

# Alternative Geographies in the Age of Globalization: On Contradiction and Simultaneity

Ginés Alberto Sánchez Arias

**Abstract:** *This past summer (2014), the author was able to connect with an indigenous leader through Facebook and plan a visit to his family's hearth. He had previously become very curious of a particular writing system that showed in the background of a photograph in his web-page. It is an alphabet radically apart from the more conventional latinized version of Ngäbere (the language of the Ngäbe). As Sánchez Arias ventured into his fieldwork, he learned that the symbols came from an elder who had deciphered a hieroglyph given to him and several others in 1962 by a messiah named Mama-chi. He was able to study from him, becoming the first non-Ngäbe to learn the alphabet. Sánchez Arias also ask the question: How is autochthony created and how does linguistics play a role in political agency and self determination?*

**Keywords:** *Ngäbe, language, hieroglyph, religión, indigenous people.*

**Resumen:** *El verano pasado (2014), el autor fue capaz de conectar con un líder indígena a través de Facebook y planificar una visita al hogar de su familia. Le había despertado la curiosidad un sistema de escritura particular que aparecía en el fondo de una fotografía en la página web del líder indígena. Es un alfabeto radicalmente aparte de la versión latinizada más convencional de Ngäbere (la lengua de los Ngäbe). Mientras Sánchez Arias se aventuró en su trabajo de campo, se enteró de que los símbolos provenían de un anciano que había descifrado un jeroglífico entregado a él y a varios otros en 1962 por una mesías llamada Mama-chi. El autor fue capaz de estudiar de él, convirtiéndose en el primer no-Ngäbe en aprender el alfabeto. Sánchez Arias también se hace la pregunta: ¿Cómo se crea la autoctonía y cómo la lingüística juega un papel en la acción política y la autodeterminación?*

**Palabras clave:** *Ngäbe, lenguaje, jeroglíficos, religión, pueblo indígena.*

## **Prelude**

*No more mirror trinkets, I will not be bartering my selfhood.*

What is the meaning of this verse? It is the acknowledgement of power relations. It is the abstraction of cultural and cosmological differences. The utterance claims a revised priority that wishes to trump clientelism with intellect. This is an indigenous sentiment realizing a past and present engraved in a *mestizo* and *criollo* collective memory, reproduced in textbooks and political life, but need not be the future. I have a little verse that expands this annunciation.

*Trinkets ate my reason. My reason is outward towards my collectivity, not inwards in selfish pursuit. The latter divides my people. My image is part of an effort to coalesce against the intruder. The forceful giant continues, 500 years later, to dictate our fate in their image.*

—Synthesis from a conversation with my *garebo* (teacher)

I channeled these ideas out of a conversation I had with my friend and teacher at Kiad, Comarca Ngäbe-Buglé. His program is to change an indigenous fate and give meaning to an entire linguistic group. That is the dream of my friend. His name is Manolo Miranda, or more appropriate, Tido Bagnama. For months at a time he walks the extensive *comarca* teaching to read and write along with *Mama-Tada*, a religion of the Ngäbe. This essay is about how religious and linguistic innovations coalesce people to act at a geopolitical scale implicating not only the Panamanians but the world at large.

## **Introduction: Structure and Thesis**

This paper proposes the following conceptual structure. The next section (II) presents the human geographical background and physical presence of the Ngäbe in the Panamanian Isthmus. Section (III) jumps scales to describe the logic of the international system or world order. Specifically, the role of political interdependency and economic liberalism in shaping the “imperatives” of national governments. Although this is not a one way street and other factors from within are also indicative of domestic hegemonic tendencies, I argue that the more important cultural influences are imported —maybe-so implicitly.

The body of this paper is laid out in section (IV), where the main analysis consists of a deconstruction of the relationship between an indigenous cosmology and the national Panamanian ethos. A couple of anecdotes from my field-work will complement this analysis. Here, I will discuss the notions of contradiction and simultaneity as suggested in the title. Section (V) hopes to address how the fields of political ecology, linguistics and ethnography intertwine to form alternative geographies of place in the shadow of the state. The penultimate section expands on the mechanism of modern maps, or how fixed property and privatization confuses legibility across cosmologies. Should, or can maps help non-capitalist cultural groups to be independent without forgoing their autochthonous circumstances.

Lastly, the discussion (VII) touches on the difficulties of the intellectual project at hand. As we try to transcend the scalar component and move out to the realm of geopolitics and state power, we encounter manifold actors and ideologies that counter the indigenous program. This paper speaks to the worrisome question of what happens to cultural diversity in a globalized world. This paper will generally refer to the non-capitalist groups as indigenous communities, today's non-state peoples (Scott, 2009). Gramsci's analysis of cultural hegemony (1935) too serves my case as it relates to identity creation.

### **Place: People and theory**

The Ngäbe constitute the largest indigenous group in Panama with approximately 260,000 self-identified members. They are an historical and cultural group of native peoples in lower Central America, thus belonging to the Chibchan language family (Ruhlen, 1987: 202). The map to the right shows the modern political boundaries delimiting their collective lands into a so called comarca, or semi-autonomous region, established in the 1997 amendment to the Panamanian constitution (Young, 2009). What is a comarca? Etymology indicates the obvious: a sort of conjunctions of marks or markings coming together to form a political territory with some degree of autonomy. Historically they are a Spanish invention. Conceptually, *comarcas* are enclaves that delimit a cultural group allowing some political liberties outside the normal of state-ness.

A smaller population lives in Costa Rica, around the Talamanca region. In Panama, they share their "ancestral land" with the Buglé, a smaller linguistic neighbor living in the southeastern part of this comarca. Located in the western

part of the country, the *comarca* neighbors the Panamanian provinces of Chiriquí, Bocas del Toro, and Veraguas. There are Ngäbe living everywhere in the country, but the more “autochthonous” Ngäbe live in and about the Cordillera Central (Figure 1). Where academics are more critical concerning colonization and development in this region, little work has been produced except for John R. Bort, (1983; 1998), Philip Young (1975; 1978; 1979; 1997; 2007; 2009), and perhaps even more relevant, Stefanie Wickstrom (2001; 2003) who engages with contemporary political ecology. The larger bulk of studies focus on genetic distributions, grammatical studies of the latinized version of Ngäbere, surveys on mythology, and other cultural ecologies.

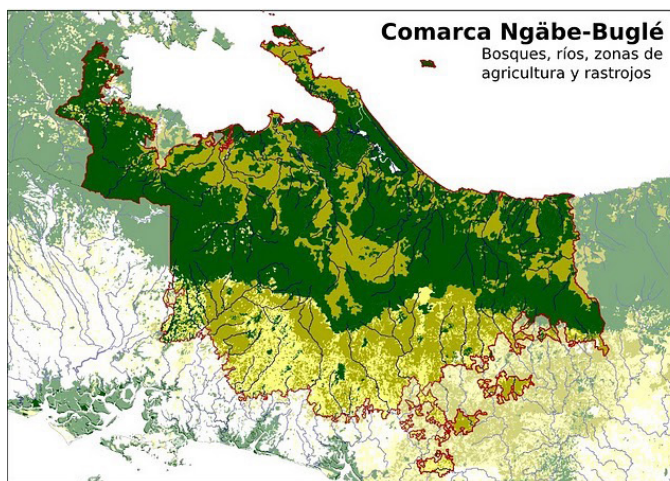


Figure 1: Western Panama, Comarca Ngäbe-Buglé. 2011. Estudio1Panama. <http://www.estudio1panama.com/noticia/?p=41839> language family (Ruhlen, 1987: 202).

One of the religions practiced among the Ngäbe is *Mama-tada* (Young, 1978). A small minority, of just a couple of thousands, follow this religion. It originated in 1961 and with the agency of *Mama-chi*, the central messianic figure, a new Ngäbe political and religious revival came about. One very important consequence of this religious and cultural program is left largely unmentioned: an autochthonous written language. A de-latinized written Ngäbere is a slow but steady cultural revolution that sprang into existence six years after *Mama-chi* passed away.

Today, the Ngäbe understand the power inherent in written language, but for a long time, indeed since Spanish colonization, they were not able to coalesce

with their own. In his book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson writes that “Print-capitalism created languages-of-power of a kind different from the older administrative vernaculars” (Anderson, 1983: 45). This difference between the pre-printing and more competitive mass cultural program that came about in Europe, first among conspicuous actors and nations, became a powerful political tool diffusing the written word to all corners the Earth. It went “viral,” to use contemporary terminology. In order to counter colonization, the Mama-Tada subset of the Ngäbe have come up with a distinctive, and unique alphabet (see example in photograph 1 —appendix).

Ngäbe means “people,” but sometimes its literal meaning shifts to mean indigenous people of the Americas, which in turn has political implications that raise questions of primacy, oppression, and Otherness. The *Mama-tada* cosmology that is created to make sense of the world addresses notions of indigeneity, of difference, colonial power and injustice. This is accentuated in scripture and narratives of Mama-tada fraternity and race, with a particular repudiation of the “old ways” that have led Ngäbe astray as “objects of mockery” (Field Notes). The scalar difference is clear: to be a Ngäbe is to be classified as an ethnicity, but to be a Mama-tada believer is to confront colonial injustice (For an ethnohistorical account of current notions of past oppression see Las Casas’ *Historia de las Indias* on *El Indio Urracá*).

Theory goes as far as the witnessing of socio-cultural dynamics that ensue from colonialism. As a researcher-observer-participant, I seek to understand more about the human condition as it is reproduced in its cultural diversity. The main goal is to understand what does an alternative geography look like, but also to try to comprehend the process whereby geographies develop and manage to play in the world arena as they compete for space. For example, what tools and nomenclatures are used for legitimating space? Maps, the National Public Registry, the institution of private property, among other devices help structure one society but not the other. Hopefully, this paper will help me investigate these themes as they orbit the case study of the Ngäbe in Kiad. My academic wanderings took me through a complex network of actors, including indigenous leaders, government officials, environmentalists, NGOs, political parties, grade school teachers, a dam, and business men. These are pillars in developing the story.

## The International World Order: The logic of modern economic liberalism

*The pancakes in the sky, seemingly attractive, are about to conquer hunger or fulfill the fetish of modernity.* An honest simile to make descriptions of modernity more emphatic since “poetry comes nearer to vital truth than history” (Emerson, 1836). *Pancakes* may represent a canon of the *liberal man* such as foreign aid, or development. He is also the modern man who enjoys his exceptional culture and uses realpolitik to propagate it. He utilizes the *sky*, which he has violently conquered. Western fumes have now re-configured the *sky*. The resulting chemistry makes the world uneven in terms of power. He navigates the world freely, while the greater bunch stays fixed to be pushed by the forces of climate and economics. He can then exert his rightful power to impart solutions in his own image creating Leviathans or notions of a “world order.” Most evidently, *pancakes* are conquering *hunger* although hunger needs not to be addressed. To this, one could sway the perspective that *hunger* and “ignorance” are actually a massive problem surging from economic growth, which is the main imperative of capitalism and modernity. Hannah Arendt elucidates on the *problematique* of the current liberal progressive endeavors inherent in the capitalist and modern mindset:

*Progress gives an answer to the troublesome question, And what shall we do now? The answer, on the lowest level, says: Let us develop what we have into something better, greater, et cetera. (The, at first glance irrational faith of liberals in growth, so characteristic of all of our present political and economic theories, depends on this notion). (Arendt, 1970: 27)*

Since the *sky* is of modern men, since they gave themselves the right to pollute it, and given that the infiltration of the system of international capital is almost impossible to take down without undermining human lives, then some of us contemplate peacefully as *Die Gedanken sind frei* while others stay as part of a herd, *all too human*.<sup>1</sup> The hitherto proposal of a logic that simultaneously affects everyone but contradicts most, is the skeleton of one cultural promulgation unidimensionally exerting over localities of endless diversity, homogenizing them (making them extinct as is the case with the biosphere). Agnew and Muskara (2012) mention fleshed out examples for this rationale. They recognize several standing traits of current political geography, such as, the growing economic in-

---

1. See Friedrich Nietzsche, Human all too Human aphorism: The farce of many industrious persons.

terdependency between nations, the “War on Terror,” a conspicuous globalization of democratic ideals, the environmental plight of Climate Change, but also, resource frontiers, and electoral tendencies. They, however, do not seem to mention the cultural impetus of said traits towards the world “weaker” participants (if they are participants at all!). I am interested in the weakest link in terms of voice, wealth, and power, and the global indigenous movement.

For example, the guiding logic professes private property, while many indigenous peoples share collective lands. “Rousseau said that the first person who wanted a piece of nature as his or her own exclusive possession and transformed it into the transcendent form of private property was the one who invented evil” (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 303). The liberal order as illustrated above, rests on institutions like private property. But does it ask, what does the evolution of private property look like? If inequalities worldwide continue to increase, we will see some real problems with that institution. If accumulation by dispossession is the rule of the land, scholars ought to identify alternative geographies for solutions that decompartmentalize the division of labour that does not do anything but separate people into apolitical subjects of capital. Many government officials in Panama and the world are part of this Fordism.

In the world international order of economic interdependency, human spaces, which are de facto everywhere, have roles that can be explained through particular dominating narratives. While justice is highly relative, some scholars seek to achieve good approaches to reasonable understandings of peace and respect. Nostalgia aside, circumstance and history have produced current global arrangements, order, clashes, bellicose tensions, among other “legible<sup>2</sup>” political configurations. We accept and praise cultural diversity but continue to overrun it to the point of extinction! Our explorers have gone to the field and absorbed the knowledge of countless “extotic” worlds. Field notes turned into marketable ideas in the capitalizable world of modernist ideology. But in the 21st Century, globalization has pushed itself as a notion towards the point where it cannot remain culturally one-sided. The cosmological political universe of indigenous people, at least in Latin America, is causing a united protest *against the grain*.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the struggle of indigenous people is to provide an alternative geography.

---

2. Scott’s notion developed in “Seeing like a State” 1998.

3. Walter Benjamin his thesis “On the Concept of History” 1940.

## **Clashing Cosmologies: Simultaneity and contradiction.**

How does the *Mama-tada* cosmology understand the world coming at them? They face a capital city that explicitly propagandizes on a cosmopolitan ideal that seeks to encompass all peoples into one model systematically failing to understand Otherness. The government (made of public officials and voters) cannot abstract itself in a manner that can be considered anthropological, which would allow sensible approaches to “nation building.” The reason is because they are embedded in a modern ideology with great confidence in its progressive capacity.

For the *Mama-tada*, historical reparations are not as important it seems, as it is the desire for the country’s respect of local autonomy and recognition of their autochthonous identity. (See political symbolism in the “ojo de agua” petroglyph in photograph 2, appendix). The indigenous people remain utterly ignored by extractive multinational companies, industrial engineers, business entrepreneurs, and a centralized economic system (Gjording, 1991). Their territory, on the other hand, is never ignored.

The fight against *the machine* is the perennial resistance against situated thinking (White, 1995). On this vein, I agree with David Harvey in that perspectives of time, for example, are quite idiosyncratic across cultural geographies, and the perspectives themselves work better decentralized. He did a study of timescale in rural versus urban economic life, although I cannot cite it, I may not altogether dismiss him. Evidently, there is a convolutedness in the political international arena, so vast, it is impossible to reconcile meaning across all human spaces. Nevertheless, I look at the following question through the lens of indigenous political agency. How is autochthony created in the post-modern world and how can we reconcile difference in the 21st Century?

Although syncretism is commonplace, the majority of the Ngäbe are culturally distinct from the mestizo population that surrounds them, and the Mama-Tada practitioners are both syncretic to, and antithetical to christianity. This is paradoxical. There is a clear impossibility to identify and renounce every attribute of christian legacy, but also there exists an obvious necessary contradiction.

The ngäbe are categorized as the poorest of all peoples in the country, or at least among the poorest. The places I have visited are nothing of the sort. The core, the Community of Kia, is in the District of Tolé. It is annexed territory to the indigenous comarca Ngäbe-Buglé in Western Panamá. Here, Ngäbe identity reproduction is also an anti-colonizing campaign. The environmental history, pedagogy, linguistics and political ecology of Kia, are means to expand our horizon of justice.



Sulia is the name for outsiders. Latinos or gringos or whites or europeans. I am a sulia. Sulia also means a type of forest-soil cockroach. But some ngäbe, like my garebo, say it is not a derogatory term. Since I first arrived, I told my hosts that I didn't mind at all, because it does feel to me like we are a multiplying pest outside and even inside the Ngäbe cosmos. The understanding among us became very sophisticated, and I consider the consequent friendship a great plus into the *emic*, or understanding of within. I would like to emphasize that in this hamlet there was much transparency, unlike the other community I visited the year prior, on 2013, a place much further to the east. Probably at a distance of three days by foot. The village's name is Guayabito and it was many times denser, already moving away from the hamlet type structure towards villagization. Peter Herlihy's LSU dissertation of the Emberá in Panama has identified this process. Anyhow, this tangents may serve to clarify the experience and the whole universe that is the Ngäbe-Buglé comarca. In Guayabito there was a aura of surveillance. Everyone was very kind, but very reserved. And they were by no means Mama-tada. They repudiated that. They were evangelists.

In Kiad, at a rally, a group of 30 or more people where considering and examining the so called "actual or real" economic dependency that Ngäbe had with the world outside the comarca: I quote: "80% of our economy is here, inside" said Tido, "you ought to remember that." "We do not rely on the government, we have everything for life right here. We have diverse plants and animals to eat, we have clean water, clean air, and no city noise. This is our home and we need to defend it until the very last of us is alive." He is the son of my teacher, we often chat on whatsapp. He is quite the medicine man or curandero or shaman if you will, outstanding spoke person, and leader. He has been on television several times expressing the Ngäbe worrisome fate when notions of development are not fully understood. The Ngäbe know how things are in the city because some have ventured there seeking higher education and jobs (or as they call it *salariando*). This has been going on since documents exist and probably before. Since the mid-19th Century, a considerable amount of Ngäbe have mixed into latino villages in a rather slow process with little conflict.

An interesting thing about Panama is that because of its lack of strong landed elite throughout history, or land based wealth, the encroachment into the highlands was quite dim. Unlike other countries of the region, wealth was made by way of commerce in the urban centers of Panama and Colon. This allowed for a sort of parallel existence between the European descendants and the native people. Today population pressures from both sides (Latino and Ngäbe) are exacerbating each other's claims to the land. The general sentiment among those

Ngäbe that I have talked to, seems to be that the city (that is, Panama City) is just not a very healthy place.

James Scott, a renowned political scientist and anthropologist writes about this very sentiment in his book *Seeing like a State*. Early states were unhealthy places, he says, (there was rampant war, disease, taxes, conscription, slavery, corruption). In his more recent book, *the art of not being governed*, he looks at Zomia, a term for this very large yet to be colonized zone in the highlands of south East Asia. In his words, these people are not, so called “primitive,” or are living in a sort of past stage of humanity’s progress waiting to be modernized, but exist today as those who ran away from the maladies of states. That is a process ever occurring.

### **Political Ecology, Linguistics and Ethnography: Alternative Geographies in Panama**

In lieu of the nature-society exchange, poststructural analysis in departing from the environmental calamities of modernity serves as basis for critique through context-dependent local discourses about environment and development. That is, each discursive is accentuated by its own contradictions. “Each has lessons to teach and problems to avoid” (Peet and Watts, 1993). Indeed, political ecology also aids from poststructural conceptualizations, it welcomes discursive analysis and does not undermine a politics of nature. Actor-Network Theory has been a particularly effective conceptual framework among interdisciplinary academics such as political ecologists. The theory was devised and propelled by Bruno Latour, a french philosopher, who examines how science is produced. The process seeks to open up the many relational aspects involved when scientists produce knowledge. From a given “objectivity” to a more complex network of interpretations, conditions, assumptions, and tools. Studies of inter-cultural conflicts as it is with the Ngäbe and the state are smart to include these approaches in consideration of long-term thinking (*long durée*).

Historical maps too give us evidence of the “erasures” and “silences” in the process of mapping today’s political boundaries. There are maps (Young, 1970) with the spatial contraction of the Ngäbe territory over the years, similar to maps on the conflict between Palestine and Israel since WWII. It also lets us examine a multiplicity of methodologies, cross-culturally, dominant-oppressed, cultural (iconic) -religious (pragmatic). Scholars can look to the many maps and documents in the historical archives, of the Spanish conquest of the West Indies

for example. It is an exercise towards new conceptualizations of graphic representation. By dissecting century old methodologies in map-making practices, geographers can learn much about how current power relations operate.

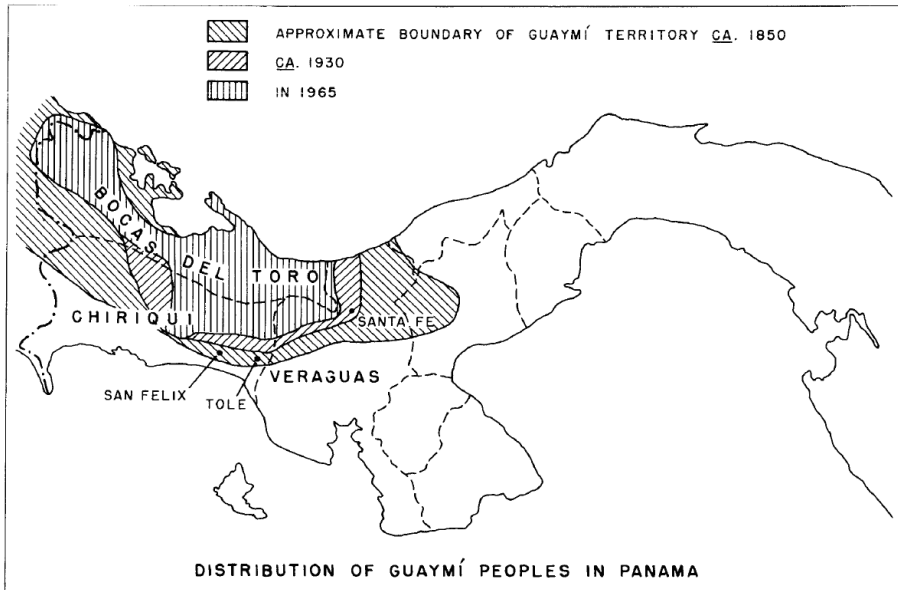


Figure 2: (Young, 1970)

Indigenous people are affected by globalization because of mining, logging and energy companies. The globalizing action helps expand the extractive industries' network towards the fringes of Western civilization: the so called "hinterlands" of urban centers (Chisholm, 1909). While at the same time indigenous people can reach larger audiences to help shed light on injustices they might be experiencing with these multinationals. In his book, *Conditions not of their choosing*, Chris Gjording, emphasizes on that very problematic. He follows, just as I am trying to do, the process by which indigenous regional leaders and mestizo peasants unite to fight the multinationals like the Canadian mining company, Canadian Javelin, Ltd.

In the middle of the the Ngäbe indigenous comarca, a Canadian mining wants to extract cooper: "Canadian Javelin, Ltd. of Montreal opened the work on the Cerro Colorado deposits in November 1970" (Gjording, 1991). Even earlier, in the 1960s and 1970s during his time in power, General Omar Torrijos Herrera, advanced many efforts to modernize the country and expand the hinterlands of Pan-

ama. During the same time, Mama-tada practitioners started to coalesce and unite the people against such projects. They won that round because the price of copper had fallen. Today however, the pressures are higher, and not only mining, but also real estate, tourism, energy and water, are lurking for traditional collective lands.

So, is the local possible? The entire development of the linguistic innovation, with the schools that emerged from the Mama-Tada practitioners, call for identity of Ngäbe existence and legitimacy. This is a more-than-Panamanian identity, because it doesn't stop at that national level. Time-framing is the process of arguing for primacy of the land, and much of the debate about being a member of a place has to do with who was there first. This requires a deep understanding of a logic that is constructed by the opposing narrative to Spanish colonialism. The lesson however, is to go beyond this primacy issue without undermining history. The central worry and inspiration for studying indigenous people and their connections to colonial powers is to investigate if their can be real progress —justice— to be made on the local's autonomy.

I asked myself and wrote on my field notes the following question. How does the Mama-tada cosmology understand the world coming at them? They face a capital city that explicitly propagandizes on a cosmopolitan ideal that seeks to encompass all peoples into one model systematically failing to understand Otherness. I concluded that the government (public officials and voters) cannot abstract itself in a manner that can be considered anthropological. The reason is because they are embedded in a modern ideology, and self-confidence. For the Mama-tada, historical reparations are not as important it seems, as it is the desire for the country's respect of local autonomy and recognition of their autochthonous identity. (See symbolism in the "ojo de agua" petroglyph in figure 3). The indigenous people remain utterly ignored by extractive multinational companies, industrial engineers, business entrepreneurs, and a centralized economic system (Gjording, 1991). Their territory, on the other hand, is never ignored. To my understanding the discussion or dialectic that may arise from of the universe that surrounds this minuscule ritual has something to do with ecology.

Bartering with states is not desired, or at least not to the extent that they undermine ones' ethos, in the case of the Ngäbe this means the right to be left alone to develop freely from a patronizing Other. Political ecology as a field of inquiry within Geography can equip us to understand this type of dynamics.

*“As critique, political ecology seeks to expose flaws in dominant approaches to the environment favored by corporate, state, and international authorities, working to demonstrate the undesirable impacts of policies and market conditions, especially from the point of view of local people, marginal groups, and vulnerable populations.” (Robbins, 2004)*

What I have posited in my abstract meant to elucidate a process for getting to know place, the battle over land, but perhaps more poignant, over cosmologies. I am interested in, what I perceive is a confluence of world views that will eventually come to characterize the future of this region and cultural landscape. That the struggle of indigenous people is to provide an alternative geography to capitalist space. My trial at perhaps some sort of applied anthropology, considers the social identities, ideologies, and the construction and uses of narrative provided I follow the path with the help of linguistic anthropology.

This name, Kiad, is also the last-name for the family who lives there. I took it to be some sort of geographical “last-name.” Probably the very notion of the last-name became influential through the imposition and cultural hegemony of the latino state (Gramsci, 1971 [1935]). Today, but also through the last half of the 20th Century, the government of Panama has ridiculed indigenous people by assigning them with insulting names and last-names. El Tribunal Electoral and its clerks take care of the bullying. There are countless stories and examples about this activity. In the name of justice and because they are largely non-assimilated Ngäbe, locals from Kiad have fought and won against this with increasing success. I have heard the stories. The journey of going through public schooling is notorious for degrading local culture and augmenting mestizo acculturation. In the Binana all of these external nuisances fade for a time. One truly feels away from the Latino-Panamanian cosmology. It is a great discovery and useful understanding for a person from the city.

Furthermore, biopolitics refers to the administration of life and the power inherent in the bureaucratic structures over citizens. Hardt and Negri write: “Little by little, as the administration develops, the relationship between society and power, between the multitude and the sovereign state, is inverted so that now power and the state produce society.”(2000, 88) Over time, the bureaucracy acquires certain constructions that deprive the populace from changing their livelihoods and most conform to its fundamentalism. Along these lines, the international world order or logic has alienated the individual from the public and political sphere. That is, the alienation of peoples by bureaucracy but their unification against bureaucracy.

A de-latinized written Ngäbere was the slow but steady cultural revolution that ensued six years after Mama-chi passed away, —at the same time with the Torrijos public schools program. In order to counter colonization, the Mama-Tada subset of the Ngäbe have come up with a distinctive, and unique alphabet. To me, the study of texts, which are being created compiling all sorts of oral histories, legends and myths is integral to understating political purpose and drive.

Eventually I learned that the elder man who was about to teach me for the next month or so, was the person who had deciphered a hieroglyph given to him and several others in 1962 by this messiah, called Mama-Chi. He showed me a (scroll) that mapped a house with three sides and each side had a stone that had been engraved by a deity or deities.

We have become good friends. Hang out every day, pretty much all day. I finally become the first non-Ngäbe to learn the alphabet, and he was very proud of it. He made me write a paragraph so that he could show in his travels around the comarca, (he dictated word by word and with much patience we worked until I could do a good calligraphy), I still do not know much of the grammar or vocabulary) although someone told me I knew about 15% which made be happy to hear. I doubt it. I learned from a previous trip that Ngäbe people encourage the positive side of things. When I had to travel around a mountain, a very huge mountain, infinitely hilly on its sides, and when asking the estimated time to arrival I would get the same answer: (1 hour, all throughout) It actually took 9 hours. It was the hardest thing I had done until later on near this other place I helped carry sheets of zinc down a mountain, there was purring rain, an intense lighting storm and this big piece of metal over my head. 5 hours later I had to be rescued because I was too “slow and weak.” I fell multiple times. But it was a good experience which reminded me of a picture of my advisor Andrew Sluyter carrying a really heavy sack from his forehead.

He who rescued me was the President of a movement called *Diez de Abril*. This group is fighting against the dam being built down the Tabasara river. And they are a brilliant bunch, really. Mostly all nephews, sons and daughters, and grandchildren of Tido, my garebo. Btw. Gare meaning knowledge and with the modifier, the one who know. So, teacher pretty much. As time progressed and we all got fonder of each other, The President took me down to the Dam, to el campamento, the protesting post they had and in the boundary between At the same time I became a scholar activist engaged with a deterritorializing plight. For the Ngäbe following Mama-Tada, and since its inception in the 1960s with Mama-chi’s sighting of god (or gods) and the prophecy, cohesion has increased within people in the highlands of la Cordillera Central of Western Panama.

## The state and the map

Situated in between Christendom and capitalism, a rather weird but married contradiction, I try to understand the Other, a hybrid culture: that is, the Ngäbe living in the Tabasará river basin. I contend that an important cultural renaissance with linguistic and religious origins from Mama-Tada has evolved along to a place that agrees with many themes of the environmentalists. They criticize modernity for its disregard of pollution and anthropocentrism. Because of hundreds of years of the West's negligence to the widespread levels of pollution caused by industrialization, the other subsets of humanity, namely "indigenous peoples," continue to suffer the consequences of their hubris, a particular kind of knowledge that excludes the Other.

The head of *Bagnama* or Cerro Viejo, the mountain where Kiad lays, art and culture with representations of vegetation and linguistic identity, constitute political symbols the build a narrative of an environmental history (To echo McNeill). People live in many parts of this *cerro*, when the flooding by the hydroelectric plant occurs, the hamlets in the bottom will have to compete for land (livable and farmable) up the *cerro*. This is colonization all over again. Ngäbe used to live near the plains closer to the coast south of this mountains where land is more fertile (Young, 1971), now they most fall back once more.

"We rather have water than electricity." Says Silvia Carrera, the *Cacica*. She is the leader of the Ngäbe. "Water is absolutely necessary. It is a human right!" she claims. Indigenous people must learn the ways of the international system and legal logic, and using appropriate vernacular. The local has to appeal to the international in order to school the national government. Environmentality has become governability for indigenous people in the past decades. Via social networks, and the internet, they learn about the world. New realizations about how human beings affected the Earth were in direct conflict with development programs and general economic growth imperatives. Many countries excused themselves out of this environmentality, but today it is only through evident corrupt workarounds that governments act inconsiderate to the environment. The hydroelectric plant at the height of Barro Blanco in river Tabasará is a very good example.

Moreover, historical forces have acculturated officials in a trajectory with specific goals, that in turn, contradict that of the indigenous people. Indigenous groups have recently re-entered the world stage with a strong call to autonomy, but also as stewards of the natural world. Not only is their historic claim to the land is a pillar of their political program, but through their understanding of mod-

ern-capitalist society's flaws —the incommensurability of waste, pollution, and the homogenization of nature itself— they have coalesced with a very compelling critique. The repudiation of colonialism is central too. The attachment to historical outcomes and the condemnation of European power serves as part of their quotidian talk.

Considering the many examples of cross-cultural political debacles across the world, the less powerful entities either conform, perish, or learn how to play the game. It really is a war, a battle of language, of definitions. But how is a group, vastly underrepresented with virtually no material wealth face a government, a propaganda that says “we are all Panamanian”, undermining real cultural diversity, history and much more.

This introductory work is of substantial importance for me. What sparked my curiosity came from rallies between indigenous people, environmental activists and officials. I observed and interpreted in my field notes on the interactions between the many parties, their agendas, claims and blames. For example, I witnessed environmental activists in their efforts to explain to the indigenous people about the technical aspects of riverine life dynamics and hydropower realities. They wanted to help build a unified scientific explanation so that indigenous people coalesce and fight back using the language of modernity. Their intention was to illustrate the government's worldview.

It is then, via intellectual revitalization and using the contemporary modes of communication to undermine the powerful and deceiving bullies in public debates, forums, and the internet. Reaching to people in the city, lawyers and activists that care. Leveling the plane-field means that not one type of indignation is more legitimate than the other. Both indigenous and mestizo types of protests and civil disobedience schemes deserve equal standing.

It is with insistent critique that indigenous people and others can refute a state that homogenizes the people, assumes levels of economic and health standards. In its most radical context, participatory mapping is a form of counter-mapping. It seeks to become a tool for emancipation, for resistance or for defense. It provides a platform for non-capitalist cultures to better speak the language of the state. But, critical geographers also make note of the implications of such a practice. Apart from the ideal objectives of the counter-mappers and that mapping itself, there are various caveats with the actual proceedings of mapping territory.



## Discussion

Between a researcher's intentions and the participants' hope for autonomy, we encounter the global industrial and capitalist system. Indeed, at the core of fieldwork, human geographers find evidence of strong cultural clashes and political cleavages resulting in cross-pragmatic incompatibilities. But even more intellectually challenging, they find, a real existential difference that must somehow transform into universal respect, coalition, or friendship. Therefore, I ask together with Castree, Fuller, Akins, Anderson, my own advisor, Andrew Sluyter, and other political ecologists, and critical human geographers:

*What role can geographers play? Can or should geographers be activists, public players, or public intellectuals (Castree, 2006; Fuller and Askins, 2007; Anderson et al., 2008; Castree et al., 2008)? In this context counter-mapping is still alive and well among communities (Parker, 2006; Cidell, 2008). The approach here is 'map or be mapped,' (Bryan, 2007). —Jeremy W. Crampton - Cartography: Performative, Participatory, Political. Progress in Human Geography (2009)*

I believe that it is absolutely necessary to be fluent in the language, costumes, and colloquialisms. I see how pedagogy, religion (notions of ecology and the cosmos) and language become instigators of new tools to continue choosing to live outside the state. I contend that illegibility is always necessary to have, create and consider, in order to improve the human condition. I believe Mama-Tada scripture and linguistic independency puts forth a very compelling program for students in western Panama today. That is, to show the potential for an original society, and to show the outside that their innovations are no less important.

My role is to help build understanding. Urban dwellers and leaders of extractive industries have their eyes looking outward to the Global North. The industrialization of the country is taken place under identifiable development discourses. Even the more educated elite are mostly lacking holism. In short, these actor's technocratic dreams could be in the process of being fulfilled with no ill intentions. I have already seen that my documenting of particular resurgences like the *Mama-tada* can help debunk fallacies in language battles. By way of resistance and cultural resurgence, the *Mama-tada* practitioners are enacting their alternative geographies and together with activist-scholars together we can help decolonize: towards enacting a very subtle antagonism to latino expansion.

Miguel de Unamuno wrote in his book, *Del Sentimiento Trágico de la vida de los hombres y pueblos* (The Tragic Sense of Life), “It always happens to be that in the beginning of knowledge there is fear” (p. 124) I want to reflect on this a little bit. If in a democracy, fear of change because of new knowledge becomes commonplace and a trend, would it not then be that people stop updating to new realities, ending their democracy? Today, those who are not too fearful are the indigenous people, and this is what I admire. I will continue to look at the cultural intellectual environmental history approach. Another interesting point in his book, Unamuno, worries about the question we constantly ask: “*for what?*” What is the land for? The water the runs over and carves it with life of all sorts, what is it for? Is it for energy, for drinking, for the trees and the birds, or just for christians?

I admit that this paper is quite lacking of historical materials. There is much more detailed oral history to be conducted and archival research to consider. The former required more field-work, and the latter can only be found in the libraries and in the Institute of Culture in Panama City. I do, however, deem this initial momentum vital for future work on this topic of Panamanian environmental history. There are very many potential studies to be made on the metabolism of the city of Panama city. A recent book by Ashley Carse, *Beyond the Big Ditch: Politics, Ecology, and Infrastructure at the Panama Canal*, follows the commercial paths and relationships of container ships with the local and international cultural and environmental landscapes. He explores how water flows, and how administrative efforts consider the inputs and outputs of this “modern world wonder.” In Latin America, the phenomena of primate cities serves as fertile soil to explore the uneven landscapes between urban and rural folk.

I have come to contest my own ideas and conventions about human constructions of terminology and the immediate ideological and political impacts that result from them. The anthropocene is a political devise as well as an indication of the magnitude of human influence in the biophysical environment. That environmental history sprouts out of worry, is no coincidence. There is, today, a fundamentally distinct view of what resources are, and a larger list includes more complex systems, shying away from simplicity. Moreover, I have previously done research on the possibility of consociational democracy as a manner of power sharing with minorities (see Arendt Lijphart). As a result of considering the unilateral momentum of modernization over the Other and the non-humans too, I wonder if democracy is at all helpful as a denominator of political live. Regardless of its ethical possibilities, it nevertheless renders the Rest—creatures and biophysical phenomena— completely out of the question. As a single species-

centric moral compass, democracy floats over culture to address problems beyond its grasp. Should democracy remain unbounded and to the mercy of a less reasonable human cultural subgroup, or can we transcend the boundary of hubris?

The state uses statistics to control people's mobility and thus comes to know how to structure the world. The scientist samples subjects and verifies that his hypothesis matches the necessary statistical significance interval and thus describes how the world works. The artisan understands the world by experience and desire without much care about mass production and financial growth. The worker realizes that with large numbers of his/her equals they may defend the gap of surplus value that they create, and this is how they shape their own world. The capitalist manages/controls all of the above and every *quarterly* innovates around commercial lines, not ecological, not democratic, not ethical, not prudent. The evolution of this type of actor keeps yielding crisis that should not be tolerated. The indigenous collectivity exists in and out this logic and they rather do something else!

### Bibliography and Selected Readings

- Agnew, J. and L. Muscara 2012. *Making Political Geography* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Alfred, T. 1999. *Peace, power, righteousness: An Indigenous manifesto*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Alfred, T. and J. Corntassel. 2005. Being Indigenous: Resurgences against contemporary colonialism. *Government and Opposition* 40(4): 597-614.
- Arendt, H. 1970. *On Violence*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich
- Auge', M. (1995). *Non-Places. Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*. London, UK: Verso.
- Castree, N. 2004. Differential geographies: Place, indigenous rights and 'local' resources. *Political Geography* (23): 133-167
- Doel, M. 1999. *Poststructuralist geographies*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Finley-Brook, M. and C. Thomas. 2011. Renewable Energy and Human Rights Violations: Illustrative Cases from Indigenous Territories in Panama. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* Vol. 101, No. 4, pp. 863-872
- Hardt, M. and A. Negri. 2000. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ikenberry, G. John. 2011. *Liberal Leviathan: the Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Liotard, J.F. 1991. *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Moraña, M., E. D. Dussel, and C.A. Jáuregui. 2008. *Coloniality at large: Latin America and the postcolonial debate*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Rousseau, J.J. 1762. *Du contrat social ou Principes du droit politique*.
- Robbins, P. 2004. 2012. *Political ecology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Ruhlen, M. 1987. *A Guide to the World's Languages*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.
- Sandoval, C. 2000. *Methodology of the oppressed*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Scott, J.C. 1998. *Seeing like a state: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press
- Scott, J.C. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press
- Simpson, L. 2008. Our elder brothers: The lifeblood of resurgences. In *Lighting the eighth fire: The liberation, resurgence, and protection of Indigenous nations*, ed. L. Simpson. Winnipeg, MB: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 73-87.
- Sparke, M., 2009. Geopolitics. In: Gregory, D., Johnston, R., Pratt, G., Watts, M., Whatmore, S. (Eds.), *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, fifth ed. Wiley- Blackwell, Chichester.
- Young, P. D. 1971. *Ngawbe: Tradition and change among the Western Guaymí of Panama*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Young, P. D. 1976. *The expression of harmony and discord in a Guaymí ritual: The symbolic meaning of some aspects of Balsería*, Helms & Loveland, *Frontiers adaptations in Lower Central America*: 37-53 Philadelphia.
- Young, P. D. 1978. La trayectoria de una religión: El movimiento de Mamá Chí entre los guaymíes y sus consecuencias sociales”, *La Antigua*, 7 (11): 45-75, Panamá.
- Young, P. D. 2009. Witnessing change in a small-scale society: A personal account. *Newsletter. Society for Applied Anthropology*, 20 (3):7-12.
- White, R. 1995. *The Organic Machine*. New York, NY: Macmillan
- Wickstrom, S. 2003. The politics of development in indigenous Panama, *Latin American Perspectives*, 131 (4): 43-68.
- Wolf, E. 1982. *Europe and the people without history*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.