39</sup> (field interviews). So while state development interventions have recast local rivers and maritime routes as obsolete, they have failed to provide alternative modes of transportation in Sambú. For years, the local population has been petitioning the government to pave the 20 kilometres of mud road between Sambú and Garachiné, so as to open new markets and lessen their ‘new’ isolation (Photo 2). Despite repeated promises – usually made during electoral campaigns – nothing has been done (Castro, 2008b) and the road is chronically impassable during the eight-month rainy season.

Finally, in the late 1980s and 1990s, the government cancelled the price control programs and subsidies for agricultural produce that had been created in the 1970s, and stopped buying agricultural produce in most towns of the Darién<sup>40</sup> (Pasos et al., 1994:49-

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<sup>39</sup> These two boats travel to Sambú on a very irregular basis. At the time of my stay in the area, it was common to wait four to six weeks for one of the boats to come, which often resulted in acute shortages of basic foodstuffs such as flour, sugar, cooking oil, and other items.

<sup>40</sup> During the 1970s and early 1980s, producers could sell their plantains and grains at various government warehouses, which had been built by the *Ministerio de Desarrollo Agropecuario* or MIDA (Ministry of Agricultural Development) through its *Instituto de Mercado Agropecuario* or IMA (Institute of Agricultural Market). The IMA went from purchasing six percent of Darién’s plantain production in 1971 to over half of the province’s commercialized production by 1975 (Government of Panama, 1976:14). The objective was to prevent traders from fixing prices and exploiting both producers and consumers (ibid., 24). The IMA bought grains at a higher price, thus providing greater profits to local producers (Bilbao, 1979:68). For instance, between January and March 1975, traders in Sambú would buy corn for \$6.50/quintal while the IMA offered \$7.75/quintal (ibid., 75-76). Yet, the amount of agricultural produce the institution was able to buy was seriously hampered by the limited amount of money it had at its disposal (Bilbao et al., 1979:77; Government of Panama, 1976:26).

**Photo 2:** The mud road connecting the towns of Sambú, on the Sambú River, and Garachiné, on the Gulf of San Miguel (France-Lise Colin, May 2007)



50; Suman, 2005:8). Darién's rice production went from representing 2.8 percent of the national production in 1990 to 1.7 percent in 2000, while the production of corn plummeted from 11.3 percent in 1990 to 3.6 percent in 2000 (UNDP and MEF, 2003a:1).

An Emberá farmer in his late sixties provides a vivid summary of the booms and busts of Emberá commercial agriculture over the last 50 years:

In the times of the banana company, people only cultivated bananas – *amboromia*. Then it failed. When they bought bananas, they didn't buy plantains. Plantains were for subsistence only. Neither did they buy rice. Everything was for our own consumption. We only made money with plantains. Then a disease came and the banana production failed. That's when they started to buy plantains – *pada* – because there wasn't anything else to sell. Then they started to buy corn, then rice. They purchased this produce until around 1975. You transported 10 or 20 *quintales* of corn and they bought them in Boca de Sábalo – that same village they call Sambú today. There, there was a Chinese guy and he bought everything. But then the whole thing failed again; it failed until today. Currently, the commerce of plantains, corn, and rice no longer exists. People don't buy anymore (Interview, June 12, 2007; my translation).

While these government programs had been designed to foster agricultural production and the participation of indigenous communities in national markets, among other things, they were also responsible for rendering farmers extremely vulnerable to their withdrawal. Since the mid-1980s, the adoption of neoliberal policies by Central American governments has led to a shift of rural and agricultural policies from agrarian reform to land policies focusing on privatization, property rights, and land taxation and titling (Kay, 2002:40; Paiment, 2007:67). Recent policies increasingly target the use of capital in farms measuring over 50 hectares, which are involved primarily in cattle ranching and industrial or export crops. Smallholders have remained outside of these processes of agricultural modernization and technological capitalization (IDB, 2005:79), at the same time as the elimination of previous, state-sponsored supports for small-scale

agriculture has further marginalized subsistence and small producers. A recent report observes that the adoption of the structural adjustment programs recommended by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund led to a greater deterioration of the Panamanian economy in the 1990s, with agriculture being one of the most affected sectors (UNDP and MEF, 2003a:11-12).

In Sambú, low crop prices, lack of bargaining power, decreasing land productivity, diseases, unreliable market access, declining availability of land, and transportation constraints – many of which reflect the new spatial and social articulations fostered by the ‘development’ and integration strategy implemented in Darién since the 1970s – have resulted in the waning of Emberá commercial agriculture. Today, very few households in the *comarca* produce any significant marketable agricultural surpluses, which greatly affects Emberá men’s earnings and their ability to function adequately as providers and ensure the social reproduction of their families.

### **2.3 Shifting livelihood strategies**

Despite the lack of infrastructure and services in the Sambú region, village economies have become highly monetized. Cash needs for household reproduction have increased significantly since the formation of Emberá villages. While Emberá households continue to rely on some cultivated crops (rice, plantain, corn, yucca), they increasingly depend on *tiendas* (local stores) for the acquisition of most necessities. Because store-bought items are imported by boat from Panama City, they are sold locally at higher prices than in urban supermarkets (field interviews; Ramnek, 1999, 2007).

Life in settlements has also brought about new expenses, including paying for running water (i.e., maintenance and repair of local water aqueducts), education (tuition,

books, school supplies, uniforms, as well as, in some cases, food and lodging for students pursuing secondary education away from home), electricity, health services (medicine, doctor appointments, hospitalization), and transport (purchase of bicycles or gasoline for outboard motors). New lifestyle demands and cultural practices as well as changes in consumption patterns are responsible for added household expenditures: women want to wear the newest *paruma* to attend church services, people hope to travel to Panama City during the dry season to visit their relatives, families wish to relax at night watching television and DVDs, and parents encourage their children to pursue higher education in urban centres. Other factors also contribute directly to families additional needs for cash. For instance, with the extension of capitalist relations of production inside the *comarca* over the last three decades, the exchange of free labour between households has frequently given way to the payment of wages. In 2006-2007, a (male or female) day-labourer was paid five dollars for seven hours of work. In addition, the creation of the *comarca* propelled new modes of land use management that resulted in additional expenses for local households. For example, certain types of land use, such as cattle ranching, and the access to and use of certain forest resources (e.g., timber species) now require the acquisition of permits. To obtain permits, people have to pay various kinds of fees to traditional authorities and, in some cases, to ANAM and the town council.

In an increasingly commodified economy, Emberá households are diversifying their economic strategies in order to meet these cash needs. With the decline of commercial agriculture, a growing number of households rely on non-agricultural activities for a rising portion of their cash requirements. Men who have some level of education and/or access to a social network are able to get remunerated jobs as civil

servants (e.g., health promoters, teachers, frontier policemen<sup>41</sup>, and clerks at local governmental offices) or may occupy temporary, elected political functions (e.g., mayor, *corregidor*, and representative of a *corregimiento*). Still, it is important to note that only 10 percent of men hold formal, waged positions. Men with access to a small start-up capital may engage in logging activities or open a *tienda*. Other sources of income for men include selling meat (wild game, domesticated pigs, and fish), carvings from *cocobolo* wood (*Dalbergia retusa*) or *tagua* nuts (*Phytelephas seemannii*), or making traditional jewellery. They also generate cash through a variety of informal, occasional services within their community – e.g., sewing *parumas*, offering haircuts, renting bicycles, selling parrots as pets, or transporting bags of rice to the nearby rice mill. Roughly two thirds of all men in Bayamón and Atalaya also earn cash working occasionally as day-labourers in one of their neighbours' fields or, sometimes, for a nearby *Interiorano* cattle rancher. Still, these opportunities are few, short-term, and highly seasonal. Overall, the current situation is one of growing socioeconomic differentiation between men who have access to formal employment, remunerated political positions, and business opportunities, and others whose involvement in land-based, subsistence activities remain predominant. Growing difficulty in generating an adequate income from agriculture means that many of these men are no longer in a position to cover the growing expenses associated with household reproduction.

Women's range of income-generating activities and access to formal waged employment is limited by several structural constraints, including lower educational

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<sup>41</sup> Ramnek (1999:16) talks of about 200 Emberá and Wounaan men working as *policías de frontera* (frontier policemen) in Darién in 1999.

levels<sup>42</sup> and ‘traditional’ notions about women’s appropriate place and behaviour. According to our census, less than two percent of women have access to formal, remunerated positions. Women who have access to both electricity and a fridge/freezer earn small amounts of cash selling homemade ice cream, small bags of ice, soft drinks, meat, and fish. Other women bake tortillas, *bollos* (corn rolls), and sweets, or sell chickens. Sources of income for women also include washing clothes, working at one of the few local *tiendas*, or cooking meals for occasional visitors. But more importantly, over the last 20 years, women have been increasingly involved in the production of chungapalm handicrafts for national and international markets – an activity that, as I show in Chapter VI, is playing an increasingly important role in the provision of cash for household reproduction. In addition, the census of Bayamón and Atalaya reveals that about 15 percent of all female and male adults also receive *remesas* (remittances) from relatives working in the city and that, children’s scholarships often complement households’ earnings. Finally, many men and women seek wage labour outside the *comarca*, engaging in seasonal migrations to Panama City where they work in various unskilled positions (i.e., mostly as night watchmen, dishwashers, and construction and factory workers for men, and as maids for women).

What is striking in the picture painted here is the reliance of most Emberá households on diversified livelihood strategies and income sources combining some form of land-based activities and, increasingly, a number of non-agricultural, market-based activities both inside the *comarca* and in urban areas. Most people thus are only partly

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<sup>42</sup> The household survey shows that 81 percent of Emberá women over the age of 40 did not attend primary school – compared to 59 percent of men. In addition, although 83 percent of women under 40 finished primary school, only eight percent completed secondary school. In contrast, over a quarter of men under 40 attended two years of secondary school, 18 percent finished secondary school, and five percent are studying or have completed an undergraduate degree.

dependent on local resources. Yet, most state documents – and others – continue to portray Emberá households as deriving their subsistence primarily from non-monetary, land-based activities, and as being only marginally and very recently integrated in the market economy.

#### **2.4 Changing gendered labour relations in agriculture**

Similarly, in contrast to the dominant portrayals of Emberá people as still being predominantly hunters-gatherers and shifting agriculturalists, local villagers repeatedly stressed a situation of declining agricultural production and growing disinterest in agriculture – especially on the part of the younger generations. Central to these villagers' narratives was the emphasis on the waning participation of Emberá women in agricultural work.

Quantitative data from the population census conducted in the summer of 2006 reveal that 88 percent of Emberá women practice subsistence agriculture. Some differences emerge when 'unpacking' the category 'women'. Eighty percent of women between the age 15 and 40 engage in subsistence agriculture, versus 96 percent of older women, aged 40 to 60. Greater disparities emerge still, when examining the frequency of women's outings to the *monte*. Women aged 15 to 40 dedicate an average of 2.4 days per week to cultivation, compared to 4.4 days for the older female group. In sum, women above 40 devote almost twice as much time to agricultural activities as younger females.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to assert conclusively that these numbers illustrate a declining participation of women in agriculture. Indeed, to quantitatively substantiate this process in the absence of statistical data on past practices, one has few options other than comparing – in the present – older women's agricultural work to younger women's. Such

an approach is premised on the idea that older women are representatives of how things were done in the past, while younger women reflect current trends. However, differences between the two age groups do not necessarily reflect historical changes, but women's different responsibilities and roles according to distinct life-cycle positionings. For instance, the smaller amount of time younger Emberá women allocate to agricultural work (compared to their older counterparts) may simply reflect the constraints of motherhood. These limitations thus alert us to the importance of combining qualitative and quantitative methods – rather than asserting the superiority of one over the other – in conducting ethnographic work.

In the past, married wives participated alongside their husbands in almost all agricultural activities (Faron, 1962:27; Torres de Araúz, 1958:171), and would occasionally accompany them on hunting trips too. Women were also responsible for growing patches of sugarcane. This was an important responsibility because sugarcane was used to prepare *guarapo* (a fermented alcoholic beverage) and *chicha dulce* (a sweet beverage) that were offered to people participating in *junta*<sup>43</sup> work parties, as well as to occasional guests. Women were also in charge of collecting a wide range of forest resources and maintaining dooryard gardens, which provided numerous medicinal and edible plants, spices, condiments, and fruits.

Today, the availability of both processed sugar and manufactured beverages (soft drinks, beer, rum) in local *tiendas*, combined with the decreasing importance of *junta*

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<sup>43</sup> A mechanism of labour exchange involving the gathering of dozens of individuals, on the invitation of one family, to perform heavy agricultural duties, including slashing primary forest patches or harvesting rice.

activities<sup>44</sup>, have diminished the significance of, and need for, growing sugarcane. Second, the formation and growth of village settlements and the introduction of food stores limit the feasibility and necessity of maintaining the dooryard orchard-gardens traditionally grown around dispersed households. Nowadays, few women still tend large gardens. Third, the depletion of riverine resources and the overexploitation of medicinal and edible wild plants near villages are reducing women's opportunities to take part to fishing and gathering activities. In addition, women's recent involvement in the production of chungá-palm handicrafts is also slowly reconfiguring the nature of women's productive work away from the land. The following extract from an interview with an Emberá woman in her early forties illustrates some of these changes:

*F.L.: Are the Emberá working the same way today as they did in the past or this has changed?*

Yes, it has changed a lot. In the past, men worked with their wives. As soon as they would get married, they would work together, to claim some land for themselves. And in those days, the forest was closer too.

*F.L.: So in the past women would accompany their husbands?*

Yes, they would.

*F.L.: What about now?*

Now, they don't.

*F.L.: Why is that?*

Now, women don't accompany their husbands much, because of their craft (Interview, May 10, 2007; my translation).

Finally, a number of contradictory processes are also making women's continuing participation in agriculture difficult. For example, the growing distances between houses and fields oblige farmers to spend more time away from home. And with children now

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<sup>44</sup> Local people identify several reasons for the fading of *junta* activities: (1) the absence of tall trees that required several men to cut down, now that most of the primary forest has been replaced by secondary forest; (2) the existence of chainsaws; (3) and the role of the church in prohibiting consumption of alcohol. As such, many women no longer agree to prepare *guarapo*, the fermented beverage offered to workers during a *junta*.

attending school – rather than accompanying their parents to the fields – women help them get ready for school, look after them when they return, wash their uniforms, and prepare meals on time.

In sum, the important socioeconomic and environmental changes fostered by the adoption of village settlements, in a regional context marked by a drastic re-organization of humans and resources, have deeply reshaped women's land-based responsibilities, encouraging women's decreasing participation in agriculture. My qualitative findings clearly suggest that, today, Emberá women perform a narrower range of, and invest less time in, land-based activities than previous female generations<sup>45</sup>. This alerts us to the fact indigenous peoples' relationships to land are neither static nor timeless: as circumstances alter, so do their land-use practices (see Sundberg, 2003).

This is not to say that this trend is homogeneous and that all women share similar positionings and experiences. In fact, the findings also suggest important disparities among women. Men's socioeconomic status plays a significant role in determining married women's participation in agriculture. Households where married men have access to waged employment either rely less on subsistence agriculture (i.e., they buy a larger share of their food at the *tienda*) or, if they decide to continue cultivating rice and plantains, hire day-labourers to perform part of the work. In such households, women's involvement in agriculture is thus limited. On the contrary, women who are married to subsistence farmers continue to contribute important amounts of labour to land-based activities. In the following statement, a 40-year-old Emberá woman describes the life of these women:

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<sup>45</sup> These activities center primarily on planting, weeding, and harvesting rice and plantains, harvesting corn, as well as planting and harvesting tubers.

Women whose husbands are not salaried must work the same way as their husbands.

*F.L.: You mean they must work in the monte?*

Yes, they must work in the *monte*. They go in the morning and go back again in the afternoon. They have to be in the sun all day! And they have to cook. And if they don't have any rice ready, they have to go hull rice. And right away, they have to start cooking! They sit for a little while, and again they have to go. The *monte* is their life. And some men don't want to leave their wives at home. As soon as you've rested, you've cooked, 'let's go again', they tell you, 'so we can finish fast!'

*F.L.: Why can't they leave their wives at home?*

I don't know. Because they don't want to work alone. Because women are helping them a lot (Interview, April 17, 2007; my translation).

An interesting feature of women's declining participation in agricultural work is the recent, growing affirmation that the *monte* is not a suitable environment for them. In her study of women in Bayamón in the late 1970s, Icaza reports the words of an Emberá man – then the representative of the Sambú *Corregimiento* – whom she witnessed telling people during a local meeting:

Fellows, I will give you a piece of advice: women don't belong to the *monte*, they belong to the house. Don't take your wives to work in the fields because they get tired and, upon their return, they have to cook, whereas men don't. When men come back home, they rest. This is all the more true when they are pregnant, because they get hot and don't feel well (1977:440).

Thirty years later, the views of this *Representante* resonate in the narratives of many Emberá men who assert that taking their wives to the *monte* would be like mistreating them. An Emberá man in his early twenties provides evidence of this belief:

*F.L.: What kind of work would your wife do in the monte [when she used to go with him]?*

She helped me to plant rice, she accompanied me sometimes. I didn't mistreat her. I mean I didn't take her to the *monte* all day long; only once in a while.

*F.L.: Why is that? Since women used to do it in the past, why [can't they do it] now?*

Well, because personally I feel sorry for the woman, that's how I see it. ...Women are having a hard time working over there. I don't like that (Interview, April 18, 2007; my translation).

The idea that a woman performing agricultural work on a daily basis is being abused by her husband is also evident in the following story told by a thirty-year-old Emberá man who talked about his elderly uncle's dismay at being accused by fellow villagers of mistreating his wife – because she accompanies him daily to the *monte*:

Sometimes my uncle says: 'Old woman, stay home, I'll go [to the *monte*] alone'. So, my aunt says: 'No, I'll go with you'. That's why she never stays home.

*F.L.: And why does your uncle tell her to stay home?*

Well, sometimes, as he says, people say that he *never* leaves my aunt at home. Wherever he goes, my aunt *always* has to go. Several people talk that way. So when he hears that, he feels bad. He tells my aunt: 'Old woman, I never force you to work with me. That's why sometimes it's painful for me. I feel bad when people criticize me like that. It's your own will that you always go with me'. But people are always commenting 'Her husband forces her to go', and God knows what... 'That's why she doesn't stay home, that's why one day she got sick and she almost died'. That's what people say (Interview, March 12, 2007; my translation).

Viewing the *monte* as an unsuitable place for women may exemplify, in part, the growing constraints associated with land-based activities in the context of nucleated settlements – particularly the great distances between villages and cultivated fields. It could also reflect the reworking of local understandings of 'proper' performances of femininity as new social norms and cultural values are being adopted and negotiated – particularly, as I show in the next chapter, the dissemination of a patriarchal ideology. Furthermore, it could implicitly encourage women to stay home, where, thanks to the production of *chunga* baskets, they are in a better position to generate cash for household reproduction.

## Conclusion

The first section of this chapter focuses on the historical and spatial construction of Panama, stressing the emergence and consolidation of spatial disparities grounded in an overriding centre comprised of the trans-isthmian zone and the 'Interior' – Panama's historical agricultural heartland – and which has constructed itself, in part, through the peripheralization of forested/indigenous areas. I show how the crisis experienced in the Interior from the 1940s onwards and the new political and economic orientation adopted by the Torrijos government during the 1970s reconfigured the social, spatial, economic, and environmental conditions of one of these 'peripheries' – the Darién Province. This was made possible, to a large extent, by a series of discursive practices – including an influential OAS report examined here – through which Darién was produced as an isolated, empty, under-utilized, and resource-rich landscape and, as such, made into a 'suitable' object for 'development' intervention. These 'extra-local' processes were given visibility, in part, through the mobilization of Emberá peoples for the recognition of their territorial rights and the creation of a *comarca*.

A second section examines the decreasing viability of land-based subsistence and commercial activities and the intensified monetization of Emberá village economies, fuelling important shifts in the livelihood strategies and gendered, agricultural labour relations of Emberá *comarcanos*. I try here to offer a nuanced picture of individuals actively engaged in a mix of subsistence and market-based activities and differently positioned through gender, socioeconomic status, education, and age – a picture that greatly contrasts with dominant representations of the Emberá as hunters-gatherers and shifting cultivators marginally and only recently integrated in the market economy.

Importantly, throughout this chapter, I use a multiscale approach to assemble a picture of the relations between the changing ‘local’ environments, economies, and social lives of Emberá *comarcanos* and ‘global’ economic and political processes. Yet, following Gezon and Paulson’s insights, by conceptualizing ‘global’ flows as “necessarily embedded in local processes”, I strive to offer a picture of the Comarca Emberá “not merely as an isolatable physical space” inexorably *impacted* by disembodied, unwavering ‘global’ forces but as “a dimension of historical and contemporary connections” (2005:9) through which the uneven ‘social’ and ‘physical’ landscapes of this indigenous territory are continuously being produced and re-signified. The Comarca Emberá thus provides insights into what Gezon and Paulson call “a situated, performed, and locally embedded globalism” (2005:5), for the ‘global’ is examined here through the multiple shapes and contours that Emberá peoples’ practices, experiences, identities, and lives espouse as the spatial and social articulations in which they are embedded are reconfigured through time.

I expand on this theme in the next chapter, as I explore some of the gendered dimensions of capitalist development in contemporary indigenous communities, revealing, via detailed ethnographic work, how these processes play out through historically constructed gender, community, and household relations.

## Chapter VI – Commodification of chungá-palm crafts and reconfiguration of gender relations and identities

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*“...the discursive position as perpetually poor, powerless and pregnant works to place African women as illiterate victims of national systems of resource distribution and disadvantage, putting them in such abject positions that only development can rescue them. It represents its objects as so lacking in the resources that underpin agency, and in such political and economic deficit, that they will never be able to get into a position on their own from which they can make claims. Powerlessness described in this way by outsiders simply serves to reinforce it” (Cornwall et al., 2004:7).*

### Introduction

The work of indigenous peoples is often made to appear irrelevant in an international context, fuelling the impression that they are excluded from the global economy. Yet, Cupples argues that, “It is crucial that we consider the way in which people, regardless of the work that they do, are positioned within processes of globalization rather than just the ways in which they are excluded from it” (2005:310). Yet, a key problem underpinning many contributions on global/local interactions, is their reliance on what Hart calls the ‘impact model’ – a model that primarily emphasizes how “inexorable forces of global capitalism bear down, albeit unevenly, on passive ‘locals” (2004:91; see also Laurie et al., 1999:175). In other words, this model views globalization as a set of abstract, immutable, and monolithic dynamics pressing on powerless, subjugated individuals. Early studies on women and development, for instance, typically constructed women as ‘victims’ who had no say over the unwavering forces of globalization, denying them the agency and ability to manoeuvre and take advantage of ‘edges and social interstices’ (Villareal, 1992:257) in order to resist and reconfigure political-economic changes. Similarly, I show in Chapter IV how a number of spatial tropes and ontological constructs informing state and other literature lead to view indigenous groups as more ‘vulnerable’ to the market economy and indigenous

cultures as being inexorably harmed and corrupted by contemporary socioeconomic restructurings. Contrary to these approaches, my analysis tries to move away from an idea of the 'global' and the 'local' as separate, privileging rather a view in which they mutually produce and infuse each other, albeit in contrasting ways throughout the globe (Gezon and Paulson, 2005; Massey, 2005).

Having stressed in broad terms the important transformations of Emberá livelihoods and household economies over the last four decades in Chapter V, I deepen my analysis of these changes by focusing, in the present chapter, on Emberá women's recent involvement in the production of handicrafts made from the fibres of chungá palms – i.e., *Astrocaryum standleyanum* (Arecaceae) – also known in English as black or spiny palm. The production and commercialization of these handicrafts is an essential component of the expansion of capitalist processes inside the Comarca Emberá. I conceptualize basketry activities as a discursive site and I examine how, as they gain a prominent position in many household economies, they operate as a privileged medium through which the micro-politics of household gendered relations and local constructions of femininity are being challenged, contested, and recoded in often contradictory ways.

In addition to the conceptual insights on space highlighted above, feminist political ecology offers other rich and valuable theoretical tools to examine these issues. First, this scholarship is very useful in resisting essentialist notions of gender for it endorses a view of all social identities as the products of historical social relations rather than biological facts (Leach, 1991; Mbilinyi, 1992). Individuals' subject positions are thus not fixed but provisional, maintained through constant re-enactment (Butler, 1990). From this perspective, particular constructions of gender are understood as being part and parcel of

the negotiation of, resistance to, and struggles over shifting power constellations and changing socioeconomic, political, and environmental conditions at the 'global'/'local' levels. Second, feminist political ecologists alert us to role of social differentiation (e.g, gender, life-cycle positioning, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity) in shaping individuals' rights and responsibilities, and experiences. In addition, they pay special attention to the power relations and regimes of truth out of which particular understandings of the world take shape and are normalized, deriving from such focus a conceptualization of struggles over resources as always both material and symbolic. Concomitantly, they insist that the various social institutions (e.g., the conjugal contract, household, community) through which rights, obligations, and resources are delineated, negotiated, and re-signified through time are not static entities but malleable 'arenas of struggle' (Paulson et al., 2005:28; Watts and Peet, 2004:37). In doing so, this approach enables a much more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of people's encounters with and experiences of the forces of transformation they face.

The first section of this chapter briefly retraces the historical connections through which chungapalm basketry became a specialized, productive activity for national and international markets, the various processes embedded in the making of baskets, and the ecology and shifting rights of access to and use of chungapalms. The second section begins with a brief overview of the critical role basketry earnings play in the reproduction of many Emberá households, particularly subsistence-farming households. I then show how several discursive practices work to render this contribution invisible and to maintain women in a subordinate position. Lastly, I explore the ways in which basketry activities and the purchases made with their proceeds help women to re-imagine

themselves and forge new subjectivities that partly disrupt dominant constructs of women as ‘mothers’ and ‘housekeepers’ and of men as ‘breadwinners’. The particular shapes changing social interactions and meanings of femininity/masculinity take provide a site through which the gendered dimension of the ‘global’ are given visibility. I demonstrate that the outcomes of processes of capitalist transformation in indigenous communities are complex and ambiguous, not uniform and necessarily oppressive, and I offer a view of indigenous experiences and realities as multifaceted, fluid, and dynamic.

## 1. *Astrocaryum standleyanum* and the commodification of crafts

### 1.1 Origins of chungá crafts in the Sambú area

Emberá women have a long tradition of weaving a variety of household baskets<sup>46</sup> made from the *maquenque* palm (*Oenocarpus mapora*) or from the long stalks of the *naguala* palm (*Carludovica palmata*), known in Emberá as *pärärä* and in English as Panama-hat palm. They also weave cargo baskets (*ě*), which are made of different types of vines (*pikiwa*), and are used to carry firewood and agricultural products as well as to fish. My interviews indicate that, traditionally, Emberá women did not use chungá palm fibres to weave baskets. According to informants, in the past, chungá fibres were only used as adornment in healing ceremonies, while the palm stems, once scraped of their spines, served as posts supporting the roof structure of Emberá houses. This is exemplified in the following account by an Emberá woman in her late sixties:

In those days, they didn’t use chungá fibres. The fibres were only for questions of *hai*, of *häämbaná*, for witch ceremony, as adornment. And the trunk of the palm was used for poles because there wasn’t any wood material for that (Interview, June 20, 2007; my translation).

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<sup>46</sup> This includes *petá* and *hamará* (large baskets to store clothes) and *üchuburri* (smaller baskets to keep women’s beads and coin necklaces).

In explaining the origins of chungá-woven baskets, all the informants insisted on the role played by various Emberá men. Around 20 years ago, these men, while traveling to Panama City or various communities of Darién, witnessed the commercialization of hand-woven baskets and, subsequently, the use of chungá fibres in the making of these items. Local narratives also explicitly trace the origins of chungá baskets to the Wounaan, which is corroborated by Velásquez (2001:78) in her study of the use and management of chungá palms in various Emberá and Wounaan villages of eastern Panama. In the following account, a woman in her mid-sixties explained to me, through her granddaughter, how the production of chungá crafts originated:

*F.L.: Did your mother weave like this?*

She says that in those times, they didn't know how to weave like this.

*F.L.: So how old was she when she learned? Was she already married?*

When she started to weave like this, she was married and already had my mother.

*F.L.: And who taught her?*

She says that the first Emberá woman learned in Santa Fe [a *Latino* town along the Pan-American Highway]. From there came another woman, and women here saw that she was weaving and they started to learn. But in those days, they didn't use chungá. They used *naguála*. Then came a tourist to the village of Mogue [an Emberá village south of La Palma], and there they figured out how to weave with chungá. And my dad, who was *cacique*, used to go to Panama City. One day he saw people there buying and selling these handicrafts. So he took chungá crafts to sell there too. But she says that, it is the Wounaan who first started to weave that way. Then it spread to the Emberá.

*F.L.: So the Wounaan taught the Emberá?*

Yes, the Wounaan are the inventors (Interview, June 09, 2007; my translation).

## **1.2 Ecology and harvesting practices of *Astrocaryum standleyanum***

*Astrocaryum standleyanum* is found from Nicaragua through Costa Rica and Panama, and along the Pacific Coast of Colombia and Ecuador (Croat, 1978). It grows in both primary and secondary forests on poorly drained soils, usually below 200 m elevation (Henderson et al., 1995), although it can be found up to 500 m in Ecuador

(Borgtoft Pederson, 1994:311). This author notes that “while no regeneration has been observed in pastures the palm can show prolific regeneration in the shade of agroforestry systems, almost to the point of forming thickets” (ibid.). Chunga is a solitary, medium-sized, sub-canopy palm that reaches a height of 10 to 15 meters (Borgtoft Pederson, 1994:311) and that displays 15 to 20 pinnate leaves measuring three to four meters in length. Chunga palms replace 3 to 7 fronds per year (Borgtoft Pederson, ibid.), although Leigh (ibid.) offers a more conservative annual average of 3.8 fronds. The entire trunk of the palm is armed with black, downward-pointing, flattened spines 5-15 centimetres long that are covered by an irritating substance causing the cuts they make to fester (Leigh, 1999:17-18). The palm bears obovoid, 4-5 cm long, orange fruits borne on short rachillae. They are eaten by many animals and are animal dispersed (Borgtoft Pederson, 1994:311) (Photo 3).

Taking into account the ecology of the palm is important for it shapes in various ways local social processes of resource use. For example, because of the hardness of the trunk and the hazardousness of the spines, men are typically responsible for harvesting chungu fronds. This, as I emphasize later in this chapter, gives them strong leverage to demand that their wives share with them their earnings from craft sales. Older women, who have spent their whole life working alongside their husband in the *monte*, usually accompany their spouse to harvest chungu. Much more rarely, these women may go with one or two female companions<sup>47</sup>. A woman whose husband does not harvest chungu may buy fibres from other villagers. In 2006-2007, a bundle of unprocessed pinnae corresponding to a single palm leaf would be sold for three to five dollars. In Bayamón

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<sup>47</sup> A woman rarely goes to the *monte* by herself. If she does, it is usually only to harvest something quickly (medicinal plants, plantain stocks) at a very short walking distance from the village, not to perform agricultural labour.

**Photo 3:** A fruiting chungá palm (France-Lise Colin, April 2007)



and Atalaya, selling chungá materials remains a marginal activity only supplying some additional, occasional cash. Yet, some evidence suggests that, in other villages of the *comarca* (such as Condotó, up the Sambú River), certain households are specializing in harvesting and processing chungá resources, which are later sold down river to women of Puerto Indio (pers. com. Kate Kirby), where chungá palms have been almost completely depleted and where fewer people devote to forest-resource extraction and agricultural activities. As for most agricultural activities, Emberá forest users generally harvest chungá according to lunar cycles, typically during the waning moon. Weavers use the youngest, most supple fronds of the chungá palm – that is, the newly emerging spear leaf found at the centre growth, at the top of the palm. The first expanded leaf is sometimes used to dye the fibres green but not to weave. The existence of heavy spines on the trunk of the palm also accounts for the destructive harvesting practices of Emberá users: as the spines make it impossible to climb the trunk to extract the core frond, the whole palm is cut down with an axe<sup>48</sup>. The core frond is removed, wrapped in other leaves (for the outer edges of the pinnae are sharp like razors), and brought back to the house to be processed – that is, turned into fibres.

Recently, the greater population densities associated with village settlements and the rising economic and cultural importance of the palm fostered by the growing commodification of chungá handicraft have led to greater pressure on the resource and have caused various degrees of depletion in naturally occurring chungá trees around

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<sup>48</sup> In some parts of Latin America, chungá palms are sometimes exploited in a non-destructive way. In northern Ecuador, for instance, *mestizo* colonists harvest the young palms (whose height is under three meters) using a pole with a chisel on the end (Fadiman, 2008:102; Velásquez, 2001:80; Borgtoft Pederson, 1994:316). Borgtoft Pederson also argues that, according to farmers and harvesters from the Province of Manabí, Ecuador, one spear leaf may be removed from each palm every three months without impacting negatively on the leaf production.

villages. Emberá forest users often have to walk several hours before they are able to find palms to harvest. A number of farmers in the *comarca* are thus starting to maintain the palms in agroforestry systems. Local management practices includes protection of the palm when secondary forest is cleared for agricultural purposes during the dry season, and protection of re-growth – that is, clearing of weeds around juvenile palms – as a forty-year-old Emberá woman explains below:

*F.L.: Where do you cut chungá?*

There, in my dad's *rastrojos*. Because my dad weeds around them; he lets the palms grow, he doesn't kill them. My dad has a *finca* [farm, cultivated field] that he devotes mostly to chungá. But some people don't do that (Interview, May 04, 2007; my translation).

### 1.3 Making and marketing chungá crafts

Processing the fibres must occur within a few days after the harvest for, as the pinnae dry, they lose their flexibility and can no longer be processed (Borgtoft Pederson, 1994:316; pers. obs.). Processing the fibres is almost exclusively a female job. It is time-consuming and requires a great deal of skill and knowledge<sup>49</sup>. To obtain coloured chungá fibres, Emberá weavers use a combination of natural, vegetal dyes (from roots, leaves, bark, fruits and berries, ashes and clay) and artificial dyes (from coloured crepe paper, mosquito-repellent coils, powdered drink mixes and pot scrubbers)<sup>50</sup>. The fibres are boiled with one or various dyes in order to obtain the desired shades. Often, this

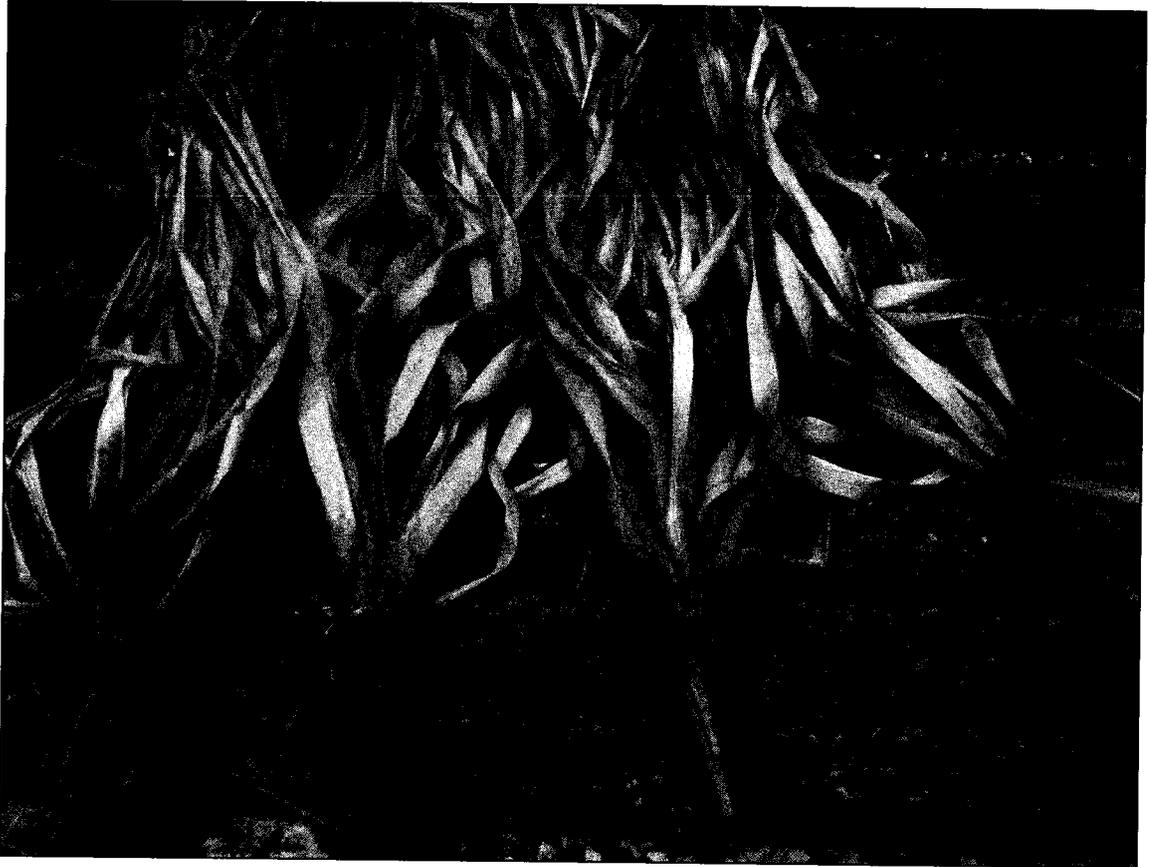
<sup>49</sup> The first step consists of peeling the pinnae: women secure one end of the pinna between their toes and carefully strip its spiny edges off (Photo 4). Because the pinna's edges are sharp, the peeling operation requires assiduousness and diligence. Then, women peel away the upper epidermis and mesophyll along the entire length of the lamina to extract the weaving fibre. The fibres are then soaked in water for several hours to lighten their color, and then air-dried and bleached in the sun for 2 or 3 days (Photo 5). Weavers then split the pinna into several thinner, vertical weaving strands. Some women may do this before the fibres are soaked so as to reduce the fraying of the fibres.

<sup>50</sup> Artificial dyes allow time to be saved, produce more vibrant colors, and help to obtain certain colors (e.g., green shades) that are difficult to get from plant dyes. Using natural dyes is more time-demanding because one must go and collect the different materials in fallow fields, home gardens, and the forest, and then prepare them (e.g., peeling jagua fruits (*Genipa Americana*), grinding berries).

**Photo 4:** Emberá woman peeling off chungá pinnae to extract weaving fibres (France-Lise Colin, April 2006)



**Photo 5:** Processed chungá fibres drying and bleaching in the sun on a corrugated steel sheet (France-Lise Colin, April 2007)



operation has to be repeated several times before the right color is reached. Dying fibres necessitates knowledge and experience, which vary from woman to woman. Finally, fibres are air-dried and often braided into skeins, ready for weaving (Photo 6). Properly dried fibres can be stored for long periods of time. Weaving *chunga* crafts also requires the harvesting and processing of *naguala* fibres<sup>51</sup> (*Carludovica palmata*). The weaving process consists of using a strand of *chunga* that is tightly woven, with a needle, over a core of five to ten *naguala* fibres, from the bottom centre outward in concentric circles, creating geometric or zoomorphic designs (Photo 7)<sup>52</sup>. While Wounaan weavers mostly produce plates and ovoid baskets (Photo 8), Emberá women weave predominantly plates, masks, and small animal figures<sup>53</sup> (Photo 9). A large majority of Emberá women favour the *escalera* stitching technique (see footnote 48), because it is easier and faster. They also use fibres of larger diameter for the same reasons. However, these techniques produce crafts of coarser weave (i.e., with thick stitches) and people thus generally concur in saying that the Wounaan are finer weavers than their Emberá counterparts – a claim that personal observation largely confirmed.

Findings from interviews and informal conversations indicate that Emberá women from the Sambú region started to weave *chunga* crafts commercially about 20 years ago. Crafts were typically collected and later sold by a family member, a friend, or a traditional leader travelling to Panama City, where most of the domestic market for these

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<sup>51</sup> *Naguala* grows abundantly in secondary forests and along forest trails and is easily harvested, typically by women. Weavers extract only the emerging leaf of *naguala* plants, which is then sliced length-wise, its midveins removed, and hung in the sun to dry and bleach.

<sup>52</sup> Two types of coil stitching are mostly used by Emberá weavers in the Sambú area. The first one, referred locally as *diente peinado* (combed tooth), creates a smooth, silky finish with the coils being almost invisible; the second technique, called *escalera* (stairs), produces a corrugated surface with each coil appearing well defined.

<sup>53</sup> I have also witnessed a few weavers making small purses (*cartera*) and one woman weaving 20-centimeter-high anthropomorphic figurines.

**Photo 6:** Coloured chungá fibres ready to weave (France-Lise Colin, April 2006)



**Photo 7:** Bottom of a basket with a geometric design and using the *diente peinado* technique. We can see clearly the core of naguala fibres on the left side, around which the thin black chungá fibre is tightly woven with a needle



**Photo 8:** A small Wounaan chungá basket upon completion, with a zoomorphic design and using the *diente peinado* stitching technique (France-Lise Colin, April 2007)



**Photo 9:** An Emberá couple from the village of Playa Muerto selling chungá baskets, masks, and plates with zoomorphic and geometric designs and using the *escalera* stitching technique. Two *cocobolo* carvings are also displayed on the left, in the background (Courtesy of Kate Kirby, June 2008)



items is located. Velásquez (2001:80) notes that as the market expanded in size and level of competition, from the second half of the 1990s onward, vendors have been traveling to local communities to purchase baskets directly from artisans. While this is true for the villages located close to the Pan-American Highway and for Wounaan weavers – who produce very high quality baskets, most Emberá women in Sambú continue to rely on relatives or friends traveling to the capital city. They may also sell their *chunga* handicrafts to local Emberá individuals occasionally working as intermediaries. These intermediaries may sell the crafts to vendors in Panama City or to vendors living in various Emberá communities located on tourist routes. Among those are Playa Muerto<sup>54</sup> and several Emberá villages located in Chagres National Park<sup>55</sup>, which receive tour operators from the Panamanian capital. Women who have the opportunity to travel to Panama City (usually during the dry season and summer school holidays) may sell their baskets directly to souvenir shops or Panamanian traders there. Since most Emberá women generally produce small items of low or average quality, they largely remain outside the international market of art collectors – through which many Wounaan weavers sell their finest baskets (Velásquez, 2001) – but do produce for a large market of foreign tourists.

Marketing indigenous crafts has been part of the government's development strategy for Darién for several years. Hence, it is possible to read in the OAS report I examine in Chapter V that, "Promoting the handicrafts made by the indigenous groups of

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<sup>54</sup> A village situated on Darién's Pacific coast, one-day walking distance from Bayamón, and visited by cruise ships.

<sup>55</sup> Chagres National Park is located on the eastern side of the Panama Canal, between the Provinces of Panamá and Colón. It encompasses 129,000 hectares and was created in 1985, primarily to protect the watershed supplying the Canal. It hosts several Emberá and Wounaan communities that have migrated since the 1960s from eastern Darién. It is located about 40 km from Panama City and is thus easily accessible to tourists.

Darién will boost the future program of tourism, taking advantage of the road transportation facilities that have been planned” (1978:48; my translation). In addition, both the state and international organizations have implemented various actions to help indigenous weavers since the mid-1990s<sup>56</sup>. The commodification of indigenous crafts was further boosted by the growth of the Panamanian tourism industry (Elton, 1997) – a sector recently defined as “a public- and national-interest industry”<sup>57</sup> (IPAT, 2008:20). This successful commodification points to the growing demand and interest of (typically) western consumers for seemingly exotic, unique, and handmade objects produced in the global south (Nash, 1993a:2). In this vein, Nash points out that, “The intrinsic value of crafts to the sophisticated traveler or catalogue consumer is precisely the human labour embodied in the product and what it tells about a whole way of life” (1993a:10).

Yet, what these handicrafts tell about Emberá weavers are often essentialist tales of a uniform indigenous culture that are in sharp contrast with the internal class differentiation exacerbated by capitalist development (Nelson, 2006:55), as well as stories of remote, traditional forest people living in harmony with nature and upholding authentic, age-old traditions (Velásquez, 2005:324-326). Such view is fuelled in part by the common assumption that the “commercial harvesting of non-timber forest resources

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<sup>56</sup> For instance, the *Ministerio de Comercio e Industrias* (MICI, Ministry of Commerce and Industries) organized production and commercialization workshops in the Comarca Emberá (Ministerio de Gobernación y Justicia, 1996:112). In 2005-2006, 116 Emberá and Wounaan women from five communities of the Tupiza River formed a community organization and received the support of WWF Central America, ANAM, and the *Secretaría Nacional de Ciencia, Tecnología e Innovación* (SENACYT, the National Secretariate for Science, Technology and Innovation) to improve production techniques and craft designs, develop the first plan for the sustainable use and management of non-timber forest products in the region, and expand the marketability of handicraft products. In 2007, an association of Wounaan producers (APROWOCA) received US\$15,000 from the Small Grants Program (SGP) of the Global Environmental Fund to fund the reforestation of various non-timber native species (including *chunga* palms), so as to ensure the continuous supply of raw materials for the making of handicrafts (pers. com. José Manuel Pérez ). The promotion of indigenous crafts was also a component of the PRO-DARIÉN project implemented in the early 2000s.

<sup>57</sup> Law 8 on Incentives for tourism development promulgated on June 14, 1994 and later modified through Decree-Law 4 of 1998.

has minimal ecological impact on tropical forest” (Peters, 1996:20). The production of crafts is often perceived to be a more ecologically sustainable strategy than other land uses. Herlihy, for instance, argues in a piece on indigenous peoples in Central America that “crafts supply many groups with cash supplements that do not require the cutting of the forest” (1997:239). In other words, since a forest exploited for its non-timber forest resources (e.g., fruits, latex, and fibres) maintains the appearance of being undisturbed, it is often believed that these resources can be harvested, year after year, on a sustainable basis (Peters, 1996:22). Against this view, Peters argues that seemingly benign short-term impacts can severely alter the delicate ecological balance maintained in a tropical forest and modify the structure and dynamics of forest tree populations (1996:26). In the Sambú area, the production of ‘traditional’ chungá handicrafts relies on the destructive and unsustainable exploitation of black palms – as I showed earlier. Moreover, lost from view in the essentialist stories associated with chungá baskets is the remarkable syncretism (rather than ‘undisturbed’ tradition) embedded in these artisanal products and the no less remarkable ability of Emberá-Wounaan weavers to recreate their ethnic identity and adapt to fast-paced changing circumstances continuously. Finally, while the fascination for, and commodification of, crafts provide a significant, alternative source of income, they also simultaneously exacerbate the dependence of indigenous households on distant markets and on the vagaries of economic fluctuations over which they have but limited control (Nash, 1993a:13; Little, 2003:50).

#### **1.4 Changing rights of access to and use of chungá palms**

The incorporation of chungá palms into a circuit of national and international capital accumulation through the recent commodification of Emberá craft has triggered

important shifts in Emberá people's relationship to the forest. In fact, the changing economic and cultural significance of chungá palms and their decreasing availability around villages have been responsible for reworking the terms of access to and use of chungá resources.

Traditionally, Emberá male and female farmers only own the crops as well as the fruit and timber species they may plant, either in their dooryard orchard garden, fallowed fields, or elsewhere. Medicinal plants, bark, leaves, palms, fruits, or berries from naturally occurring species can be harvested in anyone's cultivated or fallowed lands. Until recently, access to chungá palms was regulated by the same rules. As a naturally occurring species in both primary and secondary forests, chungá palms could be harvested by any individual without restriction. Yet, the changes mentioned above have led to important shifts in existing rules of access to, and use of, chungá palms. Data from interviews reveal that, today, in a similar fashion to timber and fruit species, farmers possess individual rights of tenure over the palms naturally occurring in both their cultivated and fallowed parcels, as illustrated here by an Emberá woman in her mid-thirties:

*F.L.: Did you cut that chungá in the finca of your father-in-law also?*

Yes, yes I did. Because they don't allow you to cut the palm in someone else's *rastrojo* anymore. If they see you, they can fine you, so you have to cut in your own *finca* (Interview, May 15, 2007; my translation).

Similar processes of tenure individualization for chungá palms have also occurred in Wounaan communities located outside the Comarca Emberá (see Velásquez et al., 2007:100). These processes denote a critical change in the ways that the forest is thought of and conceptualized by indigenous forest users – that is, less and less as a community asset and, increasingly, as a resource to be exploited for personal gain. The

individualization of tenure over *chunga* palms – as a shift in ownership towards privatization – thus provides an illustration of processes of ‘neoliberalism and nature’ (Mansfield, 2007a). Such privatization entails a double dynamic: on the one hand, it sanctions the reallocation of the control and management of *chunga* resources from the collectivity of the *comarca* to local individual users. On the other hand, the private appropriation of ‘nature’ enables its subsequent incorporation into capitalist markets as commodities (Mansfield, 2007b:481). Hence, as processes of commodification work their way deeper into indigenous spaces, they do not leave local forest resource relations intact.

The mounting pressure on *chunga* resources associated with craft commoditization has also encouraged the inhabitants of the *comarca* to adopt certain measures to regulate access to and use of black palms from primary forests. One of such measures includes the recent voting of a resolution that prohibits the “indiscriminate devastation of natural resources, such as *chunga* palms, from primary forests”<sup>58</sup>. Central to this resolution is the idea that *chunga* resources are being used irrationally – a situation that calls for the regulation and management of local people’s relations with the forest. As recent contributions from social nature theorists demonstrate, every account of nature is situated and partial in that what it says – and does not say – is shaped by individuals’ specific historical, geographic, and cultural locations and the particular constellations of power/knowledge in which they are enmeshed (Castree and Braun, 1998:17). How we make nature visible, these theorists insist, greatly determines how we act in it. In the

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<sup>58</sup> Resolution 37 of February 26, 2007, which adopts measures to suspend the devastation of natural resources from primary forests. Resolutions are adopted through vote. All *comarca* residents above the age of 18 and attending the congress can vote by raising their hand. Resolutions are adopted when majority is reached.

resolution, 'nature' is primarily viewed through the lenses of forest conservation and rational management. In doing so, the relationship between 'nature' and 'society' is apprehended through the same nature/society dichotomy I expose in the OAS report in Chapter V. The significance of such dichotomy is that it entails viewing 'nature' as an 'external domain', dissociated from society (Castree, 2001). This entails, on the one hand, understanding representations of 'nature' as unproblematic and outside of politics; it also means, on the other hand, that 'nature' is removed from history (Braun, 2002). Rendering the primary forest visible as a strictly biophysical entity authorizes the mapping of chungá 'resources' separately from the cultural relations and social practices they are embedded in – in sum separately from the people who rely on them (Braun and Wainwright, 2001). Chungá palms may now be planned for and managed in seemingly neutral and rational ways – a move that translates into the adoption of a quota on chungá extraction of "one tree per family". This quota has important material implications, because chungá palms do not mean the same to all local users. To put it differently, Emberá households are not positioned uniformly with respect to the land and forest resources. Had 'nature' been conceptualized in other words, local social relations of forest use would have been made visible, revealing that local households do not rely uniformly on chungá resources for their economic subsistence. As demonstrated by the household surveys my research assistants and I conducted, and by individual interviews, poorer households tend to rely more on basketry (and therefore on chungá palms) than better-off households with access to waged employment, for instance. In erasing these differences in the social uses of the palm and in livelihood strategies, the resolution thus penalizes with greater strength poorer, forest-reliant farmers. In addition, farmers are also

differently positioned in terms of access to land. Because most of the land around villages has already been claimed (see Chapter V), younger farmers tend to have narrower land portfolios, and as such, tend to rely more on the primary forest for provision of chungá fibres. The quota on chungá extraction has thus greater impacts on them than on older farmers who can get chungá from their fallowed lands.

In addition to the adoption of this quota, the resolution also prohibits the marketing of chungá fibres to Emberá individuals residing outside the *comarca*. In doing so, the resolution enforces a *comarca/non-comarca* dichotomy that is deeply problematic. In fact, the latter implicitly hinges on a view of *comarcas* as neatly bounded, autonomous enclaves naturally separated from the rest of the national territory, and on an understanding of identity through essentialist lenses – that is, as fixed and rooted in soil. In fact, prohibiting access to chungá resources to the Emberá residing outside the *comarca* suggests that the spatial *comarca/non-comarca* dichotomy also produces social differentiation between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ forest users. Geographical location thus determines identity. How sustainable are these divisions? In fact, they are not. As I emphasize in Chapter V, many residents of the *comarca* reside alternately in Panama City and in the *comarca*, taking advantage of distinct subsistence opportunities. Repeated migrations back and forth between these various spatial locations produce subjects with multifaceted, fluid identities that transcend any clear-cut territorial boundaries. Differentiating between ‘*comarcano*’ and ‘*non-comarcano*’ residents proves thus to be largely illusory. In addition, these seasonal migrations generate multiple, dense, and vital assemblages of socioeconomic connections and relations of mutual support between

Emberá individuals across space that fly in the face of any representation of the *comarca* as a closed system.

The unequal impacts of this nature conservation initiative on local villagers are clearly perceptible in the frustration and resentment expressed in the following extract by an Emberá woman in her mid-forties:

*F.L.: I heard that the Cacique prohibited sending chungá to Panama City?*

This has existed for a long time. Every time there's a congress they say that. And how many people have been sending chungá anyways!

*F.L.: But why does he want to prohibit it?*

That's how he is; he's against everything. That's why lately people are no longer calling him *cacique*. Of course, he doesn't care because he's receiving a pension; he's eating well, but he doesn't want other people to eat well too (Interview, May 04, 2007; my translation).

As a result, the new rules of access to and use of chungá palms are often resisted and strategized over by local users. The fact that many fallowed and cultivated fields are located at great distances from villages and are not visited regularly by their owners encourages some individuals to cut down chungá palms on their neighbours' land illegally. Similarly, processed chungá fibres are hidden in clothes and bags and sent to Panama City with family members. In the absence of concrete mechanisms to enforce Resolution 37, it is simply impossible to control the exploitation of chungá palms.

The protection of indigenous regions' 'natural and cultural heritage' has been a key rationale behind the delimitation of *comarcas* in Panama. In this vein, a central feature of the laws enforcing these *comarcas* is the obligation for traditional indigenous leadership to ensure the protection and conservation of their territories' natural resources. In other words, *comarcas* are implicitly expected to operate as 'nature conservation territories'. Central to the existence of such territories is the idea that nature and place can remain still – that they can be spatially bounded and protected against the passing of time. Of course,

neither nature nor place are bounded and static (Katz, 1997:54; Massey, 2005:137). As societies change, so does nature. With the penetration of national and international market forces deeper into the fabric of the Comarca Emberá, parts of 'nature' become lucrative commodities, fuelling unsustainable exploitation practices. In an attempt to deal with and respond to the contradictory demands of the market economy and the conservationist role they must perform to maintain their territorial rights, Emberá people are compelled to take action over the depletion of *chunga* resources. Yet, because these actions are necessarily framed within the frames of nature conservation and rational management discourses, they typically rely on a nature/society dichotomy that – as I have just demonstrated – is highly problematic in terms of the politics it entails, producing, in this particular case, socioeconomic and intergenerational inequalities among forest users over access to and use of forest resources. Although less evident at first sight, these inequalities may also have a gender dimension if we take into account the fact that while the restrictions on *chunga* access affect primarily women – as the main users of this resource – not a single reference is made about them in the resolution. In addition, as I stress later in this chapter, the indigenous institutions through which decisions and resolutions are adopted (e.g., regional congresses) are largely dominated by men. Few women occupy elected positions<sup>59</sup> in these political settings and most women are reluctant to express themselves in front of a congress audience. In addition, many women have told me that they commonly do not understand the issues being discussed in these settings (i.e., because Spanish increasingly replaces Emberá language and because too

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<sup>59</sup>Of course, women's low participation in public political settings does not necessarily mean that they have no say in political matters. Women often influence decision-making processes when they converse with their husbands at home. Nonetheless, the fact that most political assignments are taken up by men means that information passes through men first before it passes to women (Ramnek, 2007:18-19). It also means that women's voices are heard through men.

many technical terms are used). As a result, most women typically follow the majority when a vote takes place over a resolution.

In the following section, I explore how women's involvement in networks of commercial production and monetary exchange participates in reworking gender relations and identities.

## **2. Making money, negotiating gender relations and identities**

### **2.1 Re-introducing the 'political' in the household**

Neo-classical economic theory constructs the household as a natural, homogeneous, and co-operative decision-making unit, in which the preferences of all household members are aggregated into a joint utility function (Kandiyoti, 1998:136) and decisions on allocative patterns are made according to a single corporative interest (Elson, 1992:36). From this perspective, family labour, income, and resources are pooled into a common fund and are subsequently distributed equitably among family members (Evans, 1991:57). This 'black box' conception (Whitehead, 1981) validates a view of the household as a unified production unit characterized by harmonious and altruist social relations (Mbilinyi, 1992:41), which disguises the considerable diversity of individual circumstances, activities, interests and aspirations, and the plurality of men and women's responses in dealing with their situations. This neo-classical theoretical model tends to remain dominant in studies on indigenous societies (Nash, 1993b:129), partly because of stereotypical and essentialist ideas of indigenous societies as inherently harmonious and egalitarian.

In sharp opposition with such an approach, and as exemplify in Chapter II, feminist political ecologists have demonstrated that social institutions (e.g., household, family,

community) are neither consensual nor static and rigidly regimented entities, but rather the products of social interactions. Such insight is critical in that it provides space to examine the roles, relationships, and activities of individual household members (Sage, 1993:244). It allows light to be shed on the micro-politics of negotiation, resistance, and bargaining (i.e., the conflicts and trade-offs over the terms of production, authority, and obligation) occurring within the household as a result of the unequal power relations tied to differences of gender, age, economic status or life-cycle positioning (Green et al., 1998:262). Here, the household becomes a locus of alternatively shared, complementary, and conflicting rights, interests, duties, and obligations (Leach, 1991:19), shaped by love and feelings (Jelin, 1991:36), and through which meanings of the conjugal contract and gendered identities are continuously being reshaped.

Feminist scholars have also called into question the apparent naturalness of the distinction between 'private' and 'public' domains – a distinction that authorizes views of home as exclusively domestic and private. Questioning this distinction has allowed redefining the household “as a dynamic space where reproduction and production occur” (McDowell, 1989, cited in López, 2003:174). From this perspective, such institutions as the family and the household (e.g., their organization, customary practices, rules) are understood as formed, shaped, influenced by and continuously reconstituted through both 'internal' dynamics (e.g., transitions in household members' life cycles) and 'external' factors (e.g., community traditions, social policies, changes in economic and political situations, and national discourses about gender, class) (Jelin, 1991:17-20). Similarly, the interactions of these different dynamics also produce specific ideologies and norms about work, femininity and masculinity, marriage, sexuality, and kinship. Yet, far from being

given or transhistorical, the meanings attached to these different elements are always 'in the making', being alternately reinforced, contested, transformed or recodified through the daily practices of household's members and their struggles over resources, skills, and needs (French and James, 1997:19).

## **2.2 Importance of basketry work in household economies**

Traditionally, women's only sources of direct income proceeded from the occasional selling of chicken eggs and cigarettes (Kane, 1994:93). Yet, over the last twenty years, Emberá women have been actively participating in the commercialization of crafts made from the fibres of chungá palms. The household census my research assistants and I conducted in 2006 reveals that 85 percent of women engage in this productive activity. Women sell on average one or two handicrafts per month. However, during the dry season (when there is less demand for agricultural labour) or when they have to meet some pressing needs for cash, women may weave half a dozen and more chungá items in a month. In the Sambú area, where most women produce small items of low quality, chungá items usually sell for 10 to 30 dollars apiece. The census results exhibit some limitations with respect to monthly earnings for many women had great difficulty adding up their different sources of cash and providing an estimated average of their income<sup>60</sup>. Nonetheless, it is possible to assert unmistakably that basketry constitutes today, by far, women's most prominent source of cash.

The significance of basketry activities within domestic economies largely depends on the socioeconomic status of married Emberá men. When men receive an adequate

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<sup>60</sup> For instance, after I started to ask women how many crafts they sold per month (rather than asking separately whether they sold crafts and what their monthly income was), I realized that previous female interviewees had greatly underestimated the cash income they derived from basketry.

wage allowing them to fulfill the breadwinner role, basketry tends to represent only a supplementary source of income for the household. The situation is fairly different in predominantly subsistence-farming households. In fact, I explain in Chapter V that limitations on capital accumulation from agriculture and limited opportunities for wage labour mean that many Emberá men are no longer able to cover the reproductive costs of their household adequately. As a result, in households where men still operate primarily as subsistence farmers, female basketry work is critical to survival. The idea that “with the replacement of wild and locally cultivated products with products of foreign manufacture, the family depends more and more on men, rather than women, because men are the ones in charge of dealing with the outside money economy” (Kane, 1986:73) thus no longer portrays a realistic picture of the gendered roles prevailing in many contemporary Emberá households. The following account by a married Emberá woman in her early thirties illustrates the role of men’s socioeconomic status in shaping the unequal significance of basketry within local household economies:

During the last local congress, Diego [a village member] said that men were the ones who pay for everything in the household. Sure, since he’s a civil servant, maybe he pays for the water, the electricity, and everything. But a man who isn’t a civil servant, with what money is he going to pay? My husband, for instance, he doesn’t have any money.

*F.L.: He doesn’t?*

No, he doesn’t. Every day, he’s working in the *monte*. ...If both of us are working in the *monte*, with what money are we going to eat? Because here, it’s like in Panama City, you need money to eat. If I weave and someone comes to buy my basket, then I make US\$10. ...With that money, I can buy something and we can eat. ...That’s why women devote to weaving; because they know they can make their US\$10 (Interview, May 01, 2007; my translation).

A marked advantage of basketry is that, while men’s agricultural earnings are highly seasonal, basketry can provide a fairly regular income throughout the year, as the same woman comments:

My husband sometimes tells me: ‘Woman, why don’t you understand me? Where am I going to get the money? To make money, I need to work hard and plant many things, but I won’t get anything before two or three months. My money comes once a year. But that’s not your case. You can weave fast and sell it’ (Interview, May 01, 2007; my translation).

In addition to men’s socioeconomic status, women’s life-cycle positioning also determines the significance of basketry. Women in the middle stage of life may often experience greater obligations to weave baskets (because of the larger number of dependent children) than either younger women (who are just entering marriage and/or motherhood) or older ones (who may receive remittances from adult children working in the city).

Several studies on women’s contributions to household maintenance and budgeting practices in Latin America and other parts of the global south demonstrate that married women typically contribute a larger percentage of their income to household reproductive costs than their male spouses, who tend to keep a greater portion of their earnings for personal benefits and status-maintaining activities (e.g., Babb, 1996; Blumberg, 1991; Kromhout, 2000; Roldan, 1988). My research data tally with these findings and reveal that, regardless of how much they earn, Emberá wives usually contribute the majority of their earnings to cover household reproductive costs (e.g., purchase of food, clothes, and school supplies, and payment of bills and children’s education). A married woman in her mid-forties provides a typical example of such practice:

*F.L.: How do you use the money from baskets for?*

Well, sometimes I give it to the children when they ask for something. I use it also to pay for school when the teachers ask for something. Sometimes, I use it to purchase food.

*F.L.: So you use it for the household?*

Yes, for the children, for food, and for the house (Interview, May 10, 2007; my translation).

In low-income Emberá households, where women's earnings represent an essential contribution to household survival, women tend to buy very little for themselves, being reluctant to engage in personal consumption that could deprive their offspring of basic necessities – as illustrated here by a mother her mid-thirties married to a subsistence farmer:

If I have only \$10, I won't spend \$10 for a *paruma*! I don't buy *paruma* with money! Sometimes I think to myself: 'If I buy that *paruma*, what about my children? They won't have anything to eat, and they will be hungry'. When I have \$30 or \$40, then maybe I can let go of \$10. But if I only have \$10 and a lady comes to sell, no matter how pretty that *paruma* is, I won't buy it (Interview, May 01, 2007; my translation).

These comments tally those collected by Roldan (1988) in a study on domestic outworkers in Mexico City. These comments partly reflect the dominant patriarchal ideology permeating Emberá society, in which a 'good' woman is primarily conceived as one that would sacrifice everything for her family, especially her children. And, as Cupples (2005:313) notes in a study on women in Nicaragua, in the face of increasingly difficult economic conditions, understandings of good mothering are partly shifting to include not only emotional care, but also women's ability to provide economically for their children.

In the next section, I explore how this dominant patriarchal ideology works to underplay the contribution of female productive activities – as they partly erode men's position – and re-inscribe women's subordinate position by stressing – precisely – their identities as 'mothers' and 'housekeepers'.

### 2.3 Making female productive work invisible

Although women's basketry work is making a significant contribution to the reproduction and survival of many contemporary Emberá households, qualitative evidence suggests that various mechanisms informed by dominant patriarchal values are at play, underplaying basketry work and resisting women's emerging position as breadwinners. These mechanisms include the discursive constructs of the household as a 'nonwork place' and of 'weak women'.

Kane argues that, 'traditionally', Emberá society displayed an egalitarian social organization in which both female and male positions were valued. "If the Emberá were to live their lives according to the ancient way", she explains, "women and men would share equally in the making of the world" (1994:220). Yet, today signs of patriarchy are everywhere. They have made their way into Emberá society mainly, Kane contends, through men's involvement in the new spaces of participation<sup>61</sup> created as a result of the adoption of village settlements and formal political structures (ibid.). These new political settings have fostered the integration of Emberá men in the modern nation-state and have put them "in a position of power relative to Emberá women, because men are strategically placed to represent the household and interact most directly with the outside world, and because the patriarchal assumptions governing the nation-state overvalue their participation" (Kane, 1994:220).

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<sup>61</sup> These spaces include local, regional, and general congresses, the board committees of these institutions, and the *consejo nokora* for the traditional institutions, and the *Corregiduría*, *Municipio*, and *Gobernación* for state institutions. To my knowledge, only two women were elected to fulfill political and traditional posts in recent years and both were single mothers.

Let us now examine how the dissemination of patriarchal values into the fabric of Emberá society shapes how women and their work are made visible. The waning participation of women in agriculture (Chapter V) together with their recent involvement in basketry have redrawn the spatiality of female productive work. Present-day Emberá women spend long hours in their house, weaving, and less time working in cultivated fields. On the other hand, men's productive activities continue to take place in the fields/forest and, for a smaller share of them, in various state and other offices. It is not so much these spatial differences *per se* that are significant, but how they are conceptualized, and what this entails. The following account produced by a 23-year-old, married Emberá man provides valuable insights into this issue:

Today, men don't allow women to go to the *monte* so women almost don't work. And if they have a family with kids, women only devote themselves to the household. But when I have my woman and I am working, I need my wife to have the food ready for me. So when I get home: 'Well, here is your food'. This is why I leave my wife at home; not to get home from work and have to demand that she cooks.

*F.L.: So if she doesn't go with you to the monte, the agreement is that she has to keep things running smoothly at home?*

Yes. This is how I treat her. If I take her to work, we fall behind with the housework and with the kids too (Interview, April 18, 2007; my translation).

The double dichotomy 'monte'/'household' and 'work'/'housework' unambiguously constructs a view in which the 'domestic' sphere is separated from productive processes – i.e., home as 'nonwork place' – which are allegedly performed by men in the 'public' arena (López, 2003:191), as underscored by the claim "...not to get home from work and have to demand that she cooks". In constructing the household as a 'private' space, reproductive activities come to the fore and productive activities are rendered invisible. As Patel argues in a study on female peasants in India, "The submersion of women's productive role with their role as familial nurturer exacerbates the invisibility of women's

role in income creation or contribution to the family's survival and sustenance" (2002:153). The belief that women at home are not working also sets the stage for new conjugal expectations: since his wife "almost doesn't work", this man feels legitimate to expect that she promptly executes, in return, her responsibilities towards him, the household, and their children. In doing so, he clearly reinforces women's position as 'wives', 'housekeepers', and 'mothers'. In addition, in asserting that he cannot take her with him to work because they would "fall behind with the housework and with the kids too", he not only constructs himself as the 'breadwinner' – the one who goes *out* and *work*, he also asserts a clear dichotomy between women working/being able to perform properly their roles as wives and mothers. Roldan (1988:239) encountered similar views among Mexican men married to domestic outworkers. In sum, this account clearly underscores constructions of feminine and masculine subjectivities rooted in a patriarchal ideology where women must behave as dutiful 'wives', 'mothers', and 'housekeepers' subordinated to the authority of male breadwinners. These identities and the underlying 'private'/'public' dichotomy informing them conceal female home-based productive activities from view. These insights help better understand why the *Red de Oportunidades* program I examine in Chapter IV is not in a position to 'empower' 'poor' women, since in constructing them as 'efficient mothers', it further re-inscribes them in patriarchal relations and in a subordinate position.

The discursive construct of *mujeres flojas* ('weak' women) reinforces these processes. This construct stresses the alleged 'physical weakness' of present-day women as opposed to the 'physical strength' of previous female generations. I remember

commenting once to a friend that, no matter when I would pay him a visit, his aunt (i.e., a woman in her early sixties) was never home. As he explained to me:

You'll never see my aunt at home; you'll always see her working. Sometimes I ask her: 'Aunt, aren't you tired of working so much?' So she says: 'My son, I can't stay home doing nothing. I don't like it, I feel weird. Suddenly I feel tired, so I sleep but then I wake up in a bad mood. So instead of staying home sleeping, I prefer working'.

*F.L.: And does she clear land?*

Of course she does! Trees as big as this!

*F.L.: With an axe?*

Yes! She knows how to use it better than some guys. She is a hard worker. She does everything: she clears land, she burns fields! What a guy does, she does the same.

*F.L.: What about your mother?*

She's the same way. Women of that age, they don't like to be at home. They prefer to work (Interview, March 05, 2007; my translation).

The trope of 'home' as a 'nonwork place' is very much prevalent here. Also significant is the fact that old Emberá women who engage in agricultural work are not only 'strong', they are as equally 'strong' as men (cf. "What a guy does, she does the same"). Tying this comment back to Kane's earlier argument about traditional Emberá society paints a picture in which, as women worked side by side with their husbands and performed very similar tasks, gender relations were also more egalitarian. Younger women who do not participate as much in land-based activities are – as the following account by an Emberá man in his late fifties suggests – *flojas* (weak):

Nowadays women are turning *flojas*, because they don't want to go to the *monte*, especially young women today they don't want to go to the *monte* (Interview, June 21, 2007; my translation).

Yet, an examination of various reproductive tasks performed by present-day Emberá women strongly contradicts such characterization. Many of these tasks – e.g., carrying firewood, pounding rice, hand-washing clothes, and carrying plantain stocks (Photos 11,

12, 13) – are all physically very demanding. The discursive construct of ‘weak’ women thus clearly operates on another level, as other studies dealing with similar issues show. For instance, in a study on South Indian women farmers, Mencher finds that, “Wherever a task is done by women it is considered easy, and where it is done by males it is considered difficult” (1988:104). In similar fashion, Laurie’s (1999:241) study of Peruvian women employed in a state-backed work programme reveals that project bosses commonly blamed project failures on the inadequacies of the female labour force – namely, their physical weakness and lack of skills. However, upon a detailed examination of both men and women’s work tasks, Laurie demonstrates that local strength-based assumptions had more to do with traditional notions of ‘appropriate’ female behaviour than they did with women’s real strength. Still, these assumptions and claims were very effective at preventing women’s access to better paid ‘men’s jobs’ (ibid.). In the context of the present study, these perceived differences were also always implicitly associated with a set of attitudes. For instance, in the first account, being at home entailed a number of negative behaviours – e.g., ‘doing nothing’, ‘tired’, ‘sleeping’. In the second account, women who do not go to the *monte* are, in fact, ‘unwilling [to work]’. Engaging in agriculture thus connotes industriousness, while being home connotes laziness. Because these perceived differences in ‘strength’ and attitudes were systematically stressed to me in reference to land-based activities and basketry work, there is strong evidence to argue that the discourse of ‘lazy/weak women’ is tied, in part, to the shifting configuration of female productive activities – from subsistence farming to market-based craft production – and clearly works to minimize women’s productive work and reproduces their subordinate position. Yet, as the first account reproduced in this section and the next one

**Photos 10, 11 and 12:** Emberá woman carrying a cargo basket with plantains (left), carrying firewood (right) and pounding rice with her daughter. Each pestle weights several kilograms. (France-Lise Colin, August 2006 and April and June 2007)



(from a 40-year-old married woman) exemplify, some women also contribute to the discursive construct of *flojas* women:

Nowadays, my husband keeps me like this.

*F.L.: Like what?*

Like a tourist in the house. [She laughs]

*F.L.: And do you like that?*

Yes, my body became accustomed to be like this, at home, as a lazy person that's all. [She laughs] (Interview, April 17, 2007; my translation).

By defining herself as a 'tourist' and a 'lazy person', this Emberá woman clearly reproduces the idea that women at home are not working. She unambiguously depreciates both her productive and reproductive contributions to her household. Even when women understand themselves as equal workers and contributors, Patel (2002:154) argues, the existence of a dominant cultural ideology downplaying women's contribution to the family affects the value that women, themselves, place on their work. The undervaluation of women's productive is an important issue for, as Sen (1987) has shown, the access an individual has to household resources hinges on the *perception* other household members have of his/her contribution to the common fund, rather than on whether this contribution is vital to the household's survival (cited in Patel, 2002:153). In other words, it is not so much the actual time people work that matters, but the value that is attached to their work (*ibid.*).

In the next section, by conceptualizing basketry as a discursive site and conflicts over resources (in this case, basket earnings) as both material and symbolic, I show how basketry activities and the purchase made through them constitute critical loci for women to contest these dominant constructions of femininity and to forge new subjectivities

providing temporary spaces of authority to negotiate relationships with men in domestic spaces.

#### **2.4 Negotiating gender relations/identities through basketry**

Stephen makes the argument that, “Artisans who produce crafts for elite national and international consumption are also part of an international labour force. They are segmented on the basis of their ethnicity, their so-called traditional means of production, and their subordinate position in the international marketing process” (1993:27). The production and commercialization of *chunga* crafts by Emberá women thus offer a unique window through which to explore the specifically gendered dimensions of capitalist development in contemporary indigenous communities.

As in many other cultures, the management of money in Emberá society plays a major role in the definition and construction of gender identities. According to Kane, “money, the quintessential sign of *Kampuniá* exchange, falls into the domain of masculine adventure and responsibility” (1994:127). When plantains were grown commercially, men were responsible for monetary transactions with intermediaries. Although women participated in the cultivation of plantains, men typically received and controlled the money derived from their commercialization, and women depended on their spouses for money (Ramnek, 2007:14). Still, in a fair marriage, Kane (1994:127) argues, a wife would normally hold some authority over her spouse’s use of money outside the household. Today, as I emphasized earlier, the commercialization of *chunga* crafts provides women with access to an independent source of income that is not controlled, at least initially, by the patriarchal relations present in the domestic economy. To what extent do women retain control over what they earn and how are they

differentiated in this matter? But, more importantly, how do women feel about their work, their income, and their purchases? What can we learn from gendered conflicts over the use and management of money resources within Emberá households? In answering these questions, I attempt to offer a more subtle understanding of how women's increased participation in market economies provides a locus, a medium through which dominant norms of gender roles and constructions of femininity can be partly contested and rework. In doing so, I am contributing original insights into the 'local', gendered expression and materialization of 'global' processes.

Findings from this research suggest that women's ability to control the proceeds of their labour and the degree of autonomy they have over the domestic budget are affected, in part, by income disparities with male partners. In other words, women whose husbands have access to an adequate income of their own appear to retain greater rights and autonomy over their basketry earnings than those who are married to subsistence farmers. Safilios-Rothschild (1988:223) reaches similar conclusions in her study of the gender dynamics of income in six rural communities of Honduras. Life-cycle positioning matters too. For instance, in Emberá society, the rate of consensual unions<sup>62</sup> (as opposed to legal marriages) is high, which exacerbates marital instability. Men's commitment to their spouse and to the household tends to remain volatile for many years following the beginning of the union. Therefore, women in the early stages of their married lives are often in a weaker position to negotiate with their husbands over the use and allocation of

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<sup>62</sup> Traditionally, dating was unknown among the Emberá. When a man liked a woman, he would *gatear* (crawl) at night – that is, climb into the house of her parents, crawl under her mosquito net, and leave at dawn. Staying passed dawn meant that the couple was now *unido* (united), the equivalent of being married. Once *unido*, the young couple usually stay with the girl's family until their first child is born and they have build a house of their own (Icaza, 1977:437). The marriage lasts until one of the spouses passes away or abandons his/her partner.

resources. Also important is the nature of the ‘conjugal contract’ between partners. The notion of conjugal contract refers to the “terms on which husbands and wives exchange goods, incomes, and services, including labour, within the household” (Whitehead, 1981:88). These terms are neither fixed nor produce unalterable outcomes. Rather, feminist scholars argue that conjugal contracts must be understood as dynamic sites in which the conditions of interaction and exchange between husbands and wives are continuously being re-configured (Roldan, 1988:238).

Although women whose husbands participate in better-paid and more formalized jobs typically experience greater control over their basketry earnings, they are also, paradoxically, in a weaker position to challenge intra-household gendered power inequities, insofar as their work only provides a supplementary – rather than substantial – source of income for household maintenance. In the remainder of this chapter, I thus focus my analysis on households where men have difficulties generating a steady income and performing the breadwinner role and where, as a result, women contribute a significant part of daily maintenance. It is in these households that, according to Laurie, “notions about appropriate gender roles and behaviour are likely to come under much stress” (1999:232). As I emphasize in Chapter II, in conducting my analysis, I rely on a view of identities as relational and provisional rather than pre-given and fixed (Hall, 1997c; Wade, 1996) – thus as always opened to contestation and re-signification through new processes of differentiation – and conceptualize basketry as a discursive site, that is, a locus, a medium through which women are able to contest and forge new subjectivities. Conceptualizing basketry activities in these terms also means viewing the conflicts over both these activities and the resources derived from them as simultaneously material and

symbolic (Carney and Watts, 1990; Moore, 1996; Schroeder, 1996). Through these theoretical lenses, one resists approaching the following stories as simple conflicts between ‘men’ and ‘women’ over ‘money’, but as encounters through which meanings of gender roles and identities are resisted, negotiated, and constructed. That is why Cupples (2005:318) argues that, more important than the kind of work women do are the ways in which women feel about their work and the meanings they attach to it. Along the same lines, Laurie explains that “the symbolic significance women attach to purchasing is important in the construction of femininities” (1999:239). As a result, she calls for studies that pay attention to how women view their purchases as opposed to how much money they have at their disposal. Even though women’s independent income is small and is often used to meet primarily family rather than personal needs, it helps some of them to reconfigure the way in which they imagine themselves. Finally, it is also important to remember, following Foucault’s (1978, 1980) conceptualization of power, that women who are positioned in asymmetrical gender relations are not power-less, for – as I explain in Chapter II – this would entail subscribing a view of power as a commodity to be held or a strength powerful individuals are endowed with to dominate or control powerless individuals. Against this view, Foucault demonstrated that power operates through the diffuse, quotidian minutiae of everyday practices and interactions – practices through which particular constructions and meanings of the world (such as ‘men’ and ‘women’, for instance) come to predominate. Understanding power in these terms makes it possible to recognize that power is at work in moments of both domination and resistance (Sharp et al., 2000:3), which opens the way for a more subtle comprehension of social relations and identities. That is why, more important than obvious shifts of power inside the

household, one must pay attention to the ways in which women rework their understanding of themselves, of their skills and roles, and of their position within household power structures (Laurie, 1999:234).

I begin my analysis by reproducing two accounts that provide insights into these issues. The first account is from a married woman in her mid-thirties with four children:

Sometimes my husband looks for confrontation and starts saying things that he shouldn't say, and I tell him: 'Well, if you're going to be talking like this, then get out of my house! I support myself alone! I have my craft. When I sell it, I can buy things and I can give food to my children. What do you buy? I can support myself without you!' My paruma, my underwear, everything I buy alone with my basketry. You don't give me anything! So why would I keep you here? No way, man! You'd better go!' [She laughs]

*F.L.: Were women able to talk that way in the past?*

No, they weren't because men were supporting women. Men would buy everything. But that's no longer the case. That's why several women stay alone with their kids. ...With one or two children, you can make it (Interview, May 01, 2007; my translation).

The second account is from a woman telling the story of her sister-in-law's recent dispute with her husband:

One of my sisters-in-law no longer lives with her husband because he got another woman. My sister-in-law told him: 'You're not maintaining me one bit. Everything I have here, my earrings and my golden necklaces, everything I acquired with my craft work. If you want to go, then just go with your woman! Get out of my house!' Do you know what her husband did? Well, he gave to his girlfriend the stove he had bought for his wife. Since she has money, the following day my sister-in-law bought herself a new stove! 'I don't care', she said, 'I can maintain myself and my two daughters alone. I'm able to purchase everything I want for my daughters! What about you? Nothing! You're only working to get drunk!' Yes, some women talk that way and support themselves alone with their handicraft (Interview, April 17, 2007; my translation).

Women's ability to purchase the basic necessities of the household – notably food and clothes for themselves and their children – was a central feature of most stories Emberá women shared with me. This purchasing power constitutes a critical axis through which women made their contribution to the maintenance of the household visible,

simultaneously positioning themselves as the main household provider. Statements like “What do you buy? I can support myself without you!” or “You’re not maintaining me one bit. ... I’m able to purchase everything. What about you? Nothing!” are as many indicators of women’s contestation of dominant, patriarchal gender roles – i.e., women as dependent housekeepers being maintained by male breadwinners, in a context where many men are unable “to give anything”. Through their purchases, women expressed pride and command, and were able to forge new senses of selves as subjects autonomous and independent from male figures, challenging prevailing views of women as submissive and subordinate wives.

In households where men have difficulties performing as breadwinners (which are the focus of my analysis, as I mentioned earlier), women’s purchases sometimes spark off important conflicts. A prime example is the frequent arguments and, at times, physical violence, associated with women exchanging their crafts for *parumas* instead of cash. Before I turn to these conflicts, I provide a brief overview of the significance of *parumas* in Emberá society. *Parumas* are not – as a recent Panamanian press article recently claimed – “just a one-and-a-half-yard piece of fabric” (Pérez, 2004). In a fair relationship, an Emberá woman typically expects her partner to buy her the objects she uses in the home, notably her personal things – e.g., *parumas*, blouses, underwear, and soap (Icaza, 1977:438) – just as she is responsible to attend to her husband’s needs. Periodic gifts of *parumas* exemplify a husband’s consideration for his wife and his desire to please her. They also demonstrate his ability to take care of his spouse properly and to fulfill his role as the main provider for household reproduction. In addition, *parumas* operate as critical devices in the construction of gendered, ethnic, and class identities. They play an

important role in the reproduction of femininity<sup>63</sup> and Emberá ethnic identity, and operate as a reservoir of value as they may be sold when women urgently need cash. Finally, as Emberá households become more closely tied to national and international capitalist markets, *parumas* increasingly connote social status and class differentiation. Considering that a *paruma* cost between US\$10-\$12 in 2006-2007 (an important sum of money for subsistence-farming families), owning many *parumas* and being able to wear a new one on every special occasion unambiguously signal a woman's privileged socioeconomic position. In the following account, a married woman in her thirties talks of the embarrassment and criticisms that a woman may experience for wearing repeatedly the same *paruma*:

In the past, women used four *parumitas* only. But now, when you put the clothes to hang out, there are many *parumas*. You think that, today, a woman wants to wear four *parumas*, that's all? No way! If a woman only has four *parumas*, people start to criticize her: 'Oh! This woman doesn't have any *parumas*, look she's wearing the same *paruma*!' That's how women are these days. When you go out, if you put the same *paruma* twice, then people – other women – start to look at you: 'Oh! This woman *always* wears the same *paruma*'. And when they say that, you feel sorry for yourself: 'No, I'd better buy *parumas* too, so when I'll go out, I can put a *paruma* and, on another occasion, I can put another one'. But back in the old days, there wasn't that kind of critique. People didn't talk that way. Women bought new *parumas* only when the ones they owned were old (Interview, May 01, 2007; my translation).

The implicit correlation between clothing and socioeconomic well-being present in this account confirms Robinson's claim that clothing "is as much about needs as it is about wants; as much about development as it is about fashion" (Robinson, 2006:87)<sup>64</sup>. In a

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<sup>63</sup> While Emberá girls typically wear Western clothes during most of their childhood and pre-adolescence, they usually start to wear *parumas* on a daily basis after reaching puberty. Emberá mothers start to purchase *parumas* for their daughters when they are still young girls and build an assortment of them over several years. *Parumas* thus constitute a strong marker of femininity and clearly denote entrance into womanhood.

<sup>64</sup> In addition, this account reveals that, if practices of consumption have become central features in the construction of social identities in *Latino* societies (Perreault and Martin, 2005:193), this is becoming equally true for indigenous communities.

context where subsistence farmers experience great difficulties to perform as breadwinners, many husbands are no longer in a position to meet this aspect of the conjugal contract. As the same woman explained to me, many women are thus compelled to buy their own *parumas*:

*F.L.: So nowadays men no longer buy parumas?*

No, they don't. Well, maybe teachers do. Maybe a professor or a civil servant would buy it for his wife. But without a wage, without making five cents, like Eduardo...with what money do you think he could buy that *paruma*? That's the way it is (Interview, May 01, 2007; my translation).

Particularly salient in this account is, again, the important contrast between women whose husbands are salaried and can afford *parumas*, and women who are married to subsistence farmers. In a context of limited cash resources, many women are reluctant to spend 'hard cash' to purchase their *parumas* and prefer to barter *chunga* crafts for the coveted piece of fabric. This practice is exemplified here by an Emberá woman in her mid-thirties:

Here, women never buy *parumas* with money [she laughs]. I know it because we used to bring *parumas* from Panama City to sell them in the village. But all the women traded the *parumas* with crafts. ...A few days ago, I bought *parumas*. One was for me, and one was for my daughter. We are two women to wear *parumas* now. We can't buy with cash; it would cost us \$20. That's very expensive! (Interview, March 15, 2007; my translation).

Exchanges of crafts for *parumas* are often met with strong resistance and sometimes fierce opposition. Although none of the women I interviewed acknowledged experiencing this situation personally, several commented on the existence of such conflicts in neighbours' households. This married woman in her mid-thirties is one of them:

Many men say: 'I'm the one who cuts *chunga*. So if you don't give me [money], I won't cut any more *chunga*'. They punish their women that way. A majority of men, particularly young people, are like that. When a woman sells her handicrafts, right away, her husband grabs the money and then says: 'We're going to buy this and that'. If he wants to spend everything on food,

that's what he does. So if the woman didn't buy a *paruma* for herself before, she stays without *parumas*. In other cases, if women trade their crafts for *parumas*, men get angry: 'This isn't food for you to spend your craft on this!' They quarrel with their wives, and if they forget to do one little thing in the house, men say: 'Ah! As far as I can see, you're not doing anything here!' They talk that way. My friends tell me those things (Interview, March 15, 2007; my translation).

Yes. Last time I brought *parumas* [from Panama City], and I told my daughter: 'Don't sell them; I will exchange them with crafts'. And a woman told me: 'Oh dear! You know, my husband gets angry when I get *parumas* with craft'. So I told her: 'Aren't you dumb! This is your work; he doesn't have anything to do with it!' She stayed quiet because she loves him. ...But things can't work like that.

*F.L.: So that's the way things are?*

Yes. But many women don't accept that. They keep the money for themselves; they don't give it to the husband (Interview, March 15, 2007; my translation).

Women who exchange their crafts for *parumas* assert their control over the proceeds of their labour and the destination of their earnings. Yet, there is more to it than this. Because *parumas* benefit women exclusively, in purchasing them, women also construct their work as a private economic end. This is evident in this woman's claim, "Aren't you dumb! This is your work; he doesn't have anything to do with it!" Through the purchase of *parumas*, women fulfil personal needs outside their obligations to the household's collective needs. Trading baskets for *parumas* thus epitomizes women's resistance to the local norms according to which women's money equals 'household money'. These purchases provide Emberá women a venue to assert an identity outside their responsibilities towards and ties to the household, an identity as independent economic agent as opposed to dependent wives and dutiful mothers. In sum, conceptualizing women's work as a discursive site allows exploring how women "create and recreate the social and cultural landscapes in which they live and work" (Cupples, 2005:318).

As the above statement suggests, men resist women's trading baskets for *parumas* in various ways, such as, threatening to withdraw support or verbally and physically abusing their partners. In doing so, men do more than simply 'fighting over money' use and allocation. As Tinsman argues in a study on battered women in Chile, "conjugal violence must be considered historically as a shifting relation of power between husbands and wives, rather than as an ever-present pathology of patriarchal societies" (1997:288). As I emphasized earlier, in conceptualizing their productive activities as a private economic end foreign to the joint welfare needs of the family, women's position themselves outside the authority of the male figure and call into question the dominant model of the male breadwinner. Hence, men's violent response to these exchange signals the erosion of dominant masculinities as new constructions of femininity start to emerge. The fact that men's violence towards their wives often increases when female incomes are not markedly smaller than their own corroborates this claim. Such violence is a catharsis for the feelings of insecurity over female behaviours and subjectivities that compromise their ability 'to be men' (Tinsman, 1997; Safilios-Rothschild, 1988). Laurie and Calla observe that men's inability to "produce, provide, and protect as they used to...trigger[s] a crisis in which the family [becomes] the last bastion of authority, and many men end up imposing violent authoritarian control over the household" (2004:105). Such claims as, "This isn't food for you to spend your craft on this!" and "As far as I can see, you're not doing any [housework]!" clearly signal the fact that these struggles are primarily symbolic – i.e., having to do with the reconfiguration of gendered identities and responsibilities – rather than simply material – i.e., having to do strictly with money. These statements underscore men's attempts at re-inscribing the patriarchal ideology of

'maternal altruism' (Whitehead, 1981) according to which, as 'mothers' and 'wives', women's 'natural' and primary role is to devote most of their economic assets, as well as physical and emotional energies, towards caring for their families' well-being and supporting their household. These statements are thus about recoding women's position as 'housekeepers' rather than 'economic agents'. In sum, women may work only to the extent that the resources they generate are allocated to household reproduction, and do not jeopardize men's status.

Reimagining themselves as providers has provided some Emberá women with a space to contest a number of abuses embedded in their unequal gender relations – i.e., including men's infidelity, drunkenness, lack of fairness – and opportunities to negotiate conjugal relations. Statements like, "if you're going to be talking like this, then get out of my house" are exemplary of women's demands for more respect and parity in their marriage. These findings echo a number of other studies on gender and work in Latin America (Kromhout, 2000; Laurie, 1999; López, 2003; Nelson, 2006; Safilios-Rothschild, 1988; Tinsman, 1997). Although these threats are rarely carried out – because of a number of constraints, including stigma attached to single motherhood – it is important to acknowledge that the repositioning of many women as household providers and the reimagining associated with it are slowly allowing for more assertive behaviours and is reconfiguring – at least in some households – gendered power relations inside the home. Survival without a male partner, if still economically difficult, is becoming a more viable option, especially when the number of dependent offspring is limited. Yet, it is also important to note that women who are unable to leave unsatisfactory relationships are not necessarily acquiescent in them (Tinsman, 1997:278). Many women commonly

engage in a variety of everyday forms of resistance that may not subvert male dominance but still provide temporary spaces of authority to negotiate relationships with men in domestic spaces (Laurie, 1999; Tinsman, 1997). The forms of resistance of Emberá women are similar to Scott's (1985) weapons of the weak, Laurie argues (1999:233-34); they are mostly intended to go unnoticed. I remember, for instance, a young wife in her late twenties whose husband neither harvested nor bought chungá fibres for her. She resisted and compensated for her husband's lack of support by using, as she explained to me, his store as a venue to sell home-made sorbets. In doing so, she not only generates the profit she needs to buy the fibres, she also positions herself as equally capable of being an entrepreneur. Therefore, "a lack of transformation in visible gender relations does not automatically mean that femininities are unchanging" (Laurie, 1999:246). The fact that few women still dare to leave abusive relationships should neither diminish the power of their resistance strategies in curtailing males' control, nor lessen the crucial importance of the changing perceptions of gendered roles and responsibilities accompanying women's access to an independent source of income and incorporation into a market economy.

### **Conclusion**

The first section of this chapter briefly retraces the historical connections through which chungá-palm basketry became a specialized, productive activity for national and international markets, the various processes embedded in the making of baskets, and the ecology and shifting rights of access to and use of chungá palms. I then explore how the participation of Emberá women in networks of commercial production and monetary exchange is reconfiguring the micro-politics of gender relations at the intra-household

level, and simultaneously reworking local constructions of femininity. Basketry plays a critical role in the domestic economies of subsistence-farming households – i.e., households where men experience difficulties fulfilling the breadwinner role. In these households, women tend to bear a large share of household reproductive costs. Yet, such contribution is performed within a dominant patriarchal ideology that keeps it largely invisible. The discursive construction of the household as a ‘nonwork place’ obscures home-based, female productive activities and make women primarily visible as ‘housekeepers’, ‘mothers’, and ‘wives’. Simultaneously, as women disengage from subsistence, shifting agriculture and participate in market-based productive activities, they are increasingly perceived through the discourse of ‘weak/lazy women’. This discursive trope, together with identities of ‘housekeepers/wives/mothers’, maintain women in a subordinate position.

Conceptualizing basketry activities as a discursive site, I show that they constitute a privileged locus for the negotiation and contestation of gender identities. Basketry not only supplies an income, it offers women a medium through which to forge new subjectivities that partly disrupt the dominant patriarchal model. Although many women derive pride and stronger sense of selves for assuming part of the breadwinner role, in trading their baskets for *parumas* – artefacts that they are the only ones to benefit from – they also assert an autonomous, independent position foreign to the welfare needs of the household and, as such, partially resist the patriarchal ideology of ‘maternal altruism’ and their subordination to men. Men’s often violent response to the trading of baskets for *parumas* underscores their sense of insecurity as their dominant position and ability ‘to be men’ are being challenged and somewhat eroded. Paying attention to how women

understand themselves and their roles through their work and purchases and conceptualizing conflicts over resources as both material and symbolic, rather than searching for obvious 'shifts of power' in gender relations, allow for a more nuanced understanding of domination and resistance – one in which 'power' operates, in part, through particular discursive constructions of 'women' and 'men', rather than as a repressive force bearing upon women. Participation to networks of commercialization and monetary exchange does not necessarily free women from poverty or subvert male dominance but does provide a venue to challenge meanings of femininity and, as such, offers temporary spaces of authority to negotiate relationships with men in domestic spaces. As I emphasize throughout this chapter, socioeconomic and life-cycle positionings, as well as the nature of conjugal contracts, shape differently how men and women interpret the meanings and negotiate the terms of these transformations, producing therefore multi-faceted, complex, and, at times, seemingly contradictory identities and experiences.

In exploring some of the gendered dimensions of processes of capitalist transformation in contemporary indigenous communities, this detailed ethnographic work reveals that these processes are not free-floating and 'unlocated': they play out through historically constructed gender and household relations and materialize through the uneven and fluid social terrain of indigenous women's and men's lives. In doing so, I offer a view of the 'global' as contingent, situated, and varied – rather than disembodied, cohesive, and all-powerful.

## Chapter VII – How raising cattle redefines space, nature, and identity

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### Introduction

One afternoon, I was having an informal conversation with one of my Emberá friends. Bayamón had just held the 2007 regional congress for three days. I had been sick and thus had only attended the event intermittently. I asked my friend to fill me in about the discussions I had missed. He explained that a heated debate had broken out concerning cattle farming. I was not surprised. In fact, although cattle ranching was only an incipient activity in the *comarca*, developed by five individuals, it had already sparked many controversies and was at the centre of many conversations. Various persons had openly criticized the *Cacique Regional* for having granted cattle permits to several residents of Bayamón, despite the proscription of such activities inside the *comarca*. During the congress, one man had angrily commented something like: “How come you gave them permits while you denied me one? Who am I? How did you get to grant these permits!” His statement not only contested differentiated access to land, it also firmly challenged existing modes of land governance and the role and authority of traditional authorities in mediating access to and appropriate uses of land. These comments resonate with a growing number of resource conflicts taking place inside the Comarca Emberá, in the context of rapidly changing socioeconomic, political, and environmental conditions I examine in Chapter IV. Soon after, another man took the floor and said: “The *comarca* was not created to raise cattle. Cattle ranching damages the land. If the Emberá start to raise cattle, we will be just like the *colonos*”. These claims – like others I had heard during interviews – shed light on another dimension of the disagreement over raising cattle within the *comarca*. While such conflict is indisputably material, it is also,

importantly, symbolic, as cattle ranching is deeply entwined with the reconfiguration of meanings of nature, place, and identity.

The Emberá farmers who are involved in cattle ranching typically construct their activities as 'development' and simultaneously position themselves as agents of 'progress'. Because 'development' discourse operates as a powerful 'political technology' (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983:196), cattle ranching is being recast as unproblematic and Emberá ranchers as 'neutral' actors. In this chapter, I demonstrate, on the contrary, that cattle ranching engages in deeply political issues as it reworks local property arrangements in land, re-signifies meanings of land/forest, and exacerbates the current shift towards a non-egalitarian society. In demonstrating this, I rely particularly on Blomley's (2003) conceptualization of property, not as a fixed institution, but as a 'doing' continuously being re-enacted through the mobilization of bodies, technologies, and things and actively shaping how people relate to both vital resources and to each other. I then show how a conflict over a rancher's access to and use of land signals conflicting views of identity, belonging, and place in a context where cattle ranching blurs ethnic differences and disrupts 'traditional' ways of working the land. Ingold's (2000) concept of 'dwelling' as opposed to 'genealogical relatedness' offers a useful analytical framework to examine these issues. The last section of this chapter draws attention to the topographies of power through which particular understandings of the *comarca* are produced, negotiated, and contested at the *comarca* and regional levels. The present chapter thus offers additional insights into the ways in which socially differentiated, agentive Emberá people renegotiate their identities and their interactions with the land as processes of capitalist transformation further penetrate into their

territory. It also further evidences the socio-spatial connections and the interplay of multi-scale policies, practices, and discourses in reproducing through time a place called the Comarca Emberá.

### **1. Brief history of cattle ranching in Panama**

Cattle ranching in Panama dates back to 1521, when the first animals were introduced by the Spanish Crown from its Jamaican possessions (Mena García, 1984:116), and has played an important role in its rural economy ever since (Heckadon, 1997). Originally, the activity was confined to the Pacific side of the isthmus (i.e., the Interior provinces) where the Spanish population initially settled the drier, open savannahs resulting from the agricultural exploitation of the region by a then rapidly declining native population. A drier climate and the natural presence of grasslands offered favourable conditions for the development of ranching activities (Jones, 1989; McCorkle, 1968). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the construction of the canal and urbanization stimulated internal demand for agricultural products, especially beef, promoting the rapid expansion of cattle ranching in the Interior (Heckadon-Moreno, 1984a, 1984b) (Chapter V). This triggered important socioeconomic and environmental changes that, from the 1940s onwards, led to the impoverishment of many families, encouraging the emigration of thousands of marginalized farmers outside the Interior (Heckadon, 1984a, 1984b) (Chapter V). Through these migrations cattle ranching penetrated into the Provinces of Panama and Colón in the 1950s and 1960s and, from the late 1970s onward, into the Provinces of Bocas del Toro and Darién – the last national ‘frontiers’. There were half a million hectares of pasture in Panama in 1950 and one and a half million hectares in 1991 (Pasos et al., 1994:35).

In parallel, between the 1950s and 1970s, the Panamanian state was eager to foster 'development' and to integrate its agricultural 'frontiers' into the national economy (Pasos et al., 1994). This policy was strongly encouraged by the massive injection of foreign aid and investment<sup>65</sup> to foster economic growth (Williams, 1986) and satisfy North American rising demand for low-cost beef to supply an expanding fast-food industry (Myers, 1981:4). Seven to ten percent of forest loss in Panama can be attributed to public livestock credit and loans, which were primarily allocated to well-established, medium- and large-scale ranchers in traditional cattle-raising areas (Ledec, 1992). In places like Darién, the expansion of both the agricultural frontier and ranching activities was fuelled primarily by road construction and small colonist ranchers who were marginal recipients of such loans.

For decades, the expansion of cattle ranching in the Darién Province was limited by several legal measures and international agreements designed to contain the spread of hoof-and-mouth disease from neighbouring Colombia. Decree 121 of May 12, 1966<sup>66</sup> established a 50-mile strip of land (Giro, 1998:7) – i.e., the 'inspection zone', contiguous to the Colombian border and corresponding roughly to Darién National Park – where raising cattle is strictly prohibited and pig husbandry is only allowed for subsistence (CATIE, 1977:3). A 'control zone' was also implemented, north to the inspection zone, where cattle ranching is allowed but subjected to strict controls (ANAM, 2000:30) and, although a majority of the animals are slaughtered outside the province (UNDP and

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<sup>65</sup> Notably from the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

<sup>66</sup> Later subrogated by Law 6 of March 20, 1993

MEF, 2003a:23,55), their meat cannot be exported internationally<sup>67</sup>. In 1972, the MIDA signed a Cooperative Agreement for the Prevention of Hoof-and-Mouth Disease with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), which was amended in 1974 to allow for the creation of the *Comisión Panamá-Estados Unidos de América para la Prevención de la Fiebre Aftosa*<sup>68</sup> (COPFA, Commission Panama-USA for the Prevention of Hoof-and-Mouth Disease). COPFA receives 90 percent of its funding from the US government (MIPPE, 1998:4-69). In its efforts to control the spread of hoof-and-mouth disease, the US government also played a prominent role in the creation of both Katíos National Park (Department of Chocó, Colombia) in 1974<sup>69</sup> and Darién National Park in 1980, and, together with various American foundations and NGOs<sup>70</sup>, lobbied firmly against the completion of the Pan-American Highway through the so-called 'Darién Gap' (MIPPE, 1998:4-70). All these mechanisms have enabled the US government to play an important role in controlling the development of cattle ranching in Darién over the last three decades<sup>71</sup>. Nonetheless, the cattle frontier expanded significantly following the opening of the Pan-American Highway in 1980. Despite these measures, the Panamanian government saw the promotion of dual-purpose cattle ranching in Darién as a way to create new sources of employment, promote more efficient land uses, contribute to self-sufficiency, and assert national sovereignty (CATIE, 1977:6). While Darién's agricultural

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<sup>67</sup> COPEG website: <http://www.copeg.org/barrenoticias/2004/Jun2004/Junio04.html>, accessed September 24, 2009.

<sup>68</sup> COFPA was replaced in 1998 by the *Comisión para la Erradicación y Prevención del Gusano Barrenador del Ganado* (COPEG, Commission for the Eradication and Prevention of the Cattle Screwworm).

<sup>69</sup> While originally covering an extension of 52,000 hectares, the park was extended to 72,000 hectares in 1979 in order to include the riparian forests of the Atrato and Tumaradó swamps (Giot, 1998:5).

<sup>70</sup> Such as, the MacArthur Foundation, World Wildlife Fund, and the Audubon Society.

<sup>71</sup> This role was further consolidated in February 1994, when the MIDA and the USDA signed a cooperative agreement for the eradication and prevention of the cattle screwworm (MIPPE, 1998:4-70) (Illustration 2).

**Illustration 2:** A poster from COPEG displayed in an Emberá house in Atalaya and warning farmers against the threat of the screwworm, a disease transmitted by flies. (France-Lise Colin, May 2007)



Note: It is interesting to notice how cultural differentiation with respect to land practices is reproduced here by representing *colono* men (clearly recognizable through their hats) taking care of cows and a horse, while the indigenous farmer (left, bottom corner) is treating a pig and the indigenous girl, on the right, is surrounded by dogs, hens, and wild animals (i.e., a deer and a peccary).

production experienced negative growth rates throughout the 1990s, the growth rate of cattle ranching went from 2.1 percent in 1990 to 5.5 percent in 2000 (UNDP and MEF, 2003a:1). The region had a total of 84,470 head of cattle in 2001 as opposed to 10,000 in 1971 (Contraloría General, 2001), and a recent press article reports that local producers in Darién “are stopping to grow grains, tubers, and plantains...and prefer to raise cattle (Castro, 2008a). Although this statement is not entirely accurate, it reflects the perception of a dramatic increase in the livestock population recently.

For decades, the expansion of pasture has thus been a major cause of deforestation in Central America (Myers, 1981; Annis, 1992), a process further exacerbated by the fact that the agrarian legislation in Panama<sup>65</sup> and other Latin American countries commonly classified forested areas as *tierras baldías* (underworked lands) and regarded them as an obstacle to development (Utting, 1993:16). Besides, such legislation often required colonists to display ‘proof of occupancy’ understood as land clearance (known as *mejoras* or ‘improvements’) in order to acquire *derechos posesorios*<sup>66</sup> (rights of possession) (Kaimowitz, 1996:46). The concept of ‘social use of the land’<sup>67</sup> underpinning the legislation and customary practices partly promoted the conversion of rain forests into pastures in Panama (Joly, 1989:93-94). In Latin America, even when the law does not

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<sup>65</sup> In the case of Panama, see the Agrarian Code, Law 37 of 1962.

<sup>66</sup> Unclaimed lands in Panama belong to the state and, as such, are referred to as ‘national lands’. A farmer who clears and cultivates a piece of the national lands can apply to obtain *derechos posesorios*. These rights are granted by the *Dirección Nacional de Reforma Agraria* (National Office of Agrarian Reform) of the MIDA, as long as the land fulfills its social use. *Derechos posesorios* confer the privilege to occupy and use the land but do not grant ownership title. They can be ceded, sold, or transferred with the previous authorization of the Office of Agrarian Reform. The owner of these rights can also initiate a land titling procedure to register his/her property in the Public Registry (Velásquez Martínez, n.d.).

<sup>67</sup> According to Article 30 of the Agrarian Code, the land meets its ‘social use’ when “it is a) cultivated in pastures, and/or occupied by bovine or equine cattle in a proportion no less than one animal for every two hectares of land; b) when at least two-thirds of the land is planted and maintained under cultivation; c) when at least two-thirds of the land is planted with trees for the extraction of wood to be processed for industrial use; and d) when land is converted into urban areas” (Joly, 1989:94)

require deforestation to prove land possession, “land clearance and the subsequent planting of pasture has still been one of the best ways to discourage squatters and avoid the threat of agrarian action reform designed to put ‘idle lands’ into use” (Place, 1981, cited in Kaimowitz, 1996:46).

“Except for farmers with prime agricultural land”, Kaimowitz contends, “the first thing that almost any small farmer in Central America does when s/he accumulates a little land or money is to purchase cattle” (1996:23). Raising cattle presents a number of advantages. First, while the limited availability of family labour hinders the expansion of crop production, a small farmer may own up to 50 hectares of pastures and still cover half of the labour requirements with household labour (Ventura, 1992, cited in Kaimowitz, 1996:23). Second, ranching makes use of marginal or degraded lands that can no longer sustain crops, provides a regular income from the sale of dairy products and calves, and represents a convenient form of low-risk and easily convertible savings. Finally, in most Latin American rural societies, owning livestock is strongly associated with social status (Utting, 1993:19): it is a sign of purchasing power and prestige (Hecht and Cockburn, 1990:173). The term *cultura del potrero* (culture of the pasture) encapsulates this situation (Hernández, 1970:86).

To establish pasturelands, cattle ranchers clear the forest completely, by felling and burning it during the dry season. The first year (sometimes two if the soil allows it), various grains are planted. Rather than allowing for forest regeneration after planting, the land is sowed with grass<sup>68</sup> and the pasture is maintained through regular weeding,

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<sup>68</sup> In 1990, there were 135,615 hectares of pasture in Panama, out of which 10 percent were natural grasses. Sixty percent were ‘naturalized grasses’ – that is, improved grasses that were introduced over 50 years ago and that, given their adaptation to the local environment, are no longer categorized as ‘improved grasses’. These grasses include: *Faragua* (*Hyparrhenia rufa*), Indiana o Guinea (*Panicum maximum*) and Pará

burning, and the application of fertilizers. Land is grazed until it becomes so degraded that no forage will grow. The pasture is then considered 'lost' and new forested lands must be cleared to accommodate cattle herds<sup>69</sup> (Heckadon, 1993:139), reproducing the destructive cycle. Cattle ranching is largely recognized to be an exceptionally poor use of natural resources. Pastures' carrying capacity is extremely low: one head of livestock per hectare on average, immediately following forest clearing (Myers, 1981:6), and one animal for every two to three hectares after five to seven years (Heckadon, 1984c:251). Much of the pastureland in Central America is poorly adapted to cattle-grazing. This limitation, combined with poor management practices (i.e., overgrazing, constant burning of the land, and low field rotation), commonly leads to pasture degradation (i.e., weed proliferation, soil compaction, erosion, decreasing soil fertility, and nutrient depletion) (Kaimowitz, 1996:58). In addition, cattle ranching is usually unable to provide most farmers with enough to live on; when small farmers are no longer capable of supporting their families, they sell their *derechos posesorios* to larger ranchers, fuelling a process of land concentration (Heckadon, 1997:1997). Numerous studies also show that once the clearing phase is over, livestock generates very few jobs and employs mainly temporary labour (Hecht and Cockburn, 1990:174).

As a productive activity, cattle ranching is both directly and indirectly inserted

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(*Brachiaria mutica*). Finally, 30 percent were 'improved grasses'. These grasses were introduced more recently and include: Pangola (*Digitaria decumbens*), Estrella (*Cynodon Plectostachyus* M.), Tanner (*Brachiaria radicans*), Swazi (*Digitaria suazilandesis*), Zacata Alemán (*Echynocloa polystachya*), Humidícola (*Brachiaria humidicola*), King Grass (*Penisetum purpureum*) (Castillero, 1994:9).

<sup>69</sup> Cattle varieties for the production of meat in Panama include: Zebu (Brahman, Indo Brasil, Gyr, Nellore, Gusera, Santa Gertrudis), Angus, Creole cattle, Red Poll, and Charolais. For the production of meat and milk, the varieties *Suizbú* (a cross of Brown Swiss and Zebu) and Simbrah (cross of Simental and Brahman) are used (García, 2006:63). Sixty-seven percent of the animals in the Darién province are for the production of meat and 26 percent for the double purpose of meat and milk (UNDP and MEF, 2003a:54).

within the structure of the international capitalist system (García, 1996). It alters nature-society relations through the private appropriation and commodification of natural resources and reshapes social relations, both directly through the control of a salaried labour force and, indirectly, through usury, trade, credit, market prices, taxes, and state policies. Although small farmers typically produce for their own consumption and the local market, rather than for the international export market, they are still embedded to some degree in these multi-scale processes – e.g., through the purchase of inputs or as the recipients of state subsidies and land titling, among other things. Cattle ranching is thus an essential component of the expansion of capitalist processes into rural societies.

It is increasingly difficult today for small Panamanian farmers to reproduce the model of extensive cattle ranching because of land shortage, greater costs of labour and inputs, rising interest rates on bank loans, climatic change (drought, flooding), and environmental policies adopted by the national government (García, 2006). In fact, the creation of national parks and protected areas has somewhat discouraged the conversion of forests into pastures (Kaimowitz, 1996; Pasos et al., 1994). Besides, given that indigenous peoples are typically perceived as “less destructive of natural resources than other groups in the region” (Herlihy, 1997:235), the existence of indigenous territories is also commonly regarded as an effective barrier against the further conversion of forest into pasture. García writes in a recent study on cattle ranching in Panama:

Currently, the cattle frontier borders with *comarcas*, national parks, and other protected areas and coasts. Often, it triggers conflicts over the use of natural resources in these borderlands. The progression of the cattle frontier is presently reaching its limits (2006:49; my translation).

By counterposing zones of (agri)culture with zones of ‘untouched nature’, García’s statement reproduces the dichotomous construction of space I examined in Chapter V,

naturalizing a view of Panama as a nation of distinct and disconnected spatial entities in which indigenous societies and territories are systematically collapsed in nature. This representation conceals the multiple ways in which these spaces, while distinct, are intertwined and mutually produce each other. Critically, it obscures the recent expansion of ranching activities within indigenous *comarcas*, such as the Comarca Ngöbe-Buglé and the Comarca Emberá, as I show below. Mendez and Ortiz (1998) reports in a study on a Ngöbe community that, “cattle were cited as one of the principal commercial agricultural activities of an indigenous community that has no tradition of ‘pasture culture’” (cited in Connelly and Shapiro, 2006:132). Similarly, in a study in the Bayano region of eastern Panama, Simmons (1997) demonstrates that, contrary to the widespread assumption that colonists engage in forest degradation while indigenous (Kuna and Emberá) peoples sustainably manage land and resources, there is little differentiation across these cultural groups with respect to land-use and economic activities (1997:995).

Having painted the broader picture of cattle ranching in Panama, I now turn to examine its advance into the Comarca Emberá under the ‘development’ banner, and subsequently look into the issues it poses as it restructures its social and physical landscapes and blurs the ethnic identity boundaries that are central to the upholding of indigenous territorial rights.

## **2. Cattle ranching in the Comarca Emberá: A powerful ‘development’ trope**

Bayamón is currently the only village in the Sambú District of the Comarca Emberá where cattle ranching is present. Several factors may explain this situation. First, as I mentioned in Chapter III, Bayamón is one of two communities, with Puerto Indio, to have access to electricity. Electricity plays a major role in the development of local

businesses (*tiendas* selling frozen fish and meat, bars), thus enabling certain families to accumulate the capital necessary to make additional productive investments – such as cattle ranching. Second, Bayamón's subsistence territory borders with the subsistence lands of La Colonia de Bijagual – a village of *Interiorano* colonists practicing both subsistence and commercial agriculture and cattle ranching. Despite numerous tensions with these colonists, they indirectly provide Emberá farmers a model of seeming 'prosperity' that many Emberá are eager to emulate. For instance, when I asked one of the Emberá ranchers how he had come up with the idea of raising cattle, he said: "Since I was a teenager, I've been watching the *Interioranos* and asking myself: 'why would they raise cattle and not us?'" The proximity of these *colonos* also facilitates exchanges and, at times, collaboration between farmers. Finally, Bayamón is – with Puerto Indio – the only village of the *comarca* to be connected by a dirt road to Sambú and Garachiné. This makes it easier to transport the materials and products necessary to develop cattle ranching activities, such as barbed wire and fertilizers.

Cattle ranching began in Bayamón in the early 2000s, when the first official permit was delivered by the *Cacique Regional* of the time. By 2007, this first permit holder – a civil servant in his mid-forties who also owned a *tienda* and a bar – owned about 20 animals (Photos 13 and 14). Between 2006 and 2007, four additional permits were granted. One permit holder is a man in his early thirties who also owns a *tienda* in Bayamón. When I left the village at the end of June 2007, he had finished fencing his land and the grasses he had sowed were already fairly tall. He already owned a few animals that he kept with his father's herd, outside the *comarca*. Another permit holder is a teacher working at the local primary school and who also runs a *tienda*. By the end of

**Photo 13:** An Emberá pasture in the village of Bayamón. (France-Lise Colin, June 06, 2007)



**Photo 14:** Emberá men vaccinating a cow with the help of a *colono* man in a pasture of Bayamón (France-Lise Colin, June 06, 2007)



my stay in the village, he had completely fenced his land and the grasses sowed a few months before were showing mixed results. He did not yet own any animals. The remaining two cattle permit holders are still in the early stages of their enterprise. One is a farmer in his mid-forties who occupied an important local political position a few years ago. Upon completion of my fieldwork, he had fenced his land but had yet to sow grass. The last rancher, a young farmer in his early thirties, was 'behind schedule' when I interviewed him in May 2007. He lacked the capital to purchase the last wire rolls he needed. He already owned a cow that was grazing, for a modest fee, on the pasture of a *colono* from La Colonia. In June 2007, these five Emberá ranchers created the *Asociación Comarcana Emberá Ganadero* or ACEGAN (*Comarca* Association of Emberá Ranchers), hoping that the creation of a formal organization with *personería jurídica* (legal incorporation) would help them obtain loans from the *Banco de Desarrollo Agropecuario* or BDA (Agricultural Development Bank), to purchase inputs (e.g., barbed wire, grass seeds, pesticides, fertilizers, animals, stud bulls, vaccines, and vitamins, among other things).

Emberá farmers engaged in cattle ranching typically frame their activities as a powerful development device and simultaneously position themselves as promoters of development and progress. This has particular resonance considering that, as illustrated in Chapter IV, 86 percent of indigenous peoples are considered to be 'extremely poor' (MEF, 2000a:29), and that poverty has become a privileged trope through which many indigenous individuals define themselves. More importantly, as I highlighted in Chapter II, a hallmark of 'development' is the framing of its enterprise in the 'neutral' and 'universal' language of science, thus 'depoliticizing' and 'naturalizing' its operations. In

other words, development discourses work as powerful ‘political technologies’ in the sense that they recast deeply political questions into strictly technical (and therefore neutral) issues (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983:196; Foucault, 1978). Political technologies operate in part through the production of particular ‘scopic regimes’ (Gregory, 2001:314) – that is, the constitution of ‘spaces of constructed visibility’ (Rajchman, 1991:81) that define how subjects may be seen, while masking how power is exercised. Here, the trope ‘development’ renders cattle ranching as unproblematic and apolitical activities, and recasts Emberá ranchers as ‘neutral’ actors.

Ranchers’ narratives reproduce the economy of binary oppositions emblematic of most ‘development’ discourses, actively recoding the meaning of the local stage (i.e., the community/*comarca*) and the subjectivities of both ranchers and other farmers. The following interview extract with one of these ranchers is particularly instructive:

Given that the community is developing, is moving forward, the *comarca* can’t be a *comarca*. When development happens, you can’t hold it back. We can’t simply live on culture and we can’t be in the culture of the past. If we wanted to live according to that culture, then we shouldn’t have running water in the house, we should go to the river. Bathe in the river and take our drinking water from there, this is our culture. But as the community is growing, we can no longer drink the water from the river because it contains microbes that can bring diseases. Look what they did with the aqueduct. Isn’t that a development, a progress? So is cattle ranching. It’s a development (Interview May 11, 2007; my translation).

The antagonism between development and Emberá culture forms the backbone of this narrative. Against the aqueduct – a strong technological symbol – Emberá culture (e.g., bathing in/drinking from the river) comes into view as a bundle of obsolete and anachronistic practices. In a typical fashion, development expands its ‘truths’ by simultaneously reframing what was previously there as backward, improper, or stagnant. In face of the remarkable ‘progress’ brought by the aqueduct/development, any act of

resistance thus becomes suspicious of backwardness and traditionalism. Time after time, Emberá ranchers' discourse makes their fellow villagers visible as prisoner of archaic practices and displaying a number of negative traits – including apathy, passivity, short-sightedness, conformity, and volatility. These traits, Emberá ranchers suggest, produce rudimentary livelihoods focusing on the satisfaction of immediate necessities, rather than intending to meet long-term objectives. In sum, ranchers' narratives resemble in many ways conventional representations of development recipients as 'sites of lack' (Johnston et al., 2000:515). As an Emberá rancher explained to me:

Emberá people are like that. They come and go. They come here, clear a *montecito* [little piece of land], plant their *arrocito* [little rice], work, and are content with little. The youth especially live that way; they live on nothing. They don't have that mentality of work. By tradition, the Emberá are accustomed to sustain themselves with their *platanito* [little plantains], their *arrocito*, and their *pescadito* [little fish]. They go to the river, catch two or three *camaroncitos* [little shrimps], eat, and are happy with that. They don't think the way I do. I'm not content with getting two or three *camaroncitos* from the river (Interview May 11, 2007; my translation).

The repeated use of the diminutive form 'ito' at the end of the Spanish terms *montecito*, *arrocito*, *camaroncito*, *platanito*, and *pescadito* constructs a view of Emberá farmers as living a frugal subsistence and being content with little. In other words, it points to their (perceived) lack of ambition and conveys the impression of 'simple-minded' and 'childlike' individuals almost living in a state of nature. Their situation implicitly begs intervention so as to help them construct more productive and meaningful lives.

As I show in Chapter II, a key contribution of poststructuralism is its insistence on the fact that constructing 'others' is inseparable from processes of 'self-production' (Hall, 1997a, 1997c; Said, 1979, 1993). Highlighting the deficiencies and shortcomings of their fellow villagers serves to illuminate, by contrast, the positive subjectivities of Emberá

ranchers. Although they are socially differentiated in various ways (education, age, socioeconomic status, political affiliation), ranchers portray themselves in very similar terms: they typically emphasize their industriousness, determination, hard-work, and long-term vision. Central to their accounts is the desire to extricate their family from the whims of poverty and expand their economic opportunities so as to offer their children proper living conditions, particularly the opportunity to pursue higher education. While other villagers seem to be trapped in monolithic conservatism and hand-to-mouth existence, Emberá ranchers are resolutely looking forward, to the future – a posture commonly equated with ‘progress’. Their narratives underscore their maturity, self-management, and rationality. Finally, they often project the image of disinterested benefactors and/or knowledgeable leaders – in sum, individuals somewhat more ‘enlightened’ than their fellow villagers:

As an Emberá person, I can give a cow for free during a congress. I can slaughter an animal for my people. What does that cost me? I know this land is everyone’s. They didn’t give me a permit so I’d be the only one to benefit. If I have to, I’ll tell people during the congress: ‘My people, here is a calf or a cow, kill it’. People will eat. This is my offering to the people (Interview, May 08, 2007; my translation).

Another cattle rancher asserts:

I always advise and guide my community, but those who are sleeping, well continue to sleep! I’m moving forward. When they’ll wake up, I’ll already be far ahead. I’m thinking of my children’s future. I tell [my people] that instead of selling drugs or stealing, I have to think about what I can do to succeed, to generate something that can help the community. With cattle ranching, I’ll be hiring day-labourers. I’ll be generating income inside the village. This is what I explain to my people (Interview, May 13, 2007; my translation).

The choice of vocabulary in the second extract (e.g., “advise and guide my community”, “explain to my people”) positions this rancher as wise and knowledgeable. He is someone

who ‘thinks’, rather than behaves foolishly (“selling drugs or stealing”), and whose qualities and hard work can benefit the whole community.

In fact, according to Emberá ranchers, cattle ranching is not only a springboard to make oneself better off individually, it also paves the way for collective socioeconomic advancement and well-being. As I emphasize in Chapter V, the significant environmental, socio-cultural, and economic changes experienced by Emberá communities over the last three decades have seriously debilitated the viability of subsistence and commercial agriculture as pertinent livelihood options. Moreover, options for economic development and employment opportunities inside the *comarca* are curtailed by the continuous internecine struggles over traditional leadership and local political power, the lack of government funding at the *comarca* level<sup>70</sup>, and what many local villagers describe as the lack of training, accountability, and commitment of Emberá authorities. In such context, cattle – as a source of income and easily convertible savings – is presented by Emberá ranchers as a critical medium to move up the local social ladder and secure the future of their children – leaving behind the poverty, uncertainties, and hardships perceived to be associated with subsistence cultivation. It also has the potential to produce wealth locally through the generation of employment opportunities as labour is necessary to clear land, transport materials (posts, barbed wire), build fences, sow grasses, and take care of animals:

Raising cattle is a development. And thanks to that development, I am not the only one eating. When I’ll vaccinate my cows, I’ll hire various persons, because I can’t take care of 20 cows on my own. I’ll be giving them food. If I have to pay them, I will, and the community will be benefitting. All the people

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<sup>70</sup> Although both Law 22 and the Emberá Charter stipulate that the Comarca Emberá will receive an operating budget, the Panamanian state has been hampering the feasibility of such measure (Valiente López, 2003:13).

who coexist here with me in the village will benefit (Interview, May 11, 2007; my translation) (Photo 15).

Emberá ranchers also justify their activities arguing that ranching will reduce local dependency on *colono* ranchers for the provision of beef during congresses. In fact, in the absence of any significant animal-raising activities inside the *comarca*, the Emberá are repeatedly forced to buy cows from their *Latino* neighbours in order to meet their protein needs during large gatherings. Bayamón's ranchers insist that they would slaughter one of their own cows for free during these gatherings, thus further recasting their activities as a source of collective rather than simply personal benefits. In addition, developing indigenous ranching activities, they allege, would help combat *colonos'* allegations of laziness against the Emberá. These activities would prove – in a way that ‘speaks’ to *colonos* – that Emberá farmers are committed to working their lands. I come back to this issue at the end of the chapter.

Emberá ranchers' discourse exhibits two other important features. First, they insistently portray their enterprise as a ‘small-scale’ activity intended primarily for the subsistence needs of their families:

My idea isn't to have 200 cows over 200 hectares. I want 5 or 10 head of cattle for my daily subsistence, that's all. This is what I want. Or let's say, 50 small cows for instance. I won't do large scale. I don't want to have 200 hectares or 1,000 hectares. No, no. I won't go that far (Interview, May 08, 2007; my translation).

Another rancher explained to me:

The traditional authorities inside the *comarca* – both here and in other areas – are granting permits. But these permits are not to undertake large-scale activities – I mean they are not to set up a *hacienda*<sup>71</sup>. No. They are for small activities, for subsistence, for food, for the family (Interview, May 11, 2007; my translation).

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<sup>71</sup> The term *hacienda* refers to large land estates.

Second, they firmly stress their reliance on scientific and ‘proper’ technical methods, including new grass varieties, field rotation, and maintenance of tree cover, as opposed to more ‘traditional’ ranching practices characterized by the complete removal of the forest, extensive grazing, and the use of grasses that easily spread through the land. These methods, they contend, largely mitigate the negative impacts associated with cattle ranching as typically practiced by *colono* ranchers, and provide many venues to better protect local environmental conditions. Faith in the power of scientific devices is apparent, for instance, in ranchers’ designation of industrial herbicides and pesticides as ‘medicine’. The commitment of Emberá ranchers to scientific rationality is also evident in the following interview excerpts:

I attended a workshop in Barriales<sup>72</sup>. The training was delivered by a Colombian from an NGO working there with the ranchers. In Colombia and Brazil, people are using new methods to raise cattle and preserve the forest at the same time. It’s really nice; I got really excited about that idea. So now, I have many trees in my pasture. They’re still small, but I have many.

*F.L.: Did you plant these trees?*

No, I didn’t. The seeds from the *roble* tree [*Tabebuia rosea*] spread and started to grow. So I let them grow. My idea is to have trees on top and grass underneath for the animals. That way the stream doesn’t dry, because there’s vegetation. Within five years, the trees will be big, it will look different. I’m also replanting other trees. Maybe now people will shut up and will stop saying ‘He is keeping the land bare, he doesn’t leave any tree’. Maybe that way people will stop talking (Interview, May 11, 2007; my translation).

Another rancher gave the following explanation:

Although I’m raising cattle, I’m setting an example. Go and see my wood! My pastures aren’t empty! I have *caoba* [*Swietenia macrophylla*], *cedro espino* [*Bombacopsis quinata*], *espavé* [*Anacardium excelsum*], I have different timber species. I’m going to keep them there and take care of them. Mexicans, for instance, are changing the practices of raising cattle, they don’t keep the pastures empty of trees anymore; they have timber. You have to plant (Interview, May 08, 2007; my translation).

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<sup>72</sup> A community of the *Corregimiento* of Río Congo, Chepigana District, Darién Province.

While the previous two ranchers insisted on the value of planting trees and maintaining forest cover, another one stressed the importance of rotating animals among fields and provided a detailed description of the advantages of using new, improved grass varieties:

People say you can't raise cattle because the grass damages the land. But the grasses that damage the soil are those called *cabezona*, *carretera*, *paja loca*, and *veinte uña*. These grasses were brought by the *colonos* and then by the Emberá for their horses. I, on the contrary, plant a grass variety called *pasenta*. I received training from COPEG, who teaches about grasses. That variety is produced in Brazil. It doesn't produce any seed that later on will invade other land. For new grasses to grow, the livestock has to step on them. That way, they plant the seed in the soil with their hoofs. Besides, animals can't stay more than 20 days in a parcel. After that, you have to put them to graze in another lot. So you can' have 300 head of cattle like some *colonos* (Interview, May 10, 2007; my translation).

As Emberá farmers engage in ranching activities, they are incorporated in a dense mix of global and local practices that, on the one hand, challenges views of *comarcas* as isolated, bounded containers. On the other hand, emphasizing their connections to this assemblage of social relations and entities (e.g., a Colombian NGO, a national institution – COPEG – largely funded by the US government, other communities of Darién where workshops are facilitated, seed varieties imported from Brazil, sylvo-pastoral models implemented in Mexico and South America), Emberá ranchers are able to insert their practices within the field of 'rational resource management', thus further neutralizing and depoliticizing their activities.

The objective here is not to determine whether the claims of these Emberá ranchers are 'true'. As Foucault and several authors after him have emphasized, the objective in analyzing discourses and systems of ideas is not to interrogate them for their truth value, but to ask what these ideas do, what their real social effects are (Ferguson, 1990:xv). By positioning ranching activities under the 'disinterested' development banner and within

the scientific discourse of rational management, important effects are achieved: issues about cattle ranching become apprehended chiefly in technical terms (which means that they can, in turn, be fixed through the application of the ‘proper’ method or technology) and the important political dimensions of this new land use – i.e., the reworking of property arrangements in land, the re-signification of meanings of land, and growing socioeconomic disparities – are pushed in the background. I turn now to explore these issues.

### **3. A new ‘doing’ of the land**

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In a recent piece on the geography of law’s violence as it relates to private property, Blomley identifies property as “an important means by which we assign order to the world, categorizing and coding spaces and people according to their relationship to property” (2003:122). The property arrangements in land prevailing in a place thus shape the nature of human relationships and the kind of society being created (Singer, 2000:13, cited in Blomley, *ibid.*). That is why, borrowing from Rose (1994), Blomley further argues that “property is not a static, pre-given entity, but depends on a continual, active ‘doing’”, which requires, to paraphrase him, continuous re-enactment through the mobilization of bodies, technologies, and things into organized and disciplined practices (2003:122).

As I explain in Chapter VI, land, inside the *comarca*, is collective and farmers hold usufruct tenure rights over the land they clear, plant, and tend. These rights are inherited through descent lines, but remain effective only to the extent that individuals are using the land (e.g., through annual cultivation, or periodically tending and harvesting the timber and fruit trees growing in fallows). Informants told me that if a farmer leaves the

community for more than two years without assigning usufruct rights to someone, these rights are lost and the land returns to the collective 'pot'. Moreover, personal usufruct rights do not restrict passage to other users: individuals can wander on the land freely and hold various rights of access and use in each other's cultivated and fallowed fields: they can fish and hunt as well as collect vines, foliage, fruits, medicinal plants, leaves, firewood, fibres, and other naturally occurring resources. In addition, along with most indigenous peoples of neo-tropical lowland regions, a central feature of Emberá cultivation is the clearing and planting of small parcels of land (enough to sustain the family) for one or two years, followed by extended periods of fallow. This system is thus characterized by the continuous repetition of cycles, ensuring land regeneration through time. In doing so, the Emberá "do not dominate the landscape of which they are a part" (Kane, 1994:41). Finally, the collective property of *comarca* lands – and part of the *comarca*'s identity – is also grounded in the quotidian re-enactment of similar actions of planting, cultivating, and care; in sum, it hinges on the existence of a community of individuals who are committed to performing daily, in their respective parcels, these 'Emberá ways' of working the land.

The introduction of cattle ranching unsettles the tenurial relations prevailing inside the *comarca*, redefining how people relate not only to vital resources but also to each other. It erodes the collective property arrangements in land and fosters a shift towards private ownership. As such, ranching activities undeniably constitute a new 'doing' of the land.

This particular 'doing' is enacted, first, through the mobilization of a particular technology: the use of barbed wire. In his cultural history of barbed wire, Krell

demonstrates that, since its inception, this technology has been strongly associated with the action of “keeping out and keeping in” (2002:48) and, concomitantly, with notions of land possession and control. This became obvious to me one day while mapping a pasture. After the owner of the field and I had been walking for about two hours along the wired fence, we arrived at a place that he wanted to convert to pasture but that had not yet been enclosed. Several muddy foot trails were visible on the ground, crossing each other and spreading out in different directions. The Emberá rancher, a bit annoyed, stopped and said: “When all *my* land is fenced, people will have to stop their habit of building trails like this anywhere. I will put *order* here!” While Emberá cultivation practices produce a landscape of old-growth forest patches, fallowed lands, and cultivated fields in which individuals can circulate freely, the erecting of fences controls and disciplines people’s relations to space. Yet, fences do not only define where people can and cannot go. Through this performance of space, land is firmly marked out and recodified as *mine*. “To have a property in land”, Blomley argues, “is to have a right to some use or benefit of land [and] such right is necessarily relational, being held against others” (2003:121). The ‘order’ and control the Emberá rancher alludes to in the statement reproduced above is thus as much spatial as it is social, disciplining people’s actions and experiences and redefining their access to and control over land and other resources.

The privatization of land tenure in the context of cattle ranching is further enacted through the mobilization of another technology: ‘land certificates’. Considering the financial investment that raising livestock requires, some ranchers feel that the usufruct rights granted to farmers under customary law are not offering enough security. During

an interview, Aarón<sup>73</sup> explained to me how he thus requested both the *Cacique Regional* and a high-level, Emberá state representative to ‘certify’ the piece of land he was planning to convert to pasture. There is no reference to ‘land certification’ in Law 22. It seems that the practice has only emerged recently, in a context of growing competition over land and forest resources. As explained to me by this informant and others, land certification entails the delivery of a written document that formally recognizes private ownership over land.

The highly contentious nature of officially recognizing this kind of property arrangement inside the *comarca* is exemplified by the complex political negotiations Aarón had to engage in. “This document was a political game”, as he said to me during an interview. The *Cacique Regional* was indebted to him for, two years earlier, Aarón had helped him to win his electoral campaign. Now, he wanted to be repaid for his loyalty. To obtain the second certificate from the state representative, Aarón resigned from the post he occupied in a governmental office – a post this representative was eager to give to a close political supporter. The following extract from my interview with Aarón offers additional insights into the nature and implications of his certificate:

*F.L.: I have a hard time understanding what happens. Is the land collective in the comarca?*

Yes, it is.

*F.L.: So when the cacique certifies a piece of land, is it like some kind of property title or..?*

Yes, that’s exactly it!

*F.L.: So the land is no longer collective?*

No, it isn’t. As I told you, the piece of land I asked him to certify is no longer collective, it’s mine. ...Let’s take an example: it’s like I was giving a first name to a child but no last name. I thought about all that: I’m going to work

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<sup>73</sup> Names were changed to preserve interviewees’ anonymity.

hard on that piece of land, I'm going to clear 40 hectares, but I won't have a document that validates the fact that this land is mine.

*F.L.: But here, customarily, when someone clears a piece of land, isn't it his/hers?*

Yes, it is, but I didn't think of that. Instead, I got another idea. I thought I would proceed with a document. Because without a document, this land, all of a sudden, could stop being mine.

*F.L.: Have there been cases here of people working some land and other individuals taking it away?*

Yes, this has happened. I thought about that; some people could take over my property. I could go and stay in Panama City [as he had in the past] and when I come back there's nothing left. But if I have a document like this one, this land is mine (Interview, May 13, 2007; my translation).

A child without a surname has not officially been claimed or recognized by anyone. His/her belonging and filiation remain, as a result, ambiguous and unclear. Such metaphor constructs customary land rights in the *comarca* as uncertain and undeveloped entitlements that lack both security and legality. Under such land arrangements reign implicitly disorder and violence, as suggested by Aarón's reference to the threat of land dispossession. His account suggests that legal ownership based on written documentation issued by indigenous leaders – as opposed to customary tenure relying on verbal/tacit agreement – provides, on the contrary, stability and order. In the following interview extracts, the repeated counterposing of the *comarca* with 'national lands' paints an even darker picture of the collective property arrangements in land prevailing in the Emberá territory:

If I could, if I had money, I'd buy a piece of land outside the *comarca* – a piece of national lands. I know that ranching is more profitable there than here, because I can get a loan the way I want it. I wouldn't be in the situation I'm in right now. I'd be set up already. I'd have obtained a loan. Here, in the *comarca*, you can't; there are many requirements right away. ...I want to leave something to my children. Sometimes I feel like getting out of here, going to the national lands to have a propriety title.

*F.L.: You feel it is better?*

Yes, it is. I feel that way sometimes. But here, it's collective; you can't sell the

land the way you want. If you sell it, you have to sell cheap, almost as if you were giving it for free<sup>74</sup>. But outside the *comarca* it isn't like that. Over there, you can sell as much land you want and for the price you want (Interview, May 13, 2007; my translation).

Another rancher shared a similar point of view:

I know I'm a *comarcano*, and maybe I'm the only one to think badly, but sometimes I think to myself: when you live on national lands, you go to the bank and you get a loan. Here there aren't loans because these are collective lands. Look at my work here: it's almost like if it was for everyone, because no one owns the land. The *nokó* can wriggle out of it and grab my land, although it won't happen. ...And here you can't get a loan (Interview, May 10, 2007; my translation).

In these interview extracts, collective property arrangements in land code the space of the *comarca* as inhibiting individual advancement and economic prosperity while private ownership and commodification of land make it possible to participate in capitalist market and prosper. It is interesting to note the similarities between these accounts and the neoliberal argument according to which indigenous collective rights provide “an inadequate basis for participating in a modern economy” (Flanagan and Alcantara, 2004:506) and contribute to their present situation of poverty. In fact, discussing the case of Canadian Indian reserves, Flanagan and Alcantara argue that, “To attain widespread prosperity on Indian reserves, it will be necessary to develop workable systems of private property rights to facilitate market transactions” (2005:490). In June 2007, as I mentioned in the second section, a few days before I left my research site, the Emberá ranchers formed an association with legal incorporation as a manoeuvre to develop – precisely – a more ‘workable’ property regime that would override their ineligibility for state agricultural loans for residing within a collective territory. Together, they went to see the

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<sup>74</sup> According to Article 2 of Law 22, “private appropriation or transfer of *comarca* lands is prohibited under any circumstance”. Yet, occasional sales of land occur between members of the same village, at very low prices, considering the prohibition.

*Cacique Regional* who delivered them a formal letter, directed to the director of the local branch of the Agricultural Development Bank (BDA), and officially recognizing the private ownership of these ranchers over their pastures. I am unaware whether these ranchers were successful in obtaining loans. It also remains unclear at this point whether this process of land certification within a system of communal lands will lead to the sale of parcels as it did, for instance, in some indigenous communities in the Huasteca Potosina region in Mexico (see Smith et al., 2009). Because Law 22 firmly prohibits private land ownership and land transfers, it is unlikely that any land will be sold to outsiders; yet, land certificates could boost the informal sales of land that are already occurring within the community. In all cases, these processes draw attention to the embedding of the *comarca* in “two systems of meaning and economy simultaneously” (Kane, 1994:37). With the accelerated integration of Emberá livelihoods into the national society and of Emberá subsistence economy into national and international markets, this indigenous group – as many other human groups – has to increasingly deal with the “juxtaposition of codes derived from different systems of value” (Kane, *ibid.*).

The erosion of collective property arrangements in land, as cattle ranching and its embedded system of private land ownership expand, has far reaching implications for local social relations and economic conditions. First, as I emphasized in the first section of this chapter, the low productivity of tropical soils means that the carrying capacity of pastures is usually extremely low – i.e., one head of livestock per hectare on average in Panama (Castillero, 1994; Ledec, 1992). As a result, cattle ranching requires large areas of land, and new patches of forest must continuously be converted into pasture to compensate for decreasing soil fertility through time (Hecht and Cockburn, 1990;

Heckadon, 1985). The following comment by an Emberá farmer encapsulates very well the expansive nature of ranching:

[Ranchers] say: 'I'm going to work this piece of land, that's all'. But when you raise cattle, you start here and then you have to expand, you have to increase the size of your pasture, you want more land. That's what ranching does (Interview, May 01, 2007; my translation).

As a result, while Emberá farmers typically grow their grains over one or two *cabuyas* (i.e., one and a half to three hectares), GPS measurements reveal that Emberá pastures measure on average 21 hectares (i.e., from 5 to 60 hectares). This average may well increase in the future. In fact, while two ranchers had respectively 5 and 18 hectares sowed with pasture at the time of our interview, they told me that their plans were to convert into pasture, in the future, an additional 55 hectares and 25 hectares of secondary forest each. This particular land use thus fosters important land disparities and supports growing socioeconomic stratification at the community level. This is not totally surprising considering that, various studies have shown that cattle ranching across Central America has encouraged the concentration of land in a few hands and has fuelled the proletarianization of large sectors of the national peasantry (García, 2006; Pasos et al., 1994). Second, Emberá farmers complain that cattle grasses have a tendency to spread and invade their cultivated and fallowed parcels:

Those grasses are everywhere. Even when you cut down primary forest, grasses grow because the birds spread their seeds in the mountains. Before the *colonos* moved here, there wasn't any such grass in the *rastrojos*, only *jangá*. This is a natural grass. As soon as these people arrived here, they damaged all the land around them (Interview, June 12, 2007; my translation).

These exotic, improved grass varieties tend to be resistant to fire and compete with cultivated crops (especially rice). As such, they not only increase the labour inputs of farmers – who are forced to weed more frequently – they also result in decreasing yields.

As such, cattle farming also indirectly puts the subsistence of other farmers at risk. It is also common to hear Emberá farmers say that, “after pasture has been sowed, the land can no longer be worked”. In saying this, these farmers allude to the fact that sowing grasses after the initial phase of crop cultivation – instead of allowing for secondary-forest growth – renders the land unfit for crop cultivation:

What happens if my dad plants grass like the *colonos*? Where is he going to plant rice? What land is going to bear fruits? (Interview, May 04, 2007; my translation).

As cattle ranching expands, it occupies more land and destroys the forest. And what happens with time? All the land is damaged (Interview, June 12, 2007; my translation).

Suppressing forest re-growth thus removes relatively large areas of land from the collective repertoire of farmable lands – a process that is already fuelling concerns about future land conflicts, as more land is converted to pasture and less land is available to grow grains:

I don't really like the idea of cattle ranching because once those who are involved in that activity no longer have land [to grow crops or plant new pasture], they are going to fight over their neighbours' land. There is going to be enmity among people (Interview, May 04, 2007; my translation).

Replacing secondary forests with pastures represents a drastic change in local ecological conditions, for it entails the permanent removal of forest cover and, with it, the loss of rich and diversified natural habitats. As I showed previously, Emberá ranchers respond to these critiques by emphasizing their adherence to a sylvo-pastoral model that combines pasture and the planting of trees. Yet, as the following account suggest, ‘nature’ within such model is understood in very different terms:

In my pasture, I have *caoba*, *cedro espino*, *espavé*... You have to plant, because soon will come the payment of environmental services for carbon sequestration. Those who have wood will get money. ...I told the *Cacique* that

we should promote tree planting and negotiate a contract. But the *Cacique* is sleeping! He doesn't take action. The mayor, the representative, the governor, they don't have that mentality. We could also use *balsa* trees [*Ochroma pyramidale*] to make paper. We could bring in a multi-million project. They pay eight cents for one pound of *balsa* wood! And here we don't do anything with those trees, we burn them! We have thousands of them; imagine the money there! We could set up a paper processing plant and export, right away (Interview, May 08, 2007; my translation).

As I stress in Chapter II and VI, social nature theorists insist that there is no 'objective' way to talk about nature and that nature has no trans-historical, universal meaning. All discourses of nature are produced through constellations of power/knowledge that legitimize particular understandings and meanings while marginalizing and casting other ones in the shade (Braun, 2002; Braun and Wainwright, 2001; Castree and Braun, 1998; Demeritt, 1998). In the account reproduced above, nature is made visible as a strictly biophysical entity, sanctioning a strong utilitarian view of trees. Permeating this rancher's account is what Escobar (1996) calls a "post-modern form of ecological capital", a framework within which nature is redefined as 'reservoir of value' that must be planned for and managed properly. This management of nature is part and parcel of the 'economization of life' (1996:53) – that is, the commodification of life's every component – in order to sustain economic growth and, with it, the whole capitalist system. Trees here are understood strictly in economic terms – i.e., as commodities that can be marketed as environmental services (e.g., carbon credits) and wood products (e.g., fibres for paper production, timber). Even more important, in seeing nature as a strictly biophysical entity, the multiple social uses attached to the rich and diversified habitats and ecosystems that existed before these sylvo-pastoral systems are erased from view. It is, thus, a nature immune to politics. The forest as a complex habitat embedded in complex social and cultural practices of use is "deterritorialized and reterritorialized" – to

borrow Braun's (2002:42) apt formulation – as a collection of valuable timber species to be managed wisely. No matter how many trees are planted and how economically profitable they are, these sylvo-pastoral systems are permanently replacing primary and secondary forests that performed critical roles for the entire community – as places for hunting, trapping, fishing, and gathering forest resources, as well as places for worship and magic, which were also discussed in the interviews. With the decline of these communal natural resources, a number of vital collective subsistence practices are cut back, thus exacerbating socioeconomic inequalities. Various forms of reciprocity and ancestral knowledge also vanish in the process, weakening not only the base of the community's economic life, but also the foundations of the community itself.

Finally, cattle ranching takes part in resource governance practices that consolidate social, economic, and political disparities between villagers and sanction unequal social relations of access to and use of land and forest resources. According to Emberá statutory law, *caciques regional* and *general* are responsible, together with ANAM, for ensuring the conservation and rational use of renewable natural resources inside the *comarca* (Article 19 of Law 22). These *caciques* are to grant or reject resource exploitation permits, in accordance with the regulations defined by the General Congress and ANAM's previous approval (Article 45 of the Emberá Charter). Residents of the *comarca* typically apply for permits to engage in commercial logging in fallowed lands. With the monetization of local life and rising cash needs, a growing number of permits are also requested to engage in activities prohibited by traditional congresses, such as logging in primary forest and raising cattle. Although these various activities are forbidden inside the *comarca*, various informants told me that traditional authorities may

deliver permits based on individuals' special economic needs. Yet, evidence from several interviews suggests that applicants' political affiliation<sup>75</sup> and economic power – rather than situation of poverty – increasingly condition the granting of permits:

Traditional leaders examine and discuss your situation. If you say: 'Look, I have two children studying in Panama, I need money, give me the opportunity to cut the trees I saw in the primary forest'. That way, you can get a permit. These are special cases.

*F.L.: So, in special cases, despite the congress' prohibition, you can get a permit?*

Yes, you can get one. But it's limited. You need to show that you have some kind of need.

*F.L.: But here everyone has needs, don't you think?*

Yes, everyone has needs, but some cases are more special. Let's take Felix [a local resident]. What needs does he have? He doesn't have kids studying. He's salaried. Do you think he needs to cut trees? If I was nokó, I'd tell him: 'No, I won't give you a permit'.

*F.L.: Do you mean the nokó gave him one?*

Yes, he did, because Felix said: 'Here are \$20, \$50'. He made him quiet (Interview, May 08, 2007; my translation).

Another farmer told me in a separate interview:

That's how that guy got a permit to raise cattle. I don't know how much he gave the nokó. But that's how things are. Some people want to make money on the *comarca*.

*F.L.: What do you mean?*

I mean they want to live off the *comarca*, they say: 'I'm nokó, I deliver permits. You want a permit? Give me this much' (Interview, April 18, 2007; my translation).

Bribes are very alluring considering that elected positions within the traditional leadership system are not remunerated. As bribery becomes the rule, villagers with

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<sup>75</sup> Articles 44 and 46 of the Emberá Charter instruct that those who aspire to the positions of *caciques regional* and *general* "must not be a member or leader of a political organization" (1999:34). Nonetheless, the traditional Emberá leadership has become strongly politicized (i.e., connected to national political parties), which fuels constant tension and conflicts. Political partisanship heavily influences the management of many issues within the *comarca*, from the granting of government scholarships to students and the assignment of civil servant positions by local governmental authorities, to the delivery of resource use and cattle permits by traditional leaders.

money are getting privileged access to collective natural resources at the expense of poorer members of the community<sup>76</sup> and participate, in the process, in the erosion of local collective institutions. Finally, existing resource governance arrangements also discriminate against women. In fact, most women are not in a position to cultivate the political connections or access the financial resources necessary to obtain permits. Second, land certificates and cattle permits formally recognize the male petitioner as the official land right holder, making invisible women's equal usufruct rights over shared property and thus potentially further eroding women's land rights<sup>77</sup>.

As cattle ranching expands, it is not simply the physical landscape of the *comarca* that looks different. Meanings of 'nature' are partly reworked, the social fabric is rewoven and coloured in contrasting ways, and relationships to land are reconfigured, reconstructing the space of the *comarca* and the meanings attached to it. But both this space and its meanings are opened to contestation and re-signification. In the section to follow, I show how in contesting one of the ranchers' access to and use of land, villagers are also engaging in a struggle over meanings of identity/place in a context where cattle ranching blurs ethnic differences and disrupts 'traditional' ways of working the land.

#### **4. Struggles over belonging**

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Heated protests are starting to spark off against cattle ranching, contesting the asymmetric distribution of land resources and forest destruction. Yet, this is not the only issue at stake. As I explain in Chapters II and VI, a significant contribution of

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<sup>76</sup> This is confirmed, in part, by the economic status of current ranchers in Bayamón, as I showed at the beginning of this chapter.

<sup>77</sup> Traditionally, male and female Emberá siblings held the same rights with respect to land inheritance. Yet, Kane (1986) demonstrates that decreasing land availability and greater land competition in the context of nucleated villages fostered a male bias in ownership and inheritance practices. This male bias, she argues, "provides the basis of the increasing power of male-oriented descent groups...at the expense of women and kin not in the direct line descent" (1986:128-130).

poststructuralist political ecology is the conceptualization of struggles over natural resources as being always both material and symbolic (Braun and Wainwright, 2002; Carney and Watts, 1990; Moore, 1996; Peluso and Watts, 2001; Schroeder, 1996), in the sense that they reveal deeper conflicts over meanings in the ways that rights, resources, or identities are defined, negotiated, and contested within various social institutions and through time.

During my fieldwork, a group of villagers disputed the conversion of a large chunk of primary forest into pasture, arguing that the Emberá rancher responsible for it was an ‘outsider’ and had only recently settled in the village. As a male farmer in his early twenties commented to me:

Roberto is destroying a lot. He cleared about 200 hectares<sup>78</sup>. He says that he’s only cultivating, but he grows crops and then you see the entire field being covered with grasses. Besides, he isn’t from here, he isn’t from Bayamón. And it’s not like he’s been here for a long time...He arrived here and suddenly, after a few months, he was already growing pasture (Interview, May 01, 2007; my translation).

During an interview, Roberto responded to these critiques in the following terms:

My mother is from here and I was born here in Gonzalo’s *finca*. Since I arrived, people treat me as if I was a stranger. They criticize me for taking all this land. They say that I am not from here; that they are going to get me out. They even sued me. ...But I’m more *sabaleño*<sup>79</sup> than some people here. My father is *comarcano* and so am I; no one can tell me anything. My wife<sup>80</sup> is from Bayamón: where do you want me to go? I am not going anywhere (Interview May 10, 2007; my translation).

According to Article 84 of the Emberá Charter, individuals must meet two conditions to hold land tenure inside the Emberá territory: being Emberá or Wounaan, and living

<sup>78</sup> GPS field measurement reveals that this rancher cleared, in fact, 40 hectares.

<sup>79</sup> *Sabaleño* refers to someone who was born in the Sábalo River sector. As I explained in Chapter III, this river passes through Bayamón. Many Emberá continue to define their origins based on the river area where they were born. By arguing that he is from the Sábalo River, Roberto demonstrates that he belongs to Bayamón.

<sup>80</sup> This gives him further legitimacy because as a resident of this village, his wife and himself have the right to clear and cultivate unclaimed lands around the village to sustain their household.

within the administrative jurisdiction of the *comarca* (Congreso General Emberá/Wounaan, 1999:46). Hence, with regards to the Emberá Charter, Roberto was within the law. To understand the protest over Roberto's status and rights, one must instead pay attention to particular constructions of belonging/identity. In this account, Roberto draws upon three key elements to establish his insider status: (1) his mother is from Bayamón; (2) he was born in Bayamón; and (3) his father is *comarcano*. In other words, Roberto's belonging originates in a 'genealogical model' (Ingold, 2000) in which birth confers innate connection to place, and identity and belonging originate from a "past history of relatedness" – that is, from individuals' connection to particular lines of descent (2000:142-148). In this model, subjects are thus 'pre-constituted entities': their relatedness to particular ancestors – rather than their own actions – determines, in advance, their identity make-up and their position in the land. In sum, genealogical connection positions Roberto as an innate *comarcano* with legitimate rights to *comarca* lands.

Since he was born in Bayamón, lives in the *comarca*, and is Emberá, why then do other villagers cast him as an 'outsider'? The answer lies in part in a more complex understanding of belonging. First, Roberto's 'insiderness' and land rights are further challenged on the grounds that he has never been involved in the struggle for the *comarca*. A villager once told me that Roberto not only often displayed overt contempt towards the supporters of the *comarca*, he also spent several years living in Panama City to avoid – according to this informant – attending congresses and taking part in the fight for the establishment of the Emberá territory. Active involvement in this struggle thus operates as a key axis of differentiation through which categories of 'insider'/'outsider'

are defined, boundaries of belonging erected, and rights produced. When local villagers contest Roberto's 'insiderness', it is because, in their view, ongoing engagement and relationships with local people and place form the basis of belonging. Here, identity and belonging are not innate; they unfold from one's sustained "emplacement in the world" (Ingold, 2000:144). In sum, "One 'becomes' through a life of actions" (Mackenzie, 2004:127). These villagers thus conceive belonging and legitimize access to and use of local natural resources on the basis of 'dwelling', rather than as naturally deriving from birth. Second, dwelling involves more than the physical occupation of an innate surface; it entails conceptualizing land and people as mutually constitutive of each other. As Ingold asserts:

A founding premise of the relational model is that life, rather than being an internal property of persons and things, is immanent in the relations between them. It follows that the land, comprised by these relations, is itself imbued with the vitality that animates its inhabitants. The important thing is to ensure that this vitality never 'dries up'. It is essential to 'look after' or care for the land, to maintain in good order the relationships it embodies; only then can the land, reciprocally, continue to grow and nurture those who dwell therein (2000:149).

This account provides further insight into why, despite his Emberá ethnicity, his birth, and his place of residence, some villagers contest Roberto's 'insiderness'. In fact, if individuals draw their identity and belonging from particular practices of 'looking after' and 'caring for' the land – that is, from the 'Emberá ways' of working the land I mentioned earlier in this chapter – participating in activities that are at odds with these specific 'ways' recasts these individuals as 'outsiders'. As I emphasized in Chapter 4 and in the first section of this chapter, Darién is commonly represented as a neatly bounded, binary physical landscape – i.e., agriculture and ranching versus forest – that overlays a neatly bounded, racial/cultural landscape – i.e., *colonos* versus indigenous peoples. This

representation sanctions the idea of an inherent antagonism between cattle ranching and indigenous peoples. Thus, as Emberá men engage in this activity, they unsettle deeply ingrained assumptions and blur seemingly natural and impermeable ethnic boundaries. As the man I quoted in the introduction claimed, if Emberá people were to raise cattle, they would be just like the *colonos*. As the new ‘doing’ of the land promoted by Roberto challenges local meanings of identity/place and ‘traditional’ interactions between land and people, he is thus repositioned as an outsider to the community.

In contesting Roberto’s access to and use of land and in calling in question his ‘insiderness’, these villagers are thus implicitly engaging in struggles over what it means to be Emberá and over ‘proper’ performances of indigeneity/space. The next and last section of this chapter explores the issues at stake in the blurring of these ethnic/cultural boundaries and demonstrates that constructions of space are always consensual and contested processes.

##### **5. Discourses of ‘nature’, performances of indigeneity, and territorial threats**

Article 83 of the Emberá Charter stipulates that:

The lands delimited by article 1 of Law 22 of 1983...are the heritage of the Comarca Emberá-Wounaan. They are for the collective use of indigenous groups, with the objective to devote them to *agropecuario*, industrial, and any other activities that promote the integral development of the *comarca* (Congreso General Emberá/Wounaan, 1999:46; my translation).

In Spanish, the word *agropecuario* means ‘relative to cultivation and livestock farming’. Yet, while Emberá farmers recognize that animal husbandry (fowl, pigs, horses) is authorized, they insist that cattle ranching is not. Despite in-depth examination of both Law 22 and the Emberá Charter, I could not find any reference to the prohibition of cattle inside the *comarca*. Confused, I raised the issue with one of the traditional leaders:

As far as land use is concerned in the *comarca*, we're going to continue working as we have in the past – that is, growing crops such as rice and corn. But engaging in cattle ranching is prohibited.

*F.L.: Where is it prohibited?*

Here in the *comarca*.

*F.L.: Who prohibits it?*

The law.

*F.L.: But I read Law 22, and I didn't find any article prohibiting cattle ranching.*

Yes, it is in there, I don't remember which article.

*F.L.: Does that article say explicitly 'cattle ranching is prohibited'?*

Yes, it does. It says that *agropecuario* activity, cattle ranching that is, is prohibited.

*F.L.: But Article 2 says that 'comarca lands are to be devoted to agropecuario and industrial activities' and the term agropecuario means cultivation and animal husbandry isn't it?*

Yes.

*F.L.: Well, I don't understand why you say that cattle ranching is prohibited then.*

Both Law 22 and the Emberá Charter say so. That's why we have so much forest, all these fallowed lands so close to us, because the Emberá Charter prohibits cattle ranching. That's why we, the Emberá, are scared to grow pasture (Interview June 23, 2007; my translation).

My interview with this leader was very awkward. Although he seemed to share my understanding of the term *agropecuario*, he continued to claim throughout the interview that ranching was strictly forbidden and that current Emberá ranchers had acted against the law. Central to his account is the idea that crop cultivation and nature conservation (suggested in the claim “That's why we have so much forest, all these fallowed lands so close to us”) make up the ‘true’, ‘authentic’ identity of the *comarca* since it is the only one that has historical continuity/depth (cf. “working as we have in the past”), and that such identity must remain unchanged. This was further evidenced in the interview I had with an Emberá in his late sixties who told me:

The government gave us the *comarca* because it saw that, we, the Emberá,

were conservationists. That's how we obtained the support of the government. At that time, we weren't selling wood to Panama City, so the government saw that the Emberá were conserving the forest. It gave us the *comarca* so we'd maintain our culture, our lifestyle, everything. ...Look at Law 22 and tell me if they gave us the *comarca* to raise cattle! The law doesn't allow that. What did the lawyer say during the 2007 regional congress? He said very clearly that we weren't given the *comarca* to raise cattle (Interview, June 12, 2007; my translation).

In other words, there is no need for a formal prohibition of cattle ranching as the 'inherent mission' of the *comarca* itself – as a conservation territory – already prohibits it. The narrative of this old man is significant in that it alerts us to the interplay of multiple players and processes in the construction of such identity – corroborating the fact that, a group's identity is always the result of specific 'positionings' that emerge from the historical articulation of a group's own agency with “‘places of recognition' that others provide” (Hall, 1995, cited in Li 2000:152). In the 1970s and 1980s, Emberá leaders chose to portray themselves as 'ecologically noble savages' (Redford, 1990), knowing that such positioning would provide a potent 'symbolic resource' (Conklin and Graham, 1995) to obtain formal recognition of their territorial rights. At the same time, the identification of indigenous peoples as conservationists was also part and parcel of a state-sponsored regional development strategy grounded in distinct assignments of place and roles to the various ethnic groups inhabiting Darién. *Interioranos* were to expand the national agricultural frontier through the cultivation of crops, cattle ranching, and logging. Indigenous peoples, in contrast, were mainly to preserve forest resources and other natural resources for future exploitation<sup>81</sup> (Herrera, 1989:38).

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<sup>81</sup> Today, as a result, indigenous territories in Panama are regarded as the 'final frontier' available for development, as they all harbour important resources, including land, water, wood, biodiversity, and minerals (Leis, 2005:119). For instance, in the 1990s, there were 139 mining applications. Seventy-five per cent of the 16 applications that were eventually approved were located in indigenous territories and forested areas (Elton, 1997:81).

In the national context prevailing in Panama three decades ago, strategic essentialism provided the Emberá firm grounds for the mobilization of politics, as exemplified by the creation of their *comarca* in 1983. Yet, today, such strategy imprisons them within untenable dilemmas. Because essentialist identities always hinge on notions of permanence and immutability, they foreclose, in the long run, the ability of *comarcanos* to adopt other positions and adapt to changing socioeconomic and environmental circumstances. In fact, as I show in Chapter VI, the *comarca*-as-conservation-territory hinges on problematic assumptions, among which is the idea that nature and place can remain 'still'. But as Massey reminds us, "This 'natural' place to which we appeal for timelessness has of course been (and still is) constantly changing" (2005:133). In addition, it operates as a deeply 'disciplinary' space – in the Foucauldian sense of the term emphasized in Chapter II: it produces normalizing discourses about people's relationships to land and regulate subjectivities. In sum, it scripts the 'proper' place and the 'legitimate' performances of identity of its inhabitants, setting the limits of what is deemed lawful and right, keeping at bay the 'messy' world and purifying itself of 'non-conforming' uses. This illustrates very well how 'power' operates: not as an outside constraint or force pressing down on Emberá individuals, but as something that circulates and reproduces itself through every day practices, through the production of particular behaviours, discourses, and subjectivities. In sum, power operates through the ways in which people interpret the meanings and accept the truth of particular discourses (Allen, 2003:72), and adjust and self-regulate their practices accordingly

As the legitimacy of their territorial rights hinges on the continuous display of uniquely indigenous and conservationist identities, Emberá people are thus compelled to

be narrowly selective in the ways they represent themselves – including the kind of livelihoods they espouse. Insofar as “cultural identity is reproduced in a landscape of difference” (Kane, 1994:97), Emberá people are compelled to prohibit cattle ranching so they can remain true to their perceived inherent conservationist spirit and, as a result, ‘authentic’ indigenous peoples<sup>82</sup>. On the one hand, this reminds us that identity differences are never simply ‘found’; they are socio-historical productions that must be *maintained* and *reasserted* through the erection of boundaries to continue existing (Natter and Jones, 1997). On the other hand, and even more importantly, it also underscores the fact that the upholding of this ‘reality’ of the *comarca* as a conservation territory is also itself *achieved* through everyday practices rather than being an objective ‘truth’. As poststructuralist thinking reminds us, what comes to count as the ‘real’ is always contingent (Braun and Wainwright, 2002:56). In other words, the legibility of the *comarca* as a conservation territory, rather than being a truthful reflection of an unmediated reality, is an effect of practices of signification: it is attained through a number of ‘cognitive failures’ (Spivak, 1988) – that is, through multiple erasures, as I show below.

Within the frames of the *comarca*, any power Emberá people may have is thus contingent upon their ability to display ‘proper’ performances of indigeneity – that is, to “act and speak with an authority that arises from an ‘Indian way’” (Jackson, 1995:5). This positions the Emberá – and other indigenous peoples – “on a pedestal from which it

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<sup>82</sup> Maintaining this cultural difference is so vital for the upholding of their collective territory that, during the 2007 Regional Congress held in Bayamón, a resolution was adopted to regulate mixed marriages between Emberá and *kampuniá* (‘non-indigenous’) individuals. The resolution stated: “The issue of mixed marriages between Emberá and *Kampuniá* was raised with much concern in front of the congress audience. ...These disturbances are caused by the new generation, which is eager to crossbreed Emberá people. This document will serve to protect our entity as Emberá” (My translation) (Resolution 38 of February 26, 2007 through which is approved the creation of a commission to define an internal regulation on mixed marriages with *kampuniá*).

is impossible not to fall” (Barron, 2000:96). This results, in part, from the fact that any articulation of a particular identity, meaning, or reality – such as here the *comarca* as a conservation territory and *comarcanos* as conservationists – is always ‘haunted’ by its ‘constitutive outside’ (Butler, 1993) – i.e., that “which must be excluded in order for any entity or identity...to achieve its apparent coherence” (Braun and Wainwright, 2002:54). As capitalist processes penetrate deeper into the Emberá territory and ‘global’/‘local’ connections multiply, these ‘constitutive disavowals’ (e.g., cattle ranching, the marketing of *chunga* fibres, the commodification of timber species, mixed marriages with *kampuniá* individuals) “threaten to disrupt the truths that work through their absence” (2002:56). When the ‘truths’ about the *comarca* and the Emberá are challenged – as when they fail to display a ‘traditional’ culture and engage in logging, for instance, they are immediately accused of being ‘inauthentic’<sup>83</sup>. The following excerpt from a Panamanian website entitled *Etnia Negra de Panamá* (Black Ethnic Group of Panama) provides a vivid example of such situation:

We refute the idea that in Darién, the conservationists are the indigenous groups, and we want to make clear that those who are conserving nature are the Blacks. We support this claim with data from ANAM, whose records indicate that a large number of the forest concessions in Darién are within the lands ‘protected by the *comarcas*’, with the authorization of the *comarca* leadership who charges money for every tree being cut<sup>84</sup> (my translation).

To assume, though, that in a context of intense economic pressures and limited options for earning cash the Emberá (or any other indigenous group) will opt for long-term, nature-conservation practices rather than short term profits is untenable (Conklin and

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<sup>83</sup> In this vein, Assies et al. argue that “‘Traditional activities’ have come to live a life of their own” (1998:310), as they are key markers of authenticity and an essential condition for rewarding indigenous peoples’ territorial claims.

<sup>84</sup> Blanco, M.S. *Tierras colectivas: Un golpe más para los negros*. <http://diadelaetnia.homestead.com/Tierras.html> (Accessed April 19, 2009).

Graham, 1995:703). Paradoxically, when they do execute what are deemed ‘adequate’ performances of indigeneity (practicing shifting cultivation rather than engaging in cattle ranching, for instance), they are often cast by some as ‘lazy’<sup>85</sup>. In fact, the ‘culture of pasture’ that still largely predominates in rural Panamanian society sanctions a particular ‘visual codification’ (Scott, 1998:253) of the landscape in which Emberá people are made visible as ‘not working the land’:

The *colonos* say that the Emberá don’t work. ... We like to coexist with nature, like we are right now, with the forest right here. In the afternoon, a moorhen comes in this tree. It comes and goes, we can eat it, and it looks nice. But if everything was pasture, what kind of birds would come so close? This is how Emberá people live, and the *colonos* have their own ways of living. But based on that, they criticize us for not working (Interview, May 11, 2007; my translation).

In other words, where the Emberá produce, maintain, and care for a complex and dynamic landscape of cultivated fields, young- and old-growth fallowed lands, orchards, primary forest, and dooryard gardens, *Interioranos* only see unproductive, idle forests. It follows that a majority of *colonos* cannot help regarding Emberá people as anything but fundamentally ‘lazy’ people uninterested in valuing their lands – a view that often leads them to ask: “why do *indios*<sup>86</sup> want *comarcas* if they don’t work them?” (Wagua, 1993:15; my translation).

This situation is further exacerbated by the ongoing emigration of Emberá youth to Panama City, a phenomenon spurred – as I explain in Chapter V – by the limited options to earn cash locally, the lack of qualified positions for the younger educated generations

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<sup>85</sup> Of course, things are more nuanced and complex than the picture I draw here in saying that “when the Emberá fail to display a so-called ‘traditional’ culture, they are immediately accused of being ‘inauthentic’...and when they execute ‘adequate’ performances of indigeneity, they are cast by some as ‘lazy’”. Yet, this still offers a sense of the strong constraints and important contradictions Emberá peoples must deal with and reconcile as they try to make ends meet and build meaningful lives within their shared territory.

<sup>86</sup> A pejorative way of referring to indigenous peoples.

inside the *comarca*, and the growing disinterest of these young adults for agricultural work. Concerns about the *comarca*'s decreasing population were often voiced by villagers during our conversations, and many criticized traditional leaders for not imposing strict controls on emigration. In this context, many *colonos* and a growing number of Blacks believe that, considering the current size of their population, the Emberá own far more land than they really need and deserve. Such an impression can easily be confirmed when reading statements like the following: "Less than 7 percent of the land with agricultural vocation is being cultivated or in fallow in the Comarca Emberá" (UNDP and MEF, 2003a:20; my translation). Yet, such statement is very problematic in that, again, it posits the land/forest as an 'external domain' separate from the communities who rely on them. By obliterating the cultural relations of resource use and practices existing in the *comarca*, a powerful 'truth' is constructed: indigenous peoples clearly appear as not using effectively their territory – when in fact, numerous studies have demonstrated that indigenous resource-use areas are typically much larger than their agricultural land use (Herlihy, 1997:235), since the forest is used to hunt and collect a wide range of resources. During the 1990s, Haydée Milanés de Lay, a well-known Black politician and then Representative of Darién's Chepigana District, led a campaign calling for the revision of the *comarca*'s boundaries. I reproduce here part of the letter she addressed to Ernesto Perez Balladares, then President of Panama, on May 23, 1995:

[P]reoccupied by the situation experienced by the *Darienita* population with respect to the Comarca Emberá, we advise the President to reevaluate the demarcation of the *comarca* for the following reasons: a) when the *comarca* was approved, we logically thought that all the indigenous population or the large majority of it would reside in it; but, in fact, there are more *indios* outside than within the *comarca*, and they are organizing themselves and asking for

collective lands in various areas of Darién<sup>87</sup>; ...b)...c) the situation of the Sambú area is delicate and difficult since everything is *comarca* and the Blacks and *Interiorano* population do not have any land to work<sup>88</sup>; d) the Blacks of Darién are highly resentful towards indigenous peoples for being displaced by them, when in fact they have a *comarca* that apparently encompasses the best lands of the region; e) finally, we believe that the *comarca* represents a lot of land in comparison with the size of the existing indigenous population and the marginal use indigenous peoples have of it (my translation).

Milanés' letter clearly reproduces the distinction between nature and society I examined earlier. In doing so, she is able to produce seemingly 'objective' and apolitical accounts of Darién's lands. In the picture she draws, indigenous peoples own not only the 'best lands' but also a large quantity of them. Conversely, *Interioranos* and Black people have no land to work, and it can be deduced from her letter that their lands are of poorer quality. Yet, these 'truths' about land occupation and use in Darién are – again – a discursive effect and are achieved by leaving a number of elements, knowledges, and views out. Among them are the particular relations these lands maintain with the communities that are in part constitutive of them. Paying attention to such relations would bring to the fore the fact that most lands in Darién are – as I emphasized in the first section of this chapter – poorly suited to *Interioranos*' cattle-grazing activities. This limitation, together with poor management practices, is responsible for severe pasture degradation rendering cattle ranching neither ecologically nor economically sustainable. As a result, many small ranchers are forced to sell to larger ranchers, fuelling a process of

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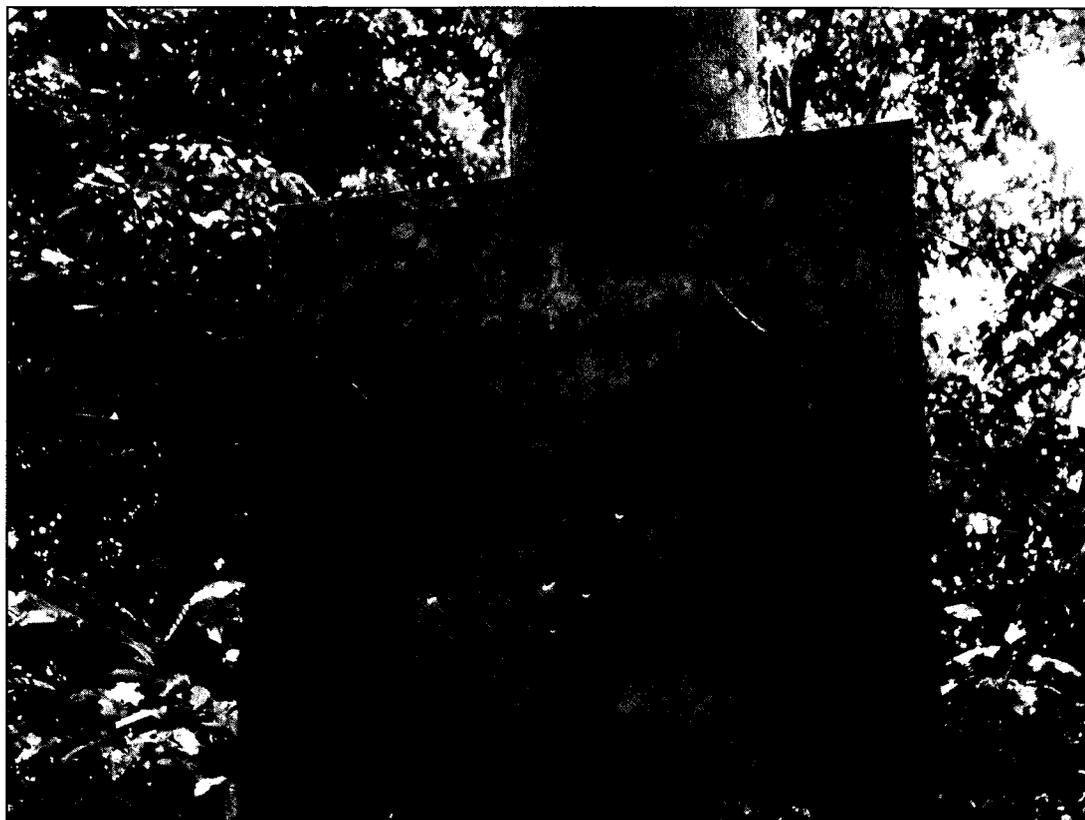
<sup>87</sup> When the Comarca Emberá was created in 1983, at least 48 Emberá and Wounaan communities (almost half of Darién Emberá and Wounaan population) were left out of the legal territory. In 1996, these communities came together and created the *Congreso General de Tierras Colectivas Emberá-Wounaan Driüa* (Emberá and Wounaan General Congress of Collective Lands) (Hvalkof and Guevara, 2004:3). They presented Project of Law 17 to the Commission for Indigenous Affairs of the Legislative Assembly – a project through which are recognized and developed the rights of the Emberá and Wounaan peoples of collective lands (Valiente López, 2003:14). These communities cannot petition for a *comarca* considering that they are too dispersed. At this date, the law has not been passed.

<sup>88</sup> While, as emphasized above, only 7 percent of the land with agricultural vocation is cultivated or in fallow in the Comarca Emberá, the totality of the land suitable for agriculture and a large share of the land unfit for these activities are farmed in the non-indigenous District of Sambú (UNDP and MEF, 2003a:20).

acute land concentration. These processes thus explain, in part, why today many *Interioranos* are either landless or own 'poor' lands. If it appears that indigenous peoples occupy the region's 'best lands', it is precisely because until now they have not engaged massively in cattle ranching. As exemplified here, examining these land issues from a 'social nature' perspective allows a very different story to be told.

The fact that "particular knowledges of nature express social power relations, and...have material effects" (Castree, 2002:13) is exemplified, in part, in the repeated requests to modify the boundaries of the Comarca Emberá and the violations of its territorial integrity. Rumours about the looming revision of the *comarca's* boundaries were common during my conversations with Emberá villagers. Although it seems unlikely that this could happen any time soon, it is difficult to dismiss completely these fears considering the repeated violations of Emberá territorial integrity both at the local and national levels – including, vandalism against *comarca* signboards (Photo 15), the uprooting of trees serving as physical territorial boundaries, and illegal incursions and settlements of *colono* farmers inside the *comarca*. These incursions have not only been happening for years; in some cases, they are overtly supported by the state. For instance, in April 2007, I was hiking along the Jesús River (which forms the north-western boundary of the *comarca*) with two villagers of Atalaya to review river names and other elements of the landscape on a sketch map made during an earlier workshop. After two hours, we arrived at Alto de Jesús, a small colonist settlement located on the south-eastern shore of the Jesús River – that is, within the *comarca's* boundaries. We visited the local school, a small cement edifice built in June 1995, with one classroom for one teacher and six children attending different grades. Interestingly, under current

**Photo 15:** A sign along the boundary of the Comarca Emberá between the villages of Bayamón and La Colonia de Bijagual. Four bullet holes are noticeable. (Translated into English, the sign reads, “Comarca Emberá-Wounaan – Law 22 of November 1983 – Boundary – Respect and protect the cultural and natural heritage of this *comarca* for the benefit of everyone – Help us! *Comarca* and local authorities”). (France-Lise Colin, February 2007)



educational policy guidelines in Panama, a minimum of eighteen students is mandatory for the government to appoint a teacher (pers.com. with a local teacher). When I mentioned my visit to this school to one of the traditional Emberá leaders, he said: “This is a political issue. That teacher was appointed there and is maintained by the *Corregimiento* Representative of Sambú”. Considering that Alto de Jesús was created by *Interiorano* families who settled illegally in the area long after the creation of the Comarca Emberá, the building of a school and the appointment of a teacher – despite falling short of the required number of students – are very troubling. It was clearly a political manoeuvre that enabled the formal recognition of the village by the national government, implicitly legitimizing and authorizing the appropriation of *comarca* lands by non-Emberá individuals. In sum, this situation constitutes a powerful statement of political power and conquest and epitomizes the on-going, multi-scale contestation of, and disregard for, the existence and integrity of indigenous territories. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that many *colonos* feel completely entitled to claim that “the *comarca* is an imaginary line” (“*la comarca es una línea imaginaria*”)<sup>89</sup>. Emberá ranchers argue that their activities could help combat these claims by ‘imprinting’ their presence on the landscape in a language – i.e., the ‘culture of the pasture’ – that ‘speaks’ to the dominant society. Interestingly, Perreault (2003:111) demonstrates in a study of a Quichua community of the Ecuadorian Amazon that the development of cattle pasture

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<sup>89</sup> The repeated co-existence of two *caciques generales* – i.e., one elected by Emberá *comarcanos* and one illegitimately appointed by the government (Chapter III) – as well as state’s interference in the designation of the *comarca*’s governor provide other powerful examples of the government’s continuous infringement of, and disregard for, Emberá territorial integrity and political autonomy. At the same time, the infiltration of the traditional leadership by national political parties is breaking apart Emberá peoples’ loyalties, resulting in a constant situation of political wrangling that impedes the proper functioning of the *comarca*, greatly stains its legitimacy, and prevents the formation of a leadership capable of comprehensively and firmly addressing territorial conflicts – issues that are also plaguing the Comarca Ngöbe-Buglé (Wickstrom, 2003:50).

has served to solidify this community's presence by providing further evidence of land occupation to outsiders. Whether this could operate as an effective strategy in the case of the Comarca Emberá is unclear at this point, and also largely depends on how the social and political issues I emphasized in the third section of this chapter are being dealt with.

The conflicts I have examined throughout this chapter – whether at the community or *comarca* level – provide strong evidence that space (and the meanings attached to it) is always a 'doing', a dynamic 'matrix of play', to borrow Rose's (1999:247-48) apt expression, that is constituted "through iteration rather than through essence" (*ibid.*). As exemplified here, the *comarca* cannot 'stay put'. Ideas of places as enclosed systems that can remain 'still' are, Massey contends, "a manoeuvre that hints at a desire for a foundation; a stable bottom to it all". (2005:98). But, as she continues, "The global flows of the planet...prohibit any ultimate refuge of this kind" (*ibid.*). The introduction of cattle in the *comarca*, the alteration of social relations of land use, the production of new meanings of 'nature', the destruction of the *comarca*'s boundary signs by *colonos*, the writing of letters denouncing Emberá ways of working the land by a *Darienita* Representative, each of these elements repeatedly alters and reshapes the networks of relations out of which a space called '*comarca*' is continuously being recreated, and, as such, resignified. Conceptualizing space as a performance, a 'doing', rather than as a 'given' or an inert substratum, alerts us to the 'topographies of power' through which it is produced and acquires meaning. It also opens the way for the constant remaking, transformation, and re-imagination of both space and the meanings attached to it; it makes it "possible for 'newness' to enter the world" (Gregory, 2004:19), for other stories and memories to be told and to take place.

## Conclusion

I start this chapter with a synopsis of cattle ranching activities, tracing briefly the historical development of this land use in Panama and in the Darién Province in connection with a number of ‘multiscale’ socioeconomic, environmental, legal, and political processes, and highlighting the main characteristics of this activity. Challenging common assumptions that raising cattle is incompatible with indigenous culture, I emphasize its emergence within the Comarca Emberá in the early 2000s, identifying it as an essential component of the expansion of capitalist processes in the Emberá territory. I reveal that the Emberá men who engage in this land use typically frame their activities as a powerful ‘development’ device. Conceptualizing this ‘development’ as a ‘political technology’, I am able to show that cattle ranching is not as ‘neutral’ a process as it appears, but that it is, rather, a situated practice authorizing certain truths and knowledges to predominate while masking how power is exercised. Here, the *comarca* and its inhabitants are recoded as backward and stagnant, raising cattle turns into a purely ‘technical’ process, and cattle ranchers becomes ‘neutral’ agents of ‘progress’. The expansion of cattle ranching is, in sum, depoliticized.

Politics is thus a central component of the third section, as I uncover the ways in which cattle ranching redefines people’s relations to vital resources and to each other. I demonstrate that this activity constitutes a new ‘doing’ of the land that recodifies collective property arrangements in land as private ownership. As such, it carries deeply political implications illustrated by the commodification of nature, growing socioeconomic stratification, and increasingly unequal social relations of access to and use of land and forest resources. I then look into a struggle over access to and use of land

opposing an Emberá rancher to various of his fellow villagers. Reusing political ecologists' conceptualization of conflicts as both material and symbolic, I demonstrate that this struggle is as much about land, as it is about what it means to be Emberá and about 'proper' performances of indigeneity/space. To raise cattle is to disrupt 'traditional' Emberá ways of working the land and to blur ethnic 'boundaries'. Consequently, as one engages in these activities, he is partly repositioned as an outsider to the community. Together, sections three and four thus draw attention to the re-signification of meanings of place, nature, and identity as capitalist processes make their way deeper into the Emberá territory.

Finally, the last section of this chapter reveals how, operating as a conservation territory, the *comarca* normalizes certain relations to land and scripts 'appropriate' performances of indigeneity whose permanence and immutability are critical for the maintenance of Emberá territorial rights through time. As a new performance of space disrupting such aspirations for permanence, cattle ranching thus must be actively prohibited. Yet, in a regional context of growing land degradation and scarcity, the meanings of the *comarca* are also increasingly contested by Darién's dominant society. I show how particular discourses of land use grounded in problematic views of nature as 'external domain' construct the *comarca* as 'idle lands' and partly sanction ongoing encroachments on the Emberá territory.

In telling this story, I try to illuminate some aspects of the topographies of power through which the space of the *comarca* is being continuously produced and resignified, resisting dominant views of indigenous territories as ahistorical, monolithic, and bounded places. The overall picture that emerges is one in which the 'local' is not a static, inert

recipient of processes of capitalist transformation but always engaged in creative reinterpretation and dynamic negotiation of the networks of relations out of which it is produced. The fact that cattle ranching could both 'threaten' the foundations of the *comarca* and solidify the presence of Emberá people demonstrates that the new performances of space/identity fuelled by 'global'/'local' interactions do not yield predetermined meanings or inexorable outcomes. They are always conditional and contingent.

## Chapter VIII – Conclusion

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*“There are no societies without history and none outside of historical time. ...Insisting that innovation and creativity rests with all societies, it will be possible to relate accounts of diverse cultures of modernity” (Robinson, 2006:18-19).*

In early June 2007, various agents from the local branch of the Panamanian Ministry of Health visited Bayamón. There had been several cases of malaria in the village, including our next-door neighbours, and they had to fumigate several houses. Their work done, they came to have refreshments at my host family’s house and we had a chat. As they were explaining to us the various locations they had to visit that day, the few Emberá persons present and myself were surprised at the names they were mentioning. One of the agents had a map of the area; I had a look at it. I pointed to him several physical features that either did not exist or were not drawn in the right location. Several names were either improperly spelled or irrelevant to the area. Several Emberá individuals confirmed what I had said, but, as I insisted, this agent replied to me: “These are the names...the names that are in the files...the names that we’ve always used. If we start using the language [names] of the *indios*, we are also going to make errors. They have their dialect and their ways of speaking, but ours is the correct one”. The statement of this state agent is symptomatic of the broader erasure of, and disregard for, indigenous histories and agency in Panama. In this dissertation, I have attempted to both uncover some of the ways in which these histories are obscured and construct a narrative that brings them back to the centre.

I have argued that informing much of the literature on indigenous peoples in Panama is a way of imagining space as already divided into discrete bits, as a sum of places already separated and bounded up. Such geographical imagination legitimizes a

view of Panama as an unproblematic, ordered, and coherent space of naturally isolable ethnic groups, places, and cultures, and sanctions ideas of resolute correspondence between peoples and places. Viewed through these conceptual lenses, geographical differences are understood as the product of innate isolation and separation. They are, also, organized in a single temporal sequence, producing a hierarchy between more 'advanced' places and others that are 'lying behind' (Massey, 2005:68). Panama is thus systematically imagined as a naturally dichotomous racial and historical landscape, in which indigenous spaces occupy remote, neatly separated locations on the margins of the 'national' territory and lying outside of time. This is a way of imagining that 'fossilizes' indigenous peoples into a timeless past, denying them history. This systematic construction of the world according to 'us'/'them' binaries, oblivious to the porosities and interdependences that necessarily – although unequally – unite these two entities, thus perpetuates in the present deeply colonial relations. Today, these binaries and the power relations embedded in them reproduce themselves through the discourse of poverty. The trope of 'the poor' simplifies social diversity and strips indigenous peoples of any agentic capacity, as it systematically positions them as subjected to, rather than as participating in, contemporary processes of capitalist transformation and of history making as is clearly the case in Darién.

What happens if we switch theoretical lenses? What happens if we refuse to continue looking at the world from this angle? What happens if we decide to expose incoherences, fragmentations, and interweaving? What other stories can we tell? What other political projects and futures can we make possible? These are some of the key interrogations that have underpinned the present work. In asking these questions, I have

neither dismissed previous stories as mistaken or wrong nor asserted mine as *the* real ‘truth’ about the Emberá. The question of ‘truth’ was not one being posed here. Rather, I was interested in showing that representations of the world are never objective (and innocent) reflections of an unmediated reality. They are unavoidably situated practices through which social reality comes into being. As such, they are embedded in particular constellations of power/knowledge that always authorize certain political projects and carry important material effects. The story I have told abides by the same tenets. It is *a* story of several encounters that took place at a specific historical time, within particular social and political conditions, and between individuals performing certain subjectivities, which since have – at least partially – been reconfigured. As such, there was and still is no definite, ‘truthful’ story to be told about the Emberá who shared their lives with me, but rather, a necessarily situated and partial account of shifting, contingent ‘realities’ inevitably shaped by our respective “embodiment[s] in the world” (Rose, 1997:308). This is not to say that the story I have narrated here is not significant. On the contrary, it is important, not only for the empirical contribution it makes to our understanding of the contemporary experiences of Emberá peoples and, more generally, of present-day living conditions in the Darién region, but also for the theoretical contribution it makes to poststructuralist political ecology scholarship, particularly with respect to the production of an ethnographic study that allows light to be shed on the ways in which the ‘global’ plays out in specific locales. But, even more importantly, it is significant for the kinds of political projects it allows, as I stress below.

Of primary concern to me was to understand how, given the rapid and profound shifts in their environments, economies, and social lives, and the increasingly

contradictory conditions in which their lives are embedded, the indigenous men and women inhabiting the Comarca Emberá renegotiate their identities and their interactions with the land, and how their lived experiences compare to portrayals of indigenous peoples in state discourses. In answering these questions, several theoretical contributions from poststructuralist political ecology have proved extremely useful. The most important was the use of a Foucauldian conceptualization of power. Privileging a view of power as productive and as operating through everyday practices – i.e., discourse – allowed the construction of a more nuanced understanding of social relations, for it forces one to acknowledge that all subjectivities, identities, knowledges, or truth claims are always achieved through particular power/knowledge relations. This helped to both denaturalize and ‘re-politicize’ anything that is presented as innate, evident, truthful, or neutral, and to open spaces for other meanings, knowledges, and views to emerge. From these insights, poststructuralist political ecologists derive an understanding of conflicts over resources as both material and symbolic and of social institutions as constellations of social interactions that are always opened for re-signification. These scholars also stress the importance of looking beyond a single geographical scale of analysis – examining the larger, multi-scale political-economic, social, and ecological processes in which rural livelihoods are embedded – and insist that space and spatial scale and entities are produced through social practice, and not pre-given. Finally, they are particularly attentive to the crucial role of gender, ethnicity, and other dimensions of social differentiation in shaping individuals’ rights, practices, roles, and beliefs, thus resisting erasing difference and flattening the multiple, contradictory locations and fluid subject positions individuals inhabit.

Weaving these theoretical insights with archival research and field data, I emphasize, first, the recent reconfiguration of Emberá livelihood strategies and gendered relations of agricultural labour, in a context of decreasing viability of land-based subsistence and commercial activities and increased monetization of household economies. I explain how these 'local' shifts and transformations were part and parcel of a number of socioeconomic, spatial, political, and environmental changes taking place at the 'regional' and 'national' levels. I stress, in particular, the role of the crisis in the Interior provinces from the 1940s onwards, the coming to power of General Omar Torrijos in 1968, and the publication of a blue-print for Darién's development by the Organization of American States in 1978. The latter represented the Darién Province as an isolated, empty, under-utilized, and resource-rich landscape – constructing it as a 'suitable' object for 'development' intervention – and, therefore, accelerated the diffusion of a number of transformative processes in the region.

Second, I continue by examining the role of Emberá women's participation in networks of commercial production and monetary exchange in reconfiguring the micro-politics of household gendered relations and reworking local constructions of femininity and masculinity. I reveal that the incomes women derive from the production and marketing of chungapalm handicrafts play a critical role in the survival of many households reliant on subsistence farming. Still, their contributions to the household are often erased by the dominant patriarchal ideology, which, by constructing the home as a 'nonwork place' erases home-based, female productive activities and positions women as 'housekeepers', 'mothers', and 'wives'. Simultaneously, the discursive construct of 'weak/lazy women' keeps women in a subordinate position. By exchanging their crafts

for *parumas* – artefacts that men do not use, women construct their basketry work as private and position themselves as autonomous economic agents, thus renegotiating the terms of both the patriarchal ideology of ‘maternal altruism’ and their subordination to men.

In the last chapter, I demonstrate that, contrary to the prevalent view that raising cattle is incompatible with indigenous culture, several Emberá men have adopted this land use in the *comarca*, and frame it as a critical ‘development’ strategy. As with any ‘development’ initiative, ranching is not neutral. It reworks human relationships to nature, as well as the meanings of local identities and subjectivities. I show that cattle ranching promotes the privatization of formerly collective land resources and simultaneously encourages the commodification of trees. In addition, it further exacerbates existing socioeconomic differentiation within the community and fosters unequal social relations of access to and use of land and forest resources. Finally, because raising cattle disrupts ‘traditional’ ways of working the land, it also blurs meanings of space and ethnic differences between the Emberá and *colonos*, which have been critical for upholding indigenous territorial rights. Cattle ranching is thus hotly contested by numerous *comarcanos* who worry that it is necessary to maintain both the ‘traditional’ land practices and conservationist identity that justified the creation of the *comarca*. Yet, in a regional context of growing land degradation and scarcity, these ‘traditional’ land use practices are themselves increasingly criminalized by Darién’s dominant society. In fact, for many *colonos* and other *Darienitas*, the abundance of forests in the *comarca* is a testimony of Emberá peoples’ laziness. Against all expectations, cattle ranching could

thus help the Emberá imprint more forcefully their presence on the landscape and resist ongoing territorial threats and invasions.

The overall story that emerges from these different chapters is that far from being a bounded, monolithic enclave within the state, the Comarca Emberá is a fluid, dynamic, porous, and contingent space. First, its character is not the product of its so-called isolation and separation from the rest of the national territory. Differences between the *comarca* and other places are not the consequence of internal characteristics. As with any other places, the spaces of the Comarca Emberá, its shapes, contours, and 'fabric', and the meanings attached to them, are always an emergent product of relations. They are, to borrow Massey's words, the outcomes of "specific constellations of interrelations within which that place is set...and of what is made of that constellation" (2005:68). In sum, the *comarca* is continuously being forged out of policies, discourses, material conditions, practices, and decisions that originate in multiple social and geographical settings and its identity/ies are the effects of its particular inscription/positioning within specific networks of power relations.

Second, contrary to dominant representations of the Emberá as homogeneous hunters-gatherers and shifting cultivators marginally and only recently integrated in the market economy, the analysis reveals individuals who have been actively engaged for several decades in a mix of subsistence and market-based activities and who are differently positioned through gender, socioeconomic status, life-cycle positioning, education, and age. This challenges the view of indigenous peoples as inherently subsistence-oriented, environmentally benign, and living outside the capitalist system, and shows that, in the face of intense economic pressures and increasing environmental

constraints, the Emberá – like most other human groups – will strategically take advantage of various options to survive even if they are unsustainable or capitalistic. The story told here also reveals that indigenous communities and households are not spaces of unchanging, equal, and harmonious relations but sites of highly heterogeneous, dynamic, and fluid interactions where several axes of difference interact to produce a complex human mosaic. Similarly, indigenous individuals are not passive victims trapped in patterns of domination and oppressed by capitalist transformation, but astute, adaptable, and resourceful social agents capable of contesting, negotiating, and reconfiguring the content and meanings of rights, identities, roles, responsibilities, and processes of change, and of navigating between networks of relations as their circumstances alter, so as to create greater spaces of autonomy and control for themselves.

Finally, this ethnographic study also contributes insights to the theorisation, within the field of poststructuralist political ecology, of the ways in which the ‘global’ plays itself out in the ‘local’. It reveals that the ‘global’ is not a bundle of free-floating, ‘unlocated’ processes ‘impacting on’ the ‘local’. These processes are always ‘grounded’ and locally embedded in the sense that they materialize themselves through historically, geographically, and socially situated and localized sites and relations. In addition, because these localized sites typically exhibit multiple, fluid shapes and uneven terrains, manifestations of the ‘global’ are always contingent, varied, and unpredictable, rather than cohesive, unwavering, and all-powerful. In turn, the ‘local’ is not the static, inert recipient of ‘global’ flows; it is always engaged in their creative reinterpretation and dynamic negotiation. The ‘global’ and the ‘local’ thus mutually inform, produce, and

illuminate each other, and these interconnections do not yield predetermined outcomes or meanings throughout the world.

As I have said earlier, the narrative I have produced here is as situated and partial as the ones recounted by the Panamanian State. Yet, the insights provided here demonstrate that it works towards very different kinds of political projects and futures. Accepting that space is always the product of interrelations entails, as Massey argues, recognizing it as the sphere of “contemporaneous plurality; the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere therefore of coexisting heterogeneity” (2005:9). In sum, conceptualizing space in these terms not only creates room for elements of change to emerge, it also firmly positions indigenous peoples as coeval others, as individuals who are journeying and making histories *with us, here and now*. Second, if, as I have argued, all identities are produced relationally then, as Massey contends again, “this poses the question of the geography of those relations of construction” (2005:10). In other words, it requires that we are critical of and take responsibility for the particular contours and content that these relations espouse, so as to refuse being complicit of perpetuating colonial relations in the present.

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