

INDIGENOUS MOBILIZATION, INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND RESISTANCE:  
THE NGOBE MOVEMENT FOR POLITICAL AUTONOMY IN WESTERN PANAMA

By

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A mi madre Cristina por todos sus sacrificios y su dedicacion para que yo pudiera  
terminar este doctorado

A todos los abuelos y abuelas del pueblo de La Chorrera,  
Que me perdonen por todo el tiempo que no pude pasar con ustedes.  
Quiero que sepan que siempre los tuve muy presentes en mi corazón,  
Y que fueron sus enseñanzas las que me llevaron a viajar a tierras tan lejanas,  
Teniendo la dignidad y el coraje para luchar por los más necesitados.  
Y por eso siempre seguiré cantando con ustedes,

Aje Vicente, toca la caja y llama a la gente,  
Aje Vicente, toca la caja y llama a la gente,  
Aje Vicente, toca la caja y llama la gente.

Toca el tambor, llama a la gente,  
Toca la caja, llama a la gente,  
Toca el acordeón, llama a la gente...

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	4
LIST OF FIGURES.....	8
ABSTRACT .....	9
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	11
Literature Review .....	15
Research Question and Case Study.....	29
Theoretical Framework .....	34
Methodology and Epistemological Considerations .....	36
Organization of the Work .....	43
2 THE “INDIAN QUESTION” IN LATIN AMERICA: A BRIEF HISTORY OF LATIN AMERICAN THOUGHT ABOUT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES.....	47
Interpreting the Indigenous Peoples during the Colony .....	48
From Independence to Liberal Republicanism.....	54
The Advent of Indigenismo and the Reinterpretation of Indigenous Descent .....	60
Reactions to Indigenismo and the Rise of Indigenous Movements.....	72
3 GOVERNMENT POLICIES TOWARDS INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ON THE ISTHMUS OF PANAMA (1510-1968) .....	76
Spanish Colonial Policies Towards Indigenous Peoples on the Isthmus of Panama (1510-1821).....	76
Indigenous Peoples During the Period of Incorporation to the Republic of New Granada (nowadays Colombia). The First Half of the XIX Century. ....	80
Political Autonomy, Capitalist Growth, and Indigenous Resistance in the Second Half of the XIX Century .....	87
Indian-State Relations in the Liberal Conception of the Republic of Panama, 1903-1931 .....	95
Nascent Indigenismo during the Advent of the Welfare State and the Onset of Virulent Nationalism, 1931-1945.....	103
Indigenous Marginalization and Formal Indigenismo during the Liberal Welfare State, 1945-1968 .....	112
4 THE NGOBE ETHNIC COMMUNITY .....	123
The Ngobe Ethnic Community before the European Arrival .....	127
The Ngobe Ethnic Community during the Early Encounter with the Europeans ...	130

	The Ngobe: Civilized or Infidels during the Colony? .....	132
	The Ngobe Ethnic Community during the Irruption of Modernity .....	138
	The Ngobe Ethnic Community in the Construction of the Panamanian Nation .....	143
	The Ngobe Ethnic Community as Seen by Modern Anthropologists .....	149
5	INCREASING NGOBE MOVILIZATION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE COMARCA, 1968-1997 .....	162
	Social Mobilization Amidst the Collapse of the Liberal Welfare State .....	163
	Military Populism and the Advent of Charismatic Indigenismo.....	167
	The Collapse of the National Indigenous Movement and the Emergence of a New Ngobe Leadership under the Torrijos Regime.....	170
	The Right Turn of the Revolutionary Process and the Dispersion of the Ngobe Leadership.....	176
	A Struggle for Power: Indigenous Peoples Against the Revolutionary Process...	181
	Indigenous Comarcas and Development Projects in the New Liberal Era .....	186
6	TEN YEARS AFTER THE COMARCA - THE COMARCA IN PRACTICE AND THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE NGOBE LEADERSHIP .....	196
	The Comarca Regime De Jure .....	197
	The Comarca in Practice – The Formative Years, 1997-2001 .....	201
	The Fallout of Ngobe Corporatism and the Ephemeral Success of Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Panama, 1999-2003.....	206
	Leadership Acquiescence and Ngobe Reaction to Neoliberal Globalism, 2003 2006.....	212
	Clashing with the Party of the Revolution: The Third Scission of the Ngobe Leadership and the Unexpected Violence of Neoliberal Multiculturalism, 2006- 2009.....	221
	The Debacle of the PRD-Ngobe Alliance and the Arrival of a new Democratic Change? .....	233
7	CONCLUSIONS .....	240
	From Ethnic Guerrillas to Regional Governments: The Miskitu of Nicaragua .....	241
	Pioneering Modern Indigenous Organization in the Americas, the Shuar Federation of Ecuador .....	243
	A People who would not Kneel or Conditions not of their Choosing? The Political Mobilization of the Kuna of Eastern Panama .....	248
	The Ngobe in Comparative Perspective – Prospects for a Participatory Leadership in the XXI Century.....	252
	Repression, Co-optation and Participation in the XXI Century – A Politics of Recognition or the Empire Strikes Back? .....	254
	LIST OF REFERENCES .....	260
	BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	273

## LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure</u>		<u>page</u>
4-1	Colonial Province of Veragua showing the possible locations of the Cocles, Guayimies (Ngobe and Bukle), and Teribes (Naso) in Western Panama .....	160
4-2	Regions of the Ngobe-Bugle Comarca created through Law 10 of 1997 .....	161

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INDIGENOUS MOBILIZATION, INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND RESISTANCE:  
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After the Kuna Revolution of 1925, Panama has generally projected an international image of respect for indigenous autonomy. In spite of this national myth, *de facto* control of the Kuna ancestral lands has concealed the persistence of racism and discrimination in the entire country, and the widespread aversion among the public and decision-makers against claims for self-determination and cultural affirmation by indigenous peoples. Under the guise of the *comarcas* (autonomous territories), Panamanian society has been continuously struggling to extricate the indigenous self from national identity, oftentimes using low-intensity campaigns, and occasionally even recurring to violent force to repress indigenous uprisings.

This study examines the case of the Ngobe of Western Panama, where indigenous autonomy has confronted opposition, repression and co-optation from the national government and private companies even before the approval of the autonomous regime in 1997. The changing policies of the national government are analyzed from Liberal assimilation, through corporatist indigenismo and culminating with the latest wave of neoliberal reforms in the 1990s. In spite of the scarcity of historical studies, the effects of these policies on Ngobe regional culture are explored, including

the formation of a Ngobe political class in the 1960s through grassroots mobilization and the spiritual revival of the Mama Tata movement.

In the mobilizational cycle leading to the creation of the Comarca in 1997, several new forms of leadership and organization were created to respond to the challenges and encroachment of modernity. These included the strengthening of the charismatic figures of the regional caciques and the creation of the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress in 1979. The author identifies grassroots activism and leadership accountability as key determinants for the success of indigenous self-government institutions. In this regard, this work warns against two polarized positions commonly adopted in the academic literature: First, the idealization of indigenous movements as intrinsically participatory; and second, the dismissal of grassroots activism as naturally prone to state co-optation. Instead, this study highlights the importance of the development and maintenance of bottom-up governance structures for participatory democracy and indigenous autonomy.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Five hundred years after the European Conquest, discussions about the location of indigenous peoples in Latin American societies are not only current, but increasingly relevant in the contentious dynamics of political democratization, economic globalization, and social inclusion. Following the Fifth Centennial, indigenous peoples have claimed the historical past that was robbed from them by the European colonists, and have simultaneously demanded from their descendants the right to write their own present. In a number of occasions, these voices have become politically explicit, most importantly in the indigenous uprisings of Ecuador and in the election of Evo Morales to the Bolivian Presidency. Although it should not be surprising that indigenous politics have moved to the forefront of national politics in countries like Guatemala, Ecuador, and Bolivia, where indigenous peoples comprise more than 25% of the general population, the so-called “Indian Question” remains a challenging political issue all throughout the Americas, including countries such as Brazil, Venezuela, and Argentina where indigenous peoples represent less than 1% of the general population. In these countries, the continuous plight of indigenous peoples had easily been swept under the carpet, using the questionable argument that they represented small “minorities”. However, even when accounting for such a minimal percentage of the national population, indigenous peoples command control of some of the most strategic natural resources, such as timber, mining, oil, and hydropower, and usually occupy vast expanses of “national lands” supported by historical claims extending far beyond the arrival of the Spanish and the Portuguese. Taking this into consideration, indigenous politics are crucial for the destiny of many countries, such as Nicaragua, Panama, and

Chile, where indigenous lands stand in the way of what policy and opinion makers in the national capitals frequently call “national development”.

Confronted with the reluctance of the national states to relinquish any rights for self-determination, indigenous rights activists have promoted a number of legal and institutional arrangements to accommodate the historical claims of indigenous peoples within the existing mold of state sovereignty. As a matter of fact, at the global level, international instruments like the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169, and the recently approved United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples have recognized the claims of indigenous peoples for self-determination (Van Cott 1994, Brysk 1994 and 2000). In addition, many Latin American constitutions, including Nicaragua (1987), Colombia (1991), Ecuador (1998) and Venezuela (2000), have explicitly acknowledged the historical rights of indigenous peoples to their ancestral territories, as well as to limited self-government. In many cases, these constitutional clauses have been developed through national enabling legislations that regulate the specific provisions of indigenous political autonomy. Regionally or ethnically specific legislation has also been created to recognize the particular demands of specific ethnic groups, such as in the Kuna *Comarca* legislation in Panama (1953) and the Autonomy Statute of Nicaragua (1987).<sup>1</sup>

In spite of all of these efforts, indigenous peoples remain the poorest among the poor in most countries in Latin America, and those special legislations created to protect their special rights have only achieved minimal success and remain a cause of continuous contestation between state officials and indigenous representatives. What

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<sup>1</sup> The 1991 Colombian Constitution also recognized the ancestral land right of Afro-descendant communities in the Pacific Coast (Arocha 1998).

problems stand in the way of indigenous political autonomy, and originate these highly conflictive relations? Is there any solution to the national sovereignty/indigenous autonomy dilemma? Are Latin American states capable of overcoming five centuries of discrimination and marginalization to become inclusive multicultural societies? This dissertation will try to address these questions by examining the case study of the Ngobe of Western Panama and Southern Costa Rica, the most numerous indigenous group in Southern Central America. Numbering around 200,000, most Ngobe live in the Republic of Panama, where indigenous politics are considered marginal, and national political leaders and opinion makers usually believe that indigenous peoples have obtained more than their fair share in the life of the country. Yet, the Ngobe also occupy highly valuable lands for mining, hydroelectric, and tourism development in the provinces of Veraguas, Chiriqui, and Bocas del Toro, and have suffered from the continuous encroachment of cattle ranchers, tourism developers, hydroelectric promoters, and mining companies, even after the formal declaration of political autonomy in 1997.

After the Kuna Revolution of 1925, Panama has projected an international image of respect for indigenous autonomy. However, *de facto* control of the Kuna ancestral lands has also concealed the persistence of racism in the country, and the widespread aversion among the public and decision-makers against any claims for indigenous self-determination and cultural affirmation. Under the guise of the so-called *comarcas* (autonomous territories), Panamanian society has been continuously struggling to extricate the indigenous self from national identity, oftentimes using low-intensity campaigns commanded by schoolteachers, bus owners, police units, and medical

personnel, but occasionally recurring to brute force to repress indigenous uprising like happened with the Mama Tata indigenous movement of the early 1960s and with the protests of the Kuna and Embera indigenous peoples affected by the Bayano Dam in 2007 . During the last ten years, however, as the country experiences spectacular economic growth, and the engine of progress demands more energy, mining and tourism lands to fuel the burgeoning economy – “and make the final leap towards the First World”, indigenous claims are becoming much more contentious and are increasingly perceived as standing in the way towards the realization of the glorious vision that most Panamanians have of their own country. As a result, conflicts over the use of natural resources on indigenous lands are becoming imminent, visible and in some occasions, even violent. As a matter of fact, after the onset of the “democratic transition” in 1990, several conflicts over the use of natural resources, such as the Cerro Pelado mining project, the Puente Blanco land dispute, and the Tabasara hydroelectric project, have degenerated towards direct confrontation between indigenous peoples and national police forces, and have consequently reinforced the commonly held public misconception that indigenous peoples are always opposed to development. Media outlets have recreated and perpetuated these general stereotypes by framing the conflicts as anti-development struggles. In reality, most indigenous leaders would not declare themselves as opposed to development itself as a semiotic category, but instead would try to imbue this word with a new meaning of their own, not easily translated into the language of Panamanian national identity and colonial domination.

This research will explore the contradictions of the Ngobe process of political autonomy, as an illustration of the failure of top-down *indigenista* and multicultural

policies even in a most favorable case scenario like Panama. Considering the legacy of the Kuna Revolution, the adoption of corporatist indigenista policies by the followers of Accion Comunal in the 1930s and the Torrijos regime in the 1970s, and the national myth of innate multiculturalism, most casual observers would have agreed with international organizations that conditions were favorable for the institutionalization of indigenous political autonomy in Panama. The *via crucis* endured by the Ngobe during the last ten years, as well as the internal debate within the Ngobe ethnic community, about the meaning of being Ngobe in modern Panamanian society, does not only reveal the limitations of *indigenismo* and multiculturalism, but the profound implications of both corporatist arrangements and neoliberal corrective mechanisms for the empowerment of indigenous populations. Ultimately, the final denouement of the Ngobe drama will illuminate current discussions about the viability of the struggles of indigenous peoples to eradicate the persistence of colonialism and to construct new relations of empowerment with a globalized society beyond the mere limits of a “politics of recognition” (Hale 2002, Taylor 1994).

### **Literature Review**

In the Latin American context, the Ngobe are only one of several hundreds indigenous peoples that are currently claiming ancestral land rights and negotiating special autonomy regimes within the existing political order of sovereign Latin American states. The following literature review will outline current discussions about indigenous movements, constitutional reforms, and the creation of new concepts of multicultural citizenship in Latin America. By examining academic interpretations about the current situation and political meaning of indigenous political autonomy, I will try to highlight the

main issues under discussion, and delineate a theoretical framework to illuminate the ensuing discussion about the Ngobe regime of political autonomy in Panama.

Although political science has always been concerned with issues of ethnic politics and minority rights, only in the last fifteen years have political scientists begun to incorporate questions of ethnic mobilization in the analysis of Latin American indigenous peoples. This marked delay in the political understanding of indigenous issues in Latin America can be attributed to the traditional relegation of indigenous issues to the realms of history and anthropology; and to the persistent difference that was made between questions of ethnic conflict around the world and the special situation of indigenous peoples in Latin America. As a matter of fact, Crawford Young (1976) considered that indigenous peoples in Latin America did not possess any sense of political identity, and hence were not as preoccupied with issues of ethnic rights and self-determination as their counterparts in Africa, Asia, and Oceania. It was not until the 1990s that American and European political scientists began to recognize the increasing mobilization of Latin American indigenous peoples, many years after red flags had been raised by area specialists, historians, and anthropologists in Latin America.<sup>2</sup>

In the discipline of political science, debates about the location of ethnic minorities in national politics were originally framed by theories of imperialism, colonialism, and nationalism. Classical political theorists, such as John Locke, Edmund Burke, John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx, were deeply concerned with the relations between European states, like Great Britain and France; with the colonized peoples of

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<sup>2</sup> In 1982, Stefano Varese discussed the development of a new pan-indigenous political identity in Latin America that he termed *Indianidad* (=Indianness). As early as 1973, the indigenous peoples of the Bolivian Plateau had announced their ambitious political agenda in the Tiwanaku Declaration.

their overseas possessions, like North America and India.<sup>3</sup> According to Pagden (1995), every world power developed a particular theory of empire that conditioned the rights of the colonized peoples and the policies of the empires. Although there were many heated debates about the rights of the colonial subjects, the academic consensus was that non-European peoples were not equal, and therefore did not have the same rights as the citizens of the European states. This convention was not seriously challenged until the aftermath of World War I. All throughout the XIX century, European countries continued acquiring overseas possessions and establishing new colonial regimes in Africa, Asia, and Oceania based on their imperial theories.

The end of World War I confronted European states with a theoretical challenge to the prevailing understanding that overseas territories should be acquired through the use of force, independently of the expressed will of the inhabitants of those possessions. The principle of self-determination obliged the major powers of the world to determine which human groups were bound for independence, and which should be included within the already existing states. Since these issues were never properly resolved, several areas of the world, like Palestine, Syria, and Iraq, were designated as mandates of European states, such as England and France. These tutelage regimes implied the outright denial of self-determination to millions of people around the world, and were largely responsible for many devastating conflicts during World War II and beyond; bequeathing a legacy of colonialism that still haunts the world until today. In the particular case of indigenous peoples, the “civilized nations of the world” consistently refused to recognize any indigenous rights to self-determination, leaving

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<sup>3</sup> Lucero (2002) provides a preliminary discussion of how several classical political theorists visualized the question of indigenous rights.

millions of “non-national” peoples under the internal colonial rules of national states that in some occasions even sought for their complete extermination.

After World War II, modern discussions about ethnic conflict emerged directly from the contentious dynamics between formerly colonized peoples and previously powerful national states, extending from Basque separatism in Spain to the recent conflicts for political autonomy in East Timor in Indonesia. These ethnic conflicts have been analyzed extensively by the sub-disciplines of international relations and comparative politics, gaining increasing attention after the end of the Cold War (Enloe 1973, Young 1976, Bertelsen 1977, Horowitz 1985, Gurr 1993 and 2000, Gurr and Harff 1994). However, the classic dictum of Crawford Young that ethnic politics did not exist in Latin America was unquestionably followed during most of the second half of the XX century. The cases of the indigenous peoples of Latin America were considered different from those of the colonized peoples of the XIX and XX century, since the great cultural diversity of the Americas was significantly reduced, impacted, and redefined by the penetrating effects of three hundred years of Spanish and Portuguese colonialism between the XVI-XVIII centuries. These cases were considered to belong to the first wave of European colonialism, as differentiated by Pagden (1995). Furthermore, the dividing lines between the European colonizers and the native subjects had been confusingly blurred by the continuous *mestizaje* that occurred between the different *castas* of the Spanish and Portuguese colonies.<sup>4</sup> In fact, all the attempts made by the

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<sup>4</sup> In the early colony, the Spanish tried to implement a strict system of segregation between the Europeans and the indigenous peoples (Thurner 1997, Castellero-Calvo 1995). As they realized that they were not being able to control miscegenation, they devised a very complicated system of castes, or *castas*, to separate people into complicated racial categories. However, by the end of the colony in the early XIX century, the *castas* system had stopped having any meaning, thus paving the way for the construction of new concepts of race and nationality in the XIX century.

Spanish Crown to create separate “Republics of Indians” and “Republics of Spanish” ended up in failure and instead produced a very complex mix of indigenous, European, and African identities, what Jose Vasconcelos referred to as the *raza cosmica* in the early XX century. This blurring of the boundary lines between different phenotypes has imprinted Latin American society with a unique blend of ethnic identities and ethnic relations. While the nascent republican governments of the XIX century strived to eliminate any reference to indigenous identities, or any other form of ethnic difference, during the early nation-building process (Sanders 2003, Thurner 1997), the collapse of European capitalist modernization paved the way for a vibrant and almost obsessive indigenista movement in the XX century (Diaz-Polanco 1997, Bartolome and Barabas 1998, Sanchez 1999).

*Indigenismo* referred to state ideologies and public policies that dominated Latin American thinking about race and ethnicity between the 1920s-1970s, and that generally considered indigenous peoples (and in some occasions Afro-descendants) as the predecessors of modern-day *mestizo* Latin American national identities (see Chapter II). Indigenismo also dominated the academic environment of Latin American universities between the 1930s and the 1970s, and provided a moral justification for the aggressive integrationist policies that were advocated by national governments during this period. The thrust of Latin American indigenismo was not seriously questioned and challenged until the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> During this decade, a group of Latin American anthropologists and historians began to explore the political underpinnings of the

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<sup>5</sup> Although there was an alternative indigenista school in Peru, Mexican indigenismo continued dominating the academic and political scenario, partly due to the formal adoption of these policies by national governments and international organizations.

nascent indigenous movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Although they inherited the academic legacy of Mexican indigenismo, they were also willing to explore new theoretical avenues, and thus initiated a controversial debate about the continued significance of indigenismo; confronting traditional indigenistas like Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran and Alfonso Caso with proponents of new perspectives about the place of indigenous peoples in Latin American societies.

According to Nuñez-Loyo (2000), the three main criticisms that were raised against the classical Mexican indigenismo in the 1970s were represented by the works of Rodolfo Stavenhagen, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, and Hector Diaz-Polanco. Drawing on global discussions about colonialism, Rodolfo Stavenhagen introduced the concept of internal colonialism (Gonzalez 2004) to describe the relations between mestizo societies and indigenous peoples.<sup>6</sup> In these early works, Stavenhagen also recognized the importance of class structure, yet he did not adhere to the rigid understanding of historical materialism espoused by other Marxist thinkers, like Diaz-Polanco.

As opposed to the instrumental understanding of class utilized by the early works of Stavenhagen, Hector Diaz-Polanco argued that ethnic identity and class oppression could not be semantically separated, since they both originated from the same imposition of colonial rule and from the unlimited expansion of capitalism (Diaz-Polanco 1982, 1987, 1997). For Diaz-Polanco, proposing any alternative forms of indigenous development divided and debilitated broad-based national popular struggles, and originated from a deviant ethnicist understanding of indigenous identities that he called *neoindigenismo* (and associated with Russian Narodnism). In this regard, Diaz-Polanco

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<sup>6</sup> Later in his career, Mexican Rodolfo Stavenhagen became the first United Nations Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples.

was opposed to the propositions presented by Guillermo Bonfil-Batalla and other “critical anthropologists” associated with the Barbados Declaration (1971), who believed that indigenous peoples had the right to develop their own unique forms of development (*etnodesarrollo*).<sup>7</sup>

Against the socialist critique of Diaz-Polanco, critical anthropologists, like Bonfil-Batalla (1987), continued advocating for the understanding of indigenous societies as they were, and for respect of their own particular worldview. Another of the critical anthropologists, Varese (1982) contended that there existed a single Western civilizing process that included both business capitalists and leftist revolutionaries. This civilizing project had given birth to a State that did not originate from the Nation, like the European states; but instead, the Nation originated from the State, thus creating a false sense of nationality. With regards to class structure, he recognized the presence of important social differences among indigenous peoples themselves, especially among the descendants of the great civilizations of Mesoamerica and the Andes – those that he called macro-ethnos. However, Varese also insisted that the common experience of colonialism had created a new sense of consciousness, *Indianidad*, which brought together the multiplicity of cultures that were commonly ascribed the label of Indian by the European colonizers, and that notions of Indianness supported emerging new forms of indigenous organization. In this regard, like the other Barbados signatories, Varese considered that indigenous peoples were protagonists of their own liberation struggles, apart and independent from worker mobilizations and other national liberation projects.

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<sup>7</sup> In 1971, a group of prominent Latin American anthropologists issued the First Barbados Declaration, urging for the termination of internal colonialism and for the recognition of indigenous rights by the national states.

Critical anthropologists, like Bonfil Batalla and Varese, brought to academic light the indigenous movements that were already gestating within many Latin American countries. They should be credited for bringing to the forefront the indigenous mobilizations that were already happening in many places in Latin America, in spite of the pessimistic assessment of Crawford Young (1976). Before the advent of critical anthropology, indigenous peoples were considered as recipients of aid or as part of the oppressed masses of peasants. They were not regarded as important actors in and of themselves, and writers like Varese and Bonfil-Batalla, called attention to the sudden appearance of these indigenous peoples in national politics, as signaled by the foundation of the Shuar Federation in the Amazonian Ecuador in the 1960s and the Tiwanaku Declaration in Bolivia in 1973. As the “End of History” silenced the proclamations of Latin American revolutions, out of the ashes of the Cold War, there appeared the contours of those indigenous movements that had been ontologically described by critical anthropologists. This became evident with the first Ecuadorian national indigenous uprising in 1990 and with the Bolivian March to La Paz during that same year.

In the early 1990s, several seminal works paved the way for the unexpected irruption of indigenous peoples in the field of political science. The pioneering work of Xavier Albo (1991), “El Retorno del Indio”, provided the most comprehensive account of the new politically active indigenous movements in South America. In this essay, Albo reviewed the recent history of indigenous political mobilizations from the formation of the Shuar Federation in the 1960s to the creation of the Katarista indigenous parties in Bolivia in the late 1980s. He categorically asserted that indigenous peoples were trying

to shake away the label of *campesinos* that had been imposed upon them since the 1950s by both Liberal modernizers and left-wing revolutionaries. Instead, Albo contended that indigenous peoples were forming their own organizations and formulating their own political projects for the XXI century.

Although Spanish-speaking anthropologists were able to recognize the clouds gathering over the sky with regards to indigenous mobilization since the 1970s, anthropologists Joel Sherzer and Greg Urban (1991) were responsible for introducing to US academia the important political implications of indigenous identity in Latin America. In the edited publication, *Nation-States and Indians in Latin America*, they argued that what appeared to be ethnically unique and apolitical representations of indigenous identity, such as the Kuna *molos* and the Guatemalan *huipiles*, actually contained layers of meaning that challenged existing colonial relations and represented signs of resistance against the dominant society. In the same line of thinking, Warren and Jackson (2002) discussed the politicization of indigenous identities through the process that they called “strategic essentializing”, an orchestrated revival of elements of traditional cultures to express indigenous identities and political aspirations.

Building on the foundation laid by Urban and Sherzer (1991), as well as Latin American cultural anthropologists, Van Cott (1994) produced the first academic study of the “new” Latin American indigenous movements from the perspective of the discipline of political science. This edited book presented papers that scrutinized indigenous politics in eight Latin American countries, situating the emergence of these indigenous movements in the context of the Latin American democratic transitions. For Van Cott, this historical juncture presented a double problem. States that had not yet consolidated

democratic governance were asked to suddenly accommodate the increasing demands of indigenous peoples, while indigenous peoples were confronted with states that did not respond to the difficult conditions in which they were living. In her later work, Van Cott (2000) provided in-depth analysis of the processes of constitutional reforms in Colombia and Bolivia, and later in Venezuela (2003), proposing that indigenous peoples were becoming “framers” of new constitutional orders that incorporated more inclusive notions of multicultural citizenship.

After the initial work of Van Cott (1994), a new generation of political scientists began to explore the implications of the Latin American indigenous movements from the perspectives of transnational networks, democratic transitions, social movements, and the creation of new forms of citizenship (Yashar 1998, 1999 and 2005, Brysk 2000, Assies *et al.* 2000, Sieder 2002, Postero and Zamosc 2004). Some of these authors, represented by the works of Brysk (1994, 2000), stressed the importance of transnational advocacy networks that supported an international indigenous rights movement. According to this author, these networks bridged the divides between the village, the national and the international levels, serving as catalysts and amplifiers of indigenous demands at the national, regional and local level.

Both classical and more recent social movement literature has provided an appealing theoretical framework to understand contemporary Latin American indigenous movements. In her pioneering work, Yashar (1998) utilized the Integrative Comparative Framework (ICF) that was proposed by Tarrow (1998) and McAdam *et al.* (1996). According to this author, Latin American indigenous movement had emerged as an unintended consequence of neoliberal state reforms that eliminated the previous

corporatist citizenship regimes; yet did not provide equal rights to indigenous peoples under the new neoliberal citizenship regimes (Yashar 1999). This dislocation between two different forms of citizenship coincided with the favorable political opportunity structures (POS) presented by the political liberalizations of the democratic transitions. In her early works, Yashar, however, argued that only those indigenous peoples that had enjoyed preexisting networks, such as those created by Catholic and Protestant churches, peasant unions, and other external organizations, would actually have the capacity to capitalize on the political opportunities granted by the democratic openings. In this way, she tried to explain the absence of indigenous political mobilization in Peru – an enduring question in the discussion of Latin American indigenous politics, as a result of the elimination of these previously existing networks by the military. In her later work, Yashar (2005) instead emphasized how the penetration of the State through the process of neoliberal globalization had been threatening those *de facto* spaces of autonomy that had been maintained by indigenous communities during previous historical periods. In this sense, as an unintended consequence of the process of neoliberal state reform, indigenous peoples had been pushed to assert their ethnic identities, organize politically, and increase their mobilization to defend their rights as indigenous peoples, and not as oppressed peasants like before.

Assies *et al.* (2000) agreed with Yashar (1998) that political liberalization had provided valuable political opportunities for the increasing mobilization of indigenous peoples, yet they also considered that state reform should not be regarded exclusively in a negative light. According to these authors, in addition to undermining the existing corporatist arrangements that guaranteed collective land use and local community

autonomy, neoliberal state reform also initiated important institutional reforms and “social adjustment programs” - like FOSIS in Chile and PRONASOL in Mexico - that afforded indigenous peoples with new opportunities to organize and develop mutual trust and solidarity. In this regard, they highlighted how the process of state reform had actually advanced the cause of indigenous peoples through the promotion of decentralization and indigenous authority; judicial reform and the recognition of customary law; and by bringing forward the issue of territory and land rights.

Although Assies *et al.* (2000) regarded the incorporation of ethnic rights in the process of neoliberal state reform as a positive development; Hale (2002) warned that the selective appropriation of these demands represented a dangerous form of neoliberal multiculturalism. For Hale, the adoption of the discourse of multiculturalism by International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and other international organizations had confined the demands of indigenous peoples to the realm of a “politics of recognition” (Taylor 1994), and had excluded the opinions of those indigenous leaders who sought more radical social transformations. As a result, those persons and organizations that raised unsettling questions about the intimate relation between neoliberal policies and the systematic violation of indigenous rights would immediately be labeled as “extremists”, and would be denied the opportunity to participate in formal consultation processes.

Following the criticisms espoused by Hale (2002), a group of authors with a Gramscian perspective have expressed similar concerns about the benevolence of neoliberal multiculturalism towards the improved destiny of indigenous peoples (Lucero 2003, Garcia 2003, Otero 2003, Otero and Jugenitz 2003). For these writers,

indigenous mobilization has undeniably represented a challenge to Western capitalist values, and contains the germ for the creation of counter-hegemonic discourses following the terminology utilized by Antonio Gramsci in the “Prison Notebooks” (1992). Vindicating the importance of class analysis, and expressing opposition to a romantic view of transnational networks, Otero and Jugenitz (2003) proposed a new approach for the understanding of indigenous movements, based on the theory of Political-Class Formation (PCF) formulated by Otero (1999). According to this perspective, indigenous peoples did not simply belong to an economic class according to the classical Marxist lexicon, but also represented a political class that would be formed by the interplay of a regional culture, the character of the state intervention, and the kind of leadership that predominated in the movement.

In this regard, Otero (2004) recognized three main types of state intervention: Co-optation, repression, and popular-democratic participation. The first two state policies hindered the development of any social movement by capturing the loyalty of the leadership, or destroying its mobilizational capacity. Repressive state intervention, however, was very limited in terms of time and depth, and in many cases led towards the rise of a reconstituted and stronger movement. For Otero (2004), the particular kind of state intervention was always intimately associated with the kind of leadership that was eventually developed by the movement. A “charismatic-authoritarian” leadership resulted from the ability of extraordinary individuals to garner the support of the members of the movement, but unfortunately could easily be swayed to the other side by means of co-optation. Whenever that happened, there was the possibility of a “corrupt-opportunistic” leadership that would not procure the interests of the collectivity,

but instead would take advantage of the situation for its own benefit. Only in a few occasions, a democratic-participatory leadership would actually develop a form of leadership that would be accountable to the members of the organization, and therefore could not be easily bought off or decapitated by the actions of external actors. In this way, Otero accepted the possibility of successful and broadly representative indigenous movements, like the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), but he warned that this would only occur under very special circumstances.

In his latest works, Diaz Polanco (2006) challenged the prevailing assumption that any form of multiculturalism would be compatible with the development of authentic forms of indigenous leadership. According to this author, multiculturalism was favorable to the expansion of global capitalism, and to the construction of a global empire as proposed by Hardt and Negri (2000). For Diaz-Polanco, multiculturalism represented a later stage of capitalist expansion, in which difference was not only recognized, but actively embraced, transformed, and remodeled according to the invasive relations of power that increasingly captured any possible remaining spaces of autonomy. Under this perspective, multiculturalism actually pretended to manage difference, diffusing any claims for dissent and independence. In his opinion, progressive social forces should resist this hegemonic discourse, and struggle to maintain autonomy in the midst of an increasingly assertive, de-centered and omnipresent neoliberal empire.

As the first decade of the XXI century comes to a close, the debate about the contradictory relations between multiculturalism and neoliberalism has become increasingly complicated by the apparent failure of the multicultural legal reforms that were enacted during the 1990s. The triumphal optimism of the End of History has been

completely shattered by disturbing preoccupations about the persistence of colonial relations, differentiated and not equal citizenship, and the conflict between capitalist expansion and indigenous autonomy. The different responses to these challenges will determine the expression and articulation of indigenous social movements with other emancipation movements in Latin America. The Ngobe case study that will be discussed in this dissertation offers intriguing questions about the trajectory of an indigenous movement that was expected to develop successfully. Like other indigenous movements in Latin America, the Ngobe struggle for political autonomy was initiated as a spontaneous expression of a new form of political identity (Herrera 1994, Bort 1983), but that movement has suffered profound transformations that today represent an arena of contestation among the Ngobe indigenous leaders. The final, and not yet determined, dénouement of these highly intense internal struggles will impact the destiny of the movement, and will determine its viability in the context of regional, national and global societies increasingly marked by the imprint of a disappearing, yet omnipresent, neoliberal state. The internal debate within the Ngobe ethnic community reflects current academic discussions about the contested relations between corporatism, neoliberalism, and multiculturalism, and about the ultimate fate of emancipatory indigenous movements in Latin America.

### **Research Question and Case Study**

This dissertation will try to examine as a central question the viability of indigenous political autonomy in the midst of neoliberal globalization. The Ngobe case study has been selected as an apparent failure within a national state that has conventionally been associated with the protection of indigenous political autonomy. As a matter of fact, the official recognition of Kuna political autonomy in Panama in 1930

paved the way for the emergence of indigenous claims for self-determination in Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Bolivia after the 1970s. In all of these cases, the Kuna experience was referenced as a model of successful indigenous autonomy. In addition, the military government that dominated Panamanian politics between 1969-1989 adopted the Kuna model of political autonomy as a prototype for state policy towards the other indigenous peoples living in Panama (Herrera 1989). Finally, Panama has developed an entrenched national discourse of cosmopolitanism that envisions the country as a crossroads of cultures from around the world. In recent times, multiculturalism has been enthusiastically embraced as a natural consequence of this inevitable “geographic vocation”. By exploring the reasons behind the apparent failure of the Ngobe process of political autonomy, I will try to uncover some clues about the external and internal factors that have conditioned the expression of indigenous self-determination in other post-authoritarian neoliberal and XXI-century-socialist Latin American countries.

In other words, the main question of this dissertation is why has the exercise of Ngobe political autonomy been so difficult under seemingly favorable conditions. The empirical evidence suggests that the Ngobe cannot make independent decisions from government and private business actors even under conditions such as the legacy of Kuna political autonomy, a state officially committed to indigenous self-determination, and the adoption of a hegemonic discourse of multiculturalism in Panamanian national society. I will explore the main factors that have constrained and/or favored the exercise of Ngobe political autonomy after the legal creation of the official regime of

political autonomy in 1997, the Comarca Indígena Ngobe-Bugle.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, socio-environmental conflicts such as the Tabasara hydroelectric projects, the Teribe-Changuinola hydroelectric projects, and the Damani Beach tourism development concession bring to light the contradictions of the Ngobe process of political autonomy. These controversial private/state initiatives also reveal the intense debates happening within the interior of this ethnic community about the construction of a functioning regime of political autonomy and the negotiation of power relations with the national government and private corporations, as well as discussions within the larger Panamanian society about the location of indigenous peoples in a neoliberal multicultural State.

Trying to understand the highly contested relations between the Ngobe ethnic community and external public and private actors it is important to recognize that there are two gray areas that will escape the scope of this investigation. The first issue concerns the enduring legacy of Ngobe traditional culture, as well as the profound transformations that this “culture” has been experiencing during the last fifty years. Ngobe ethnography historically has not been very abundant, and indeed the Ngobe have maintained very distant relations with external social actors since the first

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<sup>8</sup> On March 7, 2007, Law 10 of 1997 officially created the Comarca Indígena Ngobe-Bugle, or Ngobe-Bugle Indigenous Comarca. In 1938, the Kuna had redefined the meaning of the word *comarca* to signify a self-governing indigenous territory. In the 1970s, the other six indigenous groups living in Panama requested the military government of Omar Torrijos to recognize their traditional territories as indigenous comarcas. After a prolonged negotiation, the Ngobe and the Bugle lands were finally granted comarca status through Law 10 of 1997. Closely related with the Ngobe, the Bugle (or Bukle) actually are a different minority indigenous group that chose to form a single ethnic territory with the Ngobe. The same proposal was rejected by the Naso, another ethnic group neighboring the Ngobe in Western Panama (Jose Cruz Monico r. i. p. personal communication).

confirmed European encounter with this community in the XVII century.<sup>9</sup> Although this dissertation will try to present a comprehensive survey of all the ethnographic accounts that have been written about the Ngobe during the last four centuries, most of these works have been very incomplete, prejudiced, and have left many important questions not yet properly addressed, such as the complicated internal system of land allocation, gender relations, and Ngobe mythology and spirituality. The lack of a comprehensive understanding of Ngobe “traditional” culture is further complicated by the rapid and profound transformations that this ethnic community has been experiencing during the last fifty years. The penetration of external actors in the daily lives of the Ngobe has elicited diverse responses inside the community that are not yet well-understood by outsiders, and that according to my own ethnographic work, actually vary drastically between different sectors of Ngobe society. In this regard, always being a highly decentralized and complex ethnic community, the Ngobe are today deeply divided along generational, geographic, and personal value lines, and their society is in a state of constant internal contestation about the meaning of being Ngobe in the XXI century, and about the appropriate position of the different sectors of the community – children, women, elders, leaders, and shamans towards external social actors.

The other major gray area that will not be covered by this work concerns the historical legacy of the relations between the State and the Ngobe before the emergence of the Mama Tata revival movement in the 1960s. After this date, a number of well-researched academic works, such as Young (1971), Sarsanedas (1978),

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<sup>9</sup> The account of Dominican missionary Fray Adrian de Ufeldre (or Santo Tomas) constitutes the first written description that allows for unquestionable identification of the Ngobe ethnic community inhabiting the same ancestral territory where they are living today.

Cabarrus (1979), Bort (1983), Guionneau-Sinclair (1987), Bourgois (1989), and Gjording (1994) have left important descriptions of the changing relations between the national state and the Ngobe ethnic community. Some of the existing gaps in the literature will be filled by in-depth interviews conducted for this study with prominent Ngobe leaders and people who have worked closely with the Ngobe since the 1960s. However, besides the scant, disperse, and frequently uninformed accounts of missionaries, occasional travelers and a few anthropologists, we do not possess a complete knowledge of the official policies that were enacted by the Spanish colonial authorities, the Colombian government, and the Panamanian government towards the Ngobe before the mid-XX century. Apparently, these relations were highly limited by the geographic separation of the Ngobe who lived in isolated villages in the mountains of Chiriqui and Veraguas, and in the jungles of Bocas del Toro. However, we must assume that some important interactions might have occurred, especially considering the vast geographical expanse occupied by the Ngobe and the increasingly strategic importance of these lands for the Caribbean trade, which included bananas, turtle shells, and medicinal roots after the mid-XIX century. The history of the political, economic and social relations between the Ngobe and other public/private external actors during these periods calls for the realization of several historical investigations in the archives of Catholic congregations, governments, and private corporations in Panama, Spain, Peru, Colombia, Jamaica, and the United States. I can only hope that the present work will awaken academic interest for the historical past of this indigenous group. Albeit numerous and highly marginalized, the Ngobe have mostly remained hidden from the public eye by living in the safeguard of the mountains and jungles of

Western Panama, at least until recent times, in which the highly valuable minerals, waters, and beaches that they possess have lured investors, speculators, and mercenaries from all over the world.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Based on the literature review presented above, a modified version of the model of Political Class Formation (PCF) presented by Otero (1999) will be utilized as the theoretical framework for this investigation. As opposed to conventional class analysis, PCF explains the formation of political class through three intervening variables: State intervention, regional cultures, and leadership type. Undoubtedly, the Ngobe as a people suffered a profound transformation after the 1950s when they began losing the capacity to maintain a subsistence economy (Young 1971), and began mobilizing to demand land rights from the national authorities (Herrera 1994). The politicization of Ngobe ethnicity – according to the terminology used by most anthropologists – marks the formation of a Ngobe political class (Otero 1999). The incorporation of state intervention (Chapters 3, 5 and 6), regional culture (Chapter 4), and the type of leadership (Chapters 5 and 6) opens the possibility to explain the complexity of Ngobe political mobilization and contrasts with other indigenous peoples in Panama and elsewhere (Chapter 7).

A classical Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT)/Political Opportunity Structure (POS) approach such as that used by Yashar (2005) would not be able to explain the enduring puzzle of why the Ngobe leadership in Western Panama has fallen under control of government officials and private investors; whereas the Kuna leadership in Eastern Panama has maintained such a stark degree of independence and autonomy from external interests until today. Although the character of state intervention –

progressing from Liberal assimilationism to indigenista populism – remained essentially the same; there were certainly important differences in terms of the regional cultures, both between the Kuna and Ngobe ethnic communities, and between the non-indigenous populations surrounding the indigenous areas. Understanding the type of leadership remains a daunting challenge for social scientists as recognized by Otero (1999 p. 25-26) in his study about agrarian reform in three Mexican communities.

For the purpose of this work, the original leadership categories utilized by Otero (1999) have been modified to reflect more appropriately the reality of the Ngobe ethnic community and to respect the reputation of some of the main actors analyzed in this work, most of which are still active in Ngobe internal politics.<sup>10</sup> Thus, although the leadership of the original caciques can certainly be considered “charismatic”, the label authoritarian does not adequately reflect the deference and respect that these figures enjoyed among the Ngobe during the 1960s-1980s. Instead, this label frames the caciques in terms of non-Ngobe notions of democratic participation, and therefore I have decided to utilize the more neutral term “traditional” instead of charismatic-authoritarian. Much more serious is the use of the alternate term “corrupt-opportunistic”, which implies preconceived notions of morality. According to my own personal fieldwork, the coupling of indigenous leaders with government and private companies does not necessarily imply a sell-out, but may also reflect a position congruent with Western notions of development and progress. For this reason, I have replaced the category “corrupt-opportunistic” for “clientelistic” leadership according to

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<sup>10</sup> Since much of the analysis in Chapters 5 and 6 is based on publications that identify the names of the actors, I have also opted for using their real names. In addition to the documentary value of this work, most of the leaders are well-known public figures that have repeatedly and with no remorse expressed their personal positions in public venues.

the definition presented by Stokes (1995). In contrast with Stokes, however, I have avoided the use of the term “radical” that situates dissenting voices in a position of extremism as criticized by Hale (2002). In this latter case, I have retained the term participatory utilized by Otero (2004), excluding only the qualification of “democratic” for the same reasons of normative bias explained above.

### **Methodology and Epistemological Considerations**

The indigenous discourse emphasizes land rights, cultural preservation, and self-determination, three principles that are guaranteed by Panamanian and international legislation. Yet, the voices of indigenous peoples are never heard in Panamanian discussions about the future of indigenous peoples, and the indigenous self is being constantly constructed as backward, poor, and reactionary – an almost irrational desire to remain summoned in misery. This dissertation will try to portray the voices of the Ngobe of Western Panama – how they assess ten years of formal autonomy, how they visualize their political future, and how they conceive their place in XXI century Panamanian society. This academic effort is necessarily constrained by the author’s own limitations, who is not himself an Ngobere speaker, and who has only spent a limited, yet precious, amount of time within the Ngobe Territory. These limitations can only be possibly compensated by his work as an environmental and social activist in the area, that has gained him the trust of some of the most important Ngobe leaders of our times, and by his understanding of Panamanian society in general, especially notions of racial and ethnic identity. In spite of these efforts, there remain unknown areas that can only be filled by Ngobe leaders themselves – if they wish, and the author will remain loyal to the secrets that many Ngobe prefer to maintain hidden from the eyes of *chui*

society,<sup>11</sup> perhaps as a way to protect the cultural treasures that they have safeguarded for hundreds of generations.

I am aware that the methodology and the epistemological approach followed in this work in some manners contravene the prevailing norms in the discipline of political science and in North American social science in general. In the first place, this dissertation combines a heavy dosis of history and anthropology producing a very “thick description” of Ngobe politics, especially during the last five years. Although such an approach could be considered interpretive and qualitative in the more general sense of these words, Roseberry (1989) has warned about the important differences between the intellectual traditions represented by the works Clifford Geertz (1973) and Eric Wolf (1982). According to this author (p. 13), whereas Geertz “sees the Other as different and *separate*, a product of its own history and carrying its own historicity”; Wolf perceives “the Other as different but *connected*, a product of a particular history that is itself intertwined with a larger set of economic, political, social, and cultural processes to such an extent that analytical separation of “our” history and “their” history is impossible”.

My personal commitment towards such an epistemological approach was clearly expressed in the introduction to a previous publication about socio-environmental conflicts in Western Panama (Jordan 2009). Although I have inspired my research on the pioneering work of Richard Fenno (1978) about congressional leadership in the United States, I do not subscribe to his expression in the *Home Style* (1978) Appendix that “I did not want them as friends – only respondents... Some members became

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<sup>11</sup> For the Ngobe, the words *chui* and *sulia* refer to non-indigenous people. Whereas *chui* has a mostly neutral connotation, the word *sulia* is considered pejorative.

friends. But they remained business friends rather than personal friends, social friends, and family friends”.<sup>12</sup> Not only was it impossible to develop sympathy for people with whom I shared so many and in some occasion some very strenuous situations. I subscribe to an epistemological tradition in which this is not only inevitable, but actually desirable. In this regard, I draw my main inspiration from Italian political scientist, Antonio Gramsci: “The mode of existence of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, and exterior and momentary generator of sentiments and passions, but in active involvement in practical life, as constructor, organizer, “permanent persuader” – not a mere orator, and yet superior to the abstract mathematical spirit” (Gramsci and Buttigieg 2002 p. 83).

Information for this research was gathered through a combination of archival research, in-depth interviews, community meetings (otherwise called focus groups), and participant observation, both within and outside of the legally recognized Comarca Indígena Ngobe-Bugle. Archival research included searching for news about Ngobe politics in the daily newspapers *La Estrella de Panamá*, *La Prensa*, and the *Panama America*, as well as some occasional references to the daily tabloids *El Siglo*, *Día a Día*, *Critica*, and *Mi Diario*.<sup>13</sup> Official government publications, such as the *Gaceta Oficial*,

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<sup>12</sup> In a subsequent publication, Fenno (1990) himself warned about the inevitability of developing an emotional attachment with people he spent so much time as a researcher. Referring to the election of Dan Quayle as a running mate for George Bush Sr. in 1988, he wrote “For 25 years, I had tried to avoid the kind of emotional entanglements with politicians that would drag me over the boundary and into politics. Now I was getting very close” (p. 12).

<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, the tabloids are the most widely read papers in Panama, and many important news reports about Ngobe politics had only been published by these sensationalistic papers. Although oftentimes portrayed as an exotic, savage, and socially marginalized populations, in some occasions, the tabloids became the only written record of important events in Ngobe political history. All of these tabloids are published on a daily basis by the same companies that issue the newspapers targeting a more educated middle to upper class audience. *El Siglo* is currently published by *La Estrella de Panama*; *Día a Día* and *Critica* by Editorial Panama America, S. A. (EPASA); and *Mi Diario* by Corporación La Prensa.

were a main source of information about government policies and internal agreements among the Ngobe leaders that were sanctioned by the national government. Many important materials were also produced and distributed informally by grassroots organizations, trade unions, and business organizations; and were collected as they became available. Finally, a major challenge has been to obtain copies of internal Ngobe resolutions, as well as of confidential agreements with government and private corporations. For obtaining these documents, I relied on a network of Ngobe activists who trust my work as an academic researcher, social activist, and founding member of the Alianza para la Conservacion y el Desarrollo (ACD).

In-depth interviews included two different levels of analysis. Between 1999-2009, I conducted many elite interviews with political authorities, NGO representatives, business people and Ngobe leaders who had influence over the creation and subsequent operation of the *Comarca Indigena Ngobe-Bugle*. I also interviewed non-elite grassroots leaders who have been influential in the local politics of the different socio-environmental conflicts mentioned in this research. In these cases, language was frequently a barrier for effective personal communication. However, whenever possible, I received the assistance of local Ngobe translators who facilitated my communication with these grassroots leaders. In others, we struggled to understand each other in Spanish and Ngobere. Some of the interviews were conducted during Summer 1999 as part of my thesis research for the Master of Arts in Latin American Studies at the University of Florida. Another group of interviews occurred between May 2005-August 2009 as part of my research for this doctoral dissertation. Most of these interviews were tape recorded, yet some were only recorded in writing. In some occasions, especially in

Chapter 7, I have also used the contents of interviews that were conducted in the Atlantic autonomous regions of Nicaragua in Summer 2003. Finally, the contents of an important and highly critical group of interviews were provided to me by Ngobe political activists and collaborating organizations, such as ACD. In these cases, specific names will be omitted unless the interviews occurred as public declarations, or the use of these materials was expressly authorized by the concerned individuals.

Between 1995-2008, as a researcher, private consultant, government employee, and social and environmental activist, I have participated in dozens of community meetings with different indigenous groups in Panama and in other Latin American countries. Some of these community meetings were tape recorded or video taped; but in most of the cases, I have only taken written notes of these conversations. In many occasions, as a researcher, the communitarian approach of indigenous communities turned in-depth individual interviews into spontaneous, public and open community events in a completely unintended manner. For my master's research in Western Panama and pre-doctoral research in Nicaragua, I eventually decided to organize and call these meetings as focus groups. However, upon careful reflection, today I have serious reservations about the use of this label to characterize these community meetings, since the specific controls and protocols of formal focus groups were impossible to follow under these special circumstances. For instance, people walked in and out of the meetings at different moments; participation was limited to the most outspoken individuals, reflecting hierarchical relations; and consequently, in most occasions, women and young people would only play a marginal role in the internal dynamics of these community meetings. Considering the particular characteristics of

indigenous communities, social researchers, and especially political scientists, should further theorize and develop the methodologies for the organization of these community meetings that I personally consider practically and semantically different from the focus group methodologies that have been developed by marketing specialists and social scientists in Europe and North America.

Although I formally organized about a dozen community meetings in Panama and Nicaragua in 1999 and 2003, most of the community meetings in which I participated, and which provide the bulk of the materials utilized for this dissertation, I was only invited as a casual participant, or I was actually involved in the organization of the meeting for non-academic purposes, as a private consultant, government representative, or social and environmental activist. I have decided to use these materials, because they provide a wealth of information that cannot be obtained through archival, in-depth interviews, or survey research. Internal community dynamics, the interplay among various external actors, and the unanticipated appearance and/or departure of key actors reveal critical insights about the contentious dynamics of indigenous politics that should not be rapidly discarded based on strictly methodological considerations. As a matter of fact, the accounts of these meetings provide ethnographic information about Ngobe internal politics, and its contrasts with other indigenous groups that have never been published in the academic literature. Only direct participation in these events as an actor with a keen academic eye would have provided access to these internal dynamics that have oftentimes being missed by most anthropologists generally concerned with subsistence livelihoods and household activities, and not with the expression of political identities in the public sphere.

In addition to direct participation in community meetings and in other public spaces of interaction between indigenous communities and external actors - which also include government offices, public roads, transportation hubs, hospitals, and commercial areas; I have been granted access to personal, family, and community dynamics that has allowed me to obtain valuable ethnographic information about the deeply held beliefs and daily struggles of indigenous peoples in Panama, most of which I have never written. The paucity of consultant, government, and NGO reports has afforded very few opportunities to leave a written record of what I have learned from close personal interactions with indigenous peoples, especially with the Naso and the Ngobe of Western Panama. In this dissertation, I will only use a fraction of this information. In many cases, this knowledge was unexpectedly confided to me by unwaveringly distrustful indigenous leaders, perhaps as a confession to a fellow participant in the difficult struggle for indigenous rights, or simply as a personal friend. Much of these inside perspectives do not pertain in any manner to the questions examined in this dissertation. However, even if some of them did, I will purposely omit many important details for respect, affection, and consideration to those indigenous leaders who dared to reveal to a *chui* what usually only Ngobe were supposed to know about. After centuries of exploitation, marginalization, and discrimination, they have learned to withhold critical information from outsiders who would only misinterpret Ngobe history, values, and beliefs, or even much worse, who would take advantage of this knowledge to further oppress, humiliate and destitute the Ngobe. I owe to them my highest loyalty, and therefore this research will necessarily be limited based on strictly ethical considerations.

## Organization of the Work

This chapter has posed the main questions that will be examined in this dissertation; the literature that illuminates the discussion of these questions; and the methodologies utilized to obtain information about the Ngobe case study. Chapter 2 will present a historical survey of Latin American intellectual interpretations of the “Indian Question”, contrasting the legacies of the two dominant traditions of Mexican and Peruvian indigenismo. Chapter 3 will present an overview of the historical relations between the national state and indigenous peoples in Panama, encompassing from the insurrection of the indigenous *caudillo* Victoriano Lorenzo in the late XIX century, to the Kuna uprising of 1925, and the Mama Tata revivalist movement in the 1960s. This chapter will examine the dimension of state intervention that constitutes a main determinant of political class formation according to the PCF model (Otero 1999).

Chapter 4 will focus on the Ngobe ethnic community, exploring the origins and historical legacy of the Ngobe, as well as some of the most distinctive elements of Ngobe “traditional” culture and its transformations. As stated above, Ngobe ethnography remains unexpectedly scarce, and the Ngobe usual reluctance to confide internal matters to outsiders has created difficult conditions even for the most sympathetic social scientists. However, thanks to the work and dedication of a few mostly foreign academics, today we are able to explore some of the contours of Ngobe identity, not without recognizing our own limitations and even possible equivocations. This chapter will refer to the dimension of regional culture according to the PCF model.

Chapter 5 will develop the case study of the Ngobe movement for political autonomy, analyzing the struggle for the creation of an Ngobe autonomous territory, or comarca, between the late 1960s and the late 1990s. Emphasis will be placed in the

development of new forms of leadership and organization, most importantly the definition of the three regional caciques and the creation of the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress. Whereas most of this period was characterized by intense grassroots mobilization and by the articulation of a distinctively Ngobe indigenous discourse; in the actual negotiations for the creation of the comarca, there emerged a new kind of leadership, Westerly-educated, and with powerful links with political and religious organizations. It was this new cadre of Ngobe leaders who was able to finalize the comarca negotiations the approval of Law 10 of 1997.

This younger generation of leaders also dominated the first ten years of implementation of the comarca legislation as described in Chapter 6. However, this period has also seen the rise of traditionalists, anti-globalization and politically independent Ngobe social movements that advocate staunch opposition to centrally-planned development projects, as well as the primacy of Ngobe cultural identity and political autonomy. To examine these contentious dynamics, this chapter briefly examined three socio-environmental conflicts – the Tabasara hydroelectric projects, the Teribe-Changuinola hydroelectric projects, and the Damani Beach Resort controversy.

Finally, Chapter 7 summarized the most important findings of the Ngobe case study of political autonomy, and also situated this case study in comparative perspective, examining contrasts and similarities with other instances of ethnic mobilization for territorial autonomy in Panama and Latin America. For this purpose, I drew from a variety of secondary sources, as well as primary materials from Panama, Nicaragua and Peru. There are abundant publications readily available in both the Spanish and English-language academic literature about indigenous politics in Latin

America. However, a major challenge for this work was to relate the historical interactions between the Ngobe and the Panamanian State with other similar conflicts over ethnic autonomy at a larger scale. For a variety of reasons, academic research about Latin American, or even North American indigenous peoples, has been conservative about the possibility of extending any findings to global discussions about ethnic conflict. Perhaps the realities of indigenous peoples in the Americas share so many strains in common that comparing the Navajo and the Shuar with the Kurds and the Basques seems entirely defying. Nevertheless, some works have tried to situate Latin American indigenous peoples in the context of global discussions about ethnic conflict; and in this chapter, I will try to articulate my own personal position about these discussions after examining the main arguments presented by the relevant literature.

Chapter 7 also emphasized the normative and ethical implications of this dissertation research. I subscribe to an academic perspective in which the author can not possibly detach himself or herself from the persons that he/she is interacting with (hence the word object would be completely out of place in this context). As researchers, we intervene in a world reality that is oftentimes crude and disheartening, and I consider absolutely unethical to extract information about political actors without adopting a critical stance and a commitment for social change and solidarity. In this regard, I need to state clearly that I have been personally involved in the defense of indigenous rights during the course of this work, and that I plan to be continuously engaged in this struggle during the future. Not that this does not remain a difficult position for a *chui* who does not completely understand the worldview of the Ngobe, yet constantly enters in conflict with his *Latin* peers about the way that Panamanian society

constructs, represses, and manages the image of the Ngobe for its own convenience.

Yet, I also consider this to be the only position that is morally acceptable; and in this regard, I conceive of academic work as a way to challenge and reshape accepted social norms, and deconstruct the prevailing relations of power and oppression. With this in mind, I present this case study of the Ngobe process of political autonomy in Panama as a modest contribution to our understanding of the struggle for indigenous political autonomy in Latin America and in the world.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE “INDIAN QUESTION” IN LATIN AMERICA: A BRIEF HISTORY OF LATIN AMERICAN THOUGHT ABOUT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The place of indigenous peoples has always been a specter haunting Spanish-speaking thinkers and intellectuals for many centuries. Historically, these discussions have lacked a most basic understanding of indigenous worldviews and aspirations, as evidenced in the misnomer of Indians coined for people living thousands of kilometers away from the Western Pacific Ocean. As expressed by Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak (1988), the colonial experience denied indigenous peoples the right to write their own histories, and until recently, most depictions, images and stereotypes of indigenous peoples were crafted by the hands and minds of the descendants of the colonizers. In this regard, most arguments about the so-called “Indian Question” have been developed in the language of the colony, Spanish, and have exclusively involved non-indigenous writers. This chapter will review some of the most important landmarks in the intellectual history of thought about indigenous peoples in Latin America, placing emphasis on the existing critiques of these arguments and the frequently buried perspectives of indigenous intellectuals.

Like the “Jewish Question” and the “Eastern Question” in Europe, the so-called “Indian Question” has troubled Latin American politicians and intellectuals. Being ultimately an essential part of the “National Question”, and of the definition of citizenship, different tendencies have tried to address this “question” in many different manners even before the inception of independence in the early XIX century. As if this was not a sufficiently complicated issue, we must depart from the assumption that the “Indian Question” was a direct invention from the collective imagination of European colonizers trying to define the boundaries of their European identities in unknown places

and times (Todorov 1999, Campbell 1992). In this way, the Indians were consistently conceptualized as non-national peoples, yet living within the national territories of Latin American “imagined communities” (Anderson 1982).

In spite of the imposed non-national status of the “Indians” in the early republican period, the indigenous peoples had not always been conceived as a negative category. As a matter of fact, before the arrival of the Europeans, the Americas hosted millions of peoples with different cultural traditions, technological improvements, and military power. By the time of the Spanish arrival in 1492, the Aztecs in Mesoamerica and the Inkas in the Andes represented the successors of a lineage of American civilizations that had achieved great advancements parallel to similar developments in Europe and in the Far East. It was precisely for this reason that the desire of European merchants to find a new commercial route to the Orient had provoked the unexpected encounter between Europeans and Native Americans in the late XV century.

### **Interpreting the Indigenous Peoples during the Colony**

Although every imperial power during this first wave of European imperialism produced a different ideology to justify the dominion of the Native American populations (Pagden 1995), and the ensuing debates involved some of the most illustrious intellectuals of the XVI-XVIII century – such as Francisco De Vitoria and John Locke; a common theme of all of the major European powers was the “otherness” of the natives (Todorov 1999) and the superiority of European civilization when compared with the alleged barbarism and savagery of the Native Americans. Any significant departure from this script – like the astronomical knowledge of the Mayas, or the majestic beauty of Aztec architecture - was selectively ignored to avoid any cognitive dissonance. This has produced a methodological problem that we will further discuss later. All

contemporary accounts written about the indigenous peoples of the Americas have been tainted with prejudice and outright manipulation. These “birth defects” limit the historical validity of these sources until today.

During the early years of the Spanish colony, the question of indigenous peoples provoked passionate discussions among the most influential Spanish intellectuals of the XVI century. As it was soon evidenced that the original inhabitants of the Caribbean were not natives of India, the most critical question became who they were and what rights they had under the Castilian Monarchy (Pagden 1995). In this regard, the Laws of Burgos of 1512 represented the first major recognition of any indigenous rights, as well as of the human condition of the indigenous peoples, who had fallen under the control of the Spanish Empire.

We must note that the Laws of Burgos preceded the discovery of the highly sophisticated civilizations of the Mexican Plateau and of the Andes, and hence revolved around the question of whether the indigenous peoples were actually human beings. The Spanish encounter with rich and powerful cultures, like the Aztecs and the Inkas, confronted the Spanish with new questions about how to justify the submission of these peoples, and about the right (*ius*) by which they could continue ruling over them. According to Pagden (1995), these ideologies of empire transcended the American frontiers, and had major repercussions on the relations between the Hapsburgs and other peoples in their European possessions and beyond. The New Laws of 1542, which expressly prohibited Indian slavery and called for the gradual elimination of the despised *encomienda* system, sparked one of the most heated academic debates of the early Spanish colony, confronting the academics of the Salamanca School, like

Francisco de Vitoria and Bartolome de Las Casas, with canonists like Ines Gines de Sepulveda (Pagden 1995).

In spite of the reforms following the Salamanca debate, the colonial elites of the nascent Spanish American colonies consistently refused to abide by the orders of the Crown, and the Crown itself did not make any sufficient efforts to implement this legislation in order to avoid a collapse of the existing colonial order. The revitalization of missionary activity in the late XVI century only added to the existing tensions between the Spanish colonists and the Church about the destiny of indigenous peoples. All of these intellectual debates were occurring in the middle of a dramatic demographic collapse of the indigenous population that did not finally stabilize until the end of the XVII century, with intermittent episodes of new colonial penetrations with equal catastrophic results over the native population (Sanchez-Albornoz 1974).

The narratives of the conquistadors, chroniclers and missionaries were all part of a collective effort to define and invent the Indians for the imperial powers, which ultimately was an effort to draw the contours of European identities in the Americas. For this reason, we must assume that the “Indian” of the British – fierce, dangerous, and enemy, was not necessarily the same “Indian” of the Spanish – superstitious, naïve, and treacherous. Anthony Pagden (1995) has provided a profound account of the imperial ideologies of England, France, Portugal, and Spain, yet much work needs to be done about the definition of the “Indian” beyond the official imperial policies of the metropolitan powers. In this regard, Guatemalan historian Severo Martinez-Pelaez (1983) presents a compelling historical analysis about the conceptualization of the “Indian” in the Kingdom of Guatemala during the Spanish colony. According to

Martinez-Pelaez, the “Indian” was a changing category, and in some occasions, different images of the “Indian” shared the same historical pages and fiercely battled for the Spanish representation of the “people without history” (Wolf 1982). Thus, for the descendants of the colonists, the “Indian of the Conquest” – courageous, dignified, and intelligent, always a worthy rival for their forbearers, was radically different from the “Indian of the Colony” – stupid, ungrateful, and ultimately dependent on the beneficence of the *criollos*.

Although Martinez-Pelaez (1983) provides an exceptional account of how the “Indian” was constructed within Guatemala, the question remains as to how these “Indians” thought of themselves years after the defeat of the great civilizations of the Americas. This is a daunting and complex question that does not have any single answer, since during most of the colony the “Indians” only existed in the negative imagination of the colonizers conceptualized as “non-European” and “non-civilized” peoples. Historical data about disease, suicide, and depression reveal the demoralization suffered by those who were subdued by the joint power of violence and ideology. However, we must also remember that there were also thousands of peoples, like the Mapuche of Southern Chile, the Kuna of Eastern Panama, and the Apaches of Northwestern Mexico - who had never conceded defeat, and therefore remained defiant of the military capacity and the ideational domination of the European colonizers. Modern accounts about the relation between these peoples and the descendants of the colonists suggest that they never accepted the imposed label of “Indian” and instead they themselves created a non-self and non-people “other” that they ascribed mythical characteristics, oftentimes involving treason, cruelty and monstrosity. Not

coincidentally, for the most traditional peoples around the world, self-denomination literally means “people”, as opposed to “non-people” and “others”.

Later in this dissertation, I will present an exploratory analysis of how the Ngobe conceptualized the non-Ngobe and non-people as part of the discussion of regional culture (Chapter 5); yet such a task would be virtually impossible for every ethnic identity during the colony. Suffice to say that the Spanish did create a concept of the “Indian”, or of several “Indians” as argued by Martinez Pelaez, and that their descendants lived for generations following the beliefs, stereotypes and laws that had been enacted to “manage” relations with these “others”.<sup>1</sup> This involved several basic principles. First, the “Indians” were considered lawful subjects of the Castilian Crown, and therefore at least legally, they could not be treated like slaves (Pagden 1995, Castillero-Calvo 1995). Second, the lack of Christianity/civilization of the natives was the only acceptable rationale for the colonist tutelage over the indigenous peoples. This principle supported the institution of the “encomiendas” that the Crown itself eventually eliminated when mounting evidence demonstrated that the natives were being treated as slaves. Third, the natives were granted collective land rights and limited self-government within the so-called “*Republicas de Indios*”, territorial circumscriptions that were governed by the natives themselves and guaranteed permanent land rights for their descendants (Wade 1997). Legally, the rival “*Republicas de Espanoles*” could only benefit from indigenous labor through special arrangements, like the “mita” or “repartimiento”, yet the historical record indicates that the colonists systematically

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Wade (1997) and Hellen Safa (2005) refer to the creation of the Indian as an “institutionalized identity” as opposed to the invisibility of Afro-descendants during the colonial period.

ignored all of these provisions and effectively treated the natives as personal servants or even as slaves (Turner 1997).

The secular contradiction between the legal status of the “Indians”, and the actual practice of the colonists, reverberated until today in the persistence of colonial relations within modern forms of political autonomy, like the Comarca Indígena Ngobe-Bugle. In spite of these inconsistencies, the Spanish Crown did leave as a heritage the legal existence of the “Indian” as an inferior, non-European category, and the separation of “Indian” rights from the rights of other Spanish subjects (=differentiated rights). During the XVII-XVIII centuries, the work of Catholic missionaries in the unconquered territories of the Northwest, Caribbean Central America, Amazonia, Chaco, and Patagonia were directed towards the physical and mental incorporation of these “savage” Indians into the colonial system of the Castilian Monarchy, in which the “Indians” had a place clearly defined and adjacent to the lands and settlements of Europeans and the Church. As indicated by Martínez Peláez (1983) and Castellero Calvo (1995), the dispersion of the Indians and the continuous mixing of the *castas* subverted the established Spanish colonial order, revealing fractures within the imperial structure and *de facto* situations that were not controlled by the monarchs or the viceroys, including local regimes of indigenous exploitation by the *criollos* and the creation of new hybrid identities that would become the main contenders to the survivors of indigenous peoples in the XX century (Turner 1997).

With the Bourbon reforms of the XVIII century, the power of the Church was progressively reduced, further exposing indigenous peoples to the abuse of the Spanish colonists, as evidenced by the destruction of the Jesuit missions in the Chaco region.

This weakening of the Church influence, combined with an increasing imperial control and the turmoil associated with the decline of monarchic rule in Europe, provided the background for the three great popular rebellions of late colonial Spanish America, in which indigenous peoples played the most important protagonist roles (the Tupac Amaru rebellion in Peru, the Comunero revolt in New Granada, and the Hidalgo and Morelos movement in Mexico).

When the contradictions, fracturing, and general debility of the Spanish Empire finally lead to collapse, the purported colonial order that was originally created by the Hapsburgs had already become chaotic, complex and unpredictable. Those indigenous peoples (and some time Afro-descendants) who had not conceded defeat remained *de facto* in the fringes of the colonial administrations. The descendants of the European colonizers had become demographically and geographically inundated by the mixed descendants, or “mestizos”, that now claimed both Spanish and “Indian” descent; and the new, recreated, and imagined “Indians” of the colony were captured between colonial rights they now wanted to defend (Rappaport 1998) and unrestrained *criollo* pretensions that called for their outright elimination.<sup>2</sup>

### **From Independence to Liberal Republicanism**

The wars of independence tried to demolish the foundations of the Spanish Monarchy, and create the conditions for renewed interpretations of the place of indigenous peoples and African descendants in the new Latin American republics. According to the prevailing historical interpretation, when the three great popular revolutions of the pre-independence period - – Hidalgo-Morelos (Mexico), Comuneros

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<sup>2</sup> The Tupac Amaru Rebellion of 1771-1772 reflected this transitional moment (Thurner 1997).

(New Granada), and Tupac Amaru (Peru), were violently repressed and eventually defeated by the official authorities, the *criollo*-dominated republican armies were responsible for defining the ideological boundaries of the new nations (Lasso 2006). In this regard, the location of indigeneity became a critical arena of contestation that would determine the adhesion, indifference, or rejection of the revolutionary cause by the masses of indigenous peoples.

In spite of this conventional wisdom, recent historical research suggests a more proactive role by the “subaltern classes” of indigenous peoples and African-descendants during the independence wars. Lasso (2006) has challenged the accepted notion that African descendants were mere instruments of Creole revolutionaries during Colombian independence, and instead has presented factual evidence that demonstrates that they actively participated in drawing the republican constitutions, pressuring and exacting unexpected concessions from the dominant classes. In the same token, Sanders (2003) and Rappaport (1998) have argued that during the early years of the republican period, indigenous peoples consciously appropriated the colonial titles granted by the Spanish Crown, as well as the discourse of conservative elites, to defend ancestral land rights against the pretensions of Liberal republicans. Furthermore, Thurner (1997) presents a similar argument with regards to indigenous republicanism in the region of Huaylas-Ancash in Coastal Peru during the XIX century. These historical revisions are providing critical evidence for a more nuanced understanding of the reinvention of republican identities during and in the aftermath of the wars of independence. As a matter of fact, it would be inconceivable that indigenous peoples and other subaltern groups would have remained mere

spectators during these turbulent times following the demise of the Spanish colony; yet the dark legend of Creole instrumentalism has permeated most historical accounts of the revolutionary wars during the last century.

After the success of independence, those colonial categories that were created, imposed, redefined, and appropriated by indigenous peoples during the Hapsburg and Bourbon dynasties became subject to reexamination by those same forces contending for the invention and domination of the new states. As expressed above, recent historical evidence suggests that both subaltern and dominating classes were engaged in this dialogue for the creation of new republican identities, embracing, discarding, and redefining colonial categories like Indian, Republic, *Resguardos* and others. In the midst of this confusing *mélange* of language, symbols, and identities, each of the new republics that emerged from the Spanish colony and consolidated politically in the middle of the XIX century developed a common lexicon and shared understanding of words that bore lasting impacts on the place of indigenous peoples during the next two centuries, including the justifications for state intervention and the particularities of regional cultures. As expressed by Varese (1982), in Spanish America the states preceded the nations, and the definition of the ideational boundaries of these nations will remain a permanent arena of contestation.

In spite of all the regional variations and contradictions, officially the new republican authorities strived to eliminate the concept of the Indian as a semantic category. Based on notions of racial equality, individual freedom, and republicanism, they tried to explain social difference in terms of civic virtue and personal achievement. For this reason, they established very stringent limitations to the exercise of the

franchise, including gender, literacy, and property requirements (Bushnell 1998). In real terms, however, these restrictions foreclosed any possibility of indigenous participation in electoral politics, couched in terms of non-discriminatory measures, and not as the preservation of an intrinsic divine order like in the times of the colony. Under these new republican constitutional frameworks, the Indians formally ceased to exist, yet the same living conditions, social exclusion, and discriminatory practices that existed in the colony would survive in the guise of legal equality and color-blindness. This situation confronted indigenous peoples with the necessity of redefining their identities and their places in society, as explained by Thurner (1997); yet also stroke a severe blow to the diminished, yet consolidated social rights that they had enjoyed during the colony, most importantly land rights.

As a matter of fact, land distribution was at the core of the redefinition of republican identities, and of the formal elimination of the Indian. In the ancient colonial order, indigenous peoples had inalienable rights to collective property for the mere fact of being Indians, without any necessity to demonstrate “productivity” and without any risk of losing these colonial privileges. By redefining all peoples as equal citizens, XIX century republican governments eliminated the necessity to grant the Indians any special rights, and thus made them vulnerable to the progressive elimination of their collective lands with the ascension of Liberal reformers after the 1850s. Although some indigenous leaders clung to the colonial titles offered by the Crown (Rappaport 1998), others tried to defend their landholdings based on republican principles of *uti possedetis*. In spite of all of these efforts, the massive dispossession of indigenous landholdings, which was also associated with the concomitant demise of the Catholic

Church – historically a defender of Indian rights and itself a major bearer of colonial titles, ensured that wealthy Spanish descendants and foreign capitalists would appropriate the means of production of indigenous peoples and of their descendants. This Latin American version of the British encirclements produced severe social dislocations in the late XIX and early XX century, and was at the root of major social conflicts, like the Mexican Revolution, the One Thousand Day War in Colombia and *La Matanza* in El Salvador.

The rise of Liberalism in the Latin American republics during the late XIX century also marked the official adoption of a new language of cultural superiority, and eventually the advent of scientific racism, in which indigenous peoples and their descendants would no longer be considered inferior because of an unexplainable degenerative process from the “Indio de la Conquista” (Martinez-Pelaez 1983), but instead Darwinian principles would be invoked to explain the general “lack of mental capacity” and “lack of material progress” of indigenous peoples and their descendants. Under this perspective, stark contrasts would be made between “advanced” indigenous civilizations and “uncivilized” groups typically located in lowland areas that escaped colonial control, like the Northwestern deserts, the Caribbean Coast of Central America, the Amazon forests, and Patagonia. In this manner, New Granadan writer Jose Maria Samper explained the alleged backwardness of the Caribbean and Pacific coastal areas (Munera 2005), whereas Argentinean Domingo Faustino Sarmiento constructed a comparison between urban and coastal “civilizacion” and gaucho interior “barbarie”. As explained by Munera, these social constructions did not only legitimize the position of

the Spanish descendants in the new republics, but actually defined the boundaries of their own identities that would be invented as civilized and European.

With the advent of Positivism, the coupling of biological considerations with cultural explanations justified the most extreme forms of ethnic cleansing and negation of the indigenous past that have ever occurred in Latin America, most importantly the so-called “final solution” implemented in the Southern Cone and the promotion of eugenics to “whiten” the Latin American population (Wade 1997). Although Latin American elites were logically obliged to negate the European postulate that mixing would inevitably lead to degeneration, they did make concerted effort both to reduce the percentage of dark peoples, and to increase European immigration to “improve the race”. Most of these eugenic experiments ended up in failure, as Latin American governments failed to recruit large numbers of Europeans to settle the frontiers; yet, in some occasions, these migrations refashioned the phenotypic profile of the population, introducing new cultural elements and creating further complications in the already complex racial ideologies.

In the early XX century, and with a majority population of indigenous and African descendants, republican elites were trapped in their own web of racial prejudice and pseudo scientific explanations. According to European conventions, pure races were intrinsically superior to mixed individuals, and miscegenation would lead to physical ailments and genetic degenerations. In addition, for many “social scientists”, the Northern European races were intrinsically superior to Southern Europeans, like Spanish and Italians, a conception that was oftentimes conflated with associations of Catholicism with backwardness (Weber 2009). Against the prevailing European

prejudice, republican elites in the former Spanish colonies heralded the legacy of the “glorious Latin race” (McGuinness 2003, Szok 2001), and defended the alleged beneficial effects of racial mixing. Traces of this idealization of mixing may be found in the first expressions of the ideology of *mestizaje*, as represented by the writings of Cuban Jose Marti and Fernando Ortiz, as well as in the pioneering indigenista work of Manuel Gonzalez-Prada in Peru. In spite of these early challenges to notions of European superiority, the thrust of Latin American intellectual thought transitioned from unrestricted praise of Anglo-Saxon industriousness during the mid-XIX century to a revitalized admiration of *Latinidad* at the turn of the century. During this whole period, however, the supposed inferiority of indigenous peoples and African descendants was confronted with an unapologetic appeal to “whiten” the population either by mixing or by outright physical elimination.

### **The Advent of Indigenismo and the Reinterpretation of Indigenous Descent**

At the dawn of the XX century, the Latin American republics were confronted with a contradictory legacy of self-negation and self-defeat. Formal attempts to eliminate the Indian either in physical or in ideational terms had not been entirely successful, and the genetic and cultural weight of indigenous, African, and Hispanic descent excluded Latin American elites from the most privileged circles of European civilization. Although many intellectuals continued to propagate a legacy of scientific racism, a new cadre of Latin American thinkers began to question the racial and cultural hierarchies that had been imposed by North Atlantic metropolitan academic centers.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the rise of

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<sup>3</sup> As mentioned above, the works of Jose Marti and Fernando Ortiz in Cuba contributed to a revaluation of the Latin, African and indigenous heritage in America, while the work of Manuel Gonzalez-Prada in Peru espoused the first proper manifestation of indigenismo.

European imperialism also called for a renewed exultation of the Latin American civilized identity against the pretensions of North American and European powers, as manifest in the Cuban wars of independence and in the Mexican Revolution.

These national struggles against imperialism coincided with new cultural ideologies that departed from the strict social order imposed by European racial hierarchies, and highlighted the merits of now reinvented indigenous traditions – indigenismo. Pioneering indigenista writers like Hildebrando Castro Pozo in Peru and Manuel Gamio in Mexico challenged the primacy of European civilization that was defended by Liberal modernizers in the late XX century, and called for a reevaluation of the heritage of the great indigenous civilizations of the pre-Spanish period. When indigenista thinking was coupled with real-life historical struggles against North Atlantic domination, the resulting mix was an incredibly elaborate, ornate, idealized, and oftentimes exaggerated discourse on the Latin American greatness and originality, that encompassed authors as diverse as Mexican Jose Maria Vasconcelos, Peruvian Jose Carlos Mariategui, Nicaraguan Augusto Sandino, and Cuban Alejo Carpentier. With ideological positions extending across the entire width of the political spectrum, indigenista writings had very few points in common, most important of which was a revitalization of the indigenous (or African) past against the arrogance of European scientific racism.

A whole discussion of the abundant indigenista literature would require a much more extensive review. In this work, however, I will highlight the arguments of some of the most influential indigenista thinkers.<sup>4</sup> Two distinct indigenista schools can be

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<sup>4</sup> Although no clear difference is made in this work between the indigenous-centered indigenismo and the African-derived *mulataje*, these two closely related tendencies were applied separately in countries of

identified in the Spanish America in the late XIX and early XX century – The Peruvian School and the Mexican School.<sup>5</sup> Although the Peruvian School preceded chronologically the work of Mexican indigenistas, the former tendency did not last beyond the 1930s, had scant policy implications, and led to different conclusions about the location of indigenous peoples when compared with the Mexican academic movement (Marzal 1981). Furthermore, the Peruvian School eventually bifurcated into two different factions that were never capable of espousing any successful political project; whereas Mexican indigenismo was closely associated with the Mexican Revolution, the PRI governing party, and hence enjoyed the privileges and resources of the corporatist Mexican government model. Finally, in contrast with Mexican indigenismo, the Peruvian School did not emphasize mestizaje, but rather conceived of a dual social structure (Indian-White) with the “Indian”, and specifically the descendants of the Inkas, as the superior moral character and the prime source of Peruvian nationality, vitality and inspiration for the republic.

Even before Manuel Gonzalez-Prada, the literary works of Narciso Arestegui and Clorinda Matto de Thurner examined the so-called “Indian Question” (Marzal 1981). However, for Gonzalez Prada, the Indian was not simply a relic of the colony, as depicted by republicans in the early XIX century (Thurner 1997). Instead, in his opinion, the Indian had been historically demoralized and had been degenerated by the mistreatment of the *encastados* (mestizos) (Gonzalez-Prada 1978). Agreeing with

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predominantly indigenous or African descent (Safa 2005). Indeed, they are conceptually different, but they also share a common historical origin during a period when a racially-mixed Latin American identity needed to be opposed against the pretensions of European superiority. For this reason, and with the appropriate reservations, they will be treated jointly under the common rubric of *mestizaje*.

<sup>5</sup> According to De La Pena (2005), the Brazilians also developed their own version of indigenismo that was centered on the civilizing work of the *Servicio Da Proteccao aos Indigenas* (SPI).

Liberal Republicans that education would elevate the Indians whom he considered as capable as any European descendant, he also denounced that the Indian Problem was not solely pedagogical, but ultimately economic-social. In this regard, he contended that given the proclivity of the *encastados* to abuse the Indian, violence would be inevitable in order for the Indian to defend himself from oppression and discrimination.

The work of Gonzalez-Prada was soon followed by Dora Mayer who also founded the *Asociacion Pro Indigena* (Marzal 1981, De La Peña2005). Under this institutional umbrella, Mayer denounced the systematic injustices that were committed against the Indians in Peruvian society. However, the real transition between denunciation and policy changes happened during the government of Leguia (1919-1930), when Hildebrando Castro-Pozo organized the first indigenous affairs office within the Ministry of Agriculture. Following the decision by Leguia to recognize the property rights of the “indigenous communities”, Castro-Pozo visited many of these communities in the Peruvian countryside as part of his bureaucratic responsibilities. From these experiences, he collected valuable ethnographic information that would later be published in *Nuestra Comunidad Indigena* (1924) and *Del Ayllu al Cooperativismo Socialista* (1956). As a matter of fact, Castro-Pozo believed in the economic potential of the *ayllu* as an economic production unit, and in the revolutionary potential of the Indians to challenge the primacy of the *hacendados* (= *gamonales*) and the coastal bourgeoisie. With his research and development work in Peru, Castro-Pozo initiated a tradition of state intervention for the “betterment” of indigenous communities that reached its summit with the student brigades organized by Mexican indigenistas in the 1960s.

The work of Hildebrando Castro-Pozo also represented the first enunciation of the originally Peruvian thesis that the Indians represented the seed for a new version of socialism. Many years before the Maoist rebellion, and in contradiction with the prevailing European Marxist eschatology, Castro-Pozo suggested that the ayllu would be a viable economic unit, and that Indians had the potential to extend primitive communism to the rest of Peruvian society through the creation of socialist cooperatives. Although the work of Castro-Pozo was infused with certain ethnographic bias (and even some arrogance) when discussing the indigenous communities, he laid out the way for a Peruvian revolutionary version of indigenismo. In fact, he would later distance himself from the government of the Leguia dictatorship, and become a founder member of the Peruvian Socialist Party (Montoya 1979).

The Peruvian thesis discussed above was adopted, elaborated and radicalized by the great *Amauta*, Jose Carlos Mariategui (1975).<sup>6</sup> As much a fervent revolutionary as the rest of the Peruvian indigenistas, Mariategui also conceived of the “Indian” as the seed for a Peruvian Marxist Revolution. Based on this premise, Mariategui developed a historical materialist interpretation of Peruvian history that inverted the sequence of economic development propagated by European Marxists - from primitive communism to capitalist modernization. Instead, for Mariategui, the coastal bourgeoisie – permanently dependent on international capital and subservient to the highland *gamonales* – was incapable of moving the state completely towards modern capitalism. In contrast, the Indians had maintained a form of communism that could potentially be

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<sup>6</sup> In Quechua, the word “amauta” means “teacher”, and became the name of the main publication of Jose Carlos Mariategui in the 1920s. Eventually, the name came to denominate Mariategui himself as the great teacher of Peruvian socialism.

extended to the rest of Peruvian society without following the classical Marxist historical progression, or the *avant garde* version of the Bolshevik Revolution of Vladimir Lenin. For this purpose, every remnant of the feudal economy established by the Spanish needed to be eliminated, implying the redistribution of the large estates or *haciendas* to the indigenous communities. Unorthodox as the proposal of Mariategui was more than twenty years before the Chinese Revolution, his indigenista thinking would be challenged by his own comrade and personal friend, Victor Raul Haya de La Torre, eventually leading to enmity and to an irreparable division in the Peruvian Left.

As opposed to Mariategui's domestic class analysis, Haya de La Torre espoused a version of indigenismo that reverberated with the Latin American discourses of mestizaje. For Haya de La Torre, indigenismo was not about the special merits of the descendants of the Inkas, but about the originality and potentiality of mixing the glory of the indigenous and the European heritages. In this manner, he commanded an Indo-American internationalist movement, *Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana* (APRA), that incorporated the ideas of influential Latin American thinkers such as Jose Marti in Cuba, Jose Vasconcelos in Mexico (for whom Haya de La Torre worked during his exile) (Marzal 1981), and Augusto Sandino in Nicaragua. The *aprista* version of the revolution was not aimed against the parasitic coastal bourgeoisie despised by Mariategui, but instead against the imperial forces of the United States that imposed the colonial domination of Latin America. With such an enormously encompassing master frame, the influence of APRA was lasting both in Peru and in Latin America. However, the *aprista* movement did not emphasize the importance of the "Indian" as the protagonist of Marxist liberation, which was the main tenet of Peruvian indigenismo.

In contrast with *aprimo* that was highly influential at the hemispheric level, a group of intellectuals centered in Cuzco, the so called *Grupo Resurgimiento*, most importantly Luis E. Valcarcel and J. Uriel Garcia, continued with the *indigenista* tradition of Jose Carlos Mariategui, and even made new and more radical propositions (Marzal 1981).<sup>7</sup> Reminiscent of the *Mexico Profundo* of Guillermo Bonfil-Batalla (1987) many years later, Luis E. Valcarcel (1927) in *Tempestad en Los Andes* sustained that Cuzco, the ancient Inka capital, and Lima, the Spanish capital, represented the centers of two different Peruvian nationalities.<sup>8</sup> Although the position of Valcarcel became increasingly moderate after his relocation to Lima in the 1940s, his work represented the last great expression of the revolutionary tradition of Peruvian indigenismo (Marzal 1981).

When Valcarcel became the head of the Peruvian Indigenista Institute, the national branch of the *Instituto Indigenista Interamericano*; that event marked the epitaph of Peruvian indigenismo, as well as the unanticipated merging of this intellectual tradition with the Mexican tendency that had already dominated academic discussions throughout the Americas.<sup>9</sup> Rather than an original version of indigenismo, and being

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<sup>7</sup> The writings of J. Uriel Garcia appeared even more radical calling for the coming of a “New Indian” that would be born out of the Andean landscape. By using the term “Indianidad”, Garcia appeared to pioneer a completely new conceptualization of the Indian that would later be developed by Fausto Reinaga in Bolivia and Stefano Varese in Peru (Garcia 1937, Marzal 1981, Varese 1982).

<sup>8</sup> The former capital of the Inkas represented the real Peru, anchored in the *Sierra*, descendant of the Empire, and inheriting the secular struggle between the Sons of the Sun and the Spanish intruders. In contrast, Lima, was a creation of the invaders, a city without a past that was incapable of understanding its own country, and that looked away for an explanation of its own destiny. For Valcarcel, only the rebirth of the *Tawantinsuyo* would liberate Peru from the double ties of Spanish feudalism and dependent capitalism.

<sup>9</sup> As a matter of fact, Mexicans conducted an important proselytizing work, traveling to other countries to disseminate indigenista thinking and policies. For instance, Moises Saenz, the main organizer of the Inter-American Indigenista Congress in 1940 had previously traveled to Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia to analyze the situations of indigenous peoples in these countries. In the case of Peru, his work left a valuable testimony of how the work of Peruvian writers would be appreciated by a main representative of Mexican indigenismo (Saenz 1933).

based mostly on mestizaje, the aprista movement reproduced similar patterns elsewhere in Latin America, especially in the Mexican and Cuban revolutionary traditions. Although writers of the Cuzco School, like Luis E. Valcarcel, did follow an indigenista tradition more proximate to the lineage of Jose Carlos Mariategui, the original version of Peruvian indigenismo that flourished in the 1920s did not survive past the middle of the XX century, and was practically unrecognizable during the campaign of terror launched by the Shining Path in the 1980s (Degregori 1990, Gorriti 1999).<sup>10</sup>

Although indigenous peoples comprised the majority of the revolutionary forces in 1910, as they also had in the revolutionary movement of Hidalgo and Morelos in the early XIX century, the incorporation of indigenous peoples in the Mexican revolutionary imagery only occurred under a perspective of mestizaje (Mallon 1992). As opposed to the bottom-up revolutionary character of Peruvian indigenismo, Mexican indigenismo was constructed *desde el poder*, as an official state ideology that would try to integrate, transform, and administer the destiny of the indigenous masses that had recently risen to topple the Porfirian dictatorship.<sup>11</sup> An early articulation of Mexican indigenismo was formulated by the Minister of Education of the Revolutionary Government, Jose Vasconcelos (1948). For Vasconcelos, the inevitable fusion of the world races, and especially the Latin and the Indian stocks, in Spanish America would create a new and universal race that would transcend the limitations of the old and the new world, what he

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, the main figures of Peruvian indigenismo were eventually integrated into the Inter-American movement that was commanded by the Mexican academics. Besides Valcarcel, J. Uriel Garcia became an editor of *America Indigena*, the official publication of the Instituto Indigenista Interamericano, and Hildebrando Castro Pozo was also a contributor.

<sup>11</sup> Mexican authors commonly refer to this period of Mexican anthropology as “Populist Indigenismo”, as opposed to the “Liberal Indigenismo” of the XIX century and the “Neoliberal Indigenismo” of the last few decades (De La Pena 2005). In this work, I will use the work indigenismo exclusively to refer to what otherwise be called “Populist Indigenismo”, and that became known as indigenismo without adjectives in the rest of Latin America.

called the “cosmic race”. This hegemonic conception of a cosmic race that would be formed by the union of the Indians and Europeans was indoctrinated to the general population through the visual art of the *muralistas*, official education programs, and museum collections that emphasized the heritage of the Aztec civilization and the Spanish Colony. Once converted into official state policy, indigenismo actually became an active endeavor to construct a new post-revolutionary national myth, a new Mexican national identity.

The academic works of Manuel Gamio, Moises Saenz, and Alfonso Caso, among others, who adapted Boazian concepts of functionalism to current Mexican anthropology served to define government programs that would approach, document, and “improve” the livelihoods of indigenous peoples throughout the Mexican interior (Nuñez-Loyo 2000, Marzal 1981, De La Peña 2005). As a matter of fact, Gamio’s masterwork *La Poblacion del Valle de Teotihuacan* (1922) was only possible thanks to the support of the University of Columbia and the revolutionary government under the respective leaderships of Franz Boas and Jose Vasconcelos. As expressed by Gamio, the work of indigenista academics sought to integrate the Indians into modern civilization, recognizing the cultural values that they had contributed to the formation of the Mexican nation, yet trying to improve the livelihoods of these Mexican citizens who had been denied access to modern civilization. In other words, the indigenistas were consciously helping to create the cosmic race dreamt by Vasconcelos.

Not only did Mexican indigenismo make an everlasting impression on Mexican notions of self and nationality, but this academic school was also highly influential on other latitudes, thus creating a continental movement that would find expression in

almost every country in Latin America. For this internationalization of Mexican indigenismo, the watershed moment was the First Inter-American Indigenista Congress, held in Patzcuaro, Mexico, in 1940, and organized by Moises Saenz (De La Peña 2005). The Patzcuaro Congress was attended by government officials, academics, and a few indigenous representatives from almost every country in Latin America.<sup>12</sup> Among the commitments adopted by the participants in this meeting, there was the creation of an indigenous affairs office in each of the countries, the foundation of the Inter-American Indigenista Institute, and the publication of an official journal by this institution, that came to be called *America Indigena*. So influential was Mexican indigenismo that it eventually came to overshadow the distinctive Peruvian tradition and overcome the Servicio da Protecao dos Indios (SPI) in Brazil. As a matter of fact, Luis Valcarcel himself became the director of the Peruvian Indigenist Institute, in this way replacing his previous support for an Inka Revolution for a much more moderate stance about the participation of indigenous peoples in Peruvian politics (Marzal 1981).

As opposed to the Peruvian version of indigenismo that abruptly came into a dead end in the middle of the XX century, Mexican indigenismo (like aprismo) traveled and resonated in the aspirations of the ruling classes of Latin American countries, opposing Latin American originality against alleged European superiority, and defining a place for indigenous peoples as a source of *mestizo* nationality and as beneficiaries of government programs. In the nationalist and populist environment of the post-1930s period, indigenismo became an avenue for state policies seeking the integration of indigenous peoples in the existing mold of corporatist citizenship, and for their

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, Panamanian Kuna Ruben Perez Kantule was among the few indigenous participants in the first indigenista congress.

transformation into national subjects under the common rubric of “peasants”. As opposed to the Liberal republicans of the XIX century, indigenistas did not deny the existence of the Indian, but instead limited themselves to recognizing the persistence of indigenous peoples as modern “peasants” in predominantly *mestizo* nations.

The twin ideologies of *mestizaje* and *indigenismo* conveniently sustained the official discourse of integration of indigenous “peasants” in the Andean countries (Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador) and Mexico; yet the survival of tribal populations in the Amazon lowlands and other parts of Latin America confronted indigenistas with a daunting challenge. Although government officials were expected to respect, protect, and appreciate indigenous cultures, they were also responsible for integrating “poor” indigenous peoples in the *mestizo* nation, the process that came to be known as acculturation. In order to respond to such a challenge, Mexican anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre-Beltrán (1979) developed the concept of “regions of refuge” to refer to those areas in which indigenous cultures had remained inimical to *mestizaje*, and where the state needed to make special efforts to extend the benefits of modernity to these marginalized populations.<sup>13</sup>

In the midst of imagined cosmic races, Indo-American civilizations, and regions of refuge, the question remained of where the subject of the colonial Indian previously converted into republican citizen stood in the XX century. The immediate normative implication of indigenista thinking was to reach out to the Indians to provide government aid and community development (Aguirre-Beltrán 1976); yet some intellectuals

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<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, Aguirre-Beltrán framed his theory of “regions of refuge” in terms of anti-colonial struggles and early manifestations of dependency theory. For him, the Indians needed to be liberated from the colonial situation imposed upon them by local governing elites that preferred to maintain them isolated from modern civilization.

questioned the intentions. On the one hand, and following the lead of Cuban Fernando Ortiz and Mexican Manuel Gamio, the indigenous was considered a constant source of originality, authenticity, and self-discovery. In this sense, it was necessary to explore and uncover the indigenous roots of Latin American identities. Yet, indigenous peoples were also considered the remnants of past civilizations, innocent victims of non-inclusive capitalist development and colonial privileges, and therefore desperately needing to be rescued from permanent backwardness. They needed to be brought into the light of modern civilization.

This double-discourse of indigenismo – the indigenous as a source of nationhood and the indigenous as an indigent of the State - provoked a very heated debate in Mexican and Latin American academic circles during the 1960s, leading to a complete redefinition of the terms of discussion about indigenous peoples in the last decades of the XX century. For authors like Rodolfo Stavenhagen, Guillermo Bonfil-Batalla and Hector Diaz-Polanco, indigenismo had actually been used to justify government programs that sought to integrate, acculturate, and eventually disappear existing indigenous cultures through a process of ethno-phagy or ethnocide (Nuñez-Loyo 2000). According to these authors, trying to save the indigenous from what non-indigenous academics perceived as poverty, indigenista policies had ended up obliterating ancestral cultures, and had left a legacy of marginalization, dependence, and most importantly internal colonialism. Indigenistas, in turn, did not accept these accusations, and in response filled the pages of Mexican books and journals with self-apologies for the mission that they were promoting and counterattacks against the new generation of critical anthropologists (Aguirre-Beltran 1976). Although this debate dragged on and

even became vicious in the 1970s-1980s, indigenista policies had already suffered a mortal wound, and by most accounts were considered archaic, misguided and passé when Xavier Albo published his seminal article “The Return of the Indian” in 1991.

### **Reactions to Indigenismo and the Rise of Indigenous Movements**

In the context of Marxist revolutionary struggles, and with the emergence of indigenous movements in many parts of Latin America, some Latin American intellectuals began questioning the assumptions of indigenismo and the concept of mestizaje, that had informed state policies and academic debates since the 1930s (Medina 1983). They denounced the persistence of colonial relations between European descendants (including mestizos) and indigenous peoples; and they harshly questioned the long-term effects of government policies that sought to integrate indigenous peoples in the modern nation. As part of this critique, Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil-Batalla coined the term ethno-phagy to describe government policies that eventually lead to the disappearance of indigenous cultures. From the podium of official state positions in the Mexican government, indigenistas like Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán actively responded to these criticisms, sparking a fascinating debate about government policies towards indigenous peoples in Mexico and in Latin America (Aguirre-Beltrán 1976 and 1971).

In 1971, a group of anthropologists who were critical of indigenista policies met in Barbados under the auspices of the World Council of Churches to analyze the current situation of South American indigenous peoples. They included prominent continental figures, such as Guillermo Bonfil-Batalla, Stefano Varese and Darcy Ribeiro, who had already expressed public criticisms about the destructive legacy of indigenista policies. As opposed to indigenistas, they had abandoned Boazian concepts of functionalism,

and instead, had adopted a new anthropological approach underlain by Marxist and postcolonial theories, *critical anthropology*. In the Barbados Declaration, they condemned the persistence of internal colonialism in Latin America, and called for governments, churches, and anthropologists themselves to uphold Indian liberation movements and struggles for the emancipation of indigenous peoples. They also emphasized the rights of indigenous peoples to pursue their own forms of development, what they called ethno-development, and to avoid genocide and ethnocide.<sup>14</sup>

Parallel to these intellectual debates, indigenous movements had begun to emerge in many different countries, and were becoming increasingly assertive in national politics. In 1964, the Shuar Federation was formed in the Ecuadorian Amazon and the Confederacion Regional Indigena del Cauca (CRICA) was constituted in Southern Colombia in 1971 (Albo 1991). As opposed to previous upheavals in many different historical periods, indigenous mobilization was now producing a new Indianist discourse that challenged both government-sponsored indigenismo and Marxist orthodoxy. In Bolivia, the Indianist movement known as *Katarismo* produced the Tiwanaku Declaration in 1973, marking the rupture of the Peasant-Military Pact (PMP), and the emergence of Katarismo as a major political force in Bolivian labor politics (Albo 1994).

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<sup>14</sup> The positions articulated by the signatories of the Barbados Declaration did not only provoke the opposition of traditional indigenistas, like Aguirre Beltran, but also that of classical Marxists like Hector Diaz-Polanco. For Diaz-Polanco (1982), any intention to seek a particular form of indigenous development based on purely culturalist considerations divided the common struggle of the popular sectors for a socialist revolution. He accused critical anthropologists of practicing what Russian revolutionaries called Narodism, and staunchly questioned the ideological consistency of supposedly leftist academics like Bonfil-Batalla. According to Diaz-Polanco (1982), Narodism referred to a tendency during the Russian Revolution that emphasized cultural uniqueness and romanticism. Although the debate between classical Marxists and critical anthropologists did extend into the 1980s, traditional indigenistas were mostly discredited by this time, and new perspectives were being articulated even within the official Mexican bureaucracy.

Although indigenous intellectuals had certainly followed a separate path than critical anthropologists, they converged on many critical issues, particularly the right of indigenous peoples to adopt their own development models and the necessity to shed the label of peasants that had been imposed upon them and instead to be recognized as what they were, as indigenous peoples. In contrast with critical anthropologists, however, traditional indigenistas conceived indigenous peoples as research objects and beneficiaries of government programs. Finally, classical Marxists rejected the creation of separate identities, and regarded indigenous peoples as an integral part of the oppressed masses. The decline of the welfare state, democratization, and the end of the Cold War provided political spaces for the expression of new indigenous discourses, and eventually culminated in what Albo (1991) termed “El Retorno del Indio” (Yashar 1998, 1999, 2005). After centuries of non-indigenous thinking dominating discussions about indigenous peoples, they had finally conquered a stage of their own to articulate their own interpretations about what they were and what they wanted to be. They had passed from being colonized Indians in the Spanish colony to republican citizens in the aftermath of independence; from “equal citizens” in the Liberal republics into purported mestizo peasants in the times of indigenismo. Now they could finally portray an identity of their own – albeit impacted by five hundred years of colonialism, instead of simply adapting the different labels that were ascribed to them by the descendants of the colonists.

In Western Panama, the politicization of Ngobe identity paralleled similar developments at a continental level (Herrera 1994). Although state intervention in the Ngobe territory also traced the changes in government policies in other Latin American

countries, the period 1969-1981 saw the development of a new form of charismatic indigenismo that captured the loyalty of the most important Ngobe leaders of the times. General Omar Torrijos Herrera did not only amplified the network of indigenous clientelism that had been laid out since the 1930s, but developed a very personal relation with the indigenous leaders that will outlive his own material presence in this world. The next chapter will outline the trajectory of state intervention in Panama, highlighting the construction of a Panamanian version of indigenismo between the 1930s-1970s.

### CHAPTER 3 GOVERNMENT POLICIES TOWARDS INDIGENOUS PEOPLES ON THE ISTHMUS OF PANAMA (1510-1968)

According to the PCF model presented by Otero (1999), in order to understand the formation of a Ngobe political class in the 1960s, we need to analyze the kind of state intervention that was practiced by the Government of Panama previous to that date. Before the Mama Tata insurrection of 1965, the trajectory of state policies towards indigenous peoples in Panama traced similar developments elsewhere in Latin America. Although the Colombian conservative Regeneration (1886-1930) extended the predominance of the Catholic Church beyond countries like Mexico and Argentina, after independence and beginning in 1910, Liberal assimilation would mark the tone of state intervention in Panama. This Liberal civilizing project towards indigenous peoples failed miserably with the Kuna insurrection of 1925, and was soon followed by a prolonged yet attenuated period of Panamanian indigenismo (1932-1990). These were the policies that affected the Ngobe ethnic community when they became politicized after the penetration of their boundary by non-indigenous cattle ranchers, and the massive spread of Ngobe migrant laborers in the neighboring commercial plantations of Western Panama.

#### **Spanish Colonial Policies Towards Indigenous Peoples on the Isthmus of Panama (1510-1821)**

As documented by Catillero-Calvo (1995), the Spanish policies towards indigenous peoples on the Isthmus of Panama paralleled similar developments in the rest of the Spanish colonies in the Americas.<sup>1</sup> Before the creation of the Panamanian

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<sup>1</sup> Being the first European colony on the Spanish Main, the Governorship of Castilla del Oro (Panama) initially belonged to the jurisdiction of the Audiencia de Santo Domingo and then shortly passed to be part

*Audiencia* in 1563, Spanish America saw the implementation of two fundamental legislations, the Laws of Burgos (1512) and the New Laws (1542), initially leading to the creation of *encomiendas* and then to the reorganization of the indigenous population in “Indian Towns”. However, the demographic catastrophe produced by the Conquest drastically reduced the native population on the Isthmus, making necessary the importation of Indians from Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Peru in order to maintain the nascent colonial economy that in this part of the Empire was mostly based on inter-oceanic trade and transportation. After the passing of the New Laws, this illegal form of coerced labor would be steadily replaced by imported African slaves; yet the reduced, ethnically-mixed, and disperse indigenous population of Panama continued to decrease as a result of miscegenation, out-migration, and plain Spanish cruelty and mistreatment.

The *Audiencia de Panama* was ascribed to the Viceroyalty of Lima between 1563-1718, and then again between 1722-1739 (Arosemena 1974). In the 1570s, Viceroy Toledo ordered a census of all the indigenous populations in this jurisdiction, including the Isthmus of Panama (Castillero-Calvo 1995). This survey revealed the continuous decline of the native population, the irremediable dissolution of some of the Indian Towns that had been previously created, and the meager situation that prevailed in the remaining *encomiendas*. Based on this situation, the Viceroy ordered the consolidation of some of the Indian Towns and the elimination of the *encomiendas*. Had the Panamanian authorities ceased to procure new indigenous subjects in the unconquered territories of the Caribbean Coast and Eastern Panama, those populations who had survived the early colony and refused any contact with the Europeans would

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of the *Audiencia de Los Confines* (most of Central America) until the creation of the *Audiencia de Panama* in 1563 (Sauer 1966, Arosemena 1974).

have remained undisturbed. However, the Spanish authorities in Panama City, and eventually in the colonial provinces of Veragua and Nuevo Cartago and Costa Rica, continued organizing conquering expeditions or *entradas* into the indigenous lands under the pretext of bringing the natives into Christianity (Heckadon-Moreno 1987, Fernandez-Guardia 1969). These *entradas* were almost never welcomed by the majority of the indigenous population, and as a matter of fact, viable colonies were never created in these unconquered territories during the rest of the XVI century.

However, in the late XVI, XVII and XVIII century, the colonial authorities began to rely on Catholic missionaries from the Dominican, Franciscan, Mercedarian, and Jesuit orders to bring the remaining native populations into an expanding sphere of colonial domination (Castillero-Calvo 1995). Although scant historical investigation has been conducted about the work of these religious orders on the conversion of the Panamanian natives, the few existing archival sources revealed that the Dominicans and the Franciscans played a very significant role in the geographic resettlement and cultural suppression of ethnic groups like the Doraces, Changuinas, Ngobe, and Cocles in Western Panama. In contrast, the Naso and Bribri of Western Panama, and the Kuna of Eastern Panama, were never effectively integrated into the Spanish colonial system, and therefore remained on the margins of Spanish domination until the independence of Spanish America.<sup>2</sup>

During these two centuries of intense missionary activity, those indigenous peoples that moved from the Caribbean to the Pacific and were congregated in Indian

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<sup>2</sup> As an exception, the Indian Town of San Francisco de Terraba was founded by the Spanish authorities of Nuevo Cartago y Costa Rica to concentrate Naso people that they had convinced to relocate on the Pacific slope (Gordon 1982). This town still exists and represents the only Costa Rican location for the descendants of the Naso.

Towns typically lost their cultural identities and native languages; and eventually miscegenated with the neighboring European colonists and African descendants, unless they managed to escape from the colonial sphere and join resistant populations in the jungles of the Caribbean Coast and Eastern Panama. Thus, the missionary activity created a dual system that was reminiscent of the “Indian of the Conquest” and the “Indian of the Colony” described by Severo Martinez-Pelaez (1983). The “Indians in the Town” were forced to remain subservient to the Spanish colonizers, whereas the “Indians of the Frontier” actively or passively resisted the encroachment of the Spanish authorities. In the first case, political and religious authorities invested costly efforts to discipline these populations, imposing the Catholic faith, the Spanish language, and European customs and manners. In the latter, the Crown continued claiming nominal sovereignty over these populations; yet a combination of neglect and denial characterized the relations between the colonial authorities and the unincorporated populations.

No archival evidence has been found about the existence of Indian Resguardos on the Isthmus of Panama, similar to those documented by Rappaport (1998) in the Southern part of the New Kingdom of Granada (nowadays Colombia). Considering the proximity of the Cauca Region, this would be entirely surprising had the Isthmus not remained a completely separate colony from the sphere of influence of Santafe de Bogota and Popayan during most of the colony.<sup>3</sup> Although more research is needed to

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<sup>3</sup> The Panama Audiencia continued to respond directly to the Lima Viceroyalty during most of the colonial period; and in colonial Panama, the institutions, the actors, and interestingly even some cultural notions about indigenous peoples were mostly derived from the Pacific Coast of South America (Greater Peru), and not from the neighboring Guatemalan (Central American) or New Granadan colonial administrations. A most important aspect of this Pacific connection concerns the conceptualization of the *cholo*, a term today rarely used in Colombia or Central America, but that has major racial implications in both Panama and Peru.

clarify the possible existence of New Granadan *resguardos* in the so-called *Reino de Tierra Firme* (Panama), the complete absence of these colonial institutions should not be unexpected considering the precarious communications between Panama City and the two most important colonial centers of highland New Granada, Santafe de Bogota and Popayan.

Because of the geopolitical situation described above, colonial policies and social constructions about indigenous peoples on the Isthmus of Panama would be primarily controlled by Spanish officials in the Audiencia de Panama, and undoubtedly influenced by the authorities in Lima at least until the final incorporation of the Panama Audiencia into the Viceroyalty of New Granada in 1739. Even after that date, the formal relation between the Panamanian colony and the New Granadan hinterland remained minimal until the 1850s. For this reason, further research is still needed to understand the internal dynamics and external links of the Panama colony with the rest of the Spanish Empire during the critical second half of the XVIII century.<sup>4</sup>

### **Indigenous Peoples During the Period of Incorporation to the Republic of New Granada (nowadays Colombia). The First Half of the XIX Century.**

The republican history of Panama is usually divided in two different periods. In the first period, between 1821-1903, the history of Panama is considered to be dominated by the political contest between Liberals and Conservatives leading to the final creation of the Republic of Colombia in 1886 and the separation of the Isthmian Department seventeen years later. According to the conventional history, the second period started with the Independence of Panama from Colombia, when Indian-State

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<sup>4</sup> As an illustration, the most important missionary priest among the Ngobe, Fray Adrian de Santo Tomas actually responded to the Dominican seat in Lima, and as an illustration, while narrating his epic travel to Panama City with a group of Ngobe chiefs, he declared that he organized some of natives to enter the City dancing “a la usanza del Peru” (Castillero-Calvo 1995).

relations will be influenced by the internal process of construction of the modern Republic of Panama. In this work, however, the first period, called by Panamanian historians the Colombian period, will be divided in two very distinct phases. Between 1821-1855, the Colombian state as such did not truly exist, and contending elites who were divided along ideological and geographical lines struggled to define the contours of the nation. This complex and oftentimes confusing period of Colombian nation-building will be examined in this section. The second part of the XIX century that simultaneously saw the creation of a Panamanian autonomy regime, its irremediable dissolution, and finally the separation of the Department of Panama from the Colombian State; a period much more relevant for State-Indian relations, will be examined in the following section.

In 1821, and before the arrival of the Bolivarian Army, the colony of Panama declared independence from Spain, and immediately annexed to the Bolivarian Republic of Colombia (or Great Colombia) (Arosemena 1974). According to the official historical analysis from those times, this decision was made conscientiously after an internal debate among the Panamanian elite about the advantages of joining this political entity, and a consensus rejection of the contending Peruvian and Mexican alternatives. As part of the First Republic of Colombia between 1821-1830, Panama remained a marginal portion of the Colombian state, essentially a military bridge for troops traveling between Caribbean cities such as Cartagena and Caracas; and Pacific settlements like Guayaquil and Lima.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Only in two occasions did the fate of the Isthmus become of any importance to the Bolivarian cause. The first was the convocation of the First Inter-American Congress in Panama City by the "Liberator of the Americas" in 1826; and the second occurred that same year when a group of disaffected Panamanian

After the dissolution of the Republic of Colombia in 1830, once again there was an internal debate within the Panamanian elite confronting those who favored a political alliance with the merchants of Guayaquil with those who continued imagining Panama as an integral part of a reconstituted New Granadan Republic. Although the latter option eventually prevailed; in two separate occasions, New Granadan sovereignty was seriously challenged by the unpredictable social forces revolving on the Isthmus (Figueroa-Navarro 1982). Between 1830-1831, two contending factions separated Panama from the Republic of New Granada on two different occasions. The first case is particularly relevant for this discussion, because of the social and racial connotations of the separatist movement, and the particular reading of this episode that was advanced by the ruling elite of Panama City during the course of these events. A close Bolivar aid, Panamanian mulatto general Jose Domingo Espinar decided to separate the Isthmus from the constitutional order of New Granada, and invited the Liberator to return to power and restore the Republic of Colombia by ruling from this location. Although this invitation was rapidly dismissed by Bolivar, the political move of Espinar caused panic among the Panamanian elite who allegedly feared an insurrection of the colored masses that would recreate the horrors of the Haitian Revolution, an abominable race war (Lasso 2006, Figueroa-Navarro 1982). Not only was the reaction of the elite absolutely disproportionate; but it was also symptomatic of the hysteria in which they constantly lived by being virtually surrounded by a majority of African descendants. A few months later, the Panamanian patricians themselves supported a separatist movement led by Venezuelan general Juan Eligio Alzuru, only to backtrack

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patricians considered the creation of a commercial city-state following the model of the Northern European colonies in the Caribbean, such as St. Thomas and Curacao (Figueroa-Navarro 1982).

when the situation appeared to be spinning out of control. In this case, the conflict was not framed in racial terms, and no accusations of “race war” were leveled against the prominent families of Panama City. The main motivation appeared to be the persistent dream of the Panamanian notables to create a commercial city-state (Figueroa-Navarro 1982).

The other occasion in which New Granadan sovereignty was called into question over the Isthmus of Panama was during the so-called *Guerra de los Supremos*, in which the Panamanian ruling families led by Liberal General Tomas Herrera decided to create the *Estado del Istmo* between 1840-1841 (Figueroa-Navarro 1982).<sup>6</sup> The Herrera insurrection became an important threat to the integrity of the Republic of New Granada not only for his refusal to terminate his revolt promptly, and the establishment of diplomatic relations with the neighboring state of Costa Rica; but for the disturbing presence of British forces in the Mosquito Region. The Panamanian elite had shown a disproportionate level of sympathy towards this world power making continuous references to the creation of a special commercial regime for Panama similar to the British enclave in Jamaica. Responding to the possibility of British annexation of Panama for the construction of an inter-oceanic canal, the Government of New Granada decided to sign the Mallarino-Bidlack Treaty with the United States of America in 1846.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Although the Panamanian separation was congruent with similar developments during this period in other New Granadan regions like Cauca and Cartagena (Bushnell 1993), this episode was particularly relevant due to the length of the separation, as well as the extreme response of the Government of the Republic of New Granada. Not only was the *Estado del Istmo* legally constituted as an independent political entity for more than a year, but General Herrera went as far as signing an agreement with the nascent Government of Costa Rica. This treaty tried to define the international boundary between the two countries, a question systematically delayed since the signing of the Molino-Gual Treaty between the Central American Federation and the First Republic of Colombia in 1825.

<sup>7</sup> The Mallarino-Bidlack treaty guaranteed free passage across the Isthmus, and in tandem with the Monroe Doctrine, prevented any European power from violating the sovereignty of New Granada under the credible threat of US intervention. This treaty was a turning point in the history of Panama, because

Ironically, only a few years after the signing of the Mallarino-Bidlack Treaty that explicitly incorporated Panama in the American sphere of influence, the Government of New Granada finally granted autonomy status to the Isthmus before embarking on the most ambitious federal experiment ever to occur in the Americas (Bushnell 1993).<sup>8</sup> However, the alleged autonomy of Panama would soon clash with both the imperial pretensions of the United States and the ambitious nationalism of politicians in the New Granadan hinterland.

As described by McGuinness (2008), between 1848-1856, with the California Gold Rush and the construction of an American-controlled railroad, Panama passed from being a forgotten New Granadan region into a burgeoning commercial center for North Americans traveling between the Eastern seaboard and the promised land of California. The rapid, profound, and violent Americanization of Panama during this period drastically transformed the economy of the country, replacing working hands and boatmen with a trans-isthmian railroad and steam navigation.<sup>9</sup> With the construction of the Panama Railroad, the development of an inter-oceanic commercial and transportation hub in Panama also transformed the ethnic composition of the country,

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this agreement placed the Isthmus for the first time under the direct influence of the United States, literally in *The Talons of the Eagle* (Conniff 1992, Smith 1996).

<sup>8</sup> The Panamanian federal state was conceptualized by the Liberal Isthmian politician and renowned academic Justo Arosemena who believed in the sovereignty of the people, and the construction of the nation from the foundations of self-government at the local level (Arosemena 1974).

<sup>9</sup> The social dislocations resulting from these changes bred inconformity among the local mostly Afro-descendant population, leading to the popular insurrection historically known as the "Watermelon Incident" (McGuinness 2008, Figueroa-Navarro 1982). In a racially-charged environment, the refusal of a group of American travelers to pay for a watermelon slice unleashed a violent mob of dark-skinned locals who went after American travelers all the way to the dock of the American-owned railroad company. After this disastrous episode, the American government demanded reparations from the New Granadan authorities, leading to the first of numerous US occupations of the Isthmus of Panama during the next century and a half.

and initiated a prolonged process of identity formation that would confront the inhabitants of the commercial, urban, and cosmopolitan inter-oceanic passageway with the agricultural, rural, and local hinterland (Figueroa-Navarro 1982). During this first immigration wave, most of the immigrants came from the Caribbean Coast of New Granada, the British colonies in the Caribbean, and China. What would be the place of the indigenous populations from the periphery in the cosmopolitan metropolis of the inter-oceanic passageway during the mid-XIX century? Unfortunately, we lack sufficient historical information to respond to this question, yet the following account will delve into some of the possible scenarios using the scant historical information currently available.<sup>10</sup>

On the Eastern frontier, the Kuna had remained completely separate from the colonial administrations, and several authors believed that they had actually agreed on a truce with the Spanish authorities a few years before independence (Howe 1998). Although the Kuna had managed to dominate much of the lands east of Panama City; in the XVIII century, a different indigenous group, the Embera, had begun to migrate from the Choco Region, occupying many areas south of the San Blas Cordillera formerly occupied by the Kuna. Apparently, the Embera expansion produced important conflicts between the Embera and the Kuna. However, by the mid-XIX century, the Kunas themselves had initiated a migration towards the Caribbean Coast that would convert the San Blas Archipelago into the core of the Kuna homeland by the XX century.

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<sup>10</sup> Before analyzing the place of indigenous peoples in Panama in the XIX century, we must understand that those indigenous populations that had remained concentrated around the colonial towns in the Western Pacific Coast had experienced an extraordinary level of miscegenation, and could not properly be identified as indigenous by the mid-XIX century.

In Western Panama, the surviving indigenous groups had become more linked with the Panamanian transit economy. A combination of centrifugal forces like the Miskitu raids sponsored by the British colonists in the XVIII century, and pull factors such as the Catholic missionaries, had vacated much of the indigenous lands in Westernmost Caribbean Panama, leaving the diminished Naso and Bribri populations as the sole survivors of a previously much more diverse and numerous indigenous population. Further to the East in Caribbean Western Panama, the Ngobe had maintained important settlements in the Pacific Coast ever since the times of the first Dominican missionaries in the early XVI century; yet they had also maintained an important population in the Caribbean Coast, especially in the Cricamola River and the Valiente Peninsula. Finally, although the Cocles had apparently remained a separate indigenous group living closer to Panama City (Castillero-Calvo 1995); they also had established very important relations with the rest of Panama through the town of Penonome, and were undoubtedly experiencing a rapid process of cultural erosion that would completely eliminate any vestiges of the indigenous language by the end of the XIX century.

Considering the instability of the former Spanish colonies during the first half of the XIX century, and the particularly precarious relation between Panama and New Granada, we can assume that no indigenous policy existed in the country before the creation of the Federal State in 1855. On the other hand, the marginality of the areas occupied by the remaining indigenous peoples ensured a situation of *de facto* cultural survival and political autonomy for these populations; with the important exception of the Miskitu invasions, internal wars and the continuous work of the Catholic missionaries.

The end of the Spanish colony and the continuous animosity shown towards communal property by Liberal republicans, however, drastically weakened the power of the Catholic Church, and therefore made its influence minimal during the early XIX century. Most probably, in the 1840s, indigenous peoples experienced a period of relative calm, peace, and stability. All this would change rapidly with the commercial expansion of Panama City and the new Caribbean terminal port of Colon City, and with the penetration of the global capitalist economy into every interstice of the Caribbean Basin, including the Isthmus of Panama.

### **Political Autonomy, Capitalist Growth, and Indigenous Resistance in the Second Half of the XIX Century**

McGuinness (2008) provides a different angle about the spectacular economic growth and prosperity experienced by Panama in the 1850s. Beyond the autonomy claims of the governing elite and the optimistic tone of the American daily newspapers, there was a different story, that of the boatmen, *cargadores*, and *pongueros* who used to gain a living providing transportation services to foreign visitors before the construction of the railroad. For this underclass of mostly Afro-descendants, the construction of the *iron horse* did not signify progress; but instead relegated them to permanent destitution. As a result of this technological change, these disenfranchised inhabitants of the inter-oceanic corridor placed their lot into the promises of the Black Liberal Party; and on occasion, took matters into their own hands like in the Watermelon Incident of 1856.

After the middle of the XIX century, indigenous peoples throughout Panama would find themselves in a similar predicament. Although their lands were never necessary for the construction of the railroad or for the projected inter-oceanic canal,

and although they were very poorly integrated into the world economy, the increased global demand for all sorts of natural products, such as rubber, vegetable ivory, turtle shells (*carey*), and medicinal plants, touched directly upon the shores of the Ngobe and the Kuna homelands. In addition, the expansion of Panama City and Colon demanded an increase in agricultural production, pressuring the traditional lands that the Ngobe and the Cocles kept as landholders in Pacific Western Panama. At the beginning, indigenous peoples, like the Afro-Descendant inhabitants of the inter-oceanic corridor before the railroad, benefited from the increased sales of products to the national and international market. However, they soon realized that the forces of capitalism did not appreciate the work of artisan providers; but would rather strive to create large-scale operations in the lands that indigenous peoples had occupied since before the arrival of the Europeans.

One again, in Panama the lack of historical information is abysmal; yet, a few documents attest to the profound transformations that were being experienced by indigenous peoples in Panama during the late XIX century. In 1870, a Kuna delegation traveled to Bogota to visit the President of the United States of Colombia (Morales-Gomez 1995). They were deeply concerned with the armed threats posed by rubber-tappers and other “foreigners” who visited the Kuna lands and disrespected the authority of the traditional leaders, the *sahilas*. The documentary sources available provide a fascinating account of the Kuna diplomatic style; and at least formally, depict the national government in Bogota in a very positive light. As a matter of fact, the national authorities decided to sign an agreement with the Kuna, recognizing their ancestral land rights and offering government support to protect them against the

unwelcome intruders. Regrettably, and in the midst of constant constitutional crises, the Colombian State never implemented this agreement, and some thirty years later, the Kuna *Sahila Dummagat*, Inanakinya, would mysteriously die in very unclear circumstances when trying to approach once again the central government in Bogota (Howe 1998).<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, no mention was ever made of Kuna resguardos during these official accounts, and the dealings of the Kuna with the Colombian government were much more akin to the peace treaties that were signed between European powers and indigenous peoples in North America, the Amazon, and other unconquered territories in the Americas.<sup>12</sup>

As opposed to the Caribbean Coast, where outlaws, traders, and adventurers were responsible for harassing the indigenous communities even before the advent of the banana emporia, in Pacific Western Panama, cattle expansion was disrupting social relations in “*El Interior*”, and completely redefining power and regional dominance relations.<sup>13</sup> According to Illueca-Bonnet (1983) and Figueroa-Navarro (1982), there was

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<sup>11</sup> The *Sahila Dummagat* is traditionally the most important political/spiritual authority in a Kuna confederation. Today, although every village has two *sahilas*, the *Sahila Dummagat*, also referred as *Cacique*, is elected by the General Congress as the main representative of the Kuna people in front of the national authorities (Perez-Archibold 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Decree 29 of April 1826 ordered the Colombian State to protect and treat as national citizens the indigenous tribes inhabiting the Guajira, Darien, and Mosquitos (Guionneau-Sinclair 1991 p. 51-65). In a new decree of April 29, 1871, the Government of the United States of Colombia, based on Law 4 of 1870, ordered the creation of the Comarca of Tulenega following the January 10 agreement with the Tules (Kunas). Twenty years later, Law 89 of 1890 would differentiate between civilized Indians living in resguardos and savages being reduced to civilized life by missions.

<sup>13</sup> The infamous vendetta between the Goytia and the De La Guardia families around the town of Parita appears to be the best documented case of these outbreaks of rural violence. In this mythical story, the De La Guardias were aligned with the Conservative Party, and represented the large landholders who had dominated the rural economy of Western Panama for many centuries (Garay 1930). The Liberal Goytia family, in contrast, commanded the loyalty of the medium to small agricultural producers of the Azuero Peninsula, who had traditionally relied on subsistence agriculture and small-scale cattle ranching. The vicious confrontation between these two parties dismembered the Parita community, and possibly laid the ground for recurrent episodes of rural violence during the next forty years; most importantly, the

a dramatic growth of the cattle raising frontier that coincided with the large-scale settlement of the Westernmost Province of Chiriqui after the expansion of the demand of meat in the Panama-Colon market and the development of steamship navigation. Cattle expansion and rural violence became increasingly pronounced after the start of the Panama Canal construction by a French company in the 1880s. The descendants of the Cocles living around the town of Penonome were in a particularly vulnerable situation. Closer to the colonial centers than any of the other surviving indigenous populations in Panama, the Cocles had been abused by Spanish descendants in the countryside for centuries (Conte-Porrás 1997). Reminiscent of the Peruvian discriminatory hierarchy, they were often called *cholos* by the rest of Panamanians as they had already lost most of their indigenous language by the late XIX century. But the Cocles still continued calling themselves Indians, and they were treated as such by the neighboring mixed-blood population. In spite of these continuously tense ethnic relations, the Cocale lands around the colonial town of Penonome remained essentially Indian Territory until the late XIX century; and for this reason, the Cocles clung to the land claims that they had inherited from the colonial authorities, and to the special Indian governing institutions that outlived many years of New Granadan and Colombian republican administrations. This began to change with the passing of Law 80 of 1890.<sup>14</sup>

According to Law 80 of 1890, enacted by the Conservative government of Rafael Nuñez - who personally led the abolition of the United States of Colombia through the

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assassination of the Conservative Governor of the Sovereign State of Panama, Santiago De la Guardia in 1861, and the One Thousand Day War in 1899-1902.

<sup>14</sup> Francisco Herrera and Marcela Camargo have both commented about the possibility of a resguardo title for the Indians of Penonome; yet, those documents have never been found in Panama. Given the lack of historical research in Colombia about XIX century Panamanian history, this situation may simply be lack of sufficient archival work rather than the non-existence of these documents.

Regeneration and consequently terminated the Panama autonomy regime; the Government of Colombia had the obligation to recognize the resguardo lands that had produced so much controversy between Liberal and Conservatives in the Cauca Region during the entire XIX century (Rappaport 1998, Sanders 2003). Considering the unquestioned condition of the Cocles as indigenous peoples, they would have been expected to support the Conservative Regeneration that enacted legislation recognizing the collective lands that many Liberals wanted to eliminate since the mid-XIX century. Surprisingly, in the context of Western Panama, the *cholos coclesanos* aligned themselves with the Liberal party of Pedro Goytia and Belisario Porras, who were allegedly defending the interests of small and medium-sized land-holders against the voracity of wealthy *latifundistas*. Further research is still needed to clarify the events leading to the late XIX century Liberal insurrection in Panama. The existing evidence, however, suggests that the decisive support of the Cocle Indians to the Liberal cause stemmed from the arbitrary changes that were approved by the Conservative Government to the boundaries of the Indian Cabildo of Penonome, and to the power conflict that was generated by this measure between the Indian Governor of Penonome and the non-indigenous Alcalde of Capira (Conte-Porras 1997).<sup>15</sup>

Although Panamanian nationalists have usually exaggerated the role of the One Thousand Day War (1899-1902) in the separation of Panama from Colombia; even depicting this internal conflict as a sort of Panamanian war of independence, the federal

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<sup>15</sup> From the controversial redrawing of the Indian boundaries between Penonome and Capira, the indigenous *Regidor* of El Cacao, Victoriano Lorenzo, engaged in a dispute with the Alcalde of Capira that led to the assassination of a Capira representative (Conte-Porras 1997). For this crime, Lorenzo was condemned and incarcerated for ten years in the neighboring town of La Chorrera. After his release from jail, Lorenzo returned to Penonome, and did not involve himself in any major political activity until the eruption of the One Thousand Day Civil War between Liberals and Conservatives in 1899.

autonomy question that was violently suppressed by the Regeneration in 1886 definitely represented a main point of contention between the Liberals and Conservatives (Bushnell 1993). On the Isthmus of Panama, heavily oriented towards foreign trade and zealous about the loss of the autonomy regime, the majority of the population, including an important sector of the elite, sided with the Liberal revolutionaries. Consequently, Panama became a main transshipment center for weapons, vessels, and troops coming from the Liberal governments of Nicaragua and Ecuador. Only the large-estate owners of Pacific Western Panama, and a reduced sector of the Panama City elite, aligned themselves with the central government, turning the Isthmus into a red department and an important strategic point for the Liberal Revolution (Figueroa-Navarro 1982, Porras 1973).<sup>16</sup>

In 1901, a reinvigorated Liberal Isthmian militia disembarked in the Southern part of the Azuero Peninsula, and worked its way through the Panamanian countryside with ample support from the rural population all the way to the savannahs of the provinces of Veraguas and Coclé. At this moment, the armed support of the *cholos guerrilleros*, and especially the loyalty of their uncontested leader, Victoriano Lorenzo, represented a most decisive factor for the success of the Liberal insurrection on the Isthmus.<sup>17</sup> When

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<sup>16</sup> During the first part of the One Thousand Day War on the Isthmus of Panama, between 1899-1900, the Liberal revolutionaries managed to capture the majority of the countryside, and even established a siege of the Panama-Colon transportation axis that was heavily guarded under international protection by the US, British, and French governments (Porras 1973). This first phase of the war ended abruptly with the failed assault on Panama City that would be remembered as the Battle of the Bridge of Calidonia. During this frustrated military maneuver, the Liberal forces on the Isthmus lost many troops; and in the aftermath, the bitter divisions among the generals signaled the end of the Liberal insurrection in Panama. However, the Panamanian Liberal caudillo from the Azuero Peninsula, Belisario Porras, managed to escape to Central America, and from there he organized a new revolutionary force with the support of President Jose Santos Zelaya of Nicaragua.

<sup>17</sup> While Belisario Porras sought military support from the Government of Nicaragua, the Coclé Indians had never lost their stronghold in the mountains around Penonome. Not only had they maintained the Liberal insurrection alive, but their guerrilla campaign, at all times framed within a language of Indian

the Azuero militia commanded by Belisario Porras joined with the cholos guerilleros under Victoriano, once again the Liberals had taken control of the whole Interior, and now the elites in Bogota and Panama City had reasons to fear a new assault on the trans-isthmian corridor.<sup>18</sup> As the allied Porras-Lorenzo troops swept across Pacific Western Panama, and again zeroed in on Panama City, the rest of the Liberal insurrection in Colombia was being decimated by the power of the Colombian Army.<sup>19</sup>

The Wisconsin Peace of 1902 entailed an agreement between the Liberal and Conservative leaders to pacify the country during negotiations for the construction of the Panama Canal, now under the aegis of the United States. Although the majority of the Liberal commanders acquiesced to this agreement, Belisario Porras rejected this political move and again went into exile in Central America. Here we need to be modest about the conclusions that can be drawn from the scarce, and not necessarily objective, accounts of this period. The evidence suggests that Victoriano Lorenzo was also

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rights, terrorized Spanish-descendants in Pacific Western Panama, and made Victoriano an almost mythical figure bestowed with powers, capabilities, and tactics that threatened the status quo in the Panamanian countryside. In my opinion, one of the most complicated factors to understand the significance of Victoriano Lorenzo has been the pervasive combination of myth and reality around such a complicated historical character. He has been interpreted and reinterpreted in many different ways by several generations of Panamanian writers, and he has also been surrounded with an aura of heroicity, sanctity, and martyrdom.

<sup>18</sup> The military alliance between Porras and Lorenzo traveled much beyond the confines of a historical civil war and still moves around in the folkloric and magical world of the Panamanian countryside with countless stories about real or imaginary encounters, conversations, and actions between these two larger than life characters as recounted by elderly story-tellers. These two figures could not be any more different. Belisario Porras, a well-educated, European-looking, and doctrinaire Liberal politician who dreamt of being President of Colombia; and Victoriano Lorenzo, an Indian, ex-convict, and grassroots leader primarily concerned with the lands of his peoples, and not so much with the intricacies of Colombian politics in the distant capital of Bogota. However, if we are to believe anything about the many stories and scant historical accounts that have been written about this period, the two men developed a rapport that would not only facilitate the command of the Liberal troops during the Revolution, but would have major implications for State-Indian relations in Panama for years to come.

<sup>19</sup> By October 1902, the Liberal Revolution only appeared to survive on the remote Isthmus of Panama, where the main leaders of the Conservative and the Liberal parties decided to convene aboard the USS Wisconsin to sign the final peace treaty for this ravaging civil war, one of the worse in the republican history of Colombia (Bushnell 1993).

opposed to this form of mutual elite accommodation (Conte-Porrás 1997). What we certainly know is that despite his condition of ex-combatant, General Lorenzo was arrested a few weeks later, summarily tried in a military court, and finally executed in the old Spanish Quarters of Panama City on May 15, 1903. Not only had the possibility of a new Liberal insurrection been completely annihilated with the elimination of Victoriano, but the first major indigenous insurrection in the modern history of Panama (and Colombia) had been betrayed by the same Liberal Party with which the Cocolé Indians decided to ally during the One Thousand Day War.<sup>20</sup> As the United States wielded the 1846 Mallarino-Bidlack Treaty to mobilize the Marines to guard both coasts of the Isthmus and prevent the Colombian military from seizing control of a rebellious department, Belisario Porrás observed the events from his exiled residence in El Salvador; planning his return to Panama with a new Liberal project.

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<sup>20</sup> Colombian historiography has exalted the revolutionary movement of Manuel Quintín Lame in the Southern Cauca Region as the first modern insurrection of indigenous peoples in the country; and one of the first in Latin America. However, the same disconnect between Colombian and Panamanian history that has left Panama as a dark zone during the late XIX century, as well as the blend of this indigenous movement with the Liberal-Conservative civil war, has prevented a proper appreciation of the revolutionary movement of the *cholos coclesanos*. The immediate independence of Panama has further complicated the historical interpretation of Victoriano; yet he is still considered “el primer guerrillero de las Américas” by leftist groups in Panama, and his alleged motto, “la pelea es peleando” has traveled well beyond his time into modern Panamanian revolutionary discourse. Most importantly, today the Ngobe consider Urraca and Victoriano as precursors of the Ngobe struggle for land and autonomy.

In the immediate months following the execution of Victoriano, the political landscape in Panama remained unstable and constantly changing. In August of 1903, a rumor spread about the possible sale of the Isthmus to the Government of the United States, which provoked bitter reactions and expressions of Colombian nationalism by notable representatives of the Panama elite, most importantly Belisario Porrás and Eusebio A. Morales. Then there was the unexpected rejection of the proposed US-Colombia Panama Canal Treaty by the Colombian Senate with the only abstention of the representatives from the Isthmus; and a few months later, the declaration of Panamanian independence by a haphazard coalition of notable Liberal and Conservative politicians (Figuerola-Navarro 1982).

## **Indian-State Relations in the Liberal Conception of the Republic of Panama, 1903-1931**

With the creation of the new Republic of Panama in 1903, Indian-State relations needed to be completely redefined. This historical juncture represented simultaneously a daunting challenge and an unparalleled opportunity for indigenous peoples and the new Panamanian State. As stated above, evidence suggests that the Colombian State, marred in a seemingly irremediable conflict between Liberals and Conservatives, and with a precarious articulation with the distant Department of Panama, did not visualize the importance of indigenous peoples on the Isthmus as it certainly did in the Cauca region since the beginning of the XIX century (Sanders 2003). As explained above, the invisibility of indigenous peoples in Panama did not imply that grievances were completely absent. Instead, with the exception of the legendary Kuna visits to the distant Bogota and the revolutionary outcries of the cholos guerrilleros that were violently suppressed by the Colombian Army, the voices of the Isthmian indigenous peoples were never heard in the remote Andean capital.

With the separation of Panama from Colombia, in the new Panamanian State, territorially limited and conditioned by the overwhelming presence of the United States, the voices of indigenous peoples resonated strongly in the walls of Panama City, reviving the fears of indigenous invasions haunting the Spanish city many generations before. Although the permanent rift between Liberals and Conservatives and the “special” relation with the US were more urgent matters for the Panamanian elite, the presence, reticence, and belligerence of indigenous peoples loomed in the minds of the urban patricians, and attracted unwelcome complications to the already convoluted question of national sovereignty.

Both Francisco Herrera (1989) and James Howe (1998) have considered the initial years of State-Indian relations on the Isthmus (1903-1910) as dominated by the Conservative Party. The Conservative policy consisted in delegating the responsibility of Indian tutelage to the benevolent hands of the Catholic Church.<sup>21</sup> However, apart from the work of Herrera and Howe about the Kuna, much information is still lacking about what actually happened during these years with the Bribri, Naso, Ngobe, and Bugle in Western Panama; and with the Embera and recently arrived Wounaan on the Eastern Frontier. Although the Bishop of the Diocese of Nuevo Cartago and Costa Rica, Bernardo Thiele, possibly visited several Naso and Bribri communities in the Talamanca region a few years before the independence of Panama, for the most part, the new and distant Province of Bocas del Toro - under dispute with the neighboring Republic of Costa Rica - remained de facto United Fruit Company (UFCO) territory.

Herrera (1989) and Howe (1998) have also narrated the frustrating experience of Father Leonardo Gasso who strived to convert the Kuna in the early XX century. On top of the logical consequences of declaring that the beliefs of the Kuna people were absolutely false and inspired by the Devil, Father Gasso also confronted unforeseen difficulties arising from the political instability in Panama City. After the separation of Panama from Colombia, the Kuna became deeply divided about swearing loyalty to the new government. Whereas the Eastern communities that were commanded by sahila Inapankinya preferred to maintain a distant yet stable relation with Bogota; the Western communities leaned towards recognizing the government in Panama City. In line with

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<sup>21</sup> Law 19 of 1906 ordered the suppression of the indigenous governors and cabildos of Cocle, and the creation of schools under the responsibilities of Catholic missionaries in the villages of Pajonal, Toabre, Tolu, Canaveral, Harino and Valle de Anton. Furthermore, Law 59 of 1908 extended the civilizing mission of the Catholic Church to the "tribus salvajes de indigenas que viven en el pais" (Guionneau-Sinclair 1991 p. 68-71).

the diplomatic style of the Kuna, both parties eventually sent delegations to the respective capitals. Whereas the gesture of the Western sahilas had raised hopes for the presidential administration of Carlos A. Mendoza, the choice of the Eastern chiefdoms created concerns among the ruling class of Panama City. To quell these worries, President Mendoza organized a visit to the San Blas Archipelago that ended in a major fiasco when a group of Western sahilas refused to allow the President of Panama to disembark on the islands where they lived. Clearly, the Kuna were dwelling in lands that were claimed by the Republic of Panama; but they themselves had not yet made a final decision about political allegiance with the new country.

The Mendoza Affair also marked the beginning of twenty one years of continuous Liberal rule over the country. The period of Liberal dominance did not only see the virtual disappearance of the Conservative party, but the complete transformation of the State according to the principles of free trade, secularism, and private property. Without the tutelage of Bogota, Panamanian Liberals would finally have their say about the future of the country, and nobody was more prepared for directing this liberalization of the Isthmus than the ultimate, and now returned from exile, caudillo, Belisario Porras, who won the presidency in 1912. As any self-respecting Liberal, a natural step would be curtailing the privileges of the Catholic Church, including its monopoly over the civilization of the Indians. This happened through Law 56 of 1912 (Guionneau-Sinclair 1991 p. 71-73). Much to the dismay of Father Gasso, the Porras administration did not only grant permission, but actively encouraged a rival Protestant mission headed by North American Anne Coope on an island a few meters away from Gasso's Catholic headquarters (Herrera 1989, Howe 1998). The message of the Porras administration

was very clear. Religion and politics should remain separate; and therefore, the Catholic Church should not be afforded any special privileges by the Liberal government.

Since the Coope mission signaled a divorce between state policy and Catholic evangelization, State-Indian relations needed to be redefined along secular lines. Both Herrera (1989) and Howe (1998) coincide that the first Porras presidency (1912-1916) inaugurated a new Liberal period of State-Indian relations, in which the Christian Gospel was replaced by the Gospel of Civilization. According to Article 2 of Law 56 of 1912, the Executive could create circumscriptions to administer indigenous territories; and based on this legislation, President Porras issued Decree 33 of 1915 creating the San Blas Circumscription.<sup>22</sup> Although the Kuna were never fond of the Gasso and the Coope missions, these religious campaigns never raised the level of animosity and the visceral reactions elicited by the civilization campaign of the Liberals. Once again, although we lack information about what was happening with the Bribri, Naso, Ngobe, and Bugle in Western Panama, and with the Embera and Wounaan in the East, the Liberal policies towards the San Blas Kuna were not only culturally intolerant, but explicitly colonial.

The conflict began with the appointment of a non-indigenous *intendente* to rule over the San Blas Circumscription in 1915. Both Herrera (1989) and Howe (1998) present a very detailed description of the main grievances that the Kuna accumulated

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<sup>22</sup> In an exceptional manner, and probably in memory of Victoriano Lorenzo, President Porras issued Decree 44 of 1914, which declared inalienable a land polygon occupying the heartland of the Cocle Territory (Guionneau-Sinclair 1991 p. 74). The civilizing approach of Belisario Porras found an intriguing anomaly with the passing of the so-called Conte Law and the creation of the Toabre Indigenous Reserve. According to Herrera (1989), this was the first formal recognition of indigenous territoriality in the Republic of Panama and probably responded to a personal debt between Belisario Porras and Victoriano Lorenzo. We have scant historical information about this isolated episode; and ultimately, the Toabre Reservation became a fiction since the inhabitants of the mountains of Cocle lost any self-identification as Indians in some unrecorded time after the creation of the Republic of Panama.

against the intendentes during the following ten years. The appointment of intendentes, the creation of outposts for the appropriately named Colonial Police, and the imposition of non-indigenous teachers in public schools in the San Blas Archipelago represented a virtual invasion of the Kuna lands by the secular Liberal Panamanian State. Although the Law of 1915 tacitly recognized Kuna ownership over these lands, the most important battleground became the ideational realm, where the representatives of the State struggled to impose the Spanish language, change the Kuna ways of living, and literally strip Kuna women away from garments such as the molas and nose rings that they considered atavisms from a backward and uncivilized society. These impositions from the intendentes, colonial policemen, and school teachers violated the Kuna traditional system of governance that was based on consensual decision-making by a community congress, *onmeked* (Howe 1986). Although some villages, especially those already impacted by the work of the missionaries, knowingly accepted the new Panamanian customs, according to Kuna traditional norms, this did not affect the independent will of the other communities. This decentralized and horizontal logic for decision-making was completely unintelligible for the representatives of a nascent state particularly hysterical about questions of national sovereignty. Confronted with the Kuna refusal to abide by external orders, the messengers of civilization on many occasions proceeded to discipline the “rebellious” savages, publicly humiliating sahilas and women for clinging to “uncivilized manners”.

The spontaneous state-building work of policemen and teachers devoted to turn the Kuna into lawful Panamanian citizens, together with the tacit or explicit acquiescence of the intendentes, created a situation of increasing turmoil, uneasiness

and resentment among the Kuna villagers (Howe 1998). The perception of the Liberal presidential administrations in Panama City, and especially of Porras himself who once again became president in 1918-1920 and was reelected for a final period between 1920-1924, was that the State was making very significant inroads in the conquest of the Kuna. Instead, the civilizing work of the intendentes, policemen, and teachers had decreased the level of support of the Kuna towards the national government, and in accordance with a consensual and coalition-building political tradition, conditions were becoming ripe for a definitive resolution of this conflict. When a new Liberal president was sworn on October 1, 1924, a general Kuna uprising was only months away from occurring.

As recorded by Szok (2001) and Lasso (2001), part of the Liberal work of nation-building in Panama was explicitly directed towards constructing a predominantly Hispanic national identity, unapologetically denying the African and indigenous heritage of the country.<sup>23</sup> Under this perspective, the indigenous became only acceptable as a hispanicized version of the past; and for this reason, school teachers in San Blas struggled to undress and redress indigenous Kuna women with the national *pollera*, and obligated children to perform the national dance *tamborito*. High class women in Panama City, no longer considering themselves Colombian, experienced a similar transmutation between the 1900s and the 1920s. As documented by Szok, the most important national festivity, *Carnaval*, became an ideal venue for upper class

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<sup>23</sup> Although the indigenous was partially tolerable as a female receptacle of the Spanish heroicity, the African was completely extricated from national identity and labeled as foreign, degenerate, and corrupt. The ideal marriage between the Spanish Conquistador, Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, and the Indian Princess, Anayansi, was represented in the literary drama of *El Tesoro de Dabaibe* by Octavio Mendez Pereira (1951), and encrypted in public monuments celebrating this saga in the waterfront on Balboa Avenue. This representation of the Spanish male and the indigenous female reverberated with similar myths of mestizaje elsewhere in Latin America (see Chapter II).

Panamanians to dress as mestizo peasants from the Western Pacific Provinces, and precisely during this apotheosis of Panamanian nationalism, the Kuna decided to strike back against the Colonial Police.

Howe (1998) has provided a very detailed account of the special circumstances that led to the Kuna assault on the Liberal State, assigning proper dimension to the prominent role of the North American adventurer, Richard Marsh. The Kuna organized a premeditated, elaborate, and vindictive rebellion against the Government of Panama on Carnival 1925. Because of the sheer numbers and skillful maneuvering, the insurrectionists were able to overrun the police outposts in the San Blas Archipelago in a few days; while the Panama City elite awakened from the greatest of Panamanian festivals to realize that they had lost control of San Blas. Had the United States not intervened in the conflict, the Panamanian Government might have escalated the confrontation sending a citizen militia to fight against the Kuna. However, the direct participation of a former member of the American Legation in this insurrection, and the desire to maintain political stability on the Isthmian protectorate, motivated the American Government to intervene in the conflict.<sup>24</sup> More difficult to decipher would be the alleged American sympathy for the Kuna (and equal disdain for the Panamanians), an accusation leveled against the Americans during the media coverage following the Kuna rebellion. Although both the Kuna and the Americans showed visible signs of admiration (and occasionally animosity against mixed-blood Panamanians), gunboat

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<sup>24</sup> A similar situation had arisen in 1921, when a citizen militia in the Western Province of Chiriqui had been spontaneously organized to reclaim the Coto Valley in a border dispute with the neighboring Republic of Costa Rica.

diplomacy in the 1920s was not inspired by mutual feelings of appreciation, but rather by pragmatic considerations about American national interest.

Regardless of the visible or concealed intentions of the American Government, the swift mobilization of an American vessel to the Caribbean waters of San Blas did not only prevent a continued poisoning of the conflict; but consciously or inadvertently, favored the Kuna, who emerged victorious from the insurrection with a US-mediated agreement with the Government of Panama to respect Kuna land rights and to move indigenous policy away from the civilizing model sponsored by the Liberal State. As a matter of fact, this Liberal State, now under the command of President Rodolfo Chiari, was beginning to crumble under its own weight. US military intervention, an urban uprising led by an alliance of anarchists and communist union leaders, and de facto emancipation of the Kuna in Eastern Panama signaled the irremediable deterioration of this political alternative that prevailed in Panama since 1910.

During the next years, open neglect characterized the relations between the Liberal establishment in Panama City and the Kuna chiefs in San Blas. Although Decree 130 of November 1925 ordered the creation of a reserve for the indigenous inhabitants, presumably the Ngobe, of the District of Remedios in the Western Province of Chiriqui (Guionneau-Sinclair p. 89), and Law 59 of December 12 of 1930 (G. O. 5901) created the San Blas Reserve, government indigenous policies had lost the shine and the impetus of the Porras years (1915-1925). In 1931, Accion Comunal under the command of Arnulfo Arias Madrid staged the first coup d'etat in the history of the republic, toppling the last president of the Liberal dynasty, Florencio Harmodio Arosemena. The coup also inaugurated a new period in which nationalism, populism,

and social welfare dominated policy-making and political discourse in Panama City, including indigenous policies.

### **Nascent Indigenismo during the Advent of the Welfare State and the Onset of Virulent Nationalism, 1931-1945**

Although Herrera (1989) considers that a new period of State-Indian relations in Panama inspired by indigenismo did not start until 1946, Howe (personal communication) believes that the alliance between the Kuna and the administration of Harmodio Arias was a pivotal moment in the Kuna struggle for political autonomy. Undoubtedly, the period of Accion Comunal represented a major shift in the conduct of State-Indian relations, in which the Government of Panama adopted a US-like system of Indian reserves (or reservations).<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, we do not have a detailed historical analysis of the political motivations behind the adoption of this policy. The Accion Comunal period has remained an arena of contestation among the few Panamanian and foreign historians that have tried to understand the 1930s and early 1940s. At different moments they have labeled these years from revolutionary to a disguised form of bourgeois liberalism (Conte-Porrás 1990, Pearcy 1998, Szok 2001).

Independently of the (in) consistent policies of Accion Comunal, the administrations of Harmodio Arias and Juan Demostenes Arosemena transformed indigenous policy from a frustrated civilizing adventure into an opportunistic, clientelistic, platform. The governments of Accion Comunal were not necessarily proactive in the

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<sup>25</sup> After 1931, many of the founders of Accion Comunal became disaffected with newcomers such as the Arias brothers and considered that the movement had come to an end. In spite of this perception, the 1931 inaugurated a period of profound policy changes in the Panamanian State that reflected many of the proposals and preoccupations of Accion Comunal. In addition, many prominent figures in the presidential administrations of Harmodio Arias (1932-1936), Juan Demostenes Arosemena (1936-1940), and Arnulfo Arias (1940-1941) traced their political careers to Accion Comunal. For this reason, and despite the historical controversy, I have decided to refer to these three presidencies as the period of Accion Comunal (1932-1941).

promotion of indigenous welfare; yet they courted indigenous leaders and exchanged favors for the sake of political legitimacy and governance. Although Herrera (1989) considers that the Panamanian reserve system was a product of the Liberal Era, more than an official state policy, the San Blas Kuna Reserve (1930), the Remedios Ngobe Reserve (1925) and the Toabre inalienable lands (1914) represented *ad hoc* regimes of exception meant to accommodate and appease the historical struggles of the Cocle guerrillas and the San Blas Kuna without settling questions of self-government and/or permanence.<sup>26</sup>

The indigenous reserves created by the governments of Accion Comunal did not only represent a more comprehensive policy approach, but served a more explicit political purpose by incorporating previously marginalized indigenous groups into the mainstream of Panamanian politics. Law 18 of November 8 of 1934 (G. O. 8934) created the indigenous reserves of Cricamola (Ngobe); Cusapin y Bluefield (Ngobe); and Alto Bayano (Kuna). This law reiterated the basic principles that were stated in Law 59 of 1930: The lands would be held in common, and they would not be subject to renting or purchasing. As opposed to a specific law directed towards a particularly problematic situation, Law 18 of 1934 was meant to be a general national law to be applied to indigenous peoples around the country. As expressed by Article 3:

Artículo 3: El Poder Ejecutivo **esta obligado** a declarar inadjudicable una zona de terreno **en cada una de las Provincias de la Republica** donde haya tribus de indios y las destinara como reservas indígenas para que estos trabajen en ella gratuitamente (emphasis added).

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<sup>26</sup> More intriguing is the creation of the Remedios Reserve as the first Ngobe-specific policy enacted by a Panamanian Government. Based on the account of Johnson (1963), rural conflicts between the Ngobe and cattle ranchers might have been growing in intensity after the introduction of cattle to the Ngobe boundary in the late XIX century (see Chapter 4).

Article 3: The Executive Power **is obliged** to declare inalienable a zone of terrain **in each of the Provinces of the Republic** where Indian tribes were living, and will destine these lands as indigenous reserves for the Indians to work in them without any payment (emphasis added).

Considering the wording and geographical extent of this legislation, Law 18 of 1934 could be considered the first national *indigenista* legal provision of the country, and a definitive mark of change in Indian-State policies from Liberal civilizing to Populist indigenista (De La Peña 2005). Such a change reflected similar developments at a hemispheric level (see Chapter 2), from which the Accion Comunal coup would be a manifestation. We lack any historical documents certifying the influence of Mexican indigenistas in Panama; but the parties originating from Accion Comunal belonged to a lineage of center-left parties in Latin America, such as *Accion Democratica* (AD) in Venezuela and APRA in Peru, that were closely associated with the cultural and political project of the Mexican Revolution (Herrera 1989 p. 77). The praxis and rhetoric of the Accion Comunal administrations - allying, co-opting, and incorporating worker unions and peasant organizations - reflected similar regional tendencies towards creating new regimes of corporatist citizenship, and not a mere continuation of Liberal policies as implied by Percy (1998).

Although we lack sufficient information about the policy process leading to the enactment of Law 18 of 1934, including possible lobbying of the national government by the Ngobe leaders of Western Panama; the presidential administrations of Accion Comunal were particularly concerned with agrarian reform.<sup>27</sup> Law 20 of 1934 even

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<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, Article 1 of Law 18 made reference to an official blueprint that was leveled by the official land surveyor Blas Humberto D'Anello for the Alto Bayano Reserve (Kuna). Harmodio Arias was also responsible for the appointment of Tomas Guardia as head of the Ministry of Public Works (Percy 1998). From that moment, Mr. Guardia would become the most influential person in the development of public infrastructure in the country, irrespective of the political turmoil that characterized Panamanian politics during the following years.

authorized the national government to purchase a terrain in the area of San Juan along the National Road to the Province of Chiriqui (Guionneau-Sinclair 1991 p. 93-94).

Among the motifs for this state intervention, this law textually cites:

Que se hace indispensable reducir el latifundismo en la Republica hasta donde sea posible.

This has become necessary to reduce large land ownership in the Republic as much as possible

Que las tierras de San Juan han constituido para la Provincia de Chiriqui particularmente y en general para la Republica de Panamá, serios problemas internos y externos, muy conocidos por toda la nación.

That the lands of San Juan have represented for the Province of Chiriqui in particular and in general for the Republic of Panama, serious internal and external problems, very well known for all of the nation.

Unfortunately, the problems mentioned by the legislators are not well known by the whole nation any longer, yet we can presume that they were related with land conflicts among the Ngobe, poor mestizo peasants, and large landowners in Eastern Chiriqui Province. Undeniably, and in the absence of known mobilizations as in the case of the Kuna, powerful reasons were compelling the State to enact policies favoring the Ngobe of Western Panama during this period. Symptomatically, no similar policies were ever implemented for the Embera of Eastern Panama until Law 18 of 1952.

In 1936, and before being replaced as President of Panama by his close associate, Juan Demostenes Arosemena, Harmodio Arias Madrid faced a second Renters Strike in which Accion Comunal found itself on the other side of the fence. The event marked the final rupture of the Accion Comunal administrations with the most belligerent sectors of the Panamanian Left, and the collapse of the historical alliance with the West Indian unions operating in the Canal Zone (Pearcy 1998, Lasso 2001). Although President Arosemena continued the same populist policies of Arias, his

regime was rapidly losing credibility, and in this scenario, the Kuna vote became critical (Herrera 1989 p. 78).<sup>28</sup> On September 16, 1938, the National Assembly passed Law 12 of 1938 by which two regions of the country were declared as *comarcas* – San Blas and Baru. This was not an entirely new term in Panama, and had already been applied to undeveloped regions of the country in the XIX century, including the failed Tulenega Comarca of 1870.

Although the comarcas of Baru and San Blas were similar to governorships, Article 14 specified that they would be considered part of the provinces of Chiriqui and Colon respectively for electoral purposes. Instead of a governor, the comarcas would be ruled by an *intendente* appointed directly by the President. In this way, Law 2 reinstated the controversial figure of an intendente that had accrued a negative undertone leading to insurrection in the San Blas Circunscripcion in 1925. Nonetheless, in this case, more than a colonial official, the new intendente would be an administrative figure responsible for supervising lower level positions, such as *regidores* and secretaries. In general, Law 2 was more specific about the internal organization of the Comarca of Baru than that of the Comarca of San Blas, including the designation of a Juez Comarcano with the same hierarchical level as a municipal judge to administer justice in the Comarca. Arguably, the more difficult questions about the San Blas Comarca were left unresolved for subsequent discussions in the preparation of the *carta organica*.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> According to Herrera (1989), the Kuna vote leaned towards the opposition candidates in both the 1932 and the 1936 elections.

<sup>29</sup> In Panama, a *carta organica* or organic charter has come to represent the equivalent of an indigenous constitution that consecrates internal norms of conduct based on customary law (*usos y costumbres*).

Given the significance the term *comarca* came to acquire for indigenous political discourse in Panama after the 1930s, and even with the scant historical sources available, we need to analyze (or at best speculate) about the motivations that propelled the Accion Comunal administrations to create a common administrative regime for such disparate regions of the country. In contrast to San Blas, the Baru region was not inhabited by indigenous peoples, but had become an enclave of the United Fruit Company in the 1920s.<sup>30</sup> In addition to a marginal frontier location, the only commonality between Baru and San Blas was a general lack of strong central government institutions. As opposed to San Blas, however, the Baru region was undergoing a rapid process of incorporation to the Province of Chiriqui in the years before the relocation of the banana operations. In the San Blas islands, most government activity had come to a halt with the Kuna insurrection of 1925.

If we accept the proposition of Herrera (1989) that the San Blas Comarca was created to gain political support from the Kuna in the face of the upcoming 1940 election, this bold step towards electoral bargaining unexpectedly produced a complete redefinition of State-Indian relations after the indigenous appropriation of the term *comarca* to signify a special regime for self-government. The future interpretation of this term by indigenous leaders in Panama will be analyzed in the following pages. Before passing of new indigenous legislation in 1946, the Panamanian constitutional order entered into one its most profound crisis after the radicalization of the Accion Comunal faction that was led by Arnulfo Arias Madrid; and the desperate reaction of the

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<sup>30</sup> After the Panama Disease had decimated most of the UFCO banana plantations in Caribbean Panama and Costa Rica, this transnational company requested authorization from the Government of Panama to create a new division in Pacific Western Panama on lands that eventually became the Baru Comarca (Stephens 1987).

traditional Liberal establishment eager to recover control of the State. Former President and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ricardo J. Alfaro, represented the latter group, and he initially contested Arnulfo Arias for the 1940 elections (Percy 1998). After realizing that Arnulfo had the backing of the incumbent administration and that he was willing to utilize any possible legitimate and illegitimate means to become the next President of Panama, Alfaro elegantly withdrew from the electoral competition, leaving the field open for a political hurricane.<sup>31</sup>

Once in power, Arnulfo Arias tried to refound the Panamanian State on principles of nationalism, anti-imperialism and social welfare. The new 1941 Constitution that the President imposed on the National Assembly created a social security system and enfranchised women paralleling similar developments in Europe and Latin America (Percy 1998). The doctrine of panamenismo promoted a national movement to eliminate the widespread use of English, especially in the immigrant-dominated commercial circles of Panama City; and the Arnulfo government even began printing paper money to replace the US dollar as the main currency. This apparently innocuous celebration of Panamanian values and institutions, however, also had a dark side. The accolades of Arnulfo initiated a persecution of West Indians, Jewish, and Chinese immigrants organizing deportations, harassment, and public humiliation. Most of the

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<sup>31</sup> A Harvard-educated physician and Panamanian Ambassador to Italy during Mussolini, Arnulfo Arias became one of the most charismatic leaders in the history of Panama. He was recognized winning the presidential elections three times and possibly was denied victory in several other occasions (Lafeber 1989). He had commanded the Accion Comunal assault on the Presidency on January 2, 1931; and enjoyed important government positions during the presidential administration of his brother Harmodio Arias Madrid. Despite his close ties with Accion Comunal, Arnulfo was a character of his own and after returning from Italy espoused a virulent anti-immigrant discourse without precedent in the history of Panama. Although the thrust of Accion Comunal emphasized nationalism, anti-imperialism, and mestizaje, Arnulfo took to unimaginable levels the xenophobia that was encapsulated in the existing special laws against the immigration of undesirable races, namely West Indians, Semitic, and Orientals. The *Arnulfista* offshoot of Accion Comunal was eventually denominated *Partido Panamenista*, and with the support of President Juan Demostenes Arosemena, they easily swept the 1940 general elections

national population supported these presidential policies as a rejection of the US alienation of the country and the abuses of the foreign-born business class.

No work has yet examined appropriately how the racist policies of Arnulfo Arias affected indigenous peoples. Although the Indians were celebrated as the main stem of modern Panamanian *mestizo* identity, eloquently represented in the mythical union of Anayansi and Balboa, Arnulfo and his followers did not advocate for cultural pluralism, but rather defended a very reduced version of Panamenismo, most avidly represented by the “mestizo” peasants of the Central Provinces (Chiriqui, Veraguas, Herrera, Los Santos, and Cocolé). For *panamenistas*, the *interioranos* were the true Panamanian, Spanish-speaking, Catholic, and uncontaminated with American imperialism and West Indian subservience. Although the Arnulfo presidency coincided with the Patzcuaro Congress, this meeting did not immediately produce the same results as in Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador, where new indigenous affairs offices were created under the auspices of government-sponsored *mestizo* intellectuals. Ironically, the Kuna were among the few indigenous peoples to be represented in Patzcuaro, and a brief article about the *molas* written by Ruben Perez Kantule (1942) was published in *America Indigena*, the official organ of the Inter-American Indigenist Institute.

With a political storm looming, and with a virulently xenophobic *mestizo* discourse pervading the country, conditions were not ripe for the development of indigenist policies in Panama. However, the days were numbered for the Panamenista government (Lafeber 1989). As quixotic and independent a figure as Arnulfo was, he never enjoyed the complete backing of the Panamanian business class that had upheld every government since independence from Colombia. In a related manner, the US

Government was seriously concerned about the permanence of a Nazi sympathizer and anti-American nationalist in the presidency of Panama. Consequently, a group of Panamanian politicians and the American representatives in the Canal Zone conspired to overthrow Arnulfo and install Vice-President Ricardo Adolfo de La Guardia in the presidential seat. Taking advantage of an unauthorized trip to Cuba, Arnulfo was accused of violating the Constitution and thrown out of office. Shortly after, the deposed leader traveled to Argentina for several years of exile under the aegis of Juan Domingo Peron (who was also accused of sympathizing with the Axis powers).

The original departure of Arnulfo started a period of renewed oligarchic rule and political instability that would extend until the third overthrow of Arias by the National Guard in 1968. During this period, Arnulfo continued to enjoy widespread support among the population, and *panamenismo* lingered as an important ideology based on social welfare, populism, xenophobia, anti-imperialism, and *mestizo* nationalism. Like his successors, President De La Guardia struggled to keep Arnulfo out of the country and away from the Presidential Palace, and to gain a minimum of legitimacy among a population that simply considered him to be yet another *rabiblanco*.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps Accion Comunal failed to offer an effective political alternative to Liberal oligarchic rule; but this movement certainly left an imprint of *mestizo* nationalism and welfare populism that haunted every subsequent presidential administration until the advent of a new form of military populism in the 1960s (see Chapter 5). Then, the incipient populist corporatist alliance between the Kuna and Accion Comunal would be succeeded by a particular

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<sup>32</sup> In the complicated Panamanian racial hierarchy, the term *rabiblanco*, literally white-tailed, refers to the more European-looking upper-class families that have been ruling the country and controlling business transactions during most of the history of Panama. A similar term is also used in the Pacific coast of South America, reinforcing the Panamanian-Peruvian connection mentioned before.

strand of *Torrijista* charismatic indigenismo, as well as the extension of political patronage and clientelistic networks to the rest of indigenous peoples in Panama.

### **Indigenous Marginalization and Formal Indigenismo during the Liberal Welfare State, 1945-1968**

According to Percy (1998), the three consecutive Accion Comunal administrations - Harmodio Arias (1932-1936), Juan Demostenes Arosemena (1936-1940), and Arnulfo Arias (1940-1941) - did not represent a rupture, but instead a mere continuation of Liberal oligarchic rule. The present work, however, presents a different perspective, in which elements of Liberalism persisted beneath a new discourse and praxis of welfare populism. In this regard, the Accion Comunal administrations would be akin to the 1945-1948 Accion Democratica administrations of Venezuela (Wright 1988). In the same token, the Liberal administrations that followed the overthrow of Arnulfo Arias (1941-1968) would be authentically Liberal, with predominantly free market economics and business orientation; but would also maintain a streak of populism and elements of welfare economics as the only possible way to govern in an increasingly populated, geographically concentrated (urban), and socially-mobilized Panamanian polity. Besides repression, the only avenue to fight the populist appeal of Arnulfo Arias was the implementation of social welfare and oligarchic populism.

Confronted with questionable legitimacy, the government of Ricardo Adolfo de La Guardia always insisted on its transitional character with the mission to establish a new democratic constitution (Lafeber 1989). In this regard, the constitutional process of 1945, traditionally considered to be the best in the history of the country, did create a coalition of very disparate political forces (of course excluding panamenismo), including a number of rival Liberal factions as well as the Socialist Party, headed by Demetrio

Porras, the son of Liberal caudillo Belisario Porras. This predominantly oligarchic coalition produced the constitutional text that was approved in 1946, laying the foundations for a Panamanian Liberal version of welfare economics, bureaucratization, and corporatist citizenship.

According to Herrera (1989 p. 83), articles 94, 95 and 96 of the 1946 Constitution introduced the indigenist principles of integration and acculturation actively sponsored by the Inter-American Indigenist Institute. These same articles also sanctioned the system of indigenous reserves that had been created by the governments of Accion Comunal, and for this reason the present work maintains that Panamanian indigenismo actually originated in the 1930s, and not in the 1940s as expressed by Herrera. Although the panamenista (1940-1941) interlude created special complications for indigenismo, with the arrival of a Liberal version of corporatist citizenship, the State assumed once again the paternal role of incorporating indigenous leaders in national politics. Although Panama remained an extraordinarily unstable government after the 1946 Constitution, with four consecutive presidents, including a returned Arnulfo Arias assuming office after the 1948 elections, the fundamentals of indigenist policies remained unchanged during this entire period.<sup>33</sup>

In an unexpected turn of events, the Remon presidential administration (1952-1955) did not only fulfill some of the main obligations acquired by the Government of

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<sup>33</sup> Confronted with widespread political instability, the armed forces came to play a more prominent role in Panamanian politics after the forced ousting of Arnulfo Arias (Ropp 1982, Lafeber 1979, Percy 1998, Guevara-Mann 1996). By the 1948 election, the head of the National Guard, Jose Antonio Remon Cantera had become the broker of Panamanian politics, and he himself was responsible for inviting Arnulfo Arias to return after the controversial 1948 elections. Since Arnulfo ended up confirming that he was unmanageable, provoking a more blatant and violent coup to drag him out of the presidential palace in 1951, Remon decided to take matters into his own hands and ran uncontested for the presidency in the 1952 elections (Lafeber 1989).

Panama in the Patzcuaro Congress of 1940, but extended the usage of the term *comarca* to other indigenous territories in the rest of the country. Under his command, Law 18 of February 25 of 1952 (G. O. 11.717) created the *comarcas* of Bocas del Toro (Ngobe), Tabasara (Ngobe), and Bayano y el Darien (Kuna, Embera, and Wounaan) to protect indigenous lands around the country. According to this law, the existing indigenous reservations would become part of these *comarcas*; and each *comarca* would be administered by an *intendente* that would respond to the Ministry of Government and Justice (Article 4).

In addition to organizing all the indigenous lands in the country around *comarcas* (including the existing San Blas *Comarca*), Law 18 created the Indigenous Affairs Department in the Ministry of Government and Justice (Article 1); and the National Indigenist and Social Anthropology Institute (Article 11). Articles 5 and 6 of this Law defined the functions of the new Department that were typical of similar indigenist agencies in Latin America, including “studying indigenous life” and collecting statistical information. The National Institute was also evidently inspired by similar institutions in other Latin American countries, concentrating on anthropological and archaeological studies, and academic networking (Article 12).

As further evidence that the Remon government was considering the indigenous question seriously, Law 16 of February 19 of 1953 (G. O. 12.042) approved the *carta organica* of the San Blas *Comarca*. Law 16 is incontestably a prime example of the application of indigenismo to State-Indian relations in Panama. Beneath the formal recognition of Kuna territorial rights that was previously affirmed in Law 59 of 1930 and Law 2 of 1938, Law 16 established a number of government programs to aid the Kuna,

including education, health and community development programs. It is unclear whether foreign consultants were hired for the drafting of these laws, or if Panamanian officials, academics, or indigenous leaders traveled to indigenist institutions in Latin America to observe existing models during this period. In line with the welfare and corporatist tendencies of the time, however, the tone and the text of Law 16 portrays a protagonist state that works to provide benefits to indigenous peoples with the ultimate intention of integrating them into national life.<sup>34</sup>

In spite of the apparent concern of the Liberal administrations that ruled Panama between 1946-1968, indigenist policy was never truly implemented during this period.<sup>35</sup> In the words of anthropologist Philip Young (1971 p. 10), “until about 1961, very few Guaymí were aware that they were living on a reservation; even today those who possess this knowledge find it difficult to gain any advantages from it”. Although the Government copied *verbatim* the discourse of community development and integration propagated by Mexican anthropologists like Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán and Alfonso Caso, the State only paid nominal service to these commitments, and never assigned the necessary financial resources for the implementation of the indigenist agenda (Herrera 1989). Instead, in the 1950s and 1960s, Panamanian indigenismo would only be

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<sup>34</sup> In 1955, President José Antonio Remón Cantera was shot dead in the Juan Franco hippodrome in Panama City (Lafeber 1989). Having essentially commanded Panamanian politics since 1947, his unexpected death left a political vacuum. After a scandalous trial that never completely dispelled the mystery, the different Liberal factions began contending the presidency with the acquiescence of a new commander of the National Guard, Bolívar Vallarino.

<sup>35</sup> In 1956, Liberal Ernesto De La Guardia was elected the new constitutional president of Panama. In spite of the political intrigue pervading the country after the sudden assassination of Remón, the basic fundamentals of the indigenist policy that were sponsored by Remón remained unchanged during the De La Guardia presidential administration. Law 20 of January 31 of 1957 (G. O. 13.282) created a new indigenous reserve for the Embera in the Río Chico area of Darién; and modified Law 59 of 1930 and Law 2 of 1938 to accommodate the special Kuna legislation to the legal framework established in both the 1946 Constitution and Law 18 of 1952.

bolstered by grassroots mobilization and academic activism; not by direct state influence like in other countries in Latin America.<sup>36</sup> Although the *Centro de Investigaciones Antropologicas* of *Universidad de Panama* was not an institution dedicated to political advocacy, the pioneering works that the Center affiliates were conducting and publishing nationally and internationally succeeded in raising the profile of the indigenous question in Panama. As opposed to the previous works conducted by mostly foreign anthropologists (see Chapter 4), the Center published mainly in Spanish, and was sufficiently connected to the mainstream of Panamanian society to elicit at least intrigue and curiosity despite the prevailing indifference by politicians and the general public about the Indian Question.<sup>37</sup>

In spite of the valuable efforts of Reina Torres, the *Centro de Investigaciones Antropologicas* remained poorly funded and a dependency of the University of Panama, and academic research was incapable of attracting more than passing attention from government officials. Instead, it was the mobilization of thousands of indigenous peoples in the 1950s-1960s that turned the Indian Question into a salient national issue

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<sup>36</sup> Although Article 15 of Law 18 of 1952 established that an Anthropology degree would be a requisite for directing the National Indigenist and Social Anthropology Institute, very few Panamanians had this kind of disciplinary formation. For this reason, upon her return to her native country around 1954 with a graduate degree in Anthropology from University of Buenos Aires, Reina Torres dedicated herself to create an academic platform within the University of Panama to compensate for this vacuum (Herrera 1989 p. 102). Without any significant government support, she founded the *Centro de Investigaciones Antropologicas de la Universidad de Panama*, and although no anthropology degree was ever granted by the University, the Center served as a work base for interested individuals to be trained and conduct fieldwork on cultural anthropology, archaeology, and community development. A few years later, the Center would begin publishing the periodical *Hombre y Cultura*, a collection of works by national and foreign students and academics affiliated with the Center.

<sup>37</sup> Director Reina Torres and her associates did not only conduct ethnographic work with the more numerous and better known Kuna, Guaymi (Ngobe-Bugle) and Choco (Embera-Wounaan) indigenous groups; but also organized anthropological expeditions to visit and document the lives of the Teribes and Terrabas (Naso) and Bogota (Caribbean Bugle) in Western Panama and Southern Costa Rica.

– a situation without parallel since the Kuna mobilization of the 1920s.<sup>38</sup> No government project more eloquently symbolized the new drive for development in Panama than the Pan-American Highway sponsored by the United States. In Eastern Panama, the Bayano and Darien regions inhabited by the Kuna, Embera, and Wounaan were regarded as the national reserve of timber, agricultural land, and water resources; and the Highway was expected to open this frontier for economic exploitation and national development. In the 1960s, there were plans to extend the Pan-American Highway to the Colombian border, to build a sea-level canal, and to construct the Bayano Hydroelectric Project on the very same lands that had been declared Comarca de Bayano y el Darien by Law 18 of 1952.

Although the voracity of capitalist development would create significant conflicts between the State and the indigenous peoples of Eastern Panama after the 1970s, in the 1950s and 1960s the Ngobe lands of the so-called Comarca de Tabasara provoked violent confrontations between Ngobe leaders, cattle ranchers, and the National Government (Camilo Ortega and Jose Cruz Monico r. i. p. personal communications, Herrera 1989, Guionneau-Sinclair 1987, Sarsanedas 1978). As opposed to the isolation of Eastern Panama, the Ngobe lands of Pacific Western Panama were a different kind of frontier. Historically, the Ngobe Territory had been surrounded by cattle

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<sup>38</sup> We ought to remember that the Kuna insurrection had resulted from the civilizing policies of an assertive Liberal State that was in the process of nation-building. After the Great Depression and the ten year reign of Accion Comunal, no presidential administration ever came to command the national influence and development vision of the Porras administration. Although Harmodio Arias (1931-1940) and Jose Antonio Remon Cantera (1947-1955) came to dominate Panamanian politics for almost a decade, they presided over economically difficult and political tumultuous times, in which the national government had no other option, but to recur to populism to prevent widespread social upheaval and to maintain governance. In the same token, the radical nationalist period of Arnulfo Arias fell prey to the opposition of the national oligarchy and the imperial power of the United States. In contrast, the years after the death of Remon saw a period of rapid economic growth and capitalist development throughout the country, in which indigenous lands became increasingly valuable and attractive for politicians and their business associates.

ranchers who were both large land-holders and small *mestizo* peasants from the provinces of Veraguas and Chiriqui. Before the construction of the Pan-American Highway, the inland Ngobe communities remained virtually segregated from the coastal mestizo urban centers, such as the towns of Horconcitos, San Lorenzo, San Felix, Remedios, Tole, and Sona (see Chapter 4 about regional culture). Although the Ngobe did interact frequently with these mestizo neighbors, inter-ethnic relations were mostly limited to seasonal labor for agricultural activities, and purchasing products from the local merchants. With the realignment of the road between Santiago (Veraguas) and David (Chiriqui), the lands of the Ngobe and of poor mestizo peasants would become accessible to the national market, awakening the appetite of powerful cattle ranchers and other large landowners.

Besides increased accessibility, the Ngobe population was also experiencing a dramatic demographic explosion in the 1950s (see Chapter 4), which threatened the land base that had been able to support this indigenous population since colonial times (Gjording 1994, Young 1971). This explosive situation reinforced the already existing pattern of Ngobe migration into industrial agricultural areas in the Western Pacific Provinces to search for wage labor. The rapid economic growth happening in Panama during this time in turn affected many traditional agricultural estates, and produced labor unrest and turmoil in the banana growing areas of Baru and Changuinola, and the coffee estates of Boquete (Guionneau-Sinclair 1987).<sup>39</sup> This combination of external

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<sup>39</sup> According to Guionneau-Sinclair (1987), the decision by the United Fruit Company to fire a number of Ngobe labor leaders after a successful strike created insurmountable economic tensions in the Ngobe territory, and also contributed to the rapid spread of revivalist movements in the 1960s.

intrusions into traditional lands and scarce labor opportunities in the neighboring areas affected hundreds of Ngobe households.

Political mobilization and spiritual revival came as grassroots responses from a previously acquiescent indigenous population (Guionneau-Sinclair 1987, Jose Cruz Monico personal communication, Celio Guerra personal communication, Camilo Ortega personal communication). These disparate forces came to a head in the Ngobe Territory during the Mama Tata insurrection of 1965 when a coalition of traditional leaders (including sukias) and political activists declared an independent Ngobe Republic. This political action happened a few months after the prophet of the Mama Tata Ngobe spiritual revival movement had died unexpectedly in the neighboring area of the Fonseca River. Caught by surprise by this ethnic movement, the national authorities immediately dispatched a contingent of the National Guard under the command of Lieutenant Omar Torrijos Herrera, himself a native of the Western Province of Veraguas. According to Guionneau-Sinclair, instead of forcefully repressing the indigenous mass, Torrijos preferred to foster a negotiated solution. A few hours after the arrival of the National Guard, a faction of the protesters decided to finish the insurrection peacefully and engage in a dialogue with the national authorities. A separate group lead by the sukias, however, escaped to the mountains with the surviving daughter of the Prophet, who came to be called as Mama Chi (Small Mother). During the upcoming decades, Mama Chi (or Mama Tata) would become one of the most powerful political and cultural forces in the Ngobe Territory as will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

The unexpected Ngobe mobilization astonished the national authorities, who called Anthropologist Reina Torres de Arauz to provide advice about this unforeseen situation (Herrera 1989 p. 102, Guionneau-Sinclair 1987). As a result of this consultation, the Government started an agricultural development project in the San Felix area in line with current trends in indigenista thinking. The indigenous mobilization that suddenly exploded in the Mama Tata insurrection was only a premonition of conflicts to come. Confronted with indigenous unrest, community development projects were insufficient, as were similar efforts by the Catholic Church to respond to the mobilization of poor peasants in the Central Provinces (Plan Veraguas).

As rural mobilization and urban unrest escalated, the Liberal oligarchic republic seemed to be coming to an end (Priestly 1986). Not even the election of Arnulfo Arias in 1968 would bring governance to the country. After the sexagenarian caudillo launched a desperate attempt to restructure the National Guard, a group of junior officers, headed by Boris Martinez and Omar Torrijos, carried out the first military coup in the history of the country (Lafeber 1979). During the next twenty one years, the *Dictadura con Carino* (Dictatorship with Love), as Torrijos labeled his own autocratic regime, elevated indigenismo to an unforeseen level in Panamanian politics and officially committed the Welfare State to protect all indigenous lands beyond the promises of mining, hydroelectric, and real estate development plans.

By tracing the historical development of indigenous policies in Panama, this chapter has shown that the character of state intervention in indigenous territories in this country has followed the progression described by a number of authors for the rest of Latin America (De La Peña 2005). During the colony (1510-1821), indigenous policies in

Panama molded to the patterns established by the Castilian Monarchy, which included sending *entradas* to pacify the infidel Indians, congregating people in mission towns, and maintaining a frequently failed segregation between the Indian and Spanish republics. Although the start of Liberal assimilationalism was delayed by the complicated process of nation-building in Colombia between 1821-1855, in the second half of the XIX century, the expansion of capitalist ventures in indigenous territories had obliged the government of Santafe de Bogota to enact special legislation for indigenous peoples like the Decree of 1871 that created the Kuna Comarca of Tulenega, and Law 80 of 1890 that ordered the protection of resguardos.

After independence from Colombia in 1903, the neocolonial Conservative policies of Catholic tutelage were soon replaced by Liberal policies of civilization that resembled similar developments in other countries like Mexico and Argentina. This new vision was incarnated in the ten year struggle between the Liberal governments of Belisario Porras and the Kuna leaders of the San Blas Archipelago leading to the Kuna insurrection of 1925. After a US mediated agreement that guaranteed Kuna self-rule and a realignment of political forces within Panama, the State adopted a more accommodating posture with the creation of indigenous reserves and the declaration of the Kuna Comarca of San Blas in 1938. In my opinion, the 1930s marked the beginning of Panamanian indigenismo.

Like in other latitudes, in Panama, the cultural project of indigenismo was accompanied by government initiatives to integrate indigenous peoples in national culture and their incorporation in Panamanian politics as a corporate sector. Howe (2009) and Herrera (1989) have emphasized the special relation developed between

the Kuna leaders and the Accion Comunal governments (1932-1940). In spite of the radical nationalist interlude of Arnulfo Arias (1940-1941), the Panamanian government and the Kuna were represented in the Pazcuaro Congress. The moderately Liberal constitution of 1946 consecrated the principles of international indigenismo and the same were developed by Law 18 of 1952. In spite of these efforts, however, the State never allocated significant resources for the implementation of the indigenist agenda. The Indian Question was only brought to national attention by the work of committed social scientists like Reina Torres de Arauz, and the grassroots mobilization of indigenous peoples. This time the Ngobe boundary in Western Panama became the main battleground between indigenous peoples and the Panamanian State, reaching a critical point with the Mama Tata revolt of 1965.

In contrast with the repressive actions of the Colonial Police during the Kuna insurrection of 1925, the National Guard under Omar Torrijos adopted a position of dialogue in line with the indigenista policies of the 1960s. A few years later, as supreme ruler of the country (1968-1981), Torrijos would take indigenismo and corporatism to unimaginable levels in Panamanian history. This will be discussed in Chapter 5. Following the PCF model of Otero (1999), the formation of a political class will not depend only from the policies implemented by the national government (outlined in this chapter), but also on the regional culture of the particular area affected by these policies. For this reason, the next chapter will look at the regional culture of Western Panama, and particularly to the important transformations of Ngobe traditional culture previous to the onset of the Mama Tata insurrection.

## CHAPTER 4 THE NGOBE ETHNIC COMMUNITY

In addition to state policy, the PCF model identifies regional culture as a main factor for the formation of a political class (Otero 1999). In the case of the Ngobe, this culture does not only refer to the ethnic community as such, but also to the boundary separating the Ngobe from the neighboring non-indigenous population. The following survey will review some of the most salient elements of modern Ngobe cultural history, highlighting important events, and posing intriguing questions about the past and present of this ethnic community. The archaeological record clearly demonstrates that all of the areas inhabited by the Ngobe today were also occupied by human populations before the arrival of the Europeans in the XVI century. We cannot determine, however, the exact relation between these ancient inhabitants and the modern-day Ngobe, and unfortunately archaeological surveys have been rare and incomplete in the current Ngobe Territory. In addition, we have scarce references about the Ngobe before the XVII century, and archival research has been minimal.

According to Smith (1986 p. 32), *ethnie* (ethnic communities) may be defined as named human populations with shared ancestry myths, histories and cultures, having an association with a specific territory and a sense of solidarity. In this regard, there is no question about the existence of a distinctive Ngobe ethnic community in Western Panama that has been facing constant change yet maintaining an extraordinary continuity at least since the XVII century. In spite of the undeniable persistence of the Ngobe as an ethnic community, there are many questions still to be answered: How, when and where did the Ngobe ethnic community originate? What is the boundary of this ethnic community with other indigenous groups historically living in Western

Panama, such as the Doraces (or Dorasques) and Bukles?<sup>1</sup> What is the level of awareness among the Ngobe about the existence of a separate Ngobe ethnic community, and how do they perceive the future of this ethnic community when confronted with modernization and cultural change? In this regard, the Ngobe ethnic community is similar to an unmarked territory which incontestably exists, yet without clearly defined limits both on the inside and the outside. In later chapters, I will argue that the very definition of the present and of the future of this ethnic community constitutes one of the most fundamental political debates among the Ngobe today.

There are two radically different ways to approximate the history of the Ngobe as an ethnic community. The former would be an examination of Ngobe cosmology, self-identification and self-imagination that would necessarily lead to the recognition of characters, places, and events that are commonly known to the Ngobe, inscribed in the collective memory, and transmitted orally to new members of the ethnic community throughout generations.<sup>2</sup> The present work would be incapable of grasping this intimate history, and the question remains whether such an account should ever be written by a non-member of the community in a foreign language. The alternative approach is the only valid one for a political history of the Ngobe from an outsider perspective: A depiction of the Ngobe image through the distorting lens of external observers.

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<sup>1</sup> For years, anthropologists and ethnographers have struggled to understand the relation between the Ngobe and the Bukle, who speak a completely different language, but share a common historical past and cultural characteristics with the Ngobe. Both groups were commonly called Guaymies until the late XX century, and both struggled together to achieve the recognition of their lands as a comarca.

<sup>2</sup> In *Por las Sendas de Nuestros Antepasados*, Pastor Duran, S. J. (1992) tried to present a recollection of Ngobe history according to Ngobe cosmology. Presumably, the inherent shortcomings of translation and communicational barriers made such a document extremely difficult to understand in Spanish.

This classical approach, however, has several important limitations. First, historical accounts about the Ngobe are scarce. According to Barth (1969), a critical element for the subsistence of an ethnicity is the maintenance of a boundary between this community and the outside world. In the case of the Ngobe, this boundary, although porous and fluctuating, was geographical as well as cultural. Even today, a casual observer can easily note the moment in which the traveler leaves the world of the *chui* and penetrates into the land of the Ngobe.<sup>3</sup> These modern interactions are facilitated by technological innovations such as 4 X 4 vehicles and boat transportation. This was not the case during centuries of sporadic interactions between the Ngobe and the descendants of the European.

Second, contacts with the Ngobe were not only occasional, but amazingly prejudiced. Although the quality of the observers varied throughout the centuries from the Conquistadors, to the missionaries and the science of modern anthropologists, objectivity cannot be assumed in any of these cases. The Ngobe were usually regarded as different and intrinsically inferior, and thus they were represented and misrepresented by visitors who were conditioned by their own experiences and who bore particular interests in interacting with the “other”. What we have received today are not accurate depictions, but distorted images that reveal shapes, not actual figures.

Finally, and a constant throughout this study, more research is still needed to uncover the scant sources existing about the Ngobe, as well as the social, political, and cultural contexts that refracted the Ngobe image through the prisms of external

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<sup>3</sup> The Ngobe use the word *chui* to refer in amicable terms to non-indigenous people, especially mestizo Panamanians. An alternative denomination, *sulia*, carries pejorative connotations, as well as the term *chen* that is used to refer to African descendants. Caucasians are usually referred non-despectively as *merigini*.

observers. For this reason, this chapter only presents a modest effort to explore the trajectory of the Ngobe ethnic community. A complete study would be impossible, and not even appropriate for this dissertation. Hopefully, some day historians will become interested in sorting through the abundant writings of *cronistas*, missionaries, business representatives, and government officials from different nationalities, restoring lost documents, and translating from different languages to extract more traces of the Ngobe picture throughout the centuries. Perhaps in the future, Ngobe scholars themselves will also be interested in writing Ngobe history from an insider perspective. Today, we can only grapple with the paucity of information that we have currently available.

Today, the Ngobe ethnic community occupies an extensive area between the Western provinces of Bocas del Toro, Chiriqui, and Veraguas, as well as a number satellite communities in Southern Costa Rica. Historically, the three Panamanian provinces corresponded to the single colonial province of Veragua, whose capital was moved from Santa Fe to Nuestra Senora de Los Remedios and then to the current site in Santiago de Veraguas (Figure 4-1). The Province of Chiriqui was created in 1849, and the Province of Bocas del Toro in 1903. Although the Comarca Ngobe-Bugle was created in 1997 to protect the Ngobe and Bukle lands, many communities were never included in this autonomous territory, and hence the Ngobe still constitute important minorities in the three aforementioned provinces.

The Ngobe lands encompass significant geographic and ecological variations from the high mountains of the Tabasara Range, also called Cordillera Central, to the dry slopes of the Pacific (*Segri*) and the lush tropical forests of the Caribbean. The

mountains constitute the main division between the Caribbean region of *Ño Kribo*, which literally means Bocas del Toro; and the Pacific regions of *Nedrini* in the West and *Kodrirri* on the East (Figure 4-2). Although both Pacific regions have less forest coverage than the Caribbean, *Nedrini* (formerly part of Chiriqui) is characterized by the existence of more pronounced slopes and a more humid climate than the extensive dry savannas of *Kodrirri*. Whereas in the Caribbean Ngobe settlements extend into the coastline and the surrounding islands, the coastal plains of the Pacific are mostly occupied by mestizo peasants. In some regions, especially in *Kodrirri*, poor peasants and large landholders have lived intermingled with Ngobe families for many decades, forming a complex of intercultural relations with very important political implications (Falla 1979, Sarsanedas 1978). In fact, these were the areas that presented the most severe difficulties to define the limits during the negotiations for the creation of the Comarca Indígena Ngobe-Bugle (Herrera 1989, Camilo Ortega and Bernardo Jimenez personal communications).

### **The Ngobe Ethnic Community before the European Arrival**

The Ngobe Territory of today extends across two of the main archaeological divisions in Panama – the Western Region (or Greater Chiriqui) and the Central Region (or Greater Coclé). In both cases, the archaeology of the Pacific side has been extensively surveyed since the XIX century, especially after the lucrative sport of looting graves (also called *huaqueria*). However, archaeological research in the Caribbean has remained minimal. The pioneering work of Olga Linares in Cerro Brujo (Boca del Toro Province) constitutes until today the only other systematic archaeological survey in Caribbean Western Panama apart from the recent works of Thomas Wake from the University of California, Los Angeles, in Sitio Drago, also in Bocas del Toro Province.

The rest of the information about the Caribbean has been gathered through dispersed efforts that were mostly directed towards recording archaeological remains prior to the construction of hydroelectric, mining, real estate, and/or tourism development projects.

In contrast with the Caribbean, there are numerous archaeological collections from the Pacific both in national and foreign museums and universities. As mentioned above, these artifacts have been grouped in the cultural areas of Greater Chiriqui and Greater Cocolé. The former, extending from Southern Costa Rica to Western Panama, has never been considered as sophisticated as the chiefdoms of the Central Region, such as those in Sitio Conte and Cerro Juan Díaz. However, advances in pottery and visible signs of hierarchy, like the stone statues of Sitio Barriles (Chiriqui Province), revealed the existence of stratified societies that were living past a mere subsistence level. The archaeology of the Western Pacific also confirms interactions with Mesoamerican sites in the North, and chiefdoms in the Southwest, hinting at the possibility of continuous trade and cultural exchange with more advanced Amerindian societies.

The cultures of both Greater Chiriqui and Greater Cocolé have traditionally been considered part of the so-called Intermediate Area between the civilizations of the Andes and those of Mesoamerica. Recent explorations in the Dikis Delta in Costa Rica, however, may challenge these generally accepted conventions, and lead to a reconstruction of the history of Pre-Columbian societies in Panama and Costa Rica. Another important contribution to the reappraisal of Pre-Columbian societies in Greater Chiriqui and Greater Cocolé has been the work of Hoopes and Fonseca (2003). This research team has challenged the concept of an intermediary area (that has also been

called Lower Central America), and instead has proposed the existence of a well-defined, ontologically different Isthmo-Colombian Area spanning from Southern Costa Rica to present day Colombia.

Based on linguistics, ethnographic, genetics, and archaeological considerations, Hoopes and Fonseca (2003) sustain that there is continuity between ancient indigenous cultures from the Muisca homeland in the Cundinamarca-Boyaca Plateau (Colombia) and the multiple indigenous groups that have lived around the Talamanca Range between Panama and Costa Rica – Huetar, Cabecar, Bribri, Naso, Changuina, Dorasque, Brunka, Ngobe, and Bukle. Even more transcendental, they propose the existence of two radiation centers in the Isthmo-Colombian Area around the Talamanca Range and the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (Colombia). As opposed to most scholarship that privileges a cultural transfer from Northern South America to the Isthmus, these researchers consider the Talamanca Range as the main site for cultural differentiation and ethnogenesis.

Based on the recent study of Hoopes and Fonseca (2003), the place of the Ngobe ethnic community in the complex mosaic of indigenous cultures in Panama becomes even more intriguing. Richard Cooke (1982) has suggested considering indigenous groups in this cultural area as part of a continuous cultural complex that has changed, merged, and redefined itself throughout centuries, and not as a collection of discrete and clearly differentiated ethnic communities such as Brunka, Doraces, Ngobe, and Bukle. The approach proposed by Cooke gives merit to the malleability of culture and to the potential effects of major events in the region, such as a possible Nahuatl

colonization in the XV-XVI centuries, and the devastating effects of the European Conquest a few years later.

### **The Ngobe Ethnic Community during the Early Encounter with the Europeans**

According to Cooke (1982), the chronicles of the Fourth Voyage of Christopher Columbus constitute the first historical record of the human populations inhabiting part of what today constitutes the Ngobe Territory. According to these narratives, Columbus sailed across the Bocas del Toro (or Caribaro) Lagoon, and continued traveling to what today constitutes Northern Veraguas. Had the Ngobe been living along this Coast, as they certainly have during the last two hundred years, Columbus should have met Ngobe ancestors at some point during his journey. Unfortunately, none of the details provided by the Columbus chronicles allows establishing a direct link between the people that were encountered by the sailor and the current inhabitants of this area.

During the XVI century, the Spanish never made any other solid attempt at founding any colony in the Southern Central American Caribbean Coast until the ephemeral creation of Santiago de Talamanca by Diego de Sojo in 1605 possibly in the Bribri and Naso territories (Fernandez-Guardia 1969). Although no careful analysis has yet been conducted of the narratives of the numerous Spanish *entradas* that happened during the XVI century, we must suppose that the Spanish repeatedly encountered the Ngobe or their ancestors along the Caribbean Coast during this period.<sup>4</sup>

On the Pacific, according to Trimborn (1951), the *cronistas* Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo and Pascual de Andagoya have provided the most comprehensive accounts

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<sup>4</sup> Iglesias-Sequeiros and Culebras-Perez (2005) present two interesting documents in an archival annex, an anonymous description of the Guaymi Valley (1560) and a letter about the conquest and pacification of the Guaymi Valley by former Governor of the Province of Veragua, Pedro Godinez de Osorio (1575).

about the rapid westward expansion of the Spanish invasion from the Darien region to the Central and Western parts of the Isthmus of Panama. Linares (1968) has also discussed the possible connections between archaeological remains in the Gulf of Chiriqui and human groups currently living in Western Panama. In addition to Oviedo and Andagoya, she incorporated the chronicle of Bartolome de Las Casas to create a composite history of the arrival of the Spanish to the Province of Chiriqui.<sup>5</sup> According to Andagoya:

From Burica to this province, which is called Tobreytrota, nearly every chief has a different language from the others. From this hilly country we turned to descend towards the sea, and came to the province of Nata, where the town was founded which is now called Nata (Linares 1968 p. 76).

From the writings of Andagoya, we find no evidence attesting to the presence of the Ngobe in the Pacific, yet they could also be the descendants of any of the chiefdoms that were encountered by the Spanish in Western Panama. Subsequent conquering missions by Gil Gonzales Davila in 1522 and Benito Hurtado a year later accelerated the catastrophic depopulation of the Western Pacific Lowlands of the Isthmus of Panama (Linares 1968). Although no evidence allows tracing the Ngobe lineage to the people living in this region in the XVI century, the Ngobe consider that they are the descendants of the heroic character Urraca who resisted the Spanish encroachment. To dominate the Indian chiefdoms of Pacific Central Panama, Gaspar de Espinosa had founded the outpost of Santiago de Nata de Los Caballeros in what used to be a major Indian center before the Spanish arrival. From that location, the

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<sup>5</sup> According to Linares (1968), in 1520, Gaspar de Espinosa launched an *entrada* that sailed from Panama City to Cebaco Island in Central Panama. After being defeated by the great chief Urraca, Espinosa sailed westward to the Province of Burica located across the Gulf of Chiriqui. There Espinosa's forces defeated the local population, sent an expedition to raid a wealthy chief four days away, and then sailed back and landed in the Province of Huista. From Huista, the Spanish crossed the mountains passing through the highland Province of Tobreytrota and descending to the Province of Nata.

Conquerors invaded the neighboring regions. Nonetheless, the Spanish chronicle also registered the tenacity of Urraca who was never defeated by the Conquistadors and eventually found refuge in the mountains of Veragua. This story has made Urraca a national symbol of indigenous resistance that has been symptomatically encrypted in modern Panamanian pennies; yet for the Ngobe, Urraca has become a living proof of the territorial defense that they waged against the Spanish invaders, and an uncontested inspiration for the new generations struggling for the creation of a Comarca in the 1970s-1990s.

Once again it would be difficult to prove a direct relation between the XVI century almost mythical figure of Urraca and the modern-day Ngobe. In spite of that, some authors have posed the possibility that the modern Bukle may in fact be descendants of Urraca. The scarce historical evidence currently available makes this claim very difficult to assess. The fact is that most of the indigenous peoples living in the extensive savannahs of Central and Western Panama were annihilated by the time of the Peruvian discovery in 1531. Whoever were the ancestors of the Ngobe either escaped from the devastation of the Conquest and fled into the neighboring mountains or forests in the Caribbean; or originally were never present in the Pacific and inhabited the Pacific mountains or Caribbean slopes where the Spanish were never able to found any functional colony.

### **The Ngobe: Civilized or Infidels during the Colony?**

As argued above, even until today the Ngobe have maintained a striking cultural and geographical separation from the Spanish sphere of influence. It would be misleading, however, to argue that they were not impacted by the colonial experience, or that they did not have to mold Ngobe regional culture in response to interactions with

outsiders. Simply, we do not have sufficient knowledge about how, when, and where the Ngobe ethnic community came to exist, which demands humility from those who strive to understand the Ngobe in historical perspective.

During the entire colonial period, there are only two sources that describe thoroughly the regional culture and ethnic interactions of the Ngobe ethnic community – the writings of priests Fray Adrian de Santo Tomas in the 1620s and Father Juan Franco in the 1790s. Although scarce, these two sources allow identifying important changes in Ngobe material culture and political organization, most importantly increased interaction with Europeans for trade and religion. In spite of these transformations, in the ideational realm, Ngobe society maintained a striking level of continuity, and agriculture remained the main basis of Ngobe society. At the dawn of the colonial period, historical evidence does not suggest the configuration of a proletariat or the formation of a political class.

The first credible reference about a clearly identifiable Ngobe ethnic community encountered by the Spanish happened after the foundation of a new capital for the colonial province of Veragua, the town of Nuestra Senora de Los Remedios in 1589. According to Castellero-Calvo (1995) and Reina Torres de Arauz (1965 p. 67-68), The Governor of Veragua requested the assistance of the Dominican Friar Adrian de Santo Tomas (or Ufeldre) to evangelize a group of indigenous peoples who were living in the Caribbean slopes.<sup>6</sup> In 1622, Fray Adrian decided to support the missionary work that had already been started by Father Gaspar Rodriguez de Valderas in the Guaymi

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<sup>6</sup> According to Castellero-Calvo (1995 p. 159-160), the evangelization of the Guaymi Valley had been started by a Mercedarian priest, Melchor Hernandez, and by Father Gaspar Rodriguez de Valderas, who had formerly worked in the San Felix mission town. According to a letter to the King by the Governor of Veragua, Lorenzo del Salto, from June 21, 1627, “comenzo a poblar en la montaña del dicho Guaymi y a cabo del tiempo se salio disgustado con los indios y ellos con el”.

Province. He traveled to the reputed *Valle del Guaymi* crossing through the mountains north of Nuestra Senora de los Remedios, and after his devoted efforts convinced a number of natives to resettle in the mission town of San Lorenzo del Guaymi in the Pacific Coast.

Besides his extraordinary missionary capacity, Fray Adrian also had a keen eye for ethnographic detail and his evangelical zeal legated the most comprehensive work about the Ngobe during the colonial period. According to his description, the Ngobe gave great importance to body painting, lived in dispersed settlement, and practiced polygamy. He said that both men and women only wore a loin cloth (or *pampanilla*), and slept in *bijao* leaves next to a fire pit.

Fray Adrian described the cosmology of the Ngobe who believed in a single Universal God they called Noncomala, and also in particular deities who ruled specific regions. Nubu who was present in a sacred hill governed the Province of Guaymi.<sup>7</sup> Fray Adrian also made much emphasis in the prevalent sorcery associated with contacts with Tucla, whom he called the Devil. Sorcerers were responsible for every disease, including death, and when a person became sick, the family gathered and asked who had contact with this person, or who the person had seen in dreams. Regardless of who the sorcerer was, even the mother or the father, that person had to be killed by the rest of the family. According to his narration, sorcerers could transform themselves into different kinds of animals, such as tigers, lizards, or snakes; in which form they could attack and harm people.

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<sup>7</sup> The current inhabitants of Guaymi had been born from a seed expelled by a man in his sleep and that Nubu had planted after Noncomala in his anger had ordered the whole region to be devastated by a flood.

According to Fray Adrian, the peach palm (*Guiljelma utilis*) was the most important food source for the inhabitants of Guaymi, especially during the harvest time between September and December. Besides the nutritional value of the fruit, the stem was used to manufacture piercing weapons, and an alcoholic beverage was also produced from the sap. Perhaps for this reason he associated the peach palm season with the most important of Ngobe ritual celebrations, the *balseria*. We cannot underestimate the importance of the *balseria* in Ngobe traditional culture, being this the main reason that the people with whom Fray Adrian worked can undeniably be traced as ancestors of the modern-day Ngobe (although the relation with the Bukle is much more confusing).

As confirmed by later descriptions, the *balseria* is essentially the encounter between two kin groups for play, exchange, and competition (Torres de Arauz 1980 p. 81-83, Young 1976, Torres de Arauz 1971). Kin groups traveled long distances to participate in a *balseria*, and the night before men watched the *ba/sa* sticks without falling sleep in what Fray Adrian and subsequent observers referred to as the wake (in Spanish *vela*). The first day the two captains started the competition, which consisted of a person throwing the stick directly at the back thigh of the other, and the other trying to avoid the hit by moving his legs rapidly. After the throw, the roles would be reversed, and the competition would continue. According to Fray Adrian, a *balseria* would last three days, and during the last day, a fair would be organized to exchange the merchandise that people had brought from their places. Fray Adrian described chanting before the start of the *balseria*, and heavy alcohol drinking during the whole celebration.

As proof of his success to the Spanish authorities, Fray Adrian organized a pilgrimage from the Ngobe mountains to Panama City that prefigured the massive Ngobe mobilizations of the XX century (Castillero Calvo 1995 p. 160-162). As the Ngobe marchers, six caciques and 580 recent converts, entered into the Spanish city dancing and offering the fruits of the land, Fray Adrian celebrated the success of the Gospel among the infidels and gained political legitimacy with the authorities. In spite of his boisterous pride, the historical record raises unsettling questions about the long-term success of the Ngobe missions. Several other mission towns would be founded in the foothills of the Western Pacific, possibly by new missionaries, but the persistence of the Ngobe boundary with Spanish society signaled a rejection of the colonial order, or at least a stoic passive resistance. Except for the immediate surroundings of Spanish cities like Nuestra Senora de Los Remedios and Santiago de Veraguas, the Ngobe seemed to have remained completely separate from colonial life for centuries to come. Would Ngobe mission dwellers abandon the towns and return to the mountains and forests of the Caribbean? Would Ngobe culture be permanently transformed by the colonial experience? Would the mission towns collapse for lack of support from the colonial authorities or because of an entrenched Ngobe resistance?

The lack of historical information about the Ngobe colonial experience in Western Panama is abysmal. By the time that a new priest left a written record about the people that the Spanish continued calling Guaymies, the entire colonial order had been overhauled by the Bourbon reforms and the distant metropolis sought enlightenment in science and technology. In this context, Father Juan Franco was commissioned by the Malaspina Expedition to document the natural and cultural history of Western Panama

(Franco 1978). With certain geographic imprecision, he recognized the existence of two distinct groups of Guaymies who spoke two different languages - the Nortenos (Ngobe) and the Sabaneros (Bukle). Interestingly, he also considered that other indigenous groups like the Doraces, Changuenas, Chirilues, Yrbolos, Chalivas, and Suarimis once formed a single “nation” with the Guaymies, but that they had become divided as a result of animosities among the families (see also Cooke 1982). He referred to towns being founded in the Pacific for “indios cristianos o catecumenos” - suggesting the continuity of the missions started in the early XVII century, and to the existence of barter trade to obtain *machetes* and salt from Peru (as well as beads that were given by the missionary priests).<sup>8</sup>

An interesting ethnographic observation was the general lack of any centralized political hierarchy, and instead the practice of a limited deference towards elders that in his opinion was never absolute since young people could also influence on collective decisions, even at the “cofradia” level. Like Fray Adrian, Father Franco referred to the persistence of polygamy and to the general pattern of dispersed settlement. He also emphasized the importance of the peach palm that “tiene el lugar preferente despues del platano”. With regards to cosmology, Father Juan Franco said that the Guaymies believed in the existence of two different gods, one for the Christians and one for the gentiles, and he also mentioned the importance that they assigned to dreams.

Insidiously, he referred to the Guaymies as cowards, treacherous, and adamant to the

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<sup>8</sup> Father Franco highlighted the social importance of drinking corn *chicha* that he suspiciously associated with frequent measles epidemics, and commented on how much they feared the advent of disease (Franco 1978). When referring to the balseria, he stressed the importance of chicha drinking, face-painting, and traditional music; yet he also mentioned the use of bark clothing, feather headdresses, and animal skins as signs of personal courage.

Spanish authorities as opposed to their neighbors the Doraces, Changuenas, Chirilues, Yrbolos, Chalivas and Suarimis.

How much integration actually existed between the Spanish colonial authorities and the Ngobe communities? More historical research is definitely needed, but the two accounts left by Fray Adrian de Ufeldre and Father Juan Franco suggests a striking similarity in Ngobe social organization and cultural practices throughout the colony. Although they reveal subtle changes in cosmology and the advance of Christianity, in general there appears to be continuity in the social life of the Ngobe as an ethnic community. The increasing role of trade to obtain daily necessities such as machetes must be emphasized, yet Ngobe integration into the colonial economy was minimal and subsistence activities had not been impacted by forced labor like in other Spanish American colonies. The advent of modernity, however, would unleash more transcendental changes associated with increased trade and more frequent contacts with both the British and the Spanish spheres of influence, perhaps as premonitions of the decisive advance of the cattle frontier in the Pacific and the banana emporium in the Caribbean by the end of the XIX century.

### **The Ngobe Ethnic Community during the Irruption of Modernity**

An entire century passed between the writings of Juan Franco, and the ethnological work of Alphonse Pinart in the 1880s. What happened to the Ngobe boundary during this period? Did Ngobe people begin moving into the Pacific mountains escaping from Miskitu raids and increasing conflict with neighboring cattle ranchers? Did ranchers begin expanding the cattle frontier and encroaching upon the Ngobe lands? Unfortunately, the only major testimonial that we have about this period was written by a British merchant who lived with the Ngobe in the Caribbean in the

1820s (Heckadon-Moreno 1987). Although Orlando Roberts climbed the mountains that separate the Ngobe Territory between the Cricamola River in the Caribbean (Ño Kribo) and the San Felix River in the Pacific (Nedrini), his interactions were mostly limited to the Caribbean Ngobe whom he, like many others, called the Valiente, and who only had occasional contacts with the Spanish and the British, mostly for trade. Roberts painted a very sympathetic image of his Ngobe hosts, as well as of the animosity that they felt towards the Spanish. According to Roberts, in contrast, the Ngobe seemed amenable to British traders who exchanged with them cacao, turtle shells and sarsaparilla. Interestingly, Roberts also mentioned that the Miskitu visited this region annually to collect tribute as they considered this area to be part of the Mosquito Coast.<sup>9</sup>

Roberts emphasized the continuous communications existing between the Ngobe living in the Caribbean and those in the Pacific, “esos indios que ocasionalmente comercian con los espanoles” “those Indians that occasionally trade with the Spanish” (Heckadon-Moreno 1987 p. 155). According to his own narration, he gathered high quality sarsaparrilla from people who allegedly had traveled from the Pacific side. He agreed with Fray Adrian and Father Juan Franco on the cultural and material importance of the peach palm, and also commented on the use of corn to prepare chicha.<sup>10</sup> Surprisingly, he never mentioned the balseria.

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<sup>9</sup> A few decades after the visit of Orlando Roberts, the British and Miskitu authorities arrived to the region of Bocas del Toro warning the New Granadan (Colombian) authorities that they had to respect the lawful rights of British subjects living in this region (Fernandez-Guardia 1968).

<sup>10</sup> According to Roberst, besides corn and peach palm, plantains, bananas, and manioc represented the main staples in the Ngobe diet that were complemented with hunting and fishing as described by Fray Adrian and Father Franco.

During most of the XIX century, Ngobe interactions with both the British associates in the Caribbean and the Spanish descendants in the Pacific were characterized by the absence of powerful actors such as central governments, organized churches and multinational corporations. Lawlessness, trade, and retreat seemed to characterize the Ngobe interactions with the outside world until the advent of capitalism. By the 1880s, a new breed of actors would mold, distort and project the image of the Ngobe in Panama and abroad – modern-day social scientists paving the way for international investors, colonial powers and the banana emporium.<sup>11</sup>

A commercial agreement between French investors and the Government of the United States of Colombia for the construction of the Panama Canal facilitated the extension of the research work of Alphonse Pinart to Lower Central America. As he was particularly interested in language, Pinart collected vocabularies of different “Guaymi” dialects, as well as words from the last remaining Doraces and Changuinas in Western Panama. He also compiled the existing works of Juan Franco and William Moore Gabb who had worked in Western Panama and Southern Costa Rica before him.<sup>12</sup> The work of Pinart became the most comprehensive survey of Ngobe culture since the writings of Fray Adrian de Santo Tomas, identifying the striking continuity of

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<sup>11</sup> Among the first to visit the region, William Moore Gabb (1875) had been contracted by the Costa Rican Atlantic Railroad Company to examine the potential of the lands in the Caribbean for industrial production. Although he spent most of his time in the neighboring Talamanca Valley, he also referred to the Ngobe as a group of semi-civilized people who lived further south. A few years later, French linguist and ethnologist Alphonse Pinart organized an expedition to the fabulous Valle de Miranda (or Valle del Guaymi).

<sup>12</sup> In 1882, Pinart published in San Francisco the work of Blas Jose (Juan) Franco, including his dictionary of Norteno, Sabanero and Dorasque languages. For the next two years, he lived in Panama visiting different places and collecting ethnographic and linguistic information.

Ngobe traditions like the balseria; yet also revealing major changes in Ngobe cosmology and beliefs.<sup>13</sup>

Pinart (1885) estimated that the total number of Guaymies at that time was 4,000, and that possibly 3,000 of them lived in the Valle Miranda (Valle del Guaymie or Cricamola River). According to the French ethnologist, the Guayimi languages were divided in: 1. Muoi, 2. Moves-Valientes-Nortenos (possibly Ngobere), and 3. Murire-Bukueta-Sabaneros (possibly Buklere). In contrast with Roberts, who affirmed that he did not know about any *sukias* among the Valientes, Pinart said that they recurred to the *sukias* when somebody was ill, and that the *sukias* chased away the evil spirits using tobacco and cacao.<sup>14</sup>

Pinart also confirmed the testimonials of Fray Adrian de Santo Tomas and Father Juan Franco about the “balzeria” as the most important ritual celebration. He agreed that chicha drinking, face painting, the use of animal skins, traditional music and chanting were important parts of the festivities, and he even stated that the chants were sung in a particular dialect that only the *sukias* could understand.<sup>15</sup> He also mentioned for the first time a different celebration called *Urote* that “les Indiens conservent le plus

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<sup>13</sup> In 1885, Pinart published his fascinating narration of his visit to Valle Miranda (or Valle del Guaymie). Sailing from the town of Bocas del Toro he entered the Cricamola River in 1883 to visit the Guaymie or Valiente Indians. After passing the village of Gobrante, he arrived to Jocuatabiti in the Valle Miranda. According to Pinart, the Ngobe considered this area their territory, and they did not allow any Afro-descendants or Europeans to live there permanently.

<sup>14</sup> The word *sukia* presumably of Miskitu origin is today used to refer to shamans in all of the Southern Caribbean Coast of Central America, including the Miskitu, Cabecar, Bribri, Naso, and Ngobe territories.

<sup>15</sup> According to Pinart, *Kugere* was used for ordinary songs and *Xaketare* for particular songs only for the *sukia*.

grand mystere”, and that involved the sukia and young people when they had reached puberty.<sup>16</sup>

The work of Pinart trailed the unexpected arrival of a major actor that would revolutionize Ngobe life in the Caribbean – the United Fruit Company. Prior to the incorporation of this multinational corporation, banana production had already been started by American and German entrepreneurs in the region of Bocas del Toro (Stephens 1987). With the arrival of UFCO in 1899, the Company consolidated banana landholdings in the region and out-competed previous ventures such as the Snyder Brothers Banana Company. We still lack sufficient historical information about the impact of UFCO operations on the Ngobe territorial occupation in the Caribbean. However, in the 1910s, the whole Chiriqui Lagoon, and most importantly the lower valley of the Cricamola River (Valle del Guaymie or Valle Miranda) had already been occupied by the banana emporium. Banana operations reinforced the existing immigration patterns of Europeans, Americans, and West Indians in Bocas del Toro, and aggravated the complicated ethnic and racial relations in this Caribbean region. According to some accounts, in the early XX century the Ngobe preferred to retreat to the upper watersheds where they remained separate until the start of what Gordon (1982) has called the spectacular out-migration of this indigenous group towards the rest of Bocas del Toro after the 1970s.

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<sup>16</sup> Pinart also crossed the Ngobe mountains into the Pacific through the San Felix River Valley, reaching an altitude of approximately 2,500 meters according to his barometer. After passing Cerro Banco, he arrived to the village of Sabalo and then to the port of Canafistola, where he embarked himself upon his journey to David, the capital of the Province of Chiriqui. From David, he toured the coffee groves around the Chiriqui Volcano, and visited the villages of Caldera and Potrero Vargas where he interviewed the six Dorasque-speaking Chumulu who still lived there. Then, he traveled to Bugaba where he interviewed three descendants of the Changuina.

Foreign social scientists would continue visiting the Ngobe for years to come, and they would build on the pioneering works of Gabb, Pinart, Walter Lehmann, and Henry Pittier.<sup>17</sup> After the creation of the Republic of Panama as a separate political entity from Colombia, however, a new generation of nation-builders would be captivated by the indigenous peoples living on the Isthmus past and present, and would try to discover the roots of Panamanian identity in the cosmic mixing of these indigenous ancestors with the Spanish Conquistadors. They would construct the intellectual foundations of Panamanian indigenismo.

### **The Ngobe Ethnic Community in the Construction of the Panamanian Nation**

In the early years of the Republic of Panama, policy-makers did not only try to define the official boundaries of the Ngobe Territory in Western Panama, but also the ideational limits of Ngobe identity within the Panamanian nation.<sup>18</sup> As explained in Chapter 3, Panama was never immune to the current of indigenista thinking that was emanating from Mexican universities and institutions during the 1920s. Yet, in Panama the indigenous question was also inextricably linked with the national question; in other words, the creation of a Panamanian nation separate and distinct from the Colombian

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<sup>17</sup> Written before the era of Panamanian indigenismo, the work of Henry Pittier deserves special attention. In 1912, Swiss naturalist and ethnographer Henry Pittier published an account of his visit to the Province of Chiriqui and the Ngobe Territory in *National Geographic Magazine*. In this publication, he calculated the number of Guaymi at 5,000, and asserted that they had been submitted to the influence of missionaries for an extended period of time. In his perception, “Among the few vestiges left of that transitory semi-civilized condition under religious discipline, perhaps the most conspicuous is the flowing gown of the women, tight at the neck and reaching down to the feet” (p. 639). Like Fray Adrian and Father Juan Franco, Henry Pittier stressed the importance of face painting that “lead to the belief that they had formerly and may still have a significance as a totemic or tribal emblem” (p. 640).

<sup>18</sup> According to Guionneau-Sinclair (1991), in November 1925, Decree 130 ordered the creation of a reserve for the indigenous inhabitants, presumably the Ngobe, of the District of Remedios in the Western Province of Chiriqui (p. 89). As mentioned before, Law 18 of 1934 created the Ngobe indigenous reserves of Canquintu and Cusapin-Bluefield, and Law 20 of 1934 authorized the national government to purchase a terrain in the area of San Juan along the National Road to the Province of Chiriqui (p. 93-94).

polity that had dominated the life of the Isthmus during the last hundred years. Under this perspective, the role of academics/politicians who influenced the cultural scene in the country was fundamental, and as mentioned before, none of them was more important than the Father of Panamanian Education, Octavio Mendez-Pereira.

The 1920s saw the publication of a series of books that examined the indigenous question. Unavoidably, these works were imbued with the colonialism and scientific racism that prevailed during these times, and therefore have limited value to understand Ngobe regional culture during the early XX century.<sup>19</sup> However, they occasionally included valuable ethnographic details, and revealed a panorama of how the Ngobe were visualized by their mestizo neighbors in the Western Pacific. The publications of Otto Lutz (1924), *Los Habitantes Primitivos de la Republica de Panama*; Reginald Gordon Harris (1926), *Los Indios de Panama*; and Manuel Maria Alba (1928), *Etnologia y Poblacion Historica de Panama*, were all dedicated to the patriarch of Panamanian education, Octavio Mendez-Pereira.<sup>20</sup> As expressed by the Harris dedication: “con el sincero deseo de que como exponente de la cultura panameña, él aproveche toda oportunidad de contribuir a la conservación de estos indios que tienen un interés biológico y etnográfico tan extraordinario para los hombres de nuestros días y para la posteridad” “with the honest desire that as an exponent of Panamanian culture, he (Mendez-Pereira) capitalizes every opportunity to contribute to the conservation of

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<sup>19</sup> With the exception of Reginald Gordon Harris, who actually was Director of the Biological Laboratory of the Biological Association of Long Island Cold Spring Harbor, none of these works truly conducted any comprehensive ethnography of indigenous groups in Panama.

<sup>20</sup> An even more quixotic publication, *Panama of Today*, by A. Hyatt Verrill (1927) was dedicated to Belisario Porras, and included valuable information about indigenous groups in Panama as recognized by Torres de Arauz (1980).

these Indians that have such an extraordinary biological and ethnographic interest for men in our days and in the future”.<sup>21</sup>

Although the work of Otto Lutz, former instructor of the National Institute and former director of the National Museum of Panama, reproduced in Spanish much of the the text written by Henry Pittier for National Geographic in 1912, he also made some interesting observations about the Ngobe, whom he said he visited in several occasions.<sup>22</sup> With regards to internal governance, he wrote that “Quizá lleguen a 5000 los indios que allí viven bajo la administración de dos gobernadores o caciques” “perhaps they might reach 5,000 the Indians that live there under the administration of two governors or caciques” (p. 11). It is imprecise when this system of governors came to exist and what geographical region was covered by them; yet according to Young (1971) the governors represented the main system of governance for the Ngobe in the Pacific before the advent of the *corregidores*. Interestingly, Lutz treats governors and caciques as equivalent categories.

Lutz also referred to seasonal work in the neighboring cattle ranches during “Juan Largo”, the Mid-Summer Drought. Following the tradition of previous observers, Lutz presented a description of the *balseria*; and for the first time, made reference to second-hand accounts from neighboring mestizos about *cuvate*, when a man would

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<sup>21</sup> Although Reginald Gordon Harris mentioned the extraordinary Pre-Columbian gold, stone, and pottery art work of the “Indians of Chiriqui”, most of his attention was devoted to the culture of the “White Indians of San Blas and Darien”, the Kuna. Harris (1926 p. 1-3) mentions two publications of the National Museum of the Smithsonian Institution - an 1889 treatise about objects found in indigenous cemeteries in the Province of Chiriqui and a treatise about prehistoric art that was published by Thomas Wilson in the Smithsonian 1896 annual report.

<sup>22</sup> Like Pinart and Pittier, Lutz considered the inhabitants of Cocolé as Guaymies, stating that in 1910 numerous Indians used to participate in the Corpus processions, whipping themselves with cords that ended in glass tips. According to his narration, they would become drunken after these mortifications, and in recent dates, “El Gobierno de la Republica ha suprimido tales barbaridades” (p. 11).

stay in bed after his woman had given birth. Lutz also mentioned the importance of peach palm and manioc in the Ngobe diet, and provided a vocabulary according to his own observations near San Felix and the previous work of Walter Lehmann (1920).

As opposed to the previous authors who belonged to a whole generation of foreigners that were invited by the Liberal administrations to occupy technical and scientific positions in the new republic, Manuel Maria Alba was a native Panamanian. In his publication, he emphasized the continuity of the ancient chiefdoms encountered by the Spanish in the XVI century with the indigenous groups currently inhabiting the Isthmus of Panama, undeniably considered today a dubious assertion. Interestingly, he only devoted a paragraph and a half to the Ngobe, concluding that:

Su numero es desconocido en realidad, aunque por aproximación puede suponerse que es mayor que los dispersos por el territorio del Darien y la costa de San Blas reunidos (p. 18)”

“Their number is actually unknown, although by approximation it can be supposed that it is greater than those dispersed in the Darien territory and in the San Blas coast all together.

Undoubtedly, in addition to the Latin American obsession with an indigenous past and the struggle to construct a Panamanian nation in the 1920s, a main reason for the advance of the indigenista project was to dispel the sheer ignorance in the country about the magnitude and the location of indigenous peoples in the frontier regions of Eastern and Caribbean Panama. De Alba himself emphasized the declarations made by Swedish anthropologist Erland Nordenskiold to *La Estrella de Panama* about the Embera and Wounaan population in the Southeast – “su numero es enorme” “their number is enormous” (p. 17). Recently, Nordenskiold had also “discovered” a completely different indigenous group in Northern Panama, whom he called the “Bogota” – the modern-day Bukle (p. 18).

For that same curiosity, or perhaps for strategic reasons, former cabinet member of both the Porras and the Chiari Liberal administrations, Narciso Garay, devoted a disproportionate share of his investigations about Panamanian music to the Kuna and the Ngobe. Once out of office, Garay dedicated himself to searching for the roots of the Panamanian nation in the nostalgic countryside. For this purpose, he took advantage of the important contacts he had developed as a diplomat and politician. In 1930, he published his ethno-musicological work *Tradiciones y Cantares de Panama*. Although most of his musical records belonged to the Western Pacific lowlands, what Panamanians refer to as El Interior, he assigned a total of three chapters to document the musical heritage and the traditional customs of the Kuna and the Ngobe indigenous peoples.<sup>23</sup> In Chapter V, “Motivos Guaymies”, Garay left a very detailed description of a Ngobe balseria that strikingly evoked the narrations of Fray Adrian and Father Juan Franco in the XVII and XVIII centuries.<sup>24</sup> Garay observed that the Ngobe continually sang during the balseria, and that the local indigenous “governor” talked to them in *murire* (also known as *sabanero* or *buklere*). During the whole story, he made comparisons with the ancient “guaymi”, and made reference to the investigations conducted by foreigners about the archaeological heritage of Chiriqui. Considering that Garay had also traveled to San Blas in the wake of the Kuna Insurrection, an interesting

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<sup>23</sup> Surprisingly, when passing by Portobelo, the place with the most elaborate Afro-Panamanian musical traditions, he talked extensively about the Spanish fortifications, yet did not even mention the Congo rituals during the Carnaval celebrations – a striking omission for such a cultured individual.

<sup>24</sup> In the month of May he traveled to the localities of Calabazar and Potrero de Canas to witness the distinctively Ngobe celebration – the encounter of two kin groups for competition and exchange. He speculated about the possible Spanish origin of the modern *vela*, and commented about the spatial separation between men and women during the entire period. Garay also depicted the contrast between the joy and the melancholy of the balseria music that was played with *ocarinas*, conch shells, flutes, and drums; as well as the ingenuity of the body painting that according to his opinion was inspired by ancient Mesoamerican motifs.

hypothesis would be that his trip was facilitated by the Government to collect information about what was happening in San Blas. However, the emphasis that he placed in visiting the Ngobe in Western Panama, and other important works about indigenous peoples that were conducted before and after the visit of Garay, indicated that there was a genuine interest among Panamanian intellectuals like Garay and Mendez-Pereira about the culture of the indigenous peoples of the country.<sup>25</sup>

Although most authors do not recognize major policy changes between the Liberal administrations of the 1920s and the governments of *Accion Comunal* in the 1930s, both Harmodio Arias Madrid (1932-1936) and his successor Juan Demostenes Arosemena (1936-1940) devoted more attention to catering to indigenous peoples than any of the previous Liberal administrations (see also Chapter 3).<sup>26</sup> In the ideational realm, a new generation of intellectuals, many of them still associated with the figure of Octavio Mendez-Pereira, produced literary works that emphasized nativism, ruralism, and mestizaje. Most important among these, *La India Dormida* of Julio B. Sosa (1936) narrated the epic romance of a Spanish Conquistador with an Indian Princess – the daughter of Urraca; and therefore the epitome of the ideal Panamanian, an authentic *mestizo* of Spanish and Indian descent. A few years earlier, a similar figure had been

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<sup>25</sup> Although a rival hypothesis could be that Garay visited the Ngobe in the Pacific to find out information about the agrarian problems between the Ngobe and their mestizo neighbors that were on the rise during this historical period (see also Chapter 3).

<sup>26</sup> According to Herrera (1989), the presidents of the 1930s catered to indigenous peoples as a means to obtain votes for the Panamanian elections. However, these administrations also enacted transcendental legislations in economic and agrarian policies that approximated the state-centered corporatist regimes that predominated in the rest of Latin America during the 1930s and 1940s. In the context of Panama, a country in which both agro-exports and agricultural production were meager, these policies may seem insignificant, yet evidence suggests that the most fervent participants in the “Revolution of 1931” believed that Panama needed to move away from unrestrained market economics and to promote state-led social reform. In 1934, Arnulfo Arias founded the new Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR), the first actual party stemming from the *Accion Comunal* movement (Conte-Porras 1990). Not only did he extricate the Liberal adjective that had marked the name of most major parties in Panama, but he also copied verbatim the name of the party that was founded by the revolutionary government in Mexico in 1929.

created by the Great Teacher himself, Octavio Mendez-Pereira, in *Nuñez de Balboa, El Tesoro de Dabaibe* (1951). In this Panamanian epic, the Spanish Conquistador Vasco Nuñez de Balboa fell madly in love with the indigenous princess Anayansi in the Darien region.

### **The Ngobe Ethnic Community as Seen by Modern Anthropologists**

In spite of the laborious work of Panamanian intellectuals and foreigners associated with the cultural production of the Panamanian nation, the works from the 1920s and 1930s in general terms conflated social science with nation-building, observation with imagination. As expressed by Szok (2001), they emphasized the Hispanic heritage of Panama as opposed to the pernicious influence of English-speaking Americans, West Indians, and other foreigners. These works also depicted indigenous peoples, and particularly the Ngobe, as a broken and submissive “race” that needed to be reinvigorated by the virility of the descendants of the Conquistadors. In spite of these mental machinations, Ngobe regional culture both in the Pacific and the Caribbean was suffering most transcendental transformations that would break away with secular cultural patterns such as polygamy, dispersed settlement, subsistence agriculture, and cherished rites like the balseria in a fifty year period.

These profound changes in Ngobe regional culture were recorded by professional anthropologists like Swedish Erland Nordenskiöld and American Frederic Johnson, who in contrast with Panamanian intellectuals, carried a whole different kind of prejudice not so closely associated with the definition of the Panamanian nation, but with global discussions about race and culture (Howe 2009). Considering his reduced permanence on the Isthmus in 1927, the ethnographic work of Nordenskiöld was truly extraordinary. Not only did he visit, travel with informants, and collect ethnographic

materials with the Embera (possibly also de Wounaan) and the Kuna, but he provided the first uncontested record of the Bukle (whom he called Bogota) living in Northern Veraguas.<sup>27</sup> Although his observations further complicated the existing puzzle about the cultural and linguistic divisions of the Bukle and the Ngobe (both were still collectively called Guaymi), he also gave visibility to a previously marginalized ethnic community that had been completely eclipsed by the Ngobe.

In addition, Nordenskiöld paved the way for the ethnographic work in the Ngobe Territory of Henry Wassen two decades later. In 1947, Henry Wassen, a disciple of Nordenskiöld, visited the San Felix region in Nedrini. There he was told of differences between the Guaymies and the people that his mestizo host, Demetrio Sagel, called *sabaneros*. From this fieldwork, and in collaboration with linguist Nils Holmer, Wassen (1967) published a revision of Guaymi subdivisions, in which he upheld the classification proposed by Pinart (1885). Basically, he accepted the existence of two distinct groups: 1. An Eastern group that corresponded to the terms Murire, Bukueta, and Sabanero; and 2. A Western group that corresponded to Valiente, Move, Norteno, and Penonomeno. The so-called Bogota who were “discovered” by Nordenskiöld actually belonged to the Eastern group. Nowadays, the Western group has identified itself as Ngobe, and the Eastern group has taken the appellation of Bukle.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Although Nordenskiöld originally planned to visit the Valle de Miranda like Alphonse Pinart in 1882, he was fortunate to modify his trip for weather conditions, and ended up meeting the Bukle in the Calobevora River.

<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, Nordenskiöld made reference to a recent alliance between the Guaymi and the Bogota that was headed by a Guaymi chief who called himself Montezuma. Wassen (1967) collected a reference about the *reyes montezumas* in his conversations with Dr. Sagel in San Felix, and he also mentioned similar observations by Pinart in 1885 and Berthold Seeman in 1851.

In 1932 and 1933, and under the auspices of the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, American anthropologist Frederick Johnson visited the Ngobe Territory in the Pacific.<sup>29</sup> Johnson made more emphasis on the material basis on the Ngobe economy, most importantly agriculture, than any of the previous observers, providing a thorough list of the food plants grown by the Guaymi and describing in detail planting and harvesting practices. He also provided interesting observations about hunting and fishing, remarking that “With the recent increase of economic difficulties, (hunting) trails are sometimes guarded with bows and arrows and even guns to discourage theft and to prevent the uncontrolled movement of undesirable people in the region” (p. 233). This picture of the Ngobe guarding the hunting trails revealed an increased level of distress and the progressive reduction of the natural resource base. Implicitly, Johnson provided an explanation for heightened competition among the Ngobe by emphasizing the important economic changes brought about by the introduction of cattle and horses around 1900, such as the need to fence cultivated land and a “set of laws and other social regulations governing range areas, inheritance, cattle stealing and such are being developed in the tribal councils” (p. 234).<sup>30</sup>

In the 1930s, Johnson confirmed the persistence of the Ngobe pattern of dispersed settlement prevalent since the times of Fray Adrian and Father Franco, and he also provided detailed descriptions of costumes, invariably referring to the

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<sup>29</sup> His work was published in the celebrated *Handbook of South American Indians* by Julian H. Steward. In the Handbook classification, Steward upheld the cultural divisions presented by Pinart (1885 p. 438) – namely the Move, the Murire, and the Muoi. In contrast, Johnson preferred making a distinction between the Northern and the Southern Guaymi.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson also emphasized that “an added stimulus to cattle raising came during the first World War, when a scarcity of grazing land developed in the Republic of Panama” (p. 234).

importance of face painting, especially among men.<sup>31</sup> In a remarkable observation that would be highlighted by future ethnographers, Johnson noted that: “In spite of nearly 400 years of dealing with Europeans, the Guaymi do not yet understand the use of money” (p. 244). Like Orlando Roberts in the 1820s, he noted that people traded industrial goods within the Ngobe Territory through the traditional barter system. In this regard, he said that “A deal, even if initially of the simplest sort, usually becomes hopelessly complicated and ends up, sometimes after several years, in the council, where the governor makes an arbitrary and not always popular solution” (p. 245).

In line with previous observations, Johnson noted that the Guaymi were polygamous, and he added that inheritance was both patrilineal and matrilineal: “Claims arising from this complicated system, which at present does not work well, are adjusted by the tribal council upon the order of the governor” (p. 245). With regards to political organization, he stated that “the titular head of the Guaymi lives in the Miranda Valley”, yet he emphasized the actual authority of the local governors who ruled “over clanlike divisions” and relied on “the support of a loosely organized council made up of influential members of the group” (p. 246). Overall, Johnson’s work stressed that Guaymi society was passing through a critical period of transition:

The infusion of Panamanian ideas is breaking down former ideas of family relationships and the inheritance of property. The resulting complication often becomes intolerable, and a *Guaymi* family group may break up and join the Panamanians or it may move farther back into the mountains and in turn upset the local social, political, and economic situation there (p. 246).

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<sup>31</sup> In addition, Johnson mentioned for the first time the male Ngobe custom of sharpening their teeth, saying that “This custom is most common among the mixed Panamanian-Indian groups and among the Guaymi who have been in close contact with the Panamanians” (p. 240);

In spite of the important changes in Ngobe society noted by Johnson – that according to his own interpretation were associated with cattle ranching and increased contact with mixed-blood Panamanians, his ethnographic account still revealed much continuity in the ideational realm. With regards to religion, he considered that the current Guaymi God resembled the Christian God, and referred to the existence of “shamans and sorcerers who prophesy the future and placate various evil spirits” (p. 250) – an undeniable reference to the *sukias*. Like Pinart in the 1880s, Johnson also made reference to a secret male puberty rite that was performed by a group of men and referred to in Spanish as “clarido”. In addition, he mentioned the *chicheria* ritual celebration, in which “men and women dance in a circle to a single song that everyone sings interminably” (p. 250). Finally, writing about the *balseria*, he reproduced a description very similar, yet less detailed than previous observers, noting that “in some instances men may wage property and even their wives upon the outcome of the “stick play”” (p. 251).

Whereas Johnson considered that the expansion of cattle-raising represented the motor of change on the Pacific slope, the decision of the United Fruit Company to resume the commercial cultivation of bananas in Bocas del Toro became the main force revolutionizing the life of the Ngobe in the Caribbean. Reverend Ephraim Alphonse, who visited the “Valiente” for the first time in 1917 as a Wesleyan Methodist missionary, in his ethnographic notes documented Ngobe society before the advent of these transcendental changes.<sup>32</sup> In his *Guaymi Grammar and Dictionary*, Alphonse (1956)

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<sup>32</sup> According to Alphonse (1956), he visited the Valiente for the first time in 1917, after which he lived twenty one years in the Ngobe Territory, even learning to speak the Ngobe language. He then returned in 1948 and continued missionizing and writing ethnographic notes about Ngobe culture.

emphasized the importance of dreams as well as on the critical role played by sukias in combating evil spirits (p. 118). Like Pinart (1885), he described a ceremonial “wake” (in Ngobere *gueto, goto, ngote, or ngwote*), as a rite performed by a sukia to confront evil spirits when a person fell seriously ill, and the male puberty rite *gwuro* as well as the female equivalent *ka kuete*. Following the prevailing tradition of Ngobe ethnography, he recorded in detail the *krunkite* or balseria, and he even presented folk stories about the Ngobe mythological characters Ulikron and Ciri Klave.<sup>33</sup>

The panorama of the Ngobe in the Caribbean had already substantially changed when American geographer Burton Leroy Gordon began conducting research on indigenous groups in Western Caribbean Panama in the 1950s.<sup>34</sup> In his 1982 publication, he made reference to cultural continuity and acculturation among the Ngobe following decades of fieldwork in some of the most remote parts of the Province of Bocas del Toro. He was among the first to document that “During the last fifteen years (1967-1982), Guaymi expansion westward has been spectacular” (p. 151). Since Gordon emphasized the material base of Ngobe culture in the Caribbean, including

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<sup>33</sup> In spite of his lack of professional training, in “El Indio Guaimi de Cricamola”, Spanish physician Jose Manuel Reverte (1963) contributed some very important ethnographic details in a critical moment of transition in Ngobe society from subsistence agriculture to wage labor. Like Alphonse (1956) and Pinart (1885), Reverte referred to the male puberty ceremony that he called *gwuro*. In addition, he also described the female ceremony *kakuete* that was followed by a family celebration. Like previous observers, he presented a detailed description of the balseria (as mentioned above also called *krunkite* in the Cricamola region). Like Garay (1930), he emphasized the joy, the noise and the music that prevailed during this celebration, which also involved chicha drinking, face painting, and special attires worn by the warring parties (p. 23-27). Reverte once again pointed to the social importance of the sukias, and the existence of a separate language *murie* that could only be understood by the sukias and by some older chanters (interestingly he said that this special language was not used in the balseria chants) (p. 11). Like Fray Adrian and Father Franco, Reverte mentioned the Guaymi belief in the god Ngo-bo, and in a world of evil spirits, diablu or diablure, that were responsible for causing disease (p. 11). To fight a severe disease, a sukia could always convene a *gueto*, or *velorio* (p. 13).

<sup>34</sup> In 1953, Gordon visited for the first time the Naso along the Teribe River; and thirty years later, he left one of the most important testimonials about Naso cultural change in *A Panama Forest and Shore* (Gordon 1982 p. 152-157).

livelihood and agricultural systems, his writings represent a valuable compliment to the work conducted by Philip Young in the Pacific.<sup>35</sup> Essentially, Gordon argued that wage labor and out-migration to the banana towns and plantations of Bocas del Toro, Almirante, and Changuinola had decreased Ngobe reliance on subsistence activities, and promoted dependence on the labor market.

A similar conclusion was reached by Jesuit priest Carlos Cabarrus (1979) in *Indigena y Proletario*. For Cabarrus, the Ngobe of the Caribbean were caught between the contradiction of the land and the contradiction of labor. Whereas some of them, like those in Cusapin in the Valiente Peninsula, depended absolutely on the labor market, others like those in Valle de Risco and Cricamola only worked seasonally and used the land to satisfy most of their basic needs.

What would be the long-term effects of these economic changes on the Ngobe regional culture? In 1958, Philip Young visited for the first time Cerro Mamita in the region of San Felix (Nedrini), and he later returned in 1964-1965 to conduct his doctoral fieldwork. The work of Young (1971) constitutes the most comprehensive study of the Ngobe ethnic community until today. Although he emphasized the necessity of collecting basic ethnographic information, he also clarified that he was basing his argument on the assumption that social organization was influenced by the material basis of Ngobe society. In this regard, his perspective was grim:

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<sup>35</sup> With the creation of the Centro de Investigaciones Antropologicas of the University of Panama after the return of Reina Torres from her professional training in Argentina, a whole generation of Panamanians were prepared in ethnographic fieldwork, started recovering the works of previous researchers such as Nordenskiold and Wassen, and began interacting with a new generation of foreign anthropologist, like Philip Young and James Howe, who arrived to Panama to conduct field research. In 1964, *Hombre y Cultura*, volume I, issue 3, published a report of the survey conducted by Francisco Herrera and Raul Gonzalez in the Calobevora River, and a few years later, Reina Torres (1971) herself published *La Balseria Deporte Indigena*. The work of Reina Torres, including her most comprehensive Ngobe ethnography, is summarized in Panama Indigena (1980).

I attempt to show why Guaymi traditional culture has been so durable in the face of contact with a technologically superior alien culture, and why I think that change in a large scale is now imminent (p. 1).

In accordance with his theoretical perspective, an impending crisis in the Ngobe natural resource base would necessarily result in the transformation of traditional patterns of social interaction. In this regard, Young (p. 74-81) was the first to warn about the depletion of suitable agricultural land and the reduction of fallow periods in the Pacific, an observation upheld by Gjording (1994). In the face of a diminished base for subsistence agriculture, he identified the sale of home manufactures, agricultural produce, domestic animals, and wage labor as the main opportunities to generate needed revenues in a dwindling local economy (p. 82). Interestingly, Young did not visualize wage labor as the most promising alternative for income generation since a combination of technological innovations and political turmoil had greatly reduced the Ngobe labor force in the banana plantations in the Pacific, while the offer of workers had overwhelmed the hiring capacity of the coffee groves in the neighboring Boquete highlands and sugar cane plantations. In spite of what he considered a decrease in the importance of cattle raising in comparison with the situation at the beginning of the century, he affirmed that "The sale of cattle to Latino buyers has become perhaps the most lucrative of the sources from which the Ngobe derive a cash income" (p. 98).

In line with his general thesis, Young did not only provide a much more comprehensive understanding of Ngobe social organization, including kinship, marriage arrangements, and resource allocation, than in any previous study, but necessarily outlined how these patterns of traditional culture were being redefined in contemporary Ngobe society. After explaining the complicated relations between dispersed settlement, post-marital location, and use rights, and in the face of a new 1962 Agrarian

Law that caused distress among the Ngobe, Young concluded that: “Most Ngobe feel that an end to collective ownership of land would quickly end cooperative labor among kinsmen, and that this combination of events would serve to undermine their entire traditional socioeconomic system. In this, I feel that they are probably right” (p. 153).

In fact, Young witnessed firsthand some of the most transcendental changes happening in Ngobe society during the XX century. He commented about the trauma produced by the replacement of the previous local governors by a system of *corregidores* that were now appointed by non-indigenous mayors, and how this new structure that was imposed from above had shattered the existing patterns of authority, privileging literate individuals over those who had gained respect in the communities through traditional means (p. 202-212). He also arrived to Nedrini during the peak of the Mama Tata movement, when the sukias and other *predicadores* had dominated what Young personally considered a restorative and innovative moment. During his stay in the region, and after the unexpected death of the Prophet, a much more political group of “students” had seized control of the movement, and demanded political autonomy from the Government of Panama. Although Young did not foresee a promising future for the Mama Tata religion, he stated that “By 1970 there appeared to have been a resumption of a predominantly religious orientation and the addition to the movement of the aforementioned cargo cult features, presumably due to a lack of any spectacular gains by the would-be political activists” (p. 224).

In spite of what seemed to be the eventual marginalization of the Mama Tata movement, the years between 1961-1964 represented the main rupture of the Ngobe with fundamental social institutions that had sustained Ngobe society since the times of

Fray Adrian de Santo Tomas. After the expressed prohibition of Mama Tata, polygamy was formally abolished, and the balseria ceased to exist as the most important occasion for trans-kinship social interactions in the Ngobe world. Other ritual celebrations like the chicheria and the clarido also fell into disrepute.<sup>36</sup> The empirical evidence thus suggests that Ngobe regional culture both in the Pacific and the Caribbean suffered truly revolutionary transformations between the 1930s-1960s.

In spite of the continuous proletarianization of the Ngobe, and the growing importance of trade for the generation of cash income, Falla (1979) denied the existence of a working class conscience among the members of this ethnic community. According to this Jesuit priest, the persistence of relations with the land precluded the possibility of Ngobe solidarity with non-indigenous workers, and instead reinforced ethnic identity associated with a territory – the struggle for land took precedence over the struggle for work. Yet, a diminishing natural resource base (push) and opportunities for wage labor (pull) in the neighboring plantations were transforming the Ngobe material basis (structure) as well as the fundamental system of beliefs (superstructure) that sustained Ngobe society at least since the XVII century.<sup>37</sup>

As the State became more assertive on the use of natural resources within the Ngobe lands in order to satisfy the national interest, the Ngobe might not, and may not have ever constituted an economic class according to Marxist orthodoxy, yet they were

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<sup>36</sup> Young (1976) himself provided the first academic interpretation of the ancient rite of *krun* or balseria. For him the ceremony might be the remnant of previous Pre-Columbian ritual competitions among chiefs. For the Ngobe, *krun* represented cooperation and competition among rivals, a persistent topic in the Ngobe worldview.

<sup>37</sup> During the last forty years, a renewed understanding of the Ngobe ethnic community has emerged for two principal reasons: The arrival of a new cadre of “critical anthropologists” who have been more aware of the pitfalls of ethnographic research, and most importantly, the emergence of a new generation of Ngobe interlocutors with an unedited capacity to portray an image of the Ngobe from within.

undeniably crystallizing into a political class with the potential to influence mainstream politics at the regional and the national levels. As indigenous movements rose throughout the Americas, and the Government of Panama was seized by a populist military dictatorship, the Ngobe did not only begin puncturing the power of the national state, but internal relations of power were also being redefined in this political process. Under this scenario, the role of leadership became fundamental to define the contours of the new relations between the Ngobe ethnic community and the Panamanian State. Chapters 5 and 6 will explore the trajectory of Ngobe leadership between 1968-2008, examining the complex interplay between ethnic leaders and state cooptation, and providing hints on the prospects for ethnic autonomy in the midst of a charismatic indigenismo.





Figure 4-2. Regions of the Ngobe-Bugle Comarca created through Law 10 of 1997. Prepared by Jose Miguel Guevara.

## CHAPTER 5 INCREASING NGOBE MOVILIZATION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE COMARCA, 1968-1997

According to Young (1971), the political ramifications of the Mama Tata movement (also called the Nueva Orden Indigena) had receded by the early 1970s; and the otherwise nativist tendency had been marginalized to what he called a “cargo cult”. Under this perspective, the prospects for increased Ngobe participation in national politics were considered dim in spite of the profound social and economic changes happening within the ethnic community. Almost forty years after Young’s monograph, the panorama looks very different. Not only have the Ngobe increasingly gained political participation and formal recognition of their territorial rights. National political parties have also festered amidst the Ngobe passion for friendship/competition (see Young 1976 on the symbolic meaning of balseria) and on their undisputed position as the most marginalized indigenous group in Panama. A cyclical process seems to have occurred in which heightened political mobilization in the 1960s-1980s did not lead to grassroots empowerment (Tarrow 1998, Zibechi 2009), but to the institutionalization of leadership and to irreconcilable schisms among those Ngobe leaders who reject the fundamentals of capitalist development – privatization and exploitation of natural resources, and those who remain loyal to the national structures of power represented by the political parties.

Although a new cycle of mobilization appears to be occurring in the present, framed in terms of the defense of natural resources, dignity and territory; the question remains at to how much can the Ngobe people accomplish today after the transcendental changes happening in both Ngobe and Panamanian society during the last forty years. This chapter will start outlining the politicization of Ngobe ethnicity in

the 1960s and the onset of the first cycle of mobilization spearheaded by leaders deeply imbued in tradition like Jose Cruz Monico and Camilo Ortega. Then, I will discuss the progressive cooptation of the Ngobe leadership and the indigenous movement at large by the Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) of Omar Torrijos, and the fallout of the Ngobe leadership with this party during the Noriega dictatorship. Finally, a discussion will be provided of the last years before the approval of Law 10 of 1997, and the institutionalization of the Ngobe leadership through the creation of the Comarca.

### **Social Mobilization Amidst the Collapse of the Liberal Welfare State**

According to Priestly (1986), the 1960s brought an unprecedented wave of popular mobilization in Panama. The Liberal welfare state that had managed and attenuated radical manifestations of Arnulfista nationalism as well as revolutionary ideals in the 1950s had succeeded in maintaining electoral democracy and ensuring economic growth; yet the country had also become strained by inequality, capitalization, and rampant political corruption. Numerous instances of popular insurrections occurred following the 1947 riots against the new Panama Canal treaties (Pearcy 1998). The 1964 student demonstrations against the Canal Zone authorities revealed both the fragility of Panamanian democracy and the tenuous relationship of the country with the United States.

In rural Panama, land conflicts referred to in Chapter 3 had become accentuated in spite of the devoted efforts of the Catholic Church and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to implement limited land reform. In 1959, a group of high school students tried to organize rural guerrillas in the mountains of Veraguas only to be crushed by the state security forces a few months later. The Ngobe boundary constituted a particularly contested region as mixed-blood farmers

encroached upon the Ngobe Territory as a result of land accumulation and speculation by larger landowners to produce beef and other agricultural market products. Both Sarsanedas (1978) and Herrera (1989) agree that the construction of the Pan-American Highway between Santiago (Veraguas) and David (Chiriqui) accelerated the dispossession of Ngobe lands. Jesuit Priest Jorge Sarsanedas (1978) documented rural conflicts between the Ngobe, mestizo peasants, and large landowners in the region of Kodriri years before the Ngobe declaration of an independent Mama Tata republic in the Nedrini region in 1965 (see chapters 3 and 4). His observations were confirmed by Herrera (1972 and personal communication), Guionneau-Sinclair (1988), and many other observers who worked and/or conducted research in the Ngobe boundary during this period.

As stated by Sarsanedas (1978), there seemed to be a contradictory relation between the creation of the Tabasara Comarca in 1952 and the advance of non-indigenous farmers on Ngobe lands. The delimitation of this Comarca in the year 1958 only heightened the conflicts associated with the sudden rise in land values after the completion of the Pan-American Highway. Both Sarsanedas (1978 p. 46) and Guionneau-Sinclair (1988 p. 179-183) document movements organized by Ngobe leaders in Nedrini to demand respect for their land rights. According to *La Estrella de Panama* of December 27, 1958, the General Attorney of Panama, Hermogenes de la Rosa, even asked the commander of the National Guard, Bolivar Vallarino, “que evite esos atropellos contra los humildes indios de Chiriqui, que son por ahora los mas afectados” “to avoid these abuses against the humble Indians of Chiriqui, who are currently the most affected”. Camilo Ortega (personal communication) mentioned

similar mobilizations in Kodriri, and Jose Cruz Monico r. i. p. (personal communication) also referred to these kinds of movements in the Pacific.

In addition to overt political mobilization, the Ngobe reacted in a different manner to external pressures, recurring to Ngobe spirituality and praise for the female self. According to both Sarsanedas (1978 p. 25-26) and Guionneau-Sinclair (1988), the first apparition of the Mother Mary (Mama-Kri)<sup>1</sup> happened to Delia Sanjur in Sitio Prado in 1956, followed by Candida Jimenez in Potrero de Cana (1959), Rufina and Ifigenia Flores in Tijera (1960) and finally the great apparition to Delia Bejarano (Mama-Chi) in Soloy (1962). As explained above, the separatist movement rising from the Mama-Chi revelation eventually became politically explicit when the “students” declared an independent republic in 1965. More importantly, and contrary to the assessment of Young (1971), the Mama-Chi (or Mama-Tata) religion did not only transform Ngobe traditional culture – most prominently the elimination of polygamy, the balseria, and the chicheria, but also had everlasting political implications extending into the XXI century.

As popular mobilizations in general were gaining steam in Panama during the 1960s, the prevailing response of the Liberal oligarchic governments was outright repression through the increasingly powerful National Guard. According to Percy (1998), the National Guard in fact had become the main arbiter of Panamanian politics after the 1947 riots against the renewal of a lease for American bases in the country. Undeniably, this military/police institution had been demonstrating autonomy from the civilian oligarchy and represented a main avenue for social mobility among Panamanian poor families. For this reason, when a feud erupted between President Marcos Robles

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<sup>1</sup> In Ngobere, Mama-Kri means the Great Mother as opposed to Mama-Chi or the Little Mother as the prophet Delia Bejarano herself came to be known.

and Vice-President Max Delvalle in 1968, the commander of the National Guard Bolivar Vallarino played the leading role in resolving the crisis and preventing the anticipated collapse of the Liberal state (Guevara Mann 1996, Ropp 1982).

Although Panamanian “democracy” survived a major blow in early 1968, the fatal wound came only a few months later with the election for a third time of Arnulfo Arias to the presidency (Guevara Mann 1996, Ropp 1982). After dismissing the top of the military institution upon his inauguration in October 1, Arnulfo appointed close associates to head the National Guard without recognizing a previous pact with mid-level officials. As a result, eleven days later, majors Boris Martinez and Omar Torrijos organized a coup d’etat, and a military junta assumed power in Panama for the first time in history. As opposed to previous ventures, the new military cadre that rose in 1968 decided to continue ruling the country following similar tendencies in the rest of Latin America. Although it strongly criticized the oligarchy that had “ruled the country since the separation from Colombia”, it also repressed any significant manifestation of grassroots activism and “communist” activity (Lafeber 1979).

During the early years of the military dictatorship, social movement organizers went into hiding, and some were incarcerated and even disappeared. The annihilation of the leftist insurgency calmed the worse fears of the US State Department, yet an internal quarrel between Torrijos and Martinez gave the regime an entirely different direction. On December 16, 1969, the supporters of Martinez ousted Torrijos while he was traveling to Mexico. With the decisive support of Major Manuel Antonio Noriega in the Province of Chiriqui, Torrijos triumphantly returned to the country. As he emerged victorious, Martinez was permanently exiled to Miami. After that moment, General

Torrijos, a native from the Province of Veraguas and son of rural teachers, began creating a solid alliance with several of the most important leftist thinkers in Panama and abroad, and dedicated himself to embellish his image as the Supreme Ruler of the country. During the next decade, Omar Torrijos became the absolute and de facto ruler of Panama, launched a new constitutional process, and elevated populist corporatism to levels not even imagined by the Arias brothers in the 1930s.

### **Military Populism and the Advent of Charismatic Indigenismo**

As opposed to the legend that has been perpetuated by both prejudiced commentators and Torrijos fanatics, indigenous mobilization in Panama preceded and accelerated years before the assumption of Torrijos. Not only had the Kuna maintained political activism after the Tule Revolution, but Ngobe leaders had also become increasingly politicized and had mobilized to defend their land rights since the 1950s (Sarsanedas 1978, Herrera 1994, Camilo Ortega personal communication).

In spite of the merits of indigenous mobilization, the Torrijos regime was undeniably successful in co-opting the indigenous leadership, such as it had done with worker unions, student federations, and intellectuals. According to the social reform program of the “revolutionary process”, the 1972 Constitutional Convention would be expected to lay out the foundation for a new republic. With regards to indigenous policy, the debate centered on whether maintaining the existing framework of indigenous comarcas and reserves - heavily soaked in Mexican indigenista thinking, or starting a new process of land allocation to resolve the Indian Question (Herrera 1989 p. 94-95 and personal communication). In these discussions, Anthropologists Reina Torrez de Arauz, Francisco Herrera and Stanley Heckadon established a dialogue with members of the constitutional convention like Aristides Royo and Adolfo Ahumada.

Ultimately, an eclectic criterion prevailed. The new constitution would not eliminate the existing comarcas and reservations, but would rather include an article mandating the State to allocate the necessary lands for the survival of indigenous peoples (originally Article 117). In other words, instead of defining the boundaries of the Bocas del Toro, Tabasara, and Bayano y el Darien comarcas that had already been created in 1952, the Government assumed the responsibility of conducting direct negotiations with each of the indigenous groups to draft the legal instruments for the creation of their respective comarcas. Only the Kuna special regime that was established between 1930-1953 would remain intact.

The indefinite situation of the indigenous lands that was created by Article 117 of the 1972 Constitution masterfully served the purposes of the military regime. Instead of a formal mechanism for the protection of indigenous lands, the State now had the opportunity to negotiate with the different indigenous groups as a corporate sector, to rally political support and obtain favors in exchange of land recognition. Although the indigenous policy of the military was merely an extension of the limited populist corporatism of the *Accion Comunal* period (1931-1945), there is no doubt that the style, the discourse, and the praxis of General Torrijos enhanced clientelistic relations between indigenous peoples and the State to unprecedented levels in Panama. Undeniably, the personal charisma of the General and his amenable personality contributed to developing a personable relationship with the most important indigenous leaders of those times (Lafeber 1979, Herrera 1989), but the revolutionary process also catered to the interest of indigenous peoples to an extent that had never been achieved in the past, and possibly would never be achieved in the future. The military managed

to perfect and consolidate the regime of corporatist citizenship and indigenismo that had been under construction in Panama since the 1930s and that had remained even during the Liberal reaction of 1945-1968.<sup>2</sup>

Under this perspective, the 1965 episode of the Mama Tata rebellion in the Ngobe Territory symbolized the new relation between the State and indigenous peoples. Although the government had the armed capacity to crush an indigenous mobilization, the personal approach of Torrijos had opted for dialogue, bargaining and cooptation to bring indigenous peoples into the corporate structure of the State. The special relation with indigenous peoples was not an exception. The military were simultaneously developing corporate relations with the labor unions, student federations, peasant organizations, and the government bureaucracy (Priestley 1986). Although the loyalty of these sectors made possible the continuation of the populist military regime, the indigenous cause was certainly exceptional. First, in electoral terms, indigenous peoples could contribute the least to the continuation of the regime since they were located in distant regions, were not politically organized, and did not represent a large voting population. Second, they demanded a disproportionate share of the national lands that had already been targeted for hydroelectric, mining, and agricultural development. And finally, direct military intervention would have been relatively easy to achieve and would not have elicited a strong reaction from the general public if these actions were couched in terms of the national interest.

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<sup>2</sup> Sarsanedas (1978) and Gjording (1994) emphasized the special relation between General Omar Torrijos and the main leader of the Mama Tata movement, Samuel Gonzalez from Nedrini. Sarsanedas even pointed out that this caused problems for cacique Lorenzo Rodriguez who felt disrespected by the preference of the General for the spiritual leader.

This focus on the national interest and national sovereignty may explain why the Torrijos regime was so complacent with a sector of the population that did not offer that much in terms of political gain. A native of the countryside, Torrijos firmly believed that he was consolidating the national state by recovering the Panama Canal and the US-controlled Canal Zone, and integrating the frontier regions in national development, including the indigenous lands. According to this view, indigenous peoples, as well as West Indians who were working in the Canal Zone, were an important element in the creation of a new sovereign Panama; and therefore, the Indians needed to be incorporated, and not forcefully assimilated into the nation. Obviously, the thinking of Torrijos and of many of his collaborators was synchronized with the indigenist discourse of the 1940s-1960s that was encapsulated in the 1946 Constitution and the Law 18 of 1952. In contrast with the right-wing administrations of 1945-1968, however, Torrijos was determined to integrate the national territory, boasted absolute power to advance this agenda, and utilized a very unique personalistic style to gain the confidence of indigenous leaders (as well as poor peasants from the countryside).<sup>3</sup>

### **The Collapse of the National Indigenous Movement and the Emergence of a New Ngobe Leadership under the Torrijos Regime**

Confronted with a government that was willing to talk and at the same time was open for compromise, the indigenous organizations that had become increasingly belligerent in the 1960s ended up settling for a corporatist relationship with the State in the 1970s. An ethnographically visible manifestation of this rapprochement between the grassroots indigenous leadership and the military regime was the participation of

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Torrijos was also considered charming by such disparate personalities as former American President Jimmy Carter, Cuban leader Fidel Castro, Admiral Tito of Yugoslavia, and Colombian Nobel laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

General Omar Torrijos in the 1972 National Indigenous Congress in Cankintu (Ño Kribo), considered the heart of the Ngobe Territory (and most probably the mythical Valle del Guaymi/Valle Miranda). This event marked the beginning of an enduring alliance that would transcend the life of the General and would travel beyond any previous relation between the Kuna and Harmodio Arias. The scope of the corporatist state had now become national, and Torrijos knew how to enamor indigenous leaders to side with his revolutionary process. Hand in hand with government authorities, indigenous leaders such as Estanislao Lopez (Kuna) and Jose Cruz Monico (Ngobe) would participate in official events and represent the revolutionary nation internally and abroad. In spite of future conflicts and bitter disappointments, the image of Torrijos has never faded away in indigenous areas and still permeates State-Indian relations in Panama even until today.

The corporatist bonds between indigenous peoples and the military government were mirrored at the personal level by the friendship between Omar Torrijos and indigenous leaders. Overt conflict was never absent, yet never reached the necessary levels to ruin this special relationship. The negotiation process to obtain the approval of the Kuna for the construction of the Bayano Hydroelectric Project was indeed lengthy, protracted, and conflictive (Wali 1989, Horton 2007, Herrera personal communication); yet concluded with the signing in 1976 of the so-called Farallon Accords in the vacation residence of the General.<sup>4</sup> The most belligerent Ngobe leaders refused even talk about

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<sup>4</sup> The bargaining approach promoted by the *Dictadura con Carino* - "Dictatorship with Love" - of Omar Torrijos led to the signing of the Farallon Accords, in which the Kuna of Bayano accepted that their ancestral lands be flooded for the construction of the Bayano hydroelectric project in Eastern Panama (Wali 1989 p. 81-84; Wickstrom 2003 p. 48-49; Horton 2006 p. 838-839). In compensation for this extraordinary sacrifice, the State would provide the Kuna with health facilities and potable water; and would protect the existing forests for the Kuna to maintain their traditional culture and continue with their subsistence economy.

the possibility of building the Cerro Colorado Mining Complex and the Tabasara and Teribe-Changuinola hydroelectric projects until the Ngobe lands were declared as a comarca. Nevertheless, never did the State even threatened with using the “monopoly over the legitimate use of force” to impose these projects during the life of the General. In 1999, when interviewing one of the greatest Ngobe leader of modern times, Jose Cruz Monico r. i. p., in his humble residence in the community of Pueblo Nuevo (Ño Kribo), he proudly displayed his pictures with the deceased General eighteen years after his sudden death, and the same happened ten years later when interviewing the great cacique of Kodriri Camilo Ortega in his residence in Alto de Jesus.

In spite of this special relation, the alliance between indigenous peoples and the military government effectively demobilized the grassroots activism that was pressuring the national government for land recognition in the 1960s and also gave a fatal blow to the vibrant and independent national indigenous movement. According to Camilo Ortega, the first National Indigenous Congress was held in Alto de Jesus in the Ngobe region of Kodriri in 1969. For the next seven years, national congresses occurred every year in the different indigenous territories of the country, signaling the unity of indigenous peoples and their common struggle for land rights and cultural recognition.

The existence of an active Panamanian indigenous movement has been documented in the writings of critical anthropologists (Bonfil Batalla 1981 p. 353-366, Documentos de la Segunda Reunion de Barbados 1979 p. 255-258). After the Seventh Congress celebrated in Doboro in the Ngobe region of Nedrini between April 16-19, 1975; the Kuna patriarch Estanislao Lopez was named as the *National Cacique* of the indigenous peoples in Panama and a *Permanent Committee* was chosen to coordinate

programs with the national government. Unfortunately, three years later, the Asociación Nacional Indígena de Panama (ANIP) was divided in regional committees and after a few years disappeared altogether.

In spite of the ephemeral success of the ANIP (1969-1978), whose gestation originated from decades of Kuna activism during the aegis of international indigenismo, the consolidation of a national indigenous movement also contributed to the creation of regional governance structures happening for each ethnic community.<sup>5</sup> In the case of the Ngobe, this historical process began with the creation of two separate systems in the 1960s – that of the caciques and that of the local congresses, and culminated with the emergence of the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress in 1979.

During the first National Indigenous Congress in Alto de Jesus (Kodrirí) in 1969, the entire Ngobe territory was divided in three regions roughly corresponding to the existing Panamanian provinces – Ño Kribo (Bocas del Toro), Nedrini (Chiriquí) and Kodrirí (Veraguas). The Ngobe decided that each of these regions would be headed by a regional cacique – Jose Cruz Monico for Ño Kribo, Lorenzo Rodriguez for Nedrini, and Camilo Ortega for Kodrirí (Gjording 1994, Herrera 1989). In turn, the caciques would also be able to appoint *jefes inmediatos* who would have jurisdiction over a number of communities. As explained in Chapter 4, Ngobe history registered the existence of caciques at different times, yet external observers raised unsettling questions about the power of these political figures (Franco 1978). Perhaps never in Ngobe history had caciques reached the geographical coverage and formal authority attributed to Monico,

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<sup>5</sup> According to Camilo Ortega (personal communication), regional indigenous organizations did remain for each ethnic community – Kuna, Ngobe-Bugle, Embera-Wounaan – and filled the void left by the disappearance of ANIP.

Rodriguez and Ortega after 1969, but also historically the Ngobe had never been pressured to present a unified front to external actors as demanded by the struggle to create a comarca and to protect the Ngobe lands from the insidious advances of non-indigenous landholders and private corporations into the Ngobe lands (Gjording 1994, Sarsanedas 1978).

Existing anthropological and historical research presents an incomplete image of the role and the character of the three Ngobe caciques during the 1970s. According to Sarsanedas (1978), Lorenzo Rodriguez (Nedrini) commanded some loyalty in the District of Tole; yet he was also constantly disturbed by the apparent preference of Torrijos towards the leader of Mama Tata, Samuel Gonzalez. In the case of Jose Cruz Monico (Ño Kribo), Cabarrus (1979) emphasized that his power was bolstered by his control of the Ngobe labor force for the Bocas Division of the United Fruit Company. According to this anthropologist, no Ngobe would be hired by the Company without an express approval from Monico or his *jefes inmediatos*. Unfortunately, and in spite of his critical importance for the Comarca negotiations, printed information about the cacique of Kodriri, Camilo Ortega, is very scant.

The three caciques were typically strong Ngobe leaders who had risen in the struggle for land rights in their respective regions, yet they were also deeply rooted in Ngobe tradition and worldview. Although they had a legitimate mandate in each of their regions and communicated fluently with General Torrijos himself, they did not necessarily understand the *chui* perspective, and particularly in the case of Monico struggled to send their message across in the Spanish language. Perhaps for this reason, as currently acknowledged by Camilo Ortega, they truly valued the educational

preparation of the younger generations “for them to be able to struggle more effectively for the benefit of their own people” (personal communication).<sup>6</sup> Consequently, a main concern of the caciques, and a constant demand for the national government was granting scholarships for Ngobe youth to study in national and foreign institutions. Congruent with his human development policies nationwide, General Torrijos generously supported different kinds of exchange programs which allowed an entire generation of promising Ngobe students to study nationally and internationally. These younger leaders, typically Western-educated under the aegis of Torrijos would constitute the generational relay of the caciques beginning with the creation of the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress in 1979.

According to Camilo Ortega (personal communication), local congresses began to be organized in Kodriri in the 1960s to protect Ngobe lands from the encroachment of non-indigenous peasants and landowners. In spite of the importance of these grassroots mobilizations, in general terms, the Ngobe historically did not have strong local-level governing institutions such as the Kuna village congresses – *onmeked* (Perez Archibold 1998). Instead, kinship remained the main unit of organization until the advent of the Mama Tata movement even above the *cabildos* and governors mentioned by Johnson (1932) and other authors. As explained by Young (1971), the Mama Tata meetings replaced the *balserias* as the main occasions of trans-kinship relations, and the system of caciques implanted in 1969 in many ways was built upon the pan-Ngobe tendencies catalyzed by the Mama Tata movement. The possibility of coalescing into a general congress similar to the Kuna *Onmeked-Nega* remained a

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<sup>6</sup> In a singular twist so characteristic of his joyous personality, Camilo Ortega then added “we were proven wrong”.

challenge for Ngobe political organization that would be faced by younger members of this ethnic community with expectations, visions and aspirations less traditional than those of the original three regional caciques. When the first Ngobe-Bugle General Congress was celebrated in Cankintu in 1979, General Torrijos himself attended this gathering and reiterated his promise to create a Comarca Indígena Ngobe-Bugle. Besides his unconcealed sympathy towards the Ngobe, the General surely was preoccupied with another issue of national importance – the development of the Cerro Colorado Mining Project.

### **The Right Turn of the Revolutionary Process and the Dispersion of the Ngobe Leadership**

The oil crises of 1972 and 1978 sent shockwaves that endangered the culmination of the historical process of corporatist citizenship and welfare development that was started by Accion Comunal in 1931. Always proud of its eclecticism and reminiscent of similar regimes in Argentina (Peronismo), Brazil (Estado Novo), and Mexico (PRI), the revolutionary process had cultivated a parallel leftist tendency and a business front that became especially influential in the formulation of economic policy after 1975. As much of a corporate sector as labor, students, peasants, and indigenous peoples, the business class also benefited from the populist military regime, and some specific policies, such as the creation of the International Banking Center were clearly aimed at enhancing private capitalist profits (Lafeber 1979, Weeks and Zimbalist 1991).

As the buoyant treasury necessary for the operation of state-run enterprises and social welfare programs began to falter, the right wing of the military government began increasing its share of political power now under the leadership of US educated economists and businessmen, such as presidents-to-be Ernesto Perez Balladares and

Nicolas Ardito Barletta. After a highly publicized democratic opening and a return to the barracks in 1978,<sup>7</sup> perhaps to placate the concerns raised by the US Congress about freedom and democracy in Panama, the new civilian administration of President Aristides Royo (1978-1982) that assumed control of the government bureaucracy was much less radical and more accommodating of World Bank (WB) and Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) recommendations than the group that controlled the government between 1972-1978. While many nationalists celebrated the end of the colonial presence of the United State, the Torrijos regime was progressively turning away from welfare economics and social reform, and moving towards free market economics and the Washington consensus.

During this transitional period, conflict and disagreement between the visions of the business people and the revolutionary branch of the PRD - *La Tendencia* - were difficult to conceal.<sup>8</sup> The mediation of the General, who made occasional wanderings away from the barracks, was essential to reconcile the two logics of state-centered socialism and private-induced capitalism that vied for control of the Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD). Large government corporations like Corporación Bayano and Corporación para el Desarrollo Minero - that were a complete financial failure, were especially problematic; yet they also represented an integral part of the community development approach for the advocates of corporatist governance.

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<sup>7</sup> The Revolutionary Democratic Party, or PRD, was created by Omar Torrijos himself in 1978 as part of the democratic opening that followed the signing of the Panama Canal treaties. The opening included a reform of the 1972 Constitution and the return to Panamanian politics of exiled political figures such as the quintessential caudillo Arnulfo Arias Madrid.

<sup>8</sup> *La Tendencia* referred to a group of PRD members who identified themselves with Marxism-Leninism and other leftist tendencies.

According to the business sector and associate government bureaucrats, the State should allow the participation of private investors who had the capacity to rescue these enterprises and improve efficiency and productivity (Gjording 1994). The transformations promoted by the business sector of the PRD would completely change the rules of the game in the relations between indigenous peoples and the State, effectively terminating a prolonged process of negotiation, cooptation and incorporation that began with the Accion Comunal administrations of the 1930s.

According to Gjording (1994), the Cerro Colorado Mining Complex was conceived as one of the largest copper exploitations in the world that would convert Panama from a mere platform of commerce and transportation into a major exporter of raw goods. The Project also demanded the construction of hydroelectric dams in the Ngobe region of Tabasara in Kodriri, and in Teribe Changuinola, an area occupied by the Naso and the Ngobe ethnic communities in the Province of Bocas del Toro. Cerro Colorado was originally conceived as a state venture in line with the corporatist welfare thinking of the 1960s and early 1970s. Based on his personal experience with the Kuna in Bayano, Torrijos expected to dissuade the Ngobe to accept the construction of the Project in exchange of government services and land recognition. The Ngobe, however, were very sensitive towards a project that violated the heart of the Ngobe homeland, and closed ranks in demanding a comarca before negotiations could be undertaken.

The questions of Cerro Colorado and Teribe-Changuinola dominated Ngobe discussions with the Government during the Extraordinary General Congress of Soloy (Nedrini) in 1980. General Torrijos would be absent at this gathering as he had

voluntarily returned to the barracks. Many believed that Torrijos was actually planning to run for President as a civilian in the first direct elections after the 1968 coup scheduled for May 1984. Surprisingly, he instead died prematurely in a plane accident on July 31, 1981. We never know what the fate would have been of the Torrijos corporatist model of indigenous participation had he survived into the 1980s; yet the future tensions generated by his regime of corporatist citizenship were subsumed by the spontaneous expression of a Kuna woman during a meeting about the Bayano negotiations: “*Acaso Usted es Dios para prometer tanto?*” “*Are you perhaps God to promise so much?*” (Franciso Herrera personal communication). No new indigenous comarcas were created during the lifespan of Torrijos, and after his death, all the internal contradictions of his “revolutionary movement” emerged to the surface.

Since the death of Omar Torrijos, no Panamanian government figure has ever commanded the admiration and loyalty of indigenous leaders as the deceased general. During the next decade, a whole generation of bureaucrats would struggle unsuccessfully to achieve the contradictory goals of creating the Ngobe-Bugle Comarca and, at the same time, obtain an approval from the Ngobe for the Cerro Colorado Mining Project. None of these politicians would communicate effectively with the indigenous leaders. In the period 1972-1981, the seven ethnic groups in the country still maintained hope that all of their territories would be protected by the State, and that despite disagreements, indigenous peoples and the Government could work side by side in search of their common interests. Although indigenista sectors were always a reduced minority in the increasingly large national bureaucracy, the position of the

national government (or the “line” as Torrijos liked to say) favored bargaining, dialogue, and cooptation.

In the early 1980s, the Ngobe were confronting mixed prospects for the creation of an autonomous territory. The collapse of the national indigenous movement and the physical death of General Omar Torrijos made difficult an “interlocucion” with the national government; yet the strengthening of the Ngobe organizational capacity under the first president of the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress, Julio Dixon, and the (re) creation of a network of supporting individuals and organizations spearheaded by critical anthropologists and solidarity groups had the potential to amplify the Ngobe claims for land rights and cultural respect.<sup>9</sup> Evidently, the new generation of critical anthropologists was also articulated with student liberation movements emerging in the 1960s, and shared a strong link with Christian social doctrine and Liberation Theology. Undoubtedly, the Catholic Church was among the first to denounce and act against the exploitation of poor peasants and indigenous peoples in Western Panama through Plan

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<sup>9</sup> During a period of continued grassroots mobilization and government courting of indigenous leaders, another set of actors came to play a very prominent role – Critical Anthropologists and Solidarity Groups. As mentioned above, in 1971, a group of younger anthropologists lead by Mexican Guillermo Bonfil Batalla decided to break away from the predominant indigenista paradigm that had conditioned the indigenous policies of the Mexican Government since the Revolution. In the Barbados Declaration, and under the auspices of the World Council of Churches, they charged that government policies for community development and acculturation reproduced the historical patterns of domination and colonialism that characterized relations between indigenous and European descendants in Latin America. They called for the international community to listen and respect the voices of the liberation movements of indigenous peoples. This new generation of academics proclaimed itself as critical anthropologists, and considered a moral imperative the engagement of intellectuals in the struggle in favor of indigenous peoples.

As such a call for action progressively disseminated in the Americas, both national and foreign academics who began work in Panama in the 1970s shared this positive vision about the defense of indigenous rights, most prominently Luz Graciela Joly, James Howe, Alaka Wali, John Bort, Keith Bletzer, Philip Bourgois, and the Jesuit priests Jorge Sarsanedas, Carlos Cabarrus, and Chris Gjording. Undeniably, they followed on the steps of the academic tradition laid out by Reina Torres de Arauz, and they actively collaborated with Torres de Arauz and her disciples. However, they also articulated a more politically explicit position in defense of indigenous rights, and explored new conflictive topics such as the banana enclave in Bocas del Toro, the Cerro Colorado Mining Project, the Bayano Hydroelectric Project, and the political organization of the Kuna.

Veraguas in the 1960s. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Catholic and other Christian social activists identified with the Ngobe struggle for land rights and coalesced around the *Comite de Solidaridad con el Pueblo Guaymi* that organized the forum “El Pueblo Guayimi y su Futuro” in 1982.

As government bureaucrats under the command of Torrijos successors pressed for the construction of the Cerro Colorado Mine for the sake of national development, the Ngobe decided to organize a grassroots mobilization that would take the claims of indigenous peoples to the doorsteps of the national government. In 1983, the first Ngobe-Bugle March for the Creation of a Comarca Indigena arrived to Panama City only to encounter a capital and a government bureaucracy that, although still run by the military, had changed its tone, its approach and its style towards indigenous peoples. The tensions that were inherent to the right turn of the “revolutionary” regime remained hidden beneath the surface until the tragic accident that took away the life of General Omar Torrijos Herrera on July 31, 1981. His disappearance abruptly ended the corporatist citizenship regime that had been under construction ever since the coup of January 2, 1931, and that sustained an indigenista policy of cooptation, integration and acculturation

### **A Struggle for Power: Indigenous Peoples Against the Revolutionary Process**

After the death of Omar Torrijos, his successors inherited many promises that were difficult to fulfill. Torrijos had committed his government with the Embera, the Ngobe, the Bugle and the Naso to the creation of new *comarcas*; yet he had also embarked the country on a path of development that would demand the same land, energy and mining resources that were contained in the indigenous territories (Bort and Helms 1983 p. 3-16, Wali 1989 p. 16-17, Gjording 1991 p. 3-7, 31-35). During the first

years after the death of Torrijos, the bureaucracy of the Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) engaged in simultaneous negotiations with the different indigenous groups for the creation of their comarcas and to obtain their approval for development projects. However, government officials soon faced Ngobe opposition to the construction of hydroelectric projects in Tabasara and Teribe-Changuinola, and to the exploitation of the Cerro Colorado mines, located in the heart of the Ngobe Territory. As negotiations with the Ngobe stalled, the Government was only able to proceed with the creation of the Embera-Wounaan Indigenous Comarca in 1982.

The Ngobe negotiations collapsed in 1983 after unresolvable disagreements on the continuation of the Cerro Colorado mines and the limits of the *comarca* in the Veraguas region (Herrera 1989 p. 113-115). The failure of the negotiations coincided with a period of increasing turmoil in Panama, as the country approached the first direct presidential elections since 1968. General Manuel Antonio Noriega had defeated his main political opponents within the military, and was preparing to seize control of the government in favor of his candidate, former head of the World Bank for Latin America, Nicolas Ardito Barletta (Lafeber 1989 p. 194-197). In fact, the revolutionary process had continued a decisive movement to the right that started during the last years of Torrijos. In spite of the boisterous populism of the military regime, the Generals were fully aware that Panama would soon have to implement the structural adjustment measures of the Washington Consensus, in order to salvage the indebted economy that was a legacy of the pharaonic projects of the 1970s.

Rather than preparing the stage for a controlled transition to civilian rule, the 1984 elections initiated a period of profound political instability as news spread that the

election had been rigged by the military in favor of Ardito Barletta (Lafeber 1989 p.196-198). For many independent observers, eighty-four-years old Arnulfo Arias had once again obtained most of the popular vote. Despite cries of fraud and corruption, Nicolas Ardito Barletta assumed the presidency on October 1, 1984. Although the first structural adjustment package was eventually defeated when popular mobilizations appealed to the legacy of social conquests bequeathed by the military; the internal quarrel within the rank and files of the PRD further debilitated the legitimacy of the government (Ropp 1987). Combined with the burden of the debt crisis, this crisis of governance foreclosed any possibility of discussing the issue of the indigenous *comarcas*, and delayed even the promotion of the ambitious national development agenda of the 1970s, that included roads, dams and a mining complex.

During this period, however, the increasing participation of a new generation of Western-educated indigenous leaders in the PRD prolonged into the 1980s and created a degenerated version of the corporatist structures that had been laid out by Torrijos and his leftist supporters – *La Tendencia* – during the 1970s. The internal divisions within the PRD and the repressive turn of the dictatorship exacerbated existing political differences within the indigenous leadership. According to Kuna intellectual Juan Perez-Archibold (1998), the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) even created an indigenous affairs office under the direct control of the military:

En este contexto, la movilización política de la nación Kuna en la década de 1975-1985 condujo al gobierno panameño a que sus instituciones de dominación impulsaran con fuerza una estrategia de intervención en el Onmaked-Nega Tummat para restarle fuerza y vigor. Dentro de esta lógica, el gobierno panameño creó el sistema de Representantes de Corregimiento en 1972; posteriormente el establecimiento del Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD), en 1979; después, el sistema de

Legislación de Panamá en 1980; y finalmente, las Fuerzas de Defensa por medio de su oficina indigenista (p. 247).

Under this context, the political mobilization of the Kuna nation in the decade between 1975-1985, led the institutions of domination of the Panamanian Government to promote a strategy of intervention to debilitate the Onmaked-Nega Tummat (the Kuna General Congress). As part of this logic, the Panamanian Government created the system of corregimiento representatives in 1972; subsequently, the establishment of the Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD), in 1979; later the Panamanian legislation system in 1980; and finally the Defense Forces through its indigenista office (p. 247).

In spite of some minor historical imprecision, in this paragraph, Perez-Archibold described the penetration of the modern Panamanian party system into internal indigenous politics. Before the advent of the revolutionary process, most indigenous peoples in Panama maintained a de facto regime of political autonomy that was based on the exercise of traditional authority and isolation from the national state. Only the San Blas Kuna, through a historical process of interaction with the corporatist state since *Accion Comunal*, and the Pacific Ngobe, with an imperfect system of governors and later corregidores that were appointed by local politicians, were directly affected, yet not entirely controlled by the national power structures. The extension of the State to the grassroots level by the populist military dictatorship of Omar Torrijos essentially signified the occupation of existing indigenous spaces of autonomy, and in line with indigenista policies elsewhere, the incorporation and acculturation of the new generations to the national political party system based on individual rewards and client networks, most importantly scholarships and government positions.

After the disastrous Extraordinary Ngobe-Bugle General Congress in Soloy (1980), in which government officials were unable to approve the Cerro Colorado Mine, the PRD leadership now headed by General Manuel Antonio Noriega devised a strategy

to gain control of the General Congress, based on the unconditional collaboration of Ngobe leaders who had directly benefited and had been promoted by the revolutionary process. This new cadre of Western-educated and PRD-loyal Ngobe leaders was charged with the responsibility of promoting a draft law for the creation of the comarca that was approved by the Government. Another faction of younger Ngobe leaders, more conscious of the necessity of an independent indigenous position, allied with elder figures like Camilo Ortega to reject the government proposal that did not include much of the Ngobe lands under dispute in the Province of Veraguas.

The tension between the two sides reached a peak during the Fourth Ngobe-Bugle General Congress in 1986 when the two opposing factions called for separate gatherings in the savannas of Kodriri only miles apart from each other. The pro-government gathering in Buenos Aires was supported by the Panama Defense Forces (PDF) of General Noriega and the national PRD legislator for the Province of Veraguas, Ngobe leader Guillermo Jimenez (Camilo Ortega and Bernardo Jimenez personal communication). Yet, this meeting did not reach the level of popular support garnered by the rival gathering in Sitio Prado led by Camilo Ortega and Julio Dixon. As a consequence, government officials realized that the government proposal was not viable, and consequently froze negotiations for the creation of the comarca in the midst of the internal crisis of the Party and of the country. For the next three years, the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress remained divided with both Bernardo Jaen (pro-government) and Pedro Nola Flores (independent) claiming to be the legitimate presidents of the Congress.

As the power of the military was increasingly eroded by brutal repression and accusations of corruption after 1987, most indigenous leaders around the country remained loyal to the revolutionary process, hoping that the protection of their collective lands would be achieved through the creation of *comarcas*. For many of them, the problem was not *Torrijismo*, but Noriega and the PDF. In spite of all the unresolved controversies about the use of natural resources, indigenous leaders assumed that the corporatist agenda would be resumed once the crisis with the United States was finally resolved. The onset of the American intervention to oust Noriega in 1989, however, did not lead to a new coalition between the government, indigenous peoples, and other group-based identities, but instead to a complete reinvention of the Panamanian State along the lines of privatization and individual civil and political rights. Under these circumstances, the odds were against the continuation of any form of *de facto* indigenous political autonomy, and in favor of the private exploitation of natural resources by international corporations.

### **Indigenous Comarcas and Development Projects in the New Liberal Era**

The phantom of structural adjustment resurfaced soon after the US Marines began leaving a war-torn and devastated Panama in 1990. The claims of PRD anti-imperialists were absolutely confirmed as they battled against the economic reform package of the first Minister of Economic Planning of the new democratic period, Guillermo Ford, and against George Bush himself during his infamous visit to Panama City in 1992.<sup>10</sup> Apparently, the party of the people was not willing to sanction the

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<sup>10</sup> George Bush Sr. made a stop in Panama on his way to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. He was greeted by large demonstrations, in which prominent PRD figures, including future presidential candidate for the 2009 elections, Balbina Herrera, publicly protested in the streets against the 1989 US occupation. During the presidential campaign, Herrera proudly displayed a picture taken years later with

dismantling of the Torrijos legacy of corporatist governance, and was opposed to what it called the return of the oligarchic rule that had dominated the country before the 1960s. In this context, indigenous peoples resumed their political mobilizations and reunified the leadership (Camilo Ortega personal communication), once again demanding the legal recognition of their territorial rights based on their group identities.<sup>11</sup>

In 1993, the Governor of Panama province was held by the Kuna of Bayano, who demanded the fulfillment of the Farallon Accords and the creation of their *comarca* seventeen years after the flooding of their lands by the rise of the Bayano reservoir (Horton 2006 p. 842-843). Faced with widespread opposition on many different fronts, and covered with a mantle of illegitimacy coming from the US invasion, the postwar government of Guillermo Endara (1990-1994) adopted a conservative stance. They decided to limit the implementation of the Washington Consensus in order to maintain governance in an unstable Panama. The political and social turmoil left in the country by the US military action did not offer conditions for the enactment of economic changes that would elicit demonstrations and other strong protests by workers, students, civil servants, and professional guilds.

Paradoxically, and reminiscent of similar developments in Peru, Argentina, Bolivia and Mexico in the 1980s and 1990s; the party of the Torrijos Revolution, the PRD inherited the mission to implement structural adjustment, and so it did with unexpected fervor. The new President Ernesto Perez Balladares (1994-1999) was

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Bush Sr. to demonstrate her renewed allegiance with the United States. In spite of her efforts, she was always regarded as a sympathizer of the Bolivarian Revolution of Hugo Chavez by the Panamanian business community.

<sup>11</sup> The Ngobe-Bugle General Congress was unified in 1989 with the election of Celestino Gallardo in Cerro Iglesias (Nedrini) only months before the US invasion. In 1992, Isidro Acosta replaced Gallardo in Alto de Jesus (Kodrirri) (Bernardo Jimenez personal communication)>

commissioned with the daunting task of lifting the PRD out of the ashes of the US invasion. A former banker, minister of economy and entrenched Noriega rival, Perez Balladares moved the pendulum away from military corporatism and into what he called the “modernization” of the Panamanian economy. Under his neoliberal reforms, the promises of Torrijos to the Bayano Kuna were completely buried, as the Bayano Corporation was abolished, public utilities were privatized, and the former Directory of Community Development was eliminated. Even the Ministry of Economic Planning was transformed into the Ministry of Economy, signaling the disappearance of the welfare state of centralized planning and of state protagonism in national development.

As a well-educated adherent of neoliberalism, Perez Balladares, however, understood that private investment also required the creation of regulating institutions, like the *Ente Regulador de los Servicios Publicos* (ERSP)<sup>12</sup> and the *Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente* (ANAM)<sup>13</sup> that would guarantee free competition, the protection of individual citizen rights and business accountability. These moderating reforms, however, lagged behind the rapid elimination of government-owned corporations. Worried about the future of their collective lands in the midst of the accelerated private allocation of natural resources, the Ngobe and the Bayano Kuna increased their mobilization.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The Ente Regulador de los Servicios Publicos (ERSP), or Public Services Regulatory Entity, was created through Law 26 of 1996, and became responsible for concessioning the provision of national public services, like electricity and telephone, and for protecting customers against the potential abuses of private corporations.

<sup>13</sup> The Autoridad Nacional del Ambiente (ANAM), or National Environmental Authority, was created by Law 41 of 1998, and became responsible for approving environmental impact assessments, enforcing environmental norms, and granting concessions for the use of natural resources, such as timber and water resources.

<sup>14</sup> This last peak of mobilization ultimately led to the creation of the Ngobe-Bugle and Bayano Kuna comarcas through Law 10 of 1997 and Law 24 of 1996, respectively

Marcelino Montezuma was elected as President of the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress in Kuerima (Nedrini) in 1995 (Bernardo Jimenez personal communication). In this meeting, the Government presented a new proposal that reduced the limits of the Comarca even beyond the controversial bill that had been rejected in 1986. Once again, Camilo Ortega expressed his opposition to this bill. However, as an even younger generation assumed the Ngobe leadership, a negotiating commission was created to try to reach an agreement with the Government. This commission was formed by Julio Dixon, Ausencio Palacio, Hermelindo Ortega (son of Camilo Ortega), Jose Ellington, Antonino Acosta and Alberto Montezuma. For these younger leaders, the approval of the comarca bill could not be delayed any longer and an understanding had to be reached both with the Government and with the non-indigenous peasants and land-owners (*terratenientes*) who had been lobbying against the Comarca bill for almost twenty years (Ausencio Palacio personal communication).

During the final push for the creation of the Comarca, grassroots mobilization became a most decisive factor. In 1996, Ngobe student Saturnino Aguirre was assassinated under very suspicious circumstances in the town of San Felix where a new company Panacobre, S. A. was trying to bring back the Cerro Colorado Mine (Bernardo Jimenez personal communication).<sup>15</sup> In response, the Ngobe organized a second march to Panama City only three weeks after the assassination. This second march departed from Sitio Prado (Kodriri) and was much larger than the 1983 mobilization. The elder caciques Jose Cruz Monico and Camilo Ortega participated in

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<sup>15</sup> According to Bernardo Jimenez, this crime has never been properly clarified. The assassination of Saturnino Aguirre occurred twenty six years after the death of Elias Claras also under unclear circumstances in Cerro Pelado (Kodriri). For the Ngobe both Claras and Aguirre are considered martyrs of the struggle for the creation of the Comarca.

the march as well as younger Ngobe prospective leaders such as Pedro Abrego and Bernardo Jimenez. The march did not only become a strong statement to the National Government, but also an internal sign of Ngobe unity and mobilization capacity.

Although these grassroots mobilization signaled the strength of the Ngobe determination for the creation of an autonomous territory, several important Ngobe leaders had also maintained ties with the PRD, including members of the negotiating commission such as Julio Dixon and Ausencio Palacio. For this reason, it would be very difficult to assess how much weight did grassroots mobilization had in relation with an internal pact within the PRD and the historical commitment of this Party to honor the promises of Omar Torrijos. Independently of these interpretations, on March 7, 1997, PRD President Ernesto Perez Balladares signed Law 10 that created the Ngobe-Bugle Comarca in the heart of the historical Ngobe Territory, Cankintu, the mythical Valle del Guaymi (or Valle Miranda).

The bill approved in 1997 excluded the Bugle lands in Northern Veraguas and much of the Ngobe lands in Western Bocas del Toro.<sup>16</sup> For this reason, it was actually opposed by some leaders like Eusebio Bilbord (personal communication), while others such as Ausencio Palacio (personal communication) charged that rejecting a new government proposal was no longer an option. According to Palacio, the Ngobe had lost potential comarca lands by not accepting the 1986 proposal; and if they continued rejecting the alternatives presented by the Government, the Ngobe-Bugle Comarca would have never become a reality. This accommodating position of the younger

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<sup>16</sup> Since the Bugle (or Bukle) is a very small indigenous group (<10,000) with strong cultural affinities with the Ngobe, they decided to conform a single comarca together with the Ngobe. A similar proposal was turned down by the Naso indigenous people.

leadership allied with the PRD was also criticized by both Jose Cruz Monico of Ño Kribo and Camilo Ortega of Kodiri (personal communication).

The creation of the Ngobe-Bugle and the Madungandi<sup>17</sup> comarcas during the PRD administration of President Ernesto Perez Balladares revealed the contested legacy of the Torrijos corporatist model. The same party that had defended national sovereignty and the incorporation of the marginalized populations in the 1970s had now dismantled public corporations and set the stage for the dominance of new private actors. In compensation for the Torrijos promises, or perhaps as recourse to demobilize the indigenous population, Perez Balladares had paid the historical debt to the Ngobe and the Bayano Kuna with the creation of the comarcas. However, his government had also ensured that article 48 of Law 10 of 1997 would limit the autonomy of the Ngobe by denying their right to decide on the use of natural resources; and that article 21 of Law 24 of 1996 guaranteed the user rights of the non-indigenous colonists that had invaded the Kuna lands after the construction of the Bayano hydroelectric project. Instead of receiving unrestricted support from the party of the Revolution, indigenous leaders were forced to negotiate the terms of their political autonomy; and many indigenous leaders accepted these compromises as members of the PRD government party. Such a contradiction revealed the inherent limitations imposed by the symbolic persistence of the corporatist model of citizenship in the minds of indigenous leaders even beyond its formal elimination and substitution for a regime of neoliberal citizenship as described by Yashar (2005). In the 1970s, indigenous peoples were considered an integral part of the Revolution and loyal supporters of the anti-colonial struggles that were intimately

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<sup>17</sup> The Bayano Kuna comarca was officially denominated *Comarca Indigena Kuna de Madungandi*.

associated with the welfare state of the dictatorship of Omar Torrijos; yet, in the 1990s they would be auctioned to the best bidder during the process of privatization.

Even more controversial, many Ngobe and Bugle lands were left outside the comarca boundaries bequeathing a legacy of conflict that would explode as a time bomb in the latter half of the 2000s. A corrective mechanism known as annexed areas was devised by the Ngobe negotiators to accommodate the thousands of Ngobe and Bugle that resided outside the comarca. In Kodriri, the annexed areas of Bakama, Alto de Jesus, and Cerro Pelado were immediately defined by the comarca law; yet in Ño Kribo, the limits would have to be defined in a year and a half according to the corresponding articles.<sup>18</sup>

Following the model of Political Class Formation (PCF), there is no doubt about the politicization of Ngobe ethnicity between the 1950s-1990s. The most eloquent demonstration of this trend has been the organization of massive grassroots mobilizations in the Ngobe-Bugle congresses and the two marches to Panama City in 1983 and 1996. The formation of a political class also entailed the development of an ethnic organization that would sustain the Ngobe demands for land and autonomy. This first occurred with the spontaneous outburst of the Mama Tata movement, then progressed into the designation of the three regional caciques in 1969 and finally converged in the creation of the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress in 1979. These new governing structures arose as a reaction of Ngobe regional culture towards the

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<sup>18</sup> The annexed areas in Ño Kribo were particularly problematic for three main reasons. First, they were not established as polygon areas, but rather as point locations. Second, not all Ngobe settlements in the Caribbean seemed to fall within a designated annexed area. And finally, Ngobe traditional land use patterns inherited from both parent lines and therefore might involve large areas situated far away from each other. All of these factors would prove disastrous a mere ten years after the approval of Law 10 of 1997 (see Chapter 6)

continuous encroachment of Ngobe lands by mestizo peasants and cattle ranchers in the Pacific, and later the appearance of state-promoted development projects in indigenous lands such as the Cerro Colorado Mine and the Tabasara and Teribe-Changuinola hydroelectric projects.

The initial state intervention towards grassroots Ngobe mobilization was oriented towards repression in line with the crisis of the Liberal welfare state in the 1960s. However, the military coup of 1968 reinvigorated the indigenista policies advocated by government officials and intellectuals since the 1930s, commencing a cycle of cooptation without precedent in Panamanian history. The charismatic indigenismo of Omar Torrijos demobilized the national indigenous leadership under the promise of the state protection of indigenous lands as comarcas. This solid alliance between indigenous peoples and Torrijos was inherited by the PRD and unexpectedly extended to the late 1990s even when the PRD had abandoned the corporatist citizenship regime promoted by Torrijos. Not even the rise of repression and the blatant cooptation of the Noriega years (1983-1989) terminated the corporatist bonds between the Ngobe and the State. Simply, a sector of the Ngobe leadership spearheaded by elder leaders such as Camilo Ortega decoupled from the official state policy and continued advocating for the protection of the totality of the Ngobe lands and independent decision-making about the use of natural resources.

Nevertheless, as stated by Otero (2004) the interaction between state intervention and the type of leadership conditioned the future of political organization, in this case the prospects for Ngobe autonomy. The original traditional leadership of the three regional caciques – Jose Cruz Monico (Ño Kribo), Lorenzo Rodriguez (Nedrini)

and Camilo Ortega (Kodriri) – gave the Ngobe a measure of independence even during the period of charismatic indigenismo. It was the persistence of this leadership what prevented the complete collapse of the Ngobe organization in the 1980s when the clientelistic leadership of Guillermo Jimenez and Bernardo Jaen tried to deliver a comarca law that would betray the interests of the Ngobe ethnic community and the *raison-d’etre* of Ngobe grassroots mobilization and even personal sacrifice during thirty years.

In spite of the success of both the caciques and some younger leaders like Julio Dixon to reject the government proposal of 1986, the association of the Ngobe leadership with the State bore fruits in the 1990s through the continued rise of a new Western-educated Ngobe leadership. Independently of the pivotal role of grassroots mobilization in 1996, they believed that a compromise was necessary with the PRD. This coupling of the Ngobe leadership with the PRD resulted in the approval of Law 10 of 1997 that created the Ngobe-Bugle Comarca. Should we consider the Ngobe leadership as clientelistic or as participatory according to the modified typology of Otero (2004 and 1999) presented in this work? Would the indigenous policies of the PRD of Ernesto Perez Balladares (1994-1999) or its successor the Arnulfista Party of Mireya Moscoso (1999-2004) be considered co-opting (*indigenismo*) or popular-democratic? Undeniably, the years after the approval of Law 10 would be determinant not only for the future of the Ngobe political organization that had risen since the 1950s, but for the fate of Panamanian democracy in general.

The creation of the Kuna Comarca of Wargandi in 2000 by the presidential administration of Mireya Moscoso (1999-2004) during the congressional presidency of

Kuna legislator Enrique Garrido marked the epitaph of the alliance between the national government and indigenous peoples. In spite of all the implicit references to multiculturalism during the inauguration of Moscoso, the aspirations of indigenous peoples conflicted directly with the government's plans for economic growth and national development. The development of hydroelectric infrastructure throughout the country, under a new modality of private investment, represented an imminent threat to the integrity of indigenous territories and to the worldview of indigenous peoples. The course of collusion of the 1970s had become the road to collision in the 1990s, and the future of the Ngobe ethnic community would depend on the unavoidable confrontation between the capitalist logic of the new Liberal State and the resistance of indigenous communities. In this process of dissociation, those indigenous leaders who had initiated their political careers during the heyday of the Torrijos model of corporatist citizenship would be trapped by their double loyalties, exposed and discredited in the face of growing grassroots opposition to the privatization of their indigenous territories.

## CHAPTER 6

### TEN YEARS AFTER THE COMARCA - THE COMARCA IN PRACTICE AND THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE NGOBE LEADERSHIP

We are against the neocolonialism of the transnational corporations that try to destabilize politically and create complications in the economic life of the country, whenever they are confronted with the legitimate demands of the Sovereign in defense of its natural resources.<sup>1</sup>

The creation of the Ngobe-Bugle Comarca through Law 10 of 1997 was regarded as the culmination of the forty year struggle of the Ngobe for land rights and self-determination. The triumphalism of the signing ceremony, however, concealed profound rifts within the Ngobe leadership, divisions that had been accentuated by the negotiation process. The generation of elder traditional leaders like Camilo Ortega and Jose Cruz Monico, those who had initiated the struggle for land rights in the 1960s, felt dissatisfied by the exclusion of substantial portions of Ngobe lands in Ño Kribo and Kodriri. Most of the younger middle-aged leaders who had been Western-educated under the auspices of the Torrijos regime, and worked as public servants for several years, regarded Law 10 as a an inevitable compromise to protect most of the Ngobe lands in the face of mining, hydropower, and tourism development (Ausencio Palacio and Julio Dixon personal communication). Only a more belligerent minority of the middle-age leadership had broken ranks with the supporters of the PRD and denounced Law 10 as a renunciation of Ngobe legitimate rights. Although at this point the balance of forces favored middle-aged leaders like Palacio and Dixon, a new generation of even younger prospective leaders witnessed silently the creation of the Comarca with a combination of awe, enthusiasm and expectation. Ten years later, they would play a

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<sup>1</sup> Omar Torrijos Herrera. "Respuestas a García Márquez". Ediciones. Reforma Educativa, Panamá. 1975. Cited in José de Jesús Martínez. *Ideario Omar Torrijos*. Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana. 1982. p. 113. Translation by Osvaldo Jordán.

much more prominent role in Ngobe politics, and would side with both traditional and clientelistic leaders under the credible threat of a complete disintegration of the Comarca for the advancement of large-scale development projects.

### **The Comarca Regime De Jure**

Although the term comarca has come to signify self-determination and conjure strong feelings of ethnic pride in Panama, as stated in Chapter 3, no juridical definition of comarca has ever existed. For this reason, the actual meaning of any particular comarca is entirely dependent upon the particular law that determines its creation. Therefore, the comarca constitutes an ad hoc juridical regime. The association of comarca with self-determination is undeniably related with the historical construction of the Kuna regime between 1938-1953. As detailed in Chapter 3, the first Kuna comarca actually shared this semantic category with a non-indigenous banana growing area in Western Panama; yet, the Law of 1953 established new parameters of self-rule and customary law under the prevailing indigenista framework (Martinez-Mauri 2007). I agree with Herrera (1989) that this version of the Kuna comarca set the tone for indigenous struggles in the 1960s to present.

In the most contradictory manner, the Ngobe struggle for the creation of a comarca began only a few years after two of them had already been created, one in the Pacific (Tabasara) and the other in the Caribbean (Cusapin and Bluefields) (Sarsanedas 1978). Although academics and politicians have remained mostly silent about this fact, my own interpretation is that the 1952 comarcas did not correspond with the semantic category that the Ngobe leaders understood as a comarca, a regime much closer to the one enjoyed by the Kuna of San Blas since 1938. For this reason, all of the grassroots mobilizations between the 1960s-1990s sought the creation of a single

Comarca Indígena Ngobe covering the entire territory in the Pacific and the Caribbean.<sup>2</sup> As explained above, the proposal presented by the Government in the mid-1980s was strongly rejected. Most leaders considered that this plan did not respond to the Ngobe claims for territorial integrity and self-determination. Ironically, ten years later, the Ngobe would settle for a similar text incorporating controversial articles that ensured the right of the central government to make decision about the use of natural resources, such as mining and water resources.

According to Law 10 of 1997, the Ngobe-Bugle Comarca would be akin to a province, divided in three regions: Kodriri, Nedrini, and Ño Kribo (see Figure 4-1). In turn, the regions would be divided in districts, and the districts in corregimientos following the general administrative divisions in the Republic. Also, like in the rest of the country, the districts would elect mayors and the corregimientos would elect representatives for five year periods. There was also a Governor who would be appointed directly by the President (Article 33), a coordination council at the comarca level - Concejo de Coordinación Comarcal (Article 20), and regional councils in each of the three regions - Concejos Regionales de Coordinación (Article 23). The central government would be responsible for creating the specialized offices necessary for the administration of justice - juzgados, fiscalías y personerías (Article 40).

Law 10 actually set the limits for the entire Comarca and for the annexed areas in Kodriri. The limits for the annexed areas in Ño Kribo would be pending. According to

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<sup>2</sup> Since the Ngobe understand the term Ngobe as generally indigenous, and not necessarily as a particular linguistic group, they did not hesitate about including the Bukle and the Naso in the Comarca proposal. As explained in Chapter 5, the former in fact became part of the Comarca Indígena Ngobe-Bugle, yet the latter refused to be included in this juridical regime. The refusal of the Naso to become part of a single comarca with the Ngobe has embittered relations between the two groups until today (Jose Cruz Monico r. i. p personal communication).

Article 3, the physical delimitation of the Comarca, the territories and the communities, had to occur thirty months after the passing of the law (September 1999). The corresponding electoral districts also needed to be determined twenty four months after the enactment of Law 10 (March 1999), including the three electoral circuits that would elect three legislators for the National Assembly in 2004 (Article 56).

Chapter III designated the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress as the “highest body of ethnic and cultural expression and decision-making” “máximo organismo de expresión y decisión étnica y cultural” (Article 17). There would also be three regional congresses as well as several local congresses corresponding with the political divisions at the district level. In addition to the congresses, Law 10 designated the “traditional authorities” that would be formed by the General Cacique, the three regional caciques, local caciques, immediate chiefs (Jefes Inmediatos), and community spokespersons (Voceros de las Comunidades) (Article 24). The functions of all of these authorities would be properly determined by the Organic Charter to be approved later.<sup>3</sup> According to Article 35, the Government of Panama would allocate a budget to pay the salaries of the Governor, the General Cacique, the regional caciques, and the local caciques.<sup>4</sup>

Chapter II established the collective ownership of the comarca lands according to the “norms and collective practices of the ngobe-bugle people” “normas y practicas colectivas del pueblo ngobe-bugle” (Article 9). The Ngobe-Bugle Organic Charter would

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<sup>3</sup> Like previous comarcas for the Kuna, the Embera, and the Wounaan, the Ngobe-Bugle Comarca demanded the creation of an Organic Charter that would enable the comarca legislation and consecrate the principles of Ngobe customary law (“usos y costumbres”).

<sup>4</sup> According to Martinez-Mauri (2007), important Kuna chiefs (sahilas) were also appointed as government employees a few years after the Tule Revolution.

also determine “the regime for the use or usufruct of the lands destined for collective use” “el regimen de uso o usufructo de las tierras destinadas al uso colectivo” (Article 14). The law also safeguarded the property rights of those who already held user rights and private land titles within the Comarca. According to Ausencio Palacio (personal communication), these measures facilitated an understanding with the mixed-blood peasants (campesinos) and large landowners who opposed to the creation of the Comarca. Law 10 also authorized the transfers and sales of these privately-held lands as long as the Comarca was given the first option to buy.

Chapter V discussed the economy within the Comarca, stating that the central government would assign a budget to every public agency working in the Comarca and each of these entities would prepare special plans and programs in consultation with the Ngobe authorities (Article 42). Reminiscent of previous indigenista language and at the same time incorporating new notions of sustainability, articles 43-46 referred to community-based integrated sustainable development projects, and the creation of a high level planning commission by the central government.

Chapter VI was entirely devoted to natural resources, and contained some of the most controversial dispositions of the Comarca bill. Although articles 47-50 did make reference to the consultation and participation of the Ngobe population, this language did not establish the principle of free, prior, and informed consent according to international agreement ILO 169 (Van Cott 1994, Brysk 2000 and 1994). In contrast, Article 48 privileged “the benefit of the country according to national legislation” over the consent of indigenous authorities in “the exploration and exploitation of natural resources, salt deposits, mines, waters, quarries and mineral deposits of all kinds”. In

all of these cases, “the State and the concessionary will develop an information program”, and an “environmental impact study” would be required.

Article 49 further specified that a “tourism development commission” would be created in each of the three regions, and established a “zone of sustainable tourism development that extends 2,000 meters away from the coast into the mainland”. Through the Panamanian Tourism Institute (IPAT), the commission could approve concessions to private companies, and the revenues “will go directly to the corresponding municipalities, and will be invested in social interest works”. As many other provisions in Law 10, these concessions would be properly discussed in the Organic Charter.

### **The Comarca in Practice – The Formative Years, 1997-2001**

Thirteen years after the enactment of Law 10, there have been numerous news reports appearing in Panamanian media about the alleged failure of the Comarca regime.<sup>5</sup> These reports fall into two main categories. A group of observers, obviously sympathetic to the Ngobe cause for self-determination, have criticized the general lack of implementation of the Comarca regime, particularly the absence of government services and bureaucratic agencies in the region. A second group has instead adopted a harsh critical stance against the existence of comarcas in general, charging that this regime has kept the Ngobe and other indigenous peoples in isolation and backwardness. In spite of these debates about the proper place of indigenous peoples in XXI century Panama, this dissertation actually remains the first effort to analyze the implementation of the Comarca regime from an academic perspective.

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<sup>5</sup> La Prensa, March 4, 2002; La Prensa, August 9, 2004; La Prensa, November 26, 2004; La Prensa, April 19, 2006; La Prensa, April 24, 2006; La Prensa, October 13, 2006; La Prensa, January 19, 2008.

Before the IX Ngobe-Bugle General Congress in 2001, the implementation of the Comarca regime was rapid, decisive and turbulent. During this period, new enabling legislation had to be created, and the Ngobe leaders needed to define their position vis-à-vis the PRD government that had engendered the regime in a post-Comarca period. Only a year after the creation of the Comarca, and while negotiations still continued on the draft Executive Decree that would establish the geographical coordinates of the Ngobe boundaries, the election of new authorities for the VIII Ngobe-Bugle General Congress to be held in Cankintu (Ño Kribo) became an important moment in the Ngobe definition of their position towards the PRD. Although a sector of the middle-aged leadership rejected some of the provisions of the Comarca law, the PRD strongly supported loyal leaders like Ausencio Palacio who argued that the current comarca bill was the best possible outcome under the present unfavorable circumstances (personal communication). During the 1998 Congress, the first position was represented by Eusebio Bilbord, and the latter espoused by Dionisio Villagra, both of them candidates to president of the General Congress.<sup>6</sup>

The victory of Villagra in the elections represented a confirmation of the historical alliance between the PRD and the Ngobe leadership, and a severe blow to the sector of the leadership who rejected the results of the negotiations leading to Law 10. The election of a PRD ally like Villagra did not only represent the continuation of friendly relations between the central government and the new Comarca authorities, but also access to natural resources in the Comarca and as a reward political appointments and graft for the supporters of Villagra. Being in charge of the multi-million dollar Ngobe-

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<sup>6</sup> According to Bernardo Jimenez (personal communication), Dionisio Villagra had been proposed by Jose Cruz Monico and Eusebio Bilbord by Camilo Ortega.

Bugle Project financed by the UN International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Ngobe professional and former president of the General Congress, Bernardo Jaen openly supported the candidacy of Villagra. When PRD legislator Benicio Robinson began the congressional discussions for a new General Environmental Law, he proudly introduced Dionisio Villagra as the new president of the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress. The corporatist bonds between the PRD and the Ngobe leadership seemed intact even with the creation of a neoliberal citizenship regime in the 1990s.

In spite of the apparent triumph of the PRD, the legislative process for the approval of the General Environmental Law afforded unexpected opportunities for indigenous peoples in Panama to demand control of natural resources. During the first hearing that was presided by Robinson, himself a strongman in the Caribbean province of Bocas del Toro, the comarcas were recognized as a viable administrative division, including the creation of consultative commissions at the comarca level. It was, however, during the second hearing that the most transcendental provisions were introduced by Kuna legislator Enrique Garrido with the support of a group of Kuna lawyers who worked in Panama City. As a result, a whole chapter established the principle of free, prior, and informed consent in the approval of development projects, partially compensating for the refusal of the Panamanian State to sign the ILO 169 agreement.<sup>7</sup> In 1998, the negotiating commission was also able to complete the work for the approval of Executive Decree 69 that established the Ngobe boundaries for the

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<sup>7</sup> On July 1, 1998, the National Assembly approved Law 41 of 1998 that regulated environmental management and natural resource concessions. A special group of articles referring to the free, prior, and informed consent of indigenous communities with regards to the use of natural resources was introduced by Kuna legislator Enrique Garrido during the second congressional debate.

three regions and annexed areas, with the important exception of the annexed areas in Ño Kribo that still continued to be undefined.

Although the approval of Law 10 and the election of a favorable cadre in the 1998 Ngobe elections guaranteed the continued alliance between the PRD and the Ngobe leadership, several legal hurdles still needed to be overcome for the implementation of the comarca regime and the whole country had to face a general political campaign for the 1999 elections. These elections also represented a critical juncture for the implementation of the regime, and for the persistence of the Ngobe alliance with the PRD. Although the three Ngobe national legislators could not be elected until 2004, there were seven comarca mayors and fifty seven corregimiento representatives that had to be elected in 1999. Considering that there were no Ngobe, or for that sake no indigenous political parties in Panama, all of these authorities would be elected from the rosters of national political parties like the PRD and the Arnulfista Party. Once again, the PRD emerged victorious from this electoral contest in the Ngobe Territory confirming the enduring alliance that was forged with the Ngobe by the charismatic-authoritarian leader Omar Torrijos Herrera, most especially in this occasion when his son Martin Torrijos was running for President of the Republic. The national vote, however, followed a whole different trend with the electoral victory of the widow of Arnulfo Arias, Mireya Moscoso (1999-2004).

In day-to-day conversations while I was doing fieldwork in the Province of Bocas del Toro in summer 1999, Ngobe political activists voiced their concerns about the election of an Arnulfista to the presidency. They argued that this party had never worried about the fate of the Ngobe and other indigenous peoples. Even Jose Cruz

Monico (r. i. p.) proudly displayed photos with the deceased general when I had the opportunity to interview him in Pueblo Nuevo (Ño Kribo) that same year. To the credit of the PRD, the Ngobe-Bugle Organic Charter was actually approved in the last days of the Ernesto Perez Balladares administration through Executive Decree 194 of August 25, confirming the commitment of the party of the revolution with its most loyal supporters.

As explained above, the Organic Charter was expected to consecrate Ngobe customary law and regulate the concession of natural resources within the Comarca. It established that the directive board of the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress would be elected every five years (Article 47), and also sanctioned the existence of the “Encuentros Interregionales de Dirigentes” as an organ of the General Congress that would meet every year, instead of every five years. In addition, all of the caciques – general, regional and local - would be elected for a period of six years. Among the functions of the General Congress, it was to “approve or reject all the national and international projects and work plans” (Article 57 number 5) and to “submit for referendum all the projects for mineral exploration and exploitation” (number 6).

The Organic Charter also established that the general, regional, and local congresses would be integrated by delegates chosen in each corregimiento – one delegate for every fifty people. All the board members and all the caciques could not be registered in any national political party during the time of the internal elections. In spite of this provision, internal Ngobe elections became increasingly dominated by national political parties after the creation of the Comarca. With the election of Arnulfista President Mireya Moscoso, the privileged position of PRD loyalists became insecure as

those aligned with the Arnulfistas were now ready to push them aside to claim their share of the government spoils.

### **The Fallout of Ngobe Corporatism and the Ephemeral Success of Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Panama, 1999-2003.**

Undeniably, the Ngobe alliance with the PRD carried a very costly price. After the triumph of Mireya Moscoso (1999-2004), government scrutiny over the Ngobe authorities, and especially the administration of international funds, increased sharply. On October 22, 1999, the daily *La Prensa* reported that Eusebio Bilbord had denounced the inappropriate use of funds from the Ngobe Bugle Project to support the candidacy of Dionisio Villagra to the presidency of the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress in 1998.<sup>8</sup> Bilbord also charged that project managers utilized funds to maintain “certain influence or certain authority over our caciques and leaders” “cierta influencia o cierta autoridad sobre nuestros caciques y dirigentes”. Former director of the Ngobe-Bugle Project, Bernardo Jaen, responded that he had been unfairly fired by the Moscoso government “for political reasons” “por razones politicas”. In an op-ed in *La Prensa*, November 20, 1999, Jaen even said that not only he had been fired on October 12, but also most of the coordinators of the technical units!

The relations between the Ngobe leadership and the Moscoso administration became even more controversial, when Dionisio Villagra was temporarily suspended as president of the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress “for alleged mismanagement of resources that were donated by the State for projects in the Comarca” “por supuestos malos manejos de recursos que fueron donados por el Estado para proyectos que

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<sup>8</sup> According to the same source, on July 1, 1993, the Government of Panama signed an agreement with the IADF (11 million) to finance the development of the Ngobe Bugle Project.

debieron realizarse en la comarca” (La Prensa, January 28, 2000). The “new” interim president of the Congress Marcos Quintero said that Villagra had signed personal loans on behalf of the Congress, and that he “had not utilized resources that had been donated by the Ngobe-Bugle Project to the congress leaders for projects in the comarca” “no utilizo los recursos que habia donado el Proyecto Ngobe Bugle a la dirigencia del Congreso para proyectos en la comarca”.

In addition to the pervasive charges of PRD corruption in the early days of the Moscoso administration, the institutional changes that had been implemented by this party at the national level inadvertently unleashed social and political forces that would revive Ngobe grassroots mobilization and would strain the relations between the Ngobe leaders and the State. As mentioned above, economic reforms enacted by President Ernesto Perez Balladares (1994-1999) allowed for private investors to undertake development projects at the national level. Following the privatization of the national electricity institute - Instituto de Recursos Hidraulicos y Electrificación (IRHE), a number of concessions and licenses for the generation of electricity were granted to national and foreign investors all around the country, among them to Consorcio Tabasara, S. A., for the construction of two dams in the Tabasara River.

As mentioned in Chapter 5, the original Tabasara dams were conceived as part of the ambitious scheme to power the Cerro Colorado Mining Project (Gjording 1994). When these dams were originally proposed by the military government in the 1970s, there was widespread opposition to this government initiative among the Ngobe and poor mixed-blood peasants in the Province of Chiriqui. According to Dionisio Rodriguez (personal communication), Omar Torrijos himself heard the complaints of the Chiriqui

peasants and Ngobe indigenous peoples. After a long conversation, the General put his hat on the table and declared that they should not worry, that these projects would never be constructed. As with many other Torrijos promises, his personal commitment to respect the local opposition to the dams had fallen into oblivion years after his death. In the late 1990s, a group of local investors associated with prominent PRD figures had decided to harvest the power of the Tabasara waters. The first of the dams, Tabasara I, would affect the Ngobe-Bugle annexed area of Bakama (Kodriri), while Tabasara II was planned to be constructed downstream in lands owned by poor peasants.

When the descendants of the same peasant and indigenous leaders that had talked to Torrijos suddenly realized the imminence of the Tabasara dams during the early months of the Mireya Moscoso administration (1999-2004), they began to mobilize to express their outright opposition to these projects (Berediana Rodriguez and Adelaida Miranda personal communication). For this purpose, they reached for the assistance of two government institutions that had been established by Perez Balladares to protect citizen rights and to guarantee fair competition in the new neoliberal Panama – the National Environmental Authority (ANAM), and the Office of the Ombudsman. Unfortunately, during the public hearings that were required as part of the consultation process for the approval of the Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), ANAM presided over what became a mockery of citizen participation. Consorcio Tabasara simply used public relations techniques to sell the benefits of the projects to the impoverished peasants and indigenous peoples, including unwarranted promises of employment. The Company even tried to utilize the wealthy landowners (*latifundistas*)

to gain the support of the local authorities and to quell the opposition of the poor sectors of the population.

Faced with the lack of receptivity of the National Environmental Authority (ANAM), the peasants and indigenous peoples, now coalesced into the April 10 Movement (M-10), appealed to the National Ombudsman, Italo Antinori - who happened to be from the region impacted by the projects (Berediana Rodriguez and Adelaida Miranda personal communication). Thanks to these inquiries, on June 6, 2000, the communities organized a general assembly with the Ombudsman and the Indigenous Affairs Committee of the National Assembly in the area affected by the Tabasara I hydroelectric project. As the local population expressed its grievances against the projects, the government officials began arguing among themselves and the meeting finished in the midst of discord and confusion. As a result of this quarrel, the National Assembly even opened an investigation against the Ombudsman for disrespect to the local congressman, who belonged to a well-known latifundista family.

During the coming months, and with the assistance of the Ombudsman Office, the people affected by the Tabasara projects began filing complaints against ANAM with regards to the approval of the Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) (Berediana Rodriguez personal communication).<sup>9</sup> Although the peasants and indigenous leaders did not have money to pay for legal action, a private lawyer, Jacinto Cardenas,

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<sup>9</sup> The Administrator of ANAM, Ricardo Anguizola, also a native of Chiriqui Province, even attended a second general assembly with the affected communities convened for the month of July. As part of their campaign to voice their opposition to the projects, the peasants and indigenous leaders began organizing demonstrations to block the Pan-American Highway. Although these demonstrations were violently repressed by the Police and extracted a heavy toll from the protestors, the blockades served to attract the attention of the national media, and to put pressure on the government authorities to look for a peaceful resolution of this conflict.

presented a lawsuit against the ANAM environmental impact resolution IA-048-2000 that approved the construction of the Tabasara II hydroelectric project.<sup>10</sup> Based on this lawsuit, the Supreme Court ordered the temporary suspension of the project in December 2000, arguing that the national government had violated the General Environmental Law. As stated above, articles 96-105 of Law 41 of 1998 called for the consultation of indigenous authorities before the start of any development projects affecting their territories. The legal victory of Tabasara II was interpreted as a major step forward in the protection of indigenous rights in Panama.

Although the Supreme Court had ruled for the temporary suspension of Tabasara II based on the lack of consultation with the affected Ngobe population, the official Ngobe authorities had remained absolutely uncommitted to the plight of the Ngobe and mixed-blood peasants living along the Tabasara River. Only the great charismatic leader Camilo Ortega had come forward against the project in spite of not holding any official position in the new Ngobe comarca hierarchy. Under this context, the IX General Congress in Buenos Aires (Kodriri) in 2001 represented an opportunity to officially overthrow the leadership that was so closely associated with the PRD as well as those others who had acquiesced to the pretensions of Consorcio Tabasara. For this purpose, M-10 activists campaigned for the election of Victor Guerra as new president of the General Congress.

The unexpected success of the grassroots mobilization of the M-10 Movement generated decisive reactions from a State that was straying away from any alliance with indigenous peoples and popular organizations. In 2002, lawyer Jacinto Cardenas

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<sup>10</sup> Demanda Contencioso Administrativa de Nulidad interpuesta por el Lic. Jacinto Cárdenas (Expediente 665-00).

desisted on the Tabasara lawsuit to avoid a conflict of interest after being nominated as deputy justice for the Supreme Court. As a result, Consorcio Tabasara began considering to start with the construction of the Tabasara dams (La Prensa, January 4, 2003). In reaction to these events, on January 25, 2003, peasants and indigenous peoples blocked the Pan-American Highway demanding a meeting with President Mireya Moscoso (La Critica, January 26, 2003; El Siglo, January 26, 2003). The protest turned violent after the Governor of Chiriqui, Miguel Fanovich, visited the area instead of the President. Clashes with the Police led to the arrest of fifty-six people including women and children. Although seventeen of the protesters were accused of public disorder, these charges were later dropped after pressure from the Indigenous Affairs Committee of the National Assembly (La Prensa, January 28, 2003; La Critica, January 29, 2003).

Soon after the January 2003 demonstrations, the investors decided to halt the Tabasara hydroelectric projects, and from that moment on, the Tabasara movement has remained a reference point for national grassroots organizations struggling for the protection of their individual and collective rights from the abuses of the government and private investors. In spite of the apparent success of the Tabasara movement, over the next few months, the Moscoso administration began debilitating the multicultural provisions of the neoliberal citizenship regime consolidated during the Perez Balladares administration (1994-1999). Most importantly, the whole chapter of the General Environmental Law that called for the participation and free, prior, and informed consent of indigenous peoples was eliminated in 2003. A few months later, when the Naso of Bocas del Toro Province began expressing their opposition to the construction of the

Bonyic hydroelectric project in their ancestral lands, the articles of the General Environmental Law that guaranteed the rights of indigenous peoples to previous consultation did not longer exist. In June 2004, the National Assembly also rejected the proposed law that created the Naso Comarca. Government officials realized that the development of mining, hydroelectric, and residential projects could not be advanced without impediment when they also had to protect individual and group rights in the midst of neoliberal modernization. As private companies and government bureaucrats realized that indigenous peoples would not necessarily embrace neoliberal modernization, the State adopted an unsympathetic position towards indigenous claims.

### **Leadership Acquiescence and Ngobe Reaction to Neoliberal Globalism, 2003 2006**

The Tabasara movement raised unsettling questions about Ngobe leadership in a neoliberal citizenship regime. The persistent corporatist ties between the middle-aged leadership of clientelistic leaders like Dionicio Villagra and Bernardo Jaen became completely ineffective after the change of government between the PRD and the Arnulfista Party in 2004. Furthermore, in the midst of a major crisis that affected the Ngobe residents of Bakama (Kodriiri), the official comarca leadership remained passive, while the traditional leadership of Camilo Ortega had to come forward almost fifty years after the initial Ngobe mobilizations to defend their lands against the encroachment of non-indigenous cattle ranchers (as described by Sarsanedas 1978). In the wake of the Tabasara movement, the first election of the general and regional caciques after the approval of Law 10 represented a major test for the persistence of the comarca regime. Would a new clientelistic leadership substitute the charisma of the elder caciques? Or would a participatory leadership develop from the grassroots activism of Tabasara?

Since the general and regional congresses had not played an important role in the Tabasara mobilizations, the installment of the “traditional authorities” could become an opportunity for a more belligerent leadership reminiscent of the massive grassroots mobilizations of the 1960s. The word was even out that the two most important Ngobe figures of modern times, Jose Cruz Monico and Camilo Ortega would run for the position of general cacique.<sup>11</sup>

Ironically, the election of the caciques actually empowered political figures closely associated with the PRD, and complicated the already controversial system of decision-making in the Ngobe territory creating a new layer of clientelistic leadership. In the electoral contest celebrated on March 2, 2003, middle-aged leader Maximo Saldana from Kodriri was elected as General Cacique, whereas Johnny Bonilla (Ño Kribo), Rogelio Moreno (Nedrini) and Jose Rodriguez Camarena (Kodriri) were elected as regional caciques of their respective regions. Interestingly, the election of the Bugle local cacique Anatolio Garcia was nullified after the Electoral Tribunal confirmed that he was registered with a political party (Resolution No. 513 of the Electoral Tribunal of the Republic of Panama, July 16, 2003). Although the other elected caciques were not registered in any political parties, some of them had uncontested loyalties to the PRD extending from the times of Omar Torrijos, and the caciques and their associates eventually became the main points of support in the Ngobe leadership for the Government and private corporations, especially after the election of Martin Torrijos as new President of Panama for the period 2004-2009.

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<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, Jose Cruz Monico died a few weeks after the cacique election (Harley James Mitchell D. op-ed “Jose Cruz Monico: Cacique Ejemplar” La Critica, May 22, 2003).

A case in point was that of the regional cacique of Ño Kribo, Johnny Bonilla, and his close associate, the president of the regional congress, Enrique Pineda. According to an information bulletin of the Ngobe-Bugle Comarca, on July 13-16, 2004, the regional congress of Ño Kribo organized a meeting with representatives of the mining company Cuprum Resources in the community of Coclesito (Ño Kribo). In this meeting, a negotiating commission was established with the participation of the regional cacique Johnny Bonilla, the regional congress, the Governor, the Comarca Coordinating Council, the Mayor Elect of Kankintu, the Labor Committee and even a representative of the Mama Tata Church. According to this document, an agreement with the Company was reached on July 28, and later ratified in a second meeting in the village of Zorra (Ño Kribo) on August 1, 2004.

During the XXIV Ño Kribo regional congress held in Pueblo Nuevo on November 19-21, 2004, Celestino Villagra Chopa claimed that he had been elected as new president of the regional congress. According to a congress resolution of November 8, 2005, this election had been supervised by the National Electoral Tribunal, although no formal delegates had yet been chosen. This same resolution accused Enrique Pineda and Johnny Bonilla of organizing a separate congress on November 7-9, in which Pineda had allegedly been reelected. The Resolution stated that Enrique Pineda had run for reelection “utilizing the PRD political party” and buying “voters with money from the mine”.

Although Johnny Bonilla had been elected as regional cacique of Ño Kribo before the electoral victory of Martin Torrijos Espino (2004-2009), Bonilla was a well-known figure associated with the PRD and had even worked for the government in previous

PRD administrations. Furthermore, and although he could not be registered in any political party in order to run for cacique, he was entitled to receive a monetary payment from the Government as part of the provisions of Law 10 of 1997. For this reason, the accusation that the PRD had supported the reelection of Enrique Pineda as president of the Ño Kribo regional congress was entirely credible. A new development, however, was the close and blatant association of a traditional Ngobe leader like Bonilla and the PRD political machinery with the interests of a purely private entity like Cuprum Resources. Although Gjording (1994) has described the decisive support of the PRD to the neighboring Cerro Colorado mine and the manipulation of the Ngobe leadership of Nedrini for this project, there are two important differences with the case of Cerro Colorado in the 1970s. First, Cuprum is an entirely private venture in which the State has no monetary participation as opposed to Cerro Colorado; and second, Law 10 had been passed in 1997 to protect the lands and culture of the Ngobe. The Organic Charter established that any mining concessions had to be approved by the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress. Apparently, Cuprum and the PRD had decided to take a fast track to approval by exploiting their political connections in the Ño Kribo leadership.

With such a heated situation with regards to mining in Ño Kribo, the Tenth Ngobe-Bugle General Congress in Kuerima (Nedrini) in 2006 would be determinant for the viability of the Comarca nine years after the approval of Law 10. Fully aware of the implications of this event, the PRD government mobilized its political machinery in Western Panama and annointed Ngobe leader Alberto Montezuma as the official party candidate for president in the internal Ngobe elections. According to unconfirmed reports, the patriarch of indigenous policy in Panama, Hugo Giraud publicly supported

Montezuma as the preferred government candidate even among other PRD figures running for the same position. Although no documentary evidence has ever been obtained about this episode, if we consider the Ngobe oral tradition, for all practical purposes this became a known fact regardless of whether the event actually happened or not. Uncontestably, the night before the election of the President of the General Congress in Kuerima, there was the noticeable presence of one of the most important political figures in the PRD, former President of the National Assembly and Minister of Housing, Balbina Herrera.<sup>12</sup>

For the Kuerima Congress, the PRD mobilized all of its political apparatus to defeat the incumbent Pedro Rodriguez, a *predicador* of Mama Tata, who had unexpectedly inherited the position from Victor Guerra after he had resigned to run for corregimiento representative in the 2004 elections. Government vehicles were transporting congress participants from the farthest reaches of the Ngobe Territory, providing food, shelter, and logistical assistance for this massive event. An electric plant was set up in Kuerima and the Panama Canal Authority (PCA) even organized a cultural festival for the night after the election to try to convince the Ngobe to vote for the expansion of the Panama Canal in the October 2006 Referendum. Even the President, Martin Torrijos was expected to descend by helicopter at the congress site to salute the new president of the General Congress.

Unfortunately for the PRD, the results were not as expected. In a sudden turn of events, some of the supporters of the other candidates, including PRD supporters,

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<sup>12</sup> Two years later, Balbina Herrera won the PRD presidential nomination for the 2009 national elections, running against Ricardo Martinelli of the Democratic Change Party (CD).

coalesced behind incumbent Pedro Rodriguez who campaigned on three basic planks – no mines, no hydroelectric dams, and the installation of control posts in the access roads to the Ngobe-Bugle Comarca.<sup>13</sup> The surprising victory of Rodriguez angered many of the staunchest PRD loyalists, most importantly the General Cacique, Maximo Saldana (La Prensa, March 10, 2006). The Cacique ordered the immediate cancellation of the elections arguing that fraud had been committed. When key congress participants refused to abide by this instruction, he warned that they would “have to face government reprisals” “que se atuvieran a las consecuencias que viniesen del Gobierno”. As a reaction to the declarations of the Cacique, the General Congress passed a resolution ordering his removal from office as well as that of the regional caciques of Ño Kribo Johnny Bonilla and Kodriri Jose Rodriguez Camarena (La Prensa, March 21, 2006).

The next course of events made a complete mockery of the PRD. All support was withdrawn from the General Congress, including the use of government equipment like the electrical plant. Transportation was offered to congress participants to desert the meeting that was actually supposed to extend for three more days. With the exception of the Panama Canal Authority (PCA) gala on the night of the fiasco, no more official events were organized let alone bringing President Torrijos to such an embarrassing situation. As the number of congress participants sharply dropped and living conditions worsened literally from one day to the other, opposition politicians stepped in to take advantage of the PRD debacle, most importantly the head of the

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<sup>13</sup> According to La Prensa, March 18, 2005, a mandatory fee of US\$ 0.50 per vehicle had been implemented in the road to Quebrada Guabo in Nedrini. This measure was supported by both the regional cacique, Rogelio Moreno, and the local legislator, Patricio Montezuma. Albeit controversial for outsiders, there is an unusual consensus among different authorities in the Comarca in favor of these control posts (La Prensa, December 27, 2006).

Democratic Change (CD) party Ricardo Martinelli who replaced President Torrijos as the messianic provider to the general congress with his visit on Friday March 10<sup>th</sup>.<sup>14</sup>

During the immediate months after the election of Pedro Rodriguez as president of the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress, the National Government was truly trapped in a major dilemma.<sup>15</sup> It was not only difficult, but potentially even more embarrassing to promote the organization of a new general congress as requested by the General Cacique Maximo Saldana. Yet, the stakes were also extremely high if they allowed an avowedly independent leadership in the Comarca to threaten the economic and political interests of business and political elites in Panama City. As a consequence, the Government opted for a cautious approach. They decided to recognize Rodriguez as president of the Congress, yet they also promoted conversations with his group to gain the support of his coalition for the approval of development projects. Although the participation of Rodriguez in these talks weakened his position among some of his most fervent supporters, his conciliatory dialogue with both the Government and the private companies avoided an open confrontation with the national authorities, like had previously happened with the election of the Naso King in 2005.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> A few weeks later, in April 2006, Ricardo Martinelli accused the PRD government of leaving the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress without any food and transportation during the annual conference of the Asociacion Panameña de Ejecutivos de Empresas (APEDE). This 2006 Annual Conference of Business Executives (CADE 2006) focused on the role of political parties in the promotion of democracy, and featured prominent representatives of all the officially registered political parties in the country. Ricardo Martinelli ran against PRD Balbina Herrera in the 2009 general elections, and became the President of Panama on July 1, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> The local cacique of Cusapin Justo Buy died a few weeks after the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress (La Prensa, March 25, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Resolution 1 of September 11, 2006, established a High Level Commission to coordinate national and international projects with the National Government with the exception of mining and the use of other natural resources. This Commission was formed by Celio Guerra, Octavio Rodriguez, Ormel Smith, Clmente Jimenez, Celestino Mariano, Eladio Castellon, Candido Tugri, and Pedro Nola Flores.

Although a mutually beneficial truce was brokered between Rodriguez and the PRD, “low intensity warfare” continued to try to control the remaining positions in the Ngobe leadership. On May 2, 2006, La Prensa reproduced the accusations of Pedro Rodriguez against Bernardo Jaen, who had become once again director of the Ngobe-Bugle Project in 2004, for “ignoring the participation of the congresses according to Law 10, obstructing institutional development and affecting the execution of the Ngobe-Bugle Project”. On July 28, the head of the Union of Indigenous Agricultural Workers, Simon Gallardo, also justified a hunger strike and the retention for four hours of the regional cacique of Nedrini, Rogelio Moreno, arguing that “the regional congress had violated the international agreements signed with IFAD and arbitrarily fired the workers of the Ngobe-Bugle Project” (La Prensa, July 28, 2006).

In Resolution 13 of July 26, 2006, Pedro Rodriguez upheld the results of a new Ño Kribo regional congress that was celebrated on July 15-16 in the locality of Pueblo Nuevo. This document contained direct accusations against Enrique Pineda for signing “secretly and without consultation an exploration agreement with the mining company Cuprum, in open violation of Law 10 and usurping functions which corresponded exclusively to the General Congress”. Furthermore, the Resolution reiterated previous charges that the regional congress of November 2005, in which Pineda had been supposedly reelected, had actually been financed by the mining company. For this reason, the General Congress actually recognized the elections of July 2006, in which a new figure, Cesar Salazar, had been allegedly elected as new president of the Ño Kribo regional congress for a period of four years, and cancelled any agreement signed by Enrique Pineda on behalf of the Ngobe people.

A very similar controversy rose in the regional congress of Kodriri after this body approved a mining exploration agreement with Aurum Exploration (La Prensa, December 12, 2006). According to a representative of the community of Cerro Pelado, Jacinto Acosta, the negotiating commission formed by Fermin Franco, Rogelio Moreno, Candido Tugri, Genaro Salinas and Jacinto Ruiz was ignoring the resolutions of the General Congress of Kuerima. For this reason, he asked the Ombudswoman Monica Perez to ensure the proper respect for the position of the majority of the Ngobe people against mining development. This same position was restated during a meeting organized by the Company to reach an agreement between the two parts in early 2007 (La Prensa, January 12, 2007).

The election of Pedro Rodriguez to the presidency of the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress represented a direct challenge to the predominance of the PRD among the Ngobe population. Forged during the heyday of corporatism and a product of the charismatic indigenismo of Omar Torrijos, the PRD-Ngobe alliance had survived the scissions of the General Congress in 1986 and 1998 as well as the reprisals of the Arnulfista Party after 1999. During this period, the traditional leadership of caciques Monico and Ortega had been progressively replaced by a more clientelistic leadership who regarded comarca positions as an alternative for personal advancement and self-realization. Following Otero (2004 and 1999), only the active mobilization of civil society organizations could challenge the enticements of a co-opting state and eventually lead to the formation of a popular-democratic organization. Would the election of Pedro Rodriguez revive the Ngobe grassroots mobilization of the 1960s-1990s? Would he

inherit the ethnic conscience of Mama Tata and the belligerent activism of the Tabasara movement?

**Clashing with the Party of the Revolution: The Third Scission of the Ngobe Leadership and the Unexpected Violence of Neoliberal Multiculturalism, 2006-2009**

Besides the changes happening in the Ngobe leadership at the Comarca and at the regional levels, there were important developments at the grassroots level that paralleled the ongoing struggle of the Tabasara movement for Ngobe land rights and the defense of natural resources. A complete survey of these spontaneous manifestations of grassroots discontent around the whole Ngobe Territory is beyond the scope of this dissertation. I wish to emphasize, however, the importance of these mobilizations as a basis for changes happening at higher levels of the Ngobe leadership. Furthermore, I will like to highlight the disproportionate, pointless and misguided reaction of the National Government towards these mobilizations during the latter half of the Torrijos administration. During this period, state intervention once again shifted from co-optation to repression.

In general, the Government did not recognize any leadership and/or initiative on the part of the Ngobe that officials in Panama City considered too backward and therefore in constant need of government assistance. Instead, they were convinced that a grand conspiracy existed involving union movements (especially SUNTRACS), environmental and social justice NGOs, and foreigners of all kinds and colors from Peace Corps Volunteers to the Bolivarian Revolution of Hugo Chavez.<sup>17</sup> For the national authorities, the destiny of Panama as a first world nation was at stake, and this

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<sup>17</sup> For similar instances of blaming foreigners for situations of domestic prejudice and social injustice, see Wright (1988) and Howe (2009).

noble ideal justified any efforts, legal and illegal, peaceful and violent, to defend the nation from these dangerous agitators who used the poor Indians in detriment of the greater good of the majority. In this context, the national vote to approve a referendum for the expansion of the Panama Canal became a litmus test for national allegiance and faith in the country (Rosales 2007). The Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States, coastal and hydroelectric development would follow suit after this historical decision.

As the Government mobilized public relations and an extensive patronage network to obtain the necessary votes for the expansion of the Panama Canal,<sup>18</sup> secret meetings identified “the enemies of the nation”, among those the Catholic NGO Caritas Social. This was the national context when the Ngobe who lived in the Province of Bocas del Toro, outside of the Comarca, organized a special Naso-Ngobe-Bribri Congress in the town of Valle de Risco to oppose four hydroelectric dams recently approved for the Teribe-Changuinola Watershed as well as mining and real estate development in the coastal areas.<sup>19</sup> Officially, the Valle Risco meeting was expected to

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<sup>18</sup> The Government of Panama implemented a social assistance program called “Red de Oportunidades” to aid extremely poor families in rural areas. Each family would receive \$70.00 bimonthly conditioned on their participation in government-sponsored training workshops. Unfortunately, like in similar schemes in other Latin American countries, government follow-up and monitoring was minimal.

<sup>19</sup> According to an unofficial story narrated by Ngobe grassroots leaders, the Ngobe of Valle de Risco in the District of Changuinola rejected the proposal to belong to the Ngobe-Bugle Indigenous Comarca in 1997. The position of the Ngobe of Valle de Risco angered many of the other Ngobe leaders who were struggling for their territorial rights, yet Valle de Risco and several other communities in the Changuinola and Bocas del Toro districts in the Province of Bocas del Toro were granted a special status as annexed areas (Law 10 of 1997, Article 4; Law 69 of 1998, Article 8; Executive Decree 194 of 1999, Articles 12-14.). In spite of the decision supposedly made by the inhabitants of Valle de Risco and the other annexed areas in Bocas del Toro Province, several Changuinola leaders have occupied very prominent positions in the now institutionalized Ngobe-Bugle governing structure, including Johnny Bonilla and Enrique Pineda mentioned above. Loyal to the legacy of Omar Torrijos, most of these leaders were at some point members of the PRD; and like the Naso of the neighboring Teribe watershed, they also had high expectations that the government of Martin Torrijos would favor the interests of indigenous peoples. As a matter of fact, shortly after the transfer of power, several Ngobe leaders of Changuinola were

be attended also by Naso and Bribri leaders, and was therefore called Naso-Ngobe-Bribri Congress.<sup>20</sup>

Two years before, when a small company, Hydroteribe, S. A., organized the public hearings for the environmental impact assessments (EIAs) of three hydroelectric projects proposed in the main stem of the Changuinola River in the vicinity of Valle de Risco (Chan 75, Chan 140 and Chan 220), the Ngobe leadership was confronted with the same conflict of interests that had haunted a whole generation of indigenous leaders after the approval of Law 10 of 1997. Most of the people directly affected by the projects never attended the public hearings and were completely unaware of the implications of these projects that were explained by *chui* who spoke the language of the Conquest. Another group of more politically active Ngobe leaders had already organized large gatherings to oppose the projects since at least October 2004. Yet, there was also a critical sector of the Ngobe leadership that remained fully committed to what was sold as a “state” project, and who envisioned the benefits that would be provided for “the poor” by such an outpour of financial investment. Regardless of these internal divisions, the three hydroelectric projects appeared as a fantasy until ANAM approved the EIAs in October 2005. A few months later, a major North American corporation, Allied Energy Services (AES) from Arlington, Virginia, would claim ownership of the three hydroelectric projects, walking hand in hand with government

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assigned to key positions in the regional government bureaucracy, including the regional administrator of ANAM, Valentin Pineda from Valle de Risco.

<sup>20</sup> As mentioned above, the Bribri is a different ethnic group that also lives in the Changuinola District between the Naso Territory and the Costa Rican border.

officials, including many Ngobe leaders, to promise benefits that would surpass any of the early utopias of General Omar Torrijos.

From the beginning, the Changuinola projects suffered from a pathology that would only be imaginable in the context of the persistent memory of the charismatic indigenismo of Omar Torrijos among the indigenous population: They were sold simultaneously as government-sponsored state projects in the same corporatist tradition of the 1970s, yet also as private initiatives originating from neoliberal economic modernization. As the former, the projects should be supported wholeheartedly by the government bureaucracy, including the Ngobe leaders and the local communities, in the same way that the Kuna and the Embera had relinquished their ancestral lands for the welfare of the nation during the construction of Bayano Project in the 1970s. However, as purely private initiatives, the State was not responsible for any compensations or liability negotiations, and government institutions would only play a minimal regulatory role according to the Perez Balladares institutional reforms of the mid-1990s. As AES moved decisively into the Changuinola River, visiting the Ngobe communities with gifts and monetary offerings of all sorts, many of the indigenous leaders that were previously opposed to the hydroelectric projects began working for the Company or receiving contracts for their lands, their houses, and other kinds of services. State co-optation coupled with a clientelistic leadership seemed to succeed even during the aegis of neoliberal multicultural citizenship.

The internal division among the Ngobe population reached its zenith in the Valle de Risco congress of May 2006, in which those who supported the hydroelectric projects were allegedly denied the opportunity to participate in the meeting by those

who opposed hydroelectric development. During this meeting, some leaders called for demonstrations on June 5, 2006, World Environment Day, at each of the four proposed dam sites. They never expected that the roads leading to the dam sites would be cordoned off by the National Police days ahead of the mobilizations, and that a special operation would be launched in the whole province to track some of the main leaders of this movement. Although these irregular activities were properly denounced to the National Office of the Ombudsman, no explanation has ever been provided by the competent authorities about these irregular incursions of the National Police into the indigenous communities. During the upcoming months, and without the official participation of any government institution, AES began negotiations for the relocation of an estimated 100 families that would be “directly” impacted by the construction of the Chan 75 reservoir.<sup>21</sup> Local government officials, including several prominent Ngobe leaders, participated in the public events organized by the Company, signaling that the projects had the blessing of the government as if they were state business.<sup>22</sup>

Although the mobilization of Ngobe people affected by the hydroelectric dams was suffocated effectively through a combination of co-optation and repression, a new

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<sup>21</sup> The ANAM resolutions approving the environmental impact assessments for the three projects established that Chan 75 should be constructed before Chan 140 and Chan 220. The number of people affected by the Chan 75 project has never been officially determined, and AES only takes into consideration the communities of Changuinola Arriba, Guayabal, Valle Rey, and Charco de La Pava. The Chan 75, Chan 140 and Chan 220 hydroelectric projects are also located in the Palo Seco Protected Forest. Environmental organizations argue that these projects will not only affect this reserve, but the La Amistad International Park (PILA), a World Heritage Site that protects the headwaters of the Changuinola River. In spite of this argument, in May 2007, ANAM signed a contract with AES granting an administrative concession of 6,215 Hectares of the Palo Seco Protected Forest for the construction of the Chan 75 hydroelectric project. Ironically, according to several community leaders, the Palo Seco Forest was the main reason that many of the Ngobe of the Changuinola River Watershed had been denied the opportunity to register their land rights years before. They had been told that they were living within a protected area.

<sup>22</sup> On October 19, 2007, the National Public Services Authority (ASEP), the successor of the Public Services Regulatory Entity (ERSP), had issued resolution AN 1228-Elec, declaring that the three Changuinola projects were of public and social interest. Law 10 of 2006 had restructured the Public Services Regulatory Entity (ERSP) into the National Public Services Authority (ASEP).

storm loomed over the national authorities. In May 2006, comarca authorities from Ño Kribo requested the Minister of Economy and Finance, Carlos Vallarino, to reject concession requests 06-254 and 06-255 for lands in the sacred island of Escudo de Veraguas (La Prensa, August 1, 2006; La Prensa, August 3, 2006). This request was later reiterated by Orlando Hooker, head of the Ngobe-Bugle Anti-Corruption Comarca Council, who said that he had personally participated in a similar movement in 1991. Although an article of Law 10 reserved a strip of 2 Kilometers along the Caribbean Coast of the Comarca specifically for tourism development, the Ngobe had voiced their opposition to “tourism” development by outsiders in the Comarca on a number of occasions (La Prensa, May 8, 2000).<sup>23</sup>

The question of coastal development became a heated controversy when a US company called Damani Beach, S. A., claimed that it had obtained a concession from the regional cacique of Ño Kribo Johnny Bonilla and the president of the regional congress Enrique Pineda to develop the entire Caribbean Coast of the Comarca (Cooperation and Concession Agreement Damani Beach (Damani Mirono Umaen) Project for Social and Humanitarian, Ecotouristic, and Natural Resource Development).<sup>24</sup> This agreement that was signed on June 17 in Panama City was denounced by the Fiscal of the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress, Celio Guerra, on July 12, 2007.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Similar grassroots manifestations also occurred in June 2007 following an oil spill that affected much of the Caribbean Coast of the Comarca (La Prensa, June 27-29, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> There were also separate agreements signed with the mayors of Cusapin, Agustin Villagra, and Cankintu, Napoleón Ellington. Both mayors also sanctioned the main agreement with the regional Ngobe leadership.

<sup>25</sup> Resolution #1 of the Fourth Encuentro Interregional de Dirigentes also rejected “las concesiones cedidas por el estado panameño a las empresas nacionales e internacionales (minera, hidroeléctrica,

Six days later, in response to the Damani Beach agreement, the Governor of the Comarca Ngobe-Bugle, Ausencio Palacio, ordered the creation of the comarca commission for tourism development that was mandated by Article 49 of Law 10 of 2007. Palacio argued that the Damani agreement was only a proposal, and therefore had to be assessed by the commission prior to any final approval. Two months later, and after widespread uproar in the entire Ngobe Territory, Governor Palacio adopted a more emphatic position by declaring null the concession received by Damani Beach (Resolution 25 of September 14, 2007).<sup>26</sup> Although the Damani initiative clearly did not enjoy the support of the central government, on September 24, a letter signed by the General Cacique Maximo Saldana asked President Martin Torrijos to reconsider his government decision about the Damani Project, stating that:

We accept that naturally there is opposition in these kinds of projects, or did not the widening of the Panama Canal also have opposition? But this opposition is of a political nature by individuals who do not reside in the area and who have been distorting reality and using your name to oppose and show the people that the Government is against development projects for the comarca.

Aceptamos de que si existen oposición como es natural en estas clases de proyectos, o es que la ampliación del Canal de Panamá no tuvo oposición? Pero la oposición son de naturaleza políticas y de individuos que no residen en el área que han estado malinformando la realidad del hecho y utilizando su nombre para oponerse y hacer ver al pueblo que el Gobierno esta en contra de los proyectos de desarrollo para la comarca.

During the upcoming months, the General Cacique and the regional authorities continued with the promotion of the Damani initiative, sparking a fascinating debate

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turismo y otros)" on August 3, 2007, at the community of Quebrada Loro in the District of Mirono, Nedrini Region.

<sup>26</sup> For this action, the Governor Ausencio Palacio was even congratulated by the Executive Secretary of the Consejo Nacional de Transparencia Contra la Corrupcion, Alma Montenegro de Fletcher, in a letter dated September 25, 2007.

among the Western educated Ngobe about the future of the Comarca. Despite the formal position of the national government, Damani Beach actually became a showcase of the current situation: The Ngobe leadership was completely divided on how to respond to private initiatives such as the Guariviara and Cerro Pelado mines, the Changuinola hydroelectric dams, and tourism development in the Caribbean Coast. Three years after the ascension of Martin Torrijos to the Panamanian presidency, the prospects for private investment looked completely dismal. Not only had the national government been incapable of controlling the Ngobe leadership through co-optation, but development plans had only progressed with unforeseeable difficulties. The theory of a grand conspiracy had fallen under its own weight. Social protests continued despite the dismantling of supporting organizations and the bitter-sweet victory of the PRD in the referendum to approve the expansion of the Panama Canal in October 2006. Under these circumstances, private investors were desperate to move ahead with their projected ventures, while the Government ran out of credible options to garner the support of indigenous peoples. Thus, the situation in late 2007 no longer afforded the possibility of co-optation and instead invited the neoliberal state to utilize a level of violence already common in other latitudes, yet rarely seen in Panama until the late 2000s.<sup>27</sup>

In Teribe-Changuinola, a major meeting organized by the National Environmental Authority (ANAM) in November 2007 to present a refurbished version of the relocation plan was massively attended by the inhabitants of the Changuinola River. In this

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<sup>27</sup> In October 2007, protests of Kuna and Embera affected by the Bayano Hydroelectric Project in Eastern Panama were violently repressed by the National Police. Three weeks later, seven Naso protestors were also arrested in Changuinola for blocking the construction of the Bonyic hydroelectric project.

meeting, the Ngobe openly expressed their heart-felt rejection of the Chan 75 hydroelectric project (Lutz 2007). A few weeks later, as government plans to start dynamiting the dam site continued unabated, 100-300 Ngobe began gathering regularly to impede the continuation of the Project, and in fact they did so during the last two weeks of December 2007. Confronted with such widespread grassroots opposition, on January 3, 2008, the local authorities could only recur to sheer force to dispel the protesters. Fifty four people including elderly men, women, and children were taken to jail in the neighboring town of Changuinola (La Prensa, January 3-5, 2008). Following this violent episode, the National Police occupied the area concessioned to AES on a permanent basis, and actively assisted the Company and contractors to escort the machinery entering the farms. In reaction to these abuses, on March 7, 2008, ironically the eleventh anniversary of the creation of the Ngobe-Bugle Comarca, Alianza para la Conservacion y el Desarrollo (ACD) and Cultural Survival filed a petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to protect the lives and properties of the Ngobe living in the Changuinola River Valley.<sup>28</sup>

As grievances accumulated in Western Panama, a national mobilization of peasants and indigenous peoples affected by development projects was organized in March 2008 (La Prensa, March 13, 2008). About a hundred indigenous and peasant activists decided to camp for about forty days in the Independence Plaza in the Old Quarter of Panama City, and only blocks away from the Presidency. The demonstrators presented a long list of petitions, including a moratorium to mining, hydroelectric and

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<sup>28</sup> In June 2009, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights granted precautionary measures to protect the Ngobe inhabitants of th Changuinola River Valley, including a request to stop the construction of the Chan 75 hydroelectric project.

tourism development concessions, and the removal of the national head of the National Environmental Authority (ANAM), Ligia Castro. As the protestors waited for a possible meeting with President Torrijos, a group of Ngobe solidarity organizations and indigenous leaders gathered simultaneously in Quebrada Guabo (Nedrini) between March 21-23, to analyze the current wave of development pressures. Resolution 1 of this event requested once again the removal of the clientelistic leadership of General Cacique, Maximo Saldana, according to the decision that had been made in the X General Congress in Kuerima in 2006 (La Prensa, March 30, 2008).<sup>29</sup>

Although President Torrijos did talk personally with the protestors in April 2008, the results were disheartening. None of the requests was properly addressed, and the special commission that was temporarily created to talk about social and environmental conflicts was soon merged with the already discredited Mesa Nacional para la Concertacion.<sup>30</sup> With the lack of response from the National Government, grassroots mobilizations continued across the country, some times leading to violent clashes with company employees and the National Police (La Prensa, June 5, 2008; La Prensa, June 20, 2008; La Prensa, June 25, 2008). In a thematic hearing at the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IAHRC) held on October 28, 2008, Panamanian indigenous representatives accused the Panamanian State of not recognizing their

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<sup>29</sup> The General Cacique Maximo Saldana made his own personal contribution to incite this level of public rejection. While the group of peasants and indigenous peoples were camping at the Independence Plaza, he traveled to Panama City with his own delegation to ask for the construction of development projects!

<sup>30</sup> The Mesa Nacional was created in 2006 to dispel criticisms from academics, politicians and public opinion about the absence of a national development plan for Panama. This argument had been espoused against the approval of the referendum to widen the Panama Canal. The creation of the Mesa Nacional was regarded by the administration of Martin Torrijos as the main platform for drafting a blueprint for national development utilizing the increased canal revenues.

collective land rights and their right to free, prior, and informed consent of development projects in their territories.

As the 2009 electoral campaign approached, the question of development projects in indigenous territories began to be addressed by the different candidates. Both Balbina Herrera (PRD) and Ricardo Martinelli (CD) adopted a public commitment to create an Indigenous Affairs Ministry during the new presidential administration (2004-2009) (La Prensa, November 1, 2008).<sup>31</sup> Yet, in practice, the prospects for indigenous autonomy were not as optimistic. Although the National Assembly approved Law 72 of December 3, 2008, to allow for titling of indigenous collective lands, indigenous activists criticized that the State had failed to protect the annexed areas of the Ño Kribo region after eleven years of the enactment of Law 10 of 1997. Given this situation, in February and March 2009, representatives of the Naso and Ngobe indigenous peoples of Bocas del Toro requested an investigation of the World Bank Inspection Panel on the implementation of the National Program for Land Administration (PRONAT).<sup>32</sup>

In fact, as the national government failed to listen to the concerns of the Ngobe grassroots mobilizations, international pressure became a main avenue to voice these grievances. In this regard, nowhere was the government failure to protect indigenous lands more evident than in the granting of the 6,215 Hectares of the Palo Seco

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<sup>31</sup> Previously, PRD presidential pre-candidate, Juan Carlos Navarro, had signed an agreement with Embera and Wounaan leaders for the defense of indigenous land rights. The PRD politician had also asked the National Assembly to approve the proposed bill for the titling of indigenous collective lands ([www.tupolitica.com](http://www.tupolitica.com) May 29, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> The National Program for Land Administration (PRONAT) was jointly financed by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB). Although the main purpose was to promote private land titling, the Bank had included a component for the delimitation of protected areas and indigenous territories. This request responded to the new World Bank's indigenous policy following the structural changes discussed by Fox and Brown (1998).

Protected Forest to AES Corporation for the construction of the Chan 75 hydroelectric project on the Changuinola River. In response to this blatant disregard of indigenous rights, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples, James Anaya, visited the Ngobe communities of Charco de La Pava and Changuinola Arriba in January 2009. The Anaya report suggested that the Ngobe of the Changuinola River Valley had rights over the lands that they were occupying in spite of living outside of the Ngobe-Bugle Comarca. The conclusions of this report were upheld by a special report of the Ombudsman Office of Panama that was released in March 2009, and by the granting of precautionary measures by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IAHRC) on June 15, 2009. More than three years of efforts by AES and the Government of Panama to co-opt and repress grassroots manifestations of discontent were not able to silence the voices of the Ngobe in Teribe-Changuinola.

How would mobilization from the bottom up influence the Ngobe leadership above? Had Pedro Rodriguez developed a participatory leadership after rebelling against the PRD in the 2006 General Congress? Were clientelistic leaders like Maximo Saldana and Johnny Bonilla completely defeated by the strength of the Ngobe ethnic community? In spite of the significant legal victories at the international level, the Ngobe indigenous leadership continued to be deeply divided over their allegiance to the national political parties and their position on the construction of development projects. Before leaving office, the administration of Martin Torrijos would make a last concerted effort to control the indigenous leadership as his Father did in the 1970s. Both co-optation and repression had not succeeded in preserving the legacy of charismatic indigenismo in the 2000s, at least not completely.

## **The Debacle of the PRD-Ngobe Alliance and the Arrival of a new Democratic Change?**

The advent of the 2009 electoral campaign only heightened the divisions among the Ngobe leadership and led to yet another attempt by the PRD to capture the presidency of the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress. A main point of contention about the X Ngobe-Bugle General Congress in Kuerima had been the continued use of the traditional election method as opposed to the election of delegates as mandated by Law 10. In the traditional method, the Ngobe formed lines in support of each of the candidates, and the longest line determined the winner. This method allowed for people to change lines as they saw first hand the trends in the election. If delegates were elected as determined by Law 10, voters would not have any opportunity to change their minds at the last minute.

In order to “correct” the deficiencies of the 2006 election, a new Ngobe-Bugle General Congress was called for March 2009 at the Comarca capital of Llano Tugri or Buoidi (Kodriiri). There were several reasons that this “new” election call was considered invalid by Pedro Rodriguez and by many other Ngobe leaders. First, most delegates had not yet been elected, and therefore any such election would not represent the majority of the Ngobe population. Second, according to Law 10, the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress only met every five years, and not every three years as happened before the approval of the Comarca Law. Finally, and most importantly, it was evident that this “new” Congress was being organized for political reasons less than two months before the national elections.

Although many voters boycotted a congress that they considered illegitimate, the event went ahead with an unapologetic intervention of the central government. In fact,

at the very last minute, the congress site was changed to the more proximate locality of Chichica (Kodiriri) for weather reasons,<sup>33</sup> where coincidentally President Torrijos and the PRD presidential candidate Balbina Herrera were planning to arrive to celebrate the success of the “Red de Oportunidades” and inaugurate the new road that was constructed by the incumbent administration. Chaos reigned as many Congress participants arrived separately to Buoidi, and then the Congress became accidentally split. To the dismay of the participants, and after the official ceremony, Ngobe officials asked those who had arrived to Chichica to move to the original location of Buoidi where most of the participants were already gathered! In spite of the widespread outrage, the Government facilitated the necessary logistics for this second last-minute change of mind.

Considering the tight control of the PRD on Congress participants, it was not surprising at all when Alberto Montezuma was finally elected as the “new” President of the General Congress. Unfortunately for the PRD, and even less surprising, most Ngobe continued recognizing Pedro Rodriguez who was supposed to remain in his position until 2011. Once again, the success of the PRD was ephemeral, and the morale of the party collapsed when Democratic Change (CD) candidate Ricardo Martinelli obtained 60% of the national vote for the presidential seat. Reminiscent of the 1999 election, however, the Ngobe vote did not follow the national trend as Balbina Herrera emerged victorious in indigenous areas across the country. Observers propose that this electoral behavior resulted from the success of the “Red de Oportunidades” as

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<sup>33</sup> According to a close associate of Pedro Rodriguez, the General Cacique Maximo Saldana feared traveling to Buoidi where he could lose control of the situation. Instead, he preferred to state in Chichica close to his home base of Alto Caballero.

well as the substantial investment in the comarcas and other indigenous areas by the PRD government.

At the twilight of a new Torrijos administration, several trends became apparent. The implementation of the Comarca regime had advanced slowly, yet several fundamental questions like the election of the delegates and the definition of the annexed areas of Ño Kribo remained unaddressed. The Ngobe leadership was deeply divided along the question of development projects with figures such as Pedro Rodriguez and Eusebio Bilbord maintaining a pro-autonomy stance, while others like Johnny Bonilla and Maximo Saldana loyally supporting private development projects sponsored by the national government. Although the PRD had exploited to the fullest possible extent its historical alliance with the Ngobe people to try to seize control of the General Congress, these attempts had failed twice as the decisive support of the Ngobe in the national elections did not necessarily translate into the election of pro-development candidates in the congress elections (or recognition by people not participating in the elections).

Was the failure of a clientelistic leadership an indication that the Ngobe had developed a popular-democratic organization? Can we interpret the leadership of Pedro Rodriguez in such a positive light? As explained in Chapter 5, government policy towards indigenous peoples (state intervention) shifted progressively away from military corporatism towards neoliberal multiculturalism between the 1970s-1990s. For many years, the persistent memory of the charismatic indigenismo of Omar Torrijos outlived the General, producing the elections of Dionicio Villagra to the presidency of the General Congress in 1998 and Maximo Saldana to the position of General Cacique in

2003. Yet, when grassroots mobilization – for instance, Tabasara, Teribe-Changuinola and Damani Beach – challenged the alliance between the Government and indigenous peoples, repression continued to be an avenue for the advancement of the development agenda even without the consent of indigenous peoples.

The use of the state monopoly over the legitimate use of force had the capacity to solve the immediate needs of the Government and private companies such as AES to construct a particular project, yet according to Otero (2004) such an approach was not as effective as the combination of state co-optation and a corrupt-opportunistic leadership. Widespread use of state force could lead to the emergence of charismatic-authoritarian or participatory-democratic leaders – the Ejercito Zapatista para la Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) in the case study developed by Otero (2004). However, according to the PCF model, the character of a political class organization was also contingent upon regional culture. As explained in Chapters 4 and 5, Ngobe ethnicity had become increasingly politicized since the 1950s and new organizational structures like the traditional caciques and the congresses had developed to respond to common challenges.

In spite of the success of these governance structures to provoke the discussion, modification and approval of the Comarca bill in the 1980s-1990s, key actors in the struggle for Ngobe land rights like Camilo Ortega, Julio Dixon, and Bernardo Jimenez (personal communications) have expressed with concern that the congresses no longer gather the same number of participants as before. We need to understand that Ngobe regional culture has become increasingly integrated into national and global political and economic spheres since the 1960s. New tastes and necessities have developed

through continued interaction with the non-indigenous population, from university degrees to CD players. The Ngobe ethnic community has been progressively straying away from those kinship norms and relations of production that had sustained Ngobe livelihoods for centuries. For instance, labor migration continues to increase towards neighboring Costa Rica. Most importantly, political parties and private companies have made an imprint on indigenous populations that now regard these external intrusions not only as a threat, but also as an opportunity for material accumulation. The Ngobe population has become accustomed to gifts provided by political candidates and government officials. Government programs like the Ngobe-Bugle Project and the “Red de Oportunidades” have familiarized the Ngobe people with free cash. The extension of the “Red” as a patronage network throughout the Ngobe Territory creates worries that the Ngobe may become entirely dependent on government welfare (Berediana Rodriguez personal communication). Yet, surprisingly, a new leadership has also emerged at the grassroots level demanding renewed independence from national decisions and private interests.

In spite of the relentless efforts of the national authorities and the private companies to buy off the hearts and minds of the Ngobe for their irreflexive acceptance of development projects, clientelistic leaders like Maximo Saldana and Johnny Bonilla have never been able to prevent spontaneous outbursts of public opposition like the Tabasara demonstrations of 2003 and the Charco de La Pava protests of 2008. A flame continues ignited in the Ngobe population that blazes alive when conditions become conducive for grassroots expressions of popular discontent like the 2006 election of Pedro Rodriguez to the presidency of the General Congress and the general

uproar about the construction of the Damani Beach Project in 2007. Yet, these spontaneous expressions of indigenous identity do not appear to sever the strong ties already forged for many years between the Ngobe leadership and national political parties, most especially the PRD that ironically emerged victorious in the Ngobe Territory even against the national trend in 1999 and 2009. Is there the possibility for a participatory leadership under these conditions? Has Pedro Rodriguez been able to consolidate the Ngobe-General Congress as a popular-democratic organization?

As the new presidential administration of Ricardo Martinelli was inaugurated on July 1, 2009, state intervention was expected to move further ahead along the neoliberal pathway. In spite of his neopopulist rhetoric, Martinelli had made clear that he would strive to downsize the role of the State and further create incentives for private investment, including a new law for private land titling in coastal areas. When a third march to Panama City was organized by a sector of the Ngobe leadership in September 2009, President Martinelli refused to meet with the protestors, and instead delegated this responsibility to the new Director of Indigenist Affairs, Jose Isaac Acosta, a former anti-dam activist and CD candidate for the Kodriri seat in the national congress.

Behind the manipulation of external actors, divisions among the Ngobe leaders stemmed from different perspectives about the place of the Ngobe in a globalized XXI century. In the midst of these transformations, promising leaders continue to be selectively captured and turned into clientelistic figures by political machineries, such as the PRD, the Arnulfista Party and the CD. Yet, the persistence of that underground fire that still constitutes the Ngobe as an ethnic community, the same blaze that maintained the Ngobe boundary with the non-indigenous world for centuries and fueled massive

concentrations in the 1960s-1990s, continues to produce participatory grassroots leaders with the revolutionary potential that someday captured the imagination of Jose Carlos Mariategui. The next chapter will situate Ngobe mobilization in comparative perspective, contrasting Ngobe mobilization with similar movements in other latitudes during the XXI century. The final chapter will also assess the possibilities for the Ngobe flame not to be extinguished in the midst of the steady penetration of the Neoliberal Multicultural State into everyday life.

## CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSIONS

Can indigenous peoples develop self-government institutions (political autonomy) independent of national decision-making and the interests of private actors? As explained in Chapter 1, the current literature is deeply divided on the answer to this question. Opinions vary from the enthusiasm and optimism of Van Cott (2000) and Yashar (2005) to a grim outlook by Hale (2002) and Diaz-Polanco (2006). The case of the Ngobe in Western Panama represents a contribution to this debate. Historically, Panama has been heralded as one of the countries in the Americas where indigenous autonomy has reached the highest levels of success based primarily on the Kuna experience after the insurrection of 1925. This generally positive assessment seemed to ignore the precarious situation of the other six indigenous groups in Panama, and most importantly, the challenges facing the Kuna themselves today. This concluding chapter will try to situate the Ngobe case in comparative perspective, and discuss the possibilities for effective indigenous political autonomy in a broader context.

Zibeche (2009a) noted with concern that social movements had weakened with the ascension of progressive governments in most countries in Latin America. In his opinion, indigenous movements have represented an exception of continued mobilization in contrast with the co-optation of unions, students, neighborhood associations, peasants and other grassroots organizations. Otero (2004) presented a similar assessment when he questioned whether the Ejercito Zapatista para la Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) represented a larger tendency by indigenous peoples towards developing bottom-up popular-democratic organizations. He proposed that “we need comparative research, both across various regions of Mexico and from various

Latin American countries” (p. 342). The following survey will review some of the most prominent examples of indigenous autonomy in Latin America, examining whether the Zapatistas are indeed an exception of unusual success in an environment dominated by clientelistic leaders, or whether the Ngobe are an exception of failure to the participatory tendencies of indigenous leaderships. We will briefly examine the cases of the Miskitus of Atlantic Nicaragua, the Shuar of Amazonian Ecuador and the Kuna of Eastern Panama for comparative purposes.<sup>1</sup>

### **From Ethnic Guerrillas to Regional Governments: The Miskitu of Nicaragua**

The case of Nicaragua is particularly compelling as a point of comparison. After the Kuna exception of 1925, no other case of indigenous autonomy has attained the level of academic attention and the discursive power of the Miskitu insurrection of the early 1980s. On the other hand, some academics who subsequently worked with the Zapatistas began thinking about indigenous political autonomy in Nicaragua (Diaz-Polanco 1987). There were many reasons why the Miskitu rebellion was so explosive. First, it was not directed against an exclusive capitalist society as most progressive academics would have expected during the heyday of dependency theory, but instead against the popular democratic regime of the Frente Sandinista para la Liberacion Nacional (FSLN). Furthermore, the Miskitu leadership showed a level of political allegiance with the United States that could not be properly explained by the simple manipulation of the CIA and the State Department (Hale 1994). Finally, the level of support that the international community, and eventually the Sandinista government

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<sup>1</sup> The three cases represent indigenous groups who were not assimilated into the Spanish colonial system, and therefore remained “infidels” and independent until the Twentieth Century.

itself, provided to the question of regional autonomy in the Atlantic Coast offered hopes for the creation of an international model of multiethnic political autonomy.

Unfortunately, a preliminary assessment conducted by this author in Summer 2003 revealed a very similar pattern to what was found later with the Ngobe of Western Panama. An important sector of the charismatic leadership who had led the struggle against the Sandinistas had eventually been co-opted by traditional political parties. Among them, Steadman Fagoth had become a national congressman for the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC). Although the bulk of the leadership had allied with the FSLN, including the leaders of the main Miskitu ethnic party YATAMA, grassroots interviews and focal groups conducted in communities along the Coco River revealed a lack of participatory-democratic organization, and instead a top-down approach that was financed by international cooperation and the allocation of government budgets. Grassroots leaders affirmed that their level of political participation was only limited to casting their votes during the regional elections, and that their “representatives” rarely visited the communities or attended their demands in-between elections. The representative of an intermediary NGO, Rufino Lucas, offered a plausible explanation for this lack of accountability (personal communication). He said that traditional decision-making structures such as community councils had suddenly been replaced by Western-style representative democracy that was only based on political party competition. As a visible sign, even the building of the regional council of the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) resembled a European Parliament instead of the horizontal, bottom-up decision-making governance structures of the Miskitu before the passing of the Autonomy Statute in 1987.

In separate interviews with leaders of the RAAN government, lack of support from the central government emerged as the main concern of the government bureaucrats and elected officials. In fact, in 2003, the RAAN government was controlled by an alliance of the FSLN and YATAMA political parties, while the central government in Managua remained under control of the PLC<sup>2</sup>. The victory of the Sandinistas in 2006 offered new hopes that the popular-participatory structures established in the 1980s would improve the quality of representative democracy in the whole country, including the Atlantic Coast. However, the Sandinistas instead promoted a system of clientelism involving Miskitu leaders from the Atlantic autonomous regions. In general terms, the case of the Miskitu of Nicaragua seems to disprove the suggestion made by Otero (2004) that indigenous peoples could have an inclination towards the creation of popular-democratic organizations.

### **Pioneering Modern Indigenous Organization in the Americas, the Shuar Federation of Ecuador**

According to Albo (1991), the creation of the Shuar Federation in Amazonian Ecuador in 1961 represented the first of the modern indigenous organizations in the Americas. This groundbreaking movement - undeniably in reaction to the national and international plans for oil exploitation in the Amazon – preceded the creation of CRICA in Colombia in 1965 and the Miskitu organization ALPROMISU in Nicaragua in the 1970s. Although the Shuar struggle was originally limited to the Amazon, the creation of an Amazonian multiethnic organization – CONFENAIE - empowered the Shuar leadership to promote a successful alliance with the class-based organization of the

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<sup>2</sup> After the prosecution of former PLC President Arnoldo Aleman, the PLC only managed to remain in power through a controversial entente with the FSLN (the so-called Pacto Libero-Sandinista).

indigenous peoples of the Andes, ECUARUNARI. Eventually, CONFENAIE and ECUARUNARI coalesced to form a single national organization, CONAIE.

As opposed to Nicaragua, where indigenous mobilization was only limited to the marginal Atlantic Coast, CONAIE enjoyed nation-wide support. Under these circumstances, they were able to exploit their extraordinary mobilization capacity and organized a national insurrection in 1990 (Lavinás Picq 2008, Albo 1991). The alliance between Amazonian and Andean indigenous peoples helped to blockade all access routes to the inland capital of Quito, and showed to the world that indigenous peoples now had the capacity to influence national politics. The CONAIE insurrection, in which Shuar leaders played very prominent roles, constituted the main reference point for indigenous struggles during the 1990s. The Ecuadorian indigenous peoples were organized around the concept of plurinationality that had been under discussion in the Ecuadorian Andes since the heyday of class-based corporatist organizations between the 1930s-1970s. As opposed to the traditional demands of Andean indigenous peoples for community autonomy (*cabildos*) and land ownership (*tierras comunitarias*), however, the inception of the Shuar in the 1960s oriented the movement towards issues of cultural preservation, informed consent and territorial recognition. In these aspirations, the Kuna of Panama and the Miskitu of Nicaragua represented the kind of models of political autonomy that Ecuadorian indigenous peoples demanded for in their Amazonian territories. Because of the successful CONAIE mobilizations, some principles of political autonomy and self-determination were incorporated *de jure* in the new 1998 Constitution.

Since the legal response of the national government was incomplete and elusive, CONAIE became more politically explicit with the organization of the ethnic party Pachakutik in 1996 (Lavinás Picq 2008). As national policies became increasingly favorable towards foreign investment and privatization, CONAIE organized a national mobilization that eventually overthrew the central government in 2000. During the coup, and reminiscent of the role played by Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Colonel Lucio Gutierrez presented himself as an ally of indigenous peoples. During the upcoming 2002 elections, Gutierrez won the presidency with the active support of CONAIE and Pachakutik promising the implementation of the 1998 Constitution and the territorial recognition of indigenous peoples in Ecuador.

Yet, the economic policies of former General Gutierrez soon began deviating from the agreements with CONAIE. Not only did he continue the promotion of foreign investment for oil exploitation in the Amazon, but he also started negotiations with the United States for the signing of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Interestingly, the CONAIE leadership refused to remain co-opted by the central government, and instead terminated its alliance with Gutierrez. Without the support of indigenous peoples and other grassroots organizations, the Gutierrez government crumbled under its own weight before the 2006 elections. In Ecuador, top-down presidential support did not override the CONAIE popular-democratic organization like happened in Nicaragua with the return of the Sandinistas.

In spite of a failed electoral alternative with the 2002 alliance between CONAIE, Pachakutik and Lucio Gutierrez, Ecuadorian indigenous peoples and other grassroots organizations supported the election of leftist candidate Rafael Correa to the national

presidency in 2006. In contrast with Gutierrez, Correa explicitly became an ally of the continental movement against neoliberalism that was led by Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. By this time, indigenous Aymara leader Evo Morales had also become the president of Bolivia ensuring a pro-indigenous orientation for the Alternativa Bolivariana de las Americas (ALBA). In this regard, Correa did not only enjoy the backing of Ecuadorian grassroots organizations, but he also benefitted from an international support network that buffered his administration from the attacks, intervention and sabotage of right-wing domestic groups, the United States and its regional allies like Colombia and Peru. With this level of political strength, Correa was able to suspend negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States and disavow the renewal of an agreement for a US military base in the port city of Manta.

With the 2006 election of Rafael Correa under most favorable conditions, the indigenous peoples of Ecuador attained a level of political influence only comparable to more ambitious developments in Bolivia. The alliance with the Correa government allowed passing a new constitution in 2008, which called more explicitly for indigenous autonomy and an alternative development pathway - “vivir bien”.<sup>3</sup> CONAIE seemed to have persisted as a popular-democratic organization in spite of the clientelistic episode of Lucio Gutierrez, even turning state intervention towards a more participatory approach – the ideal combination according to the PCF model (Otero 2004).<sup>4</sup> In

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<sup>3</sup> Albo, Xavier. November 19, 2009. “Planificando el ‘Vivir Bien’”. [www.servindi.org/actualidad/opinion/19159](http://www.servindi.org/actualidad/opinion/19159).

<sup>4</sup> The cancellation of the Baba hydroelectric project, financed by BNDES and constructed by Brazilian Norberto Odebrecht, as well as the unexpected face-off between the two left-of-center regimes of Brazil and Ecuador further reinforced an image of horizontal accountability for the Correa administration.

practice, however, the question of natural resources would test the limits of both CONAIE and Rafael Correa.

Not even a year after the passing of the 2008 constitution, CONAIE, and specifically the Shuar Federation distanced themselves from the Correa administration. The national government had presented a law for the exploitation of natural resources that indigenous peoples considered in violation of their right to free, prior, and informed consent. As the political battle heated up, the Shuar decided to recur to the same formula that had gained them such an extraordinary level of political influence nationwide – grassroots mobilization to blockade roads. As the central government pressed for the passing of the new legislation, the conflict in the Amazon turned violent, resulting in September 2009 in a clash with the National Police in which a Shuar protestor died. President Correa had to retrieve the controversial legislation from Congress, yet the Shuar leadership had also confirmed once again that even a seemingly popular-democratic government could rapidly turn towards state repression when faced by grassroots opposition to its development plans (Zibeche 2009b).

The revolt of an indigenous group against a leftist regime was not unprecedented. The Miskitus had rebelled against the socialist government of the Sandinistas and the EZLN had launched its insurrection against the nominally revolutionary government of the PRI, history seemed to repeat itself. The decoupling of a popular-democratic government with a participatory leadership in Ecuador became both an embarrassment for the administration of Rafael Correa and once again a resounding success for CONAIE. In contrast with the Miskitu and the Ngobe, the Shuar had followed a pathway more similar to the Zapatistas.

The limited evidence discussed in this work warns against two extreme propositions (1) that indigenous political organizations are intrinsically immune to state co-optation, and (2) that indigenous leadership is irremediably condemned to become clientelistic when transitioning from grassroots movements to regional governments. Since the two cases discussed above happened in two entirely different countries, we may consider that the articulation of indigenous organizations with the national government constitutes the main determinant of the quality of political class formation (PCF). However, to answer this question, we should also examine the most celebrated case of indigenous autonomy in the Americas, and a mandatory reference point for both the Shuar and Miskitu mobilizations – the Kuna of Eastern Panama.<sup>5</sup>

### **A People who would not Kneel or Conditions not of their Choosing? The Political Mobilization of the Kuna of Eastern Panama**

In spite of the pessimistic assessment of Crawford Young (1976), indigenous rebellions in the Americas were never rare. During the colonial period, countless episodes were documented, and indigenous uprisings represented one of the major challenges for the construction of republican citizenship in the XIX century (Sanders 2003, Thurner 1997). From this perspective, the Kuna insurrection of 1925 was not an exception; yet the political outcomes reached by the Kuna were truly revolutionary –the formal recognition of indigenous collective ownership and self-government by a national state in the 1930s.

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<sup>5</sup> According to Rufino Lucas and Armando Rojas (personal communication), the Miskitus visited and maintained contacts with the Kuna during their own struggle for political autonomy. The main editorial house of the indigenous peoples of Ecuador was also named Abya Yala, which means “the land of the Americas” in the Kuna language. Furthermore, the denomination of Abya Yala was also applied to a proposed international indigenous organization for Latin America (Deere and Royce 2009). These gestures represent a symbolic recognition of the Kuna pioneering work for indigenous autonomy by the most belligerent indigenous movement of today.

Some authors have explained the success of the Kuna political mobilization in terms of the weakness of the Panamanian state and the direct intervention of the United States (Howe 1998, Herrera 1989). Risking counterfactual interpretations, evidence indeed suggests that most national states would have violently crushed a rebellion like the one organized by the Kuna in the 1920s. Yet, the puzzle of Kuna autonomy does not reside in their immediate political success, but instead in the persistence of an autonomy-based political project for more than eighty years. What fueled the Kuna struggle for political autonomy throughout the decades? How have they been able to maintain a generally consistent position towards the State through successive phases of repression, co-optation and popular-democratic rule? What are the prospects for continued Kuna autonomy in the XXI century?

For some authors, leadership has indeed been a defining factor (Howe 2009 and 1998, Martinez-Mauri 2007). Undeniably, the quality of Kuna leadership has been extraordinary. Figures such as Abisua, Cimral Coleman, Nele Kantule, Estanislao Lopez, and Ruben Perez Kantule left undeletable impressions over government officials, private investors and other external actors in Panama, Colombia, Mexico, Europe and the United States. Yet, this Kuna leadership did not happen in a void. Instead, it was deliberately and uniquely crafted in the crucible (*criso*) of Kuna regional culture. For any individual to become a cacique, first he needed to participate constantly in the village congresses (*onmeked*), then visit different villages to learn about the Kuna ways, immerse himself in the Kuna chants and oral history, and still work his way up in the Kuna hierarchy through intermediate positions such as the local *sahilas* and *argars* (Perez-Archibold 1998, Howe 1986). As explained by Howe (1986),

Kuna daily life was traditionally based on their political participation in the village onmeked, and in many ways, being Kuna was in and of itself a community-based process of leadership training. When confronted with populist governments like those of Harmodio Arias (1932-1936) or Omar Torrijos (1969-1981), the Kuna leaders always remained accountable to participatory institutions that originated from Kuna tradition and that demanded consensus-building and grassroots consultation. Famous caciques like Nele Kantule and Estanislao Lopez were undoubtedly charismatic figures, yet they could not so easily turn themselves into clientelistic leaders against governance structures that imposed limits on the power that they enjoyed as Kuna representatives (see Martinez-Mauri 2007).

In my opinion, it was not the ephemeral intervention of the United States in 1925, or top-down political favors handed by populist indigenista governments, what propelled the Kuna to obtain the passing of five national laws creating three different comarcas in three different provinces between 1930-2000.<sup>6</sup> Instead, the strength of traditional Kuna governance has produced capable and accountable leaders who were not allowed to stray away from fundamental community interests and were always obligated to advocate positions adopted and negotiated at the grassroots level. Between the 1940s-1970s, the Kuna indeed tried to extend their model of political autonomy to other indigenous groups in Panama through pan-indigenous activism; yet, these groups could never replicate the originally Kuna community-based governance structures that were rooted in the Kuna historical experience in Eastern Panama. Instead, each indigenous

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<sup>6</sup> The last of these laws creating the Wargandi Comarca was passed during the congressional presidency of Kuna legislator Enrique Garrido. Thanks to this extensive legislation, there is not yet any mining or large-scale tourism development on the Kuna Territory. Not even the central government has been able to install a naval base in the controversial Caribbean border with Colombia.

group developed its own governance structures responding to their own political realities and with varying degrees of success when confronted with state policies and private interests.

Although the Kuna model of political autonomy has historically been an example for other indigenous peoples in the Americas, there are now reasons to question its long-term viability. The Kuna governance structures have been compromised by the penetration of Western society and representative democracy in the Kuna Territory (Martinez-Mauri 2007, Herrera personal communication). Both the attendance and frequency of village congresses (onmeked) has greatly diminished in all of the three comarcas. Population growth and the consequential depletion of natural resources have turned out-migration into non-indigenous towns and cities into a practical necessity. Furthermore, in addition to a shrinking land base, the expectations of the Kuna youth have changed substantially when compared to the days of Abisua and Nele Kantule. As with the Ngobe, most of the Kuna of today greatly value Western education, which demands monetary resources and in many occasions leaving the village at an early age. Even more worrisome, Kuna Yala has become a main route for illegal drug trade to Central America and the United States; which offers the possibility of easy money for poor people who have few if any cash generation alternatives. The mysterious and yet unexplained burning of three Kuna villages in each of the three different comarcas between December 2006 and January 2007 stands as a permanent reminder that the Kuna lifestyle is currently threatened by other kinds of external actors. The flow of cash and the allure of globalization seemed to be producing what the Spanish cannons and

the indigenista clientelistic networks were never able achieve – the dismantlement of the Kuna popular-democratic organization.

### **The Ngobe in Comparative Perspective – Prospects for a Participatory Leadership in the XXI Century**

Comparing the Ngobe with other indigenous mobilizations in the Americas, we can conclude that the capture of the leadership by national politicians do not represent neither an exception nor a rule. Otero (2004) had warned about the propensity of charismatic leaders to become clientelistic under two conditions: 1. A prevalent state intervention of co-optation, and 2. The lack of a popular-democratic organization. Both of these conditions were present in Panama, especially during the administrations of the PRD between 1978-2009.<sup>7</sup> This explains the instrumental role played by leaders such as Maximo Saldana and Johnny Bonilla to legitimate the penetration of private capital in the Ngobe Territory. But, the State and private business have not yet been able to dominate all of the Ngobe leadership. Thus, the question remains of for how long the Ngobe grassroots can resist the temptations of state/business co-optation or the threat of state/business violence. The results of this case study can be summarized in the following conclusions:

- Between the XVI-XIX centuries, Ngobe regional culture evolved progressively according to material and ideological changes conditioned by state interventions from the Spanish Crown and the Colombian Government. However, relations of production, cultural norms, and kinship networks generally persisted during this period through a boundary between the Ngobe ethnic community and the non-indigenous population.
- The rapid growth of capitalism accelerated cultural changes at the turn of the XX century, especially cattle expansion in the Pacific and banana cultivation in the

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<sup>7</sup> During this thirty-one-year period, Panamas has only been government by non-PRD administration during ten years – Guillermo Endara (1989-1994) and Mireya Moscoso (1999-2004).

Caribbean. Demographic growth also affected the material base for Ngobe survival, and therefore wage labor became increasingly important for the Ngobe economy.

- After the 1930s, state intervention favored co-optation through indigenista policies directed towards protecting indigenous lands and integrating the Ngobe in Panamanian society. However, in general terms, the Ngobe, mixed-blood peasants, and large landowners remained indifferent to national policies such as the creation of the Tabasara and Cusapin-Bluefield comarcas in 1952.
- In the 1950-1960s, increased social tensions and land conflicts sparked massive mobilizations under the leadership of traditional figures such as the caciques and a spiritual revival movement, Mama Tata. This period marked the emergence of a Ngobe **political class**, a process that involved profound transformations in Ngobe traditional culture and the creation of new forms of organization such as the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress.
- During the 1970s, the charismatic indigenismo of Omar Torrijos favored the co-optation of Ngobe leaders to gain political legitimacy and access to natural resources. Although the caciques remained accountable to the grassroots following traditional norms of governance, a new generation of Western-educated leaders became clientelistic under the aegis of the PRD. The schism of the Ngobe leadership was symbolized by the division of the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress in 1986.
- After the passing of the Comarca Law in 1997, political parties and private companies continued fostering clientelistic forms of leadership. Yet, the election of Pedro Rodriguez as president of the General Congress in 2006 signaled a dissociation of the Ngobe from government policies of co-optation, and the emergence of a more participatory leadership.
- After 2007 grassroots mobilizations also favored internal accountability and consensus decision-making; yet the national government increasingly turned repressive towards Ngobe leaders opposed to the unrestricted advance of top-down development projects.
- In contrast with Chiapas and Ecuador, where the EZLN and CONAIE were able to consolidate popular-democratic organizations, the Ngobe remain deeply divided between clientelistic leaders who prefer the benefits of state co-optation and those who remain accountable to the grassroots even when confronting increasing levels of repression.
- The cases of the Ngobe of Panama and the Miskitu of Nicaragua indicate that the creation of participatory leadership is not intrinsic to indigenous mobilization. Yet, the case of the Ngobe also suggests that the quality of leadership will remain a contested arena in Western Panama for years to come.

## **Repression, Co-optation and Participation in the XXI Century – A Politics of Recognition or the Empire Strikes Back?**

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, US academic literature in the field of political science praised the rise of indigenous movements to prominence in Latin America (Yashar 2005, Van Cott 2000, Brysk 2000, Assies et al. 2000). For these authors, indigenous mobilization was only possible thanks to the windows of opportunities that were granted by democratic transitions and constitutional reforms. Undoubtedly, the level of participation of indigenous peoples in redefining citizenship in Latin American countries in the late 1980s and 1990s was unprecedented. Thus, the political trajectories described by the above mentioned authors were uncontested. The controversy rose in the interpretation of the causes. For Yashar (2005), the dislocation of corporatist forms of citizenship by the process of state reform threatened the existence of indigenous spaces of autonomy. In turn, indigenous peoples were able to capitalize pre-existing networks to contest the terms of the new form of neoliberal citizenship.

In addition to the criticisms raised by Hale (2002), Otero and Jugenitz (2003), Otero (2004) and Diaz-Polanco (2006), the model of ethnic mobilization presented by Yashar contained several contradictions:

- In contrast to the general assertion presented by US political scientists, indigenous mobilization in Latin America grew steadily after the 1950s, and not after the onset of democratic transitions in the 1980s-1990s (Albo 1991, Varese 1981, Bonfil-Batalla 1981, Barbados Declaration 1978 and 1971). Indigenous peoples were confronting the terms of citizenship in Latin America decades before the democratic transitions and structural adjustment policies.
- Although indigenous peoples utilized pre-existing networks created by missionaries, revolutionaries, academics, and government officials, some of the strongest mobilizations arose in places where these networks were particularly weak, such as the Shuar in Ecuador and the Ngobe in Panama.

- Although indigenous activism appeared to be weaker in countries dominated by populist/corporatist regimes before the 1980s, several of the most important organizations rebelled against these kinds of regimes both before and after the process of structural reform. I will return to this critical point.

If we consider that the Resource Mobilization/Political Opportunity Structure (RM/POS) model presented by Yashar is insufficient to explain indigenous mobilization in the late XX century, should we then accept the opposite thesis by Hale (2002) and Diaz-Polanco (2006) that multicultural reform is essentially a new form of domination by the global capitalist system? Here I propose that modern indigenous mobilization is primarily a continuation of local forms of resistance that have occurred since the arrival of the Spanish in the XVI century. Throughout the centuries, indigenous peoples have utilized the spaces and the discourses available to advance claims for land rights and self-government, such as colonial titles in the XVIII century (Rappaport 1998), new notions of republican citizenship and armed rebellion in the XIX and early XX century (Sanders 2003, Thurner 1997, Gonzalez-Prada 1978), class-based organization during the heyday of corporatist governance (Albo 1991) and multiculturalism in an era of globalization and capitalist expansion.

Instead of identifying a single source for the politicization of ethnicity in the late XX century, the model of Political Class Formation (PCF) presented by Otero (2004) conditions the possibility of indigenous mobilization on regional culture and state intervention. Whereas indigenous groups living in a permanent situation of internal colonialism have incorporated subtle and oftentimes imperceptible forms of resistance in everyday life (Urban and Sherzer 1991, Warren and Jackson 2002), those who had remained separate from the European spheres of influence for centuries suddenly felt

threatened by the expansion of global capitalism after World War II. Such is the case of the Shuar in Amazonian Ecuador and the Ngobe in Western Panama.

Yet, the model presented by Otero (2004) also accounts for the quality of state intervention. Whenever the State decides to proceed through repression, visible (=active) and invisible (=passive) forms of resistance arise to defend those existing spaces of autonomy, an ethnic territory for indigenous peoples who were never colonized. However, the model presented by Otero (2004) also allows to explain more nuanced forms of domination that remain inexplicable in more normatively positive theories such as Yashar (2005). The State may also extend a hand to indigenous leaders and organizations through clientelistic networks and co-optation. Perhaps Otero (1999) was particularly sensitive to this possibility since his original model was developed to explain the success/failure of land reform in post-revolutionary Mexico. In this regard, both the corporatist regimes of the 1930s-1970s and the neoliberal regimes of the 1980s-2000s had the capacity to deter indigenous mobilization through bargaining and negotiation.

Logically, the possibility of co-optation should not be ruled out for the XXI century socialist regimes that have emerged in the last ten years. The mobilization of the Shuar against the revolutionary government of Rafael Correa in 2009 has raised flags about the possibility of a new form XXI century indigenismo (Zibechi 2009b).<sup>8</sup> As stated above, the co-optation, demobilization and fractioning of indigenous leaderships and organizations by progressive regimes has precedents in the Miskitu insurrection and the schism of the Ngobe-Bugle General Congress in the 1980s. Perhaps apart from the

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<sup>8</sup> De Castro Sanchez, Segio. November 17, 2009. "Socialismo y Aculturación: Hacia un Indigenismo del S. XXI. [www.servindi.org/actualidad/opinion/19097](http://www.servindi.org/actualidad/opinion/19097).

properly indigenous regime of Evo Morales in Bolivia, state co-optation does have the capacity to affect indigenous autonomy and to hinder indigenous mobilization in nominally pro-indigenous regimes such as Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua.

In spite of the effectiveness of state co-optation to demobilize indigenous organizations and even destroy indigenous cultures (ethnocide) through a refurbished variety of indigenismo, what then explains the persistence of indigenous resistance against corporatist indigenismo, neoliberal multiculturalism and XXI century socialism? Are indigenous peoples condemned to disappear through a combination of repression and co-optation, displacement and integration? According to this work, the existence or creation of participatory leadership will ultimately condition whether charismatic-authoritarian figures will eventually become co-opted by the State, or will remain accountable to the grassroots population. In those cases such as the Kuna, the Shuar, and the Lacandon Maya where these governance structures have been solidified, the possibilities for state co-optation remain minimal. Yet, in many other cases such as the Ngobe of Western Panama and the Miskitu of Nicaragua the last word is still to be said. What appears as irrational factionalism and even corruption to many casual observers represents a profound internal debate about the place of the indigenous self in the nation-state and the global arena.

The importance of internal accountability and bottom-up governance has two other implications that cannot be properly examined in this work, yet remain puzzling questions for future research. First, state co-optation and repression has decapitated indigenous leadership throughout the centuries. How then has indigenous resistance

survived during this five-hundred-year period? The proposition presented in Chapter 6 is that indigenous mobilization remains as an underground flame amidst apparent acquiescence, manipulation, and domination by external actors. States and private companies always have the capacity to annihilate charismatic leaders, or to convert them into clientelistic leaders in the absence of participatory-democratic governance structures. Yet, as long as that flame continues burning, it may set ablaze when confronted with external threats, and even recreate new forms of leadership and organization as happened with the Kuna in the 1920s, the Ngobe in the 1960s, the Lacandon Maya in the 1990s, and the indigenous peoples of the Peruvian Amazon in 2009.

Yet, there is another side to this metaphor which should be the main concern for development practitioners, environmental activists, human rights advocates, indigenous representatives and organic intellectuals. Since this fire may extinguish, what would be future of indigenous peoples in the XXI century? This question has remained unaddressed in World Bank fora, environmental campaigns and academic conferences, perhaps under the assumption of Otero (2004) and Zibechi (2009) that indigenous organizations remain inimical to the machinations of national governments. In 1927, Mariategui saw in the Andes the germ for a new kind of revolution; and sixty years later, Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil-Batalla (1987) celebrated the persistence of the “Deep Mexico” or “Mexico Profundo” beneath the rubbles of the Aztec temples destroyed by the Spanish. Yet, the disintegration of the social fabric of the Kuna in Eastern Panama warns against the possibility of continued resistance in limited spaces of autonomy (Warren and Jackson 2002) or the articulation of a counter-hegemonic

vision in indigenous civil society (Otero 2004). We do not know whether the Ngobe will continue to be so into the XXII century. I only know that somewhere in the mountains of Western Panama, a Ngobe woman ascends a steep hill carrying a chakara bag replete with yams to prepare a large meal for her family of children, grand children, in-laws, nephews and nieces. On the other side of the hill, a bulldozer is clearing land for the construction of a hydroelectric dam, an open-pit mine, or a five-star beach hotel. Can indigenous peoples develop self-government institutions (political autonomy) independent of national decision-making and the interests of private actors?

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