

Human-tree exchanges in the Isthmo-Colombian area. Ethnographic contributions from Gunayala (Panama)¹

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Abstract:

In the ethnography of the Isthmo-Colombian area the cultural and spiritual relationship between humans and plants has not received the attention it deserves. The present article, based on firsthand experience among the Guna of Panama over more than twenty years, explores the relationships between the Guna and trees, and between the Guna and *nudsugana*, the spirit beings embodied in anthropomorphic and zoomorphic carvings. After a preliminary sketch of the “ontological perspective” informing these questions, the article considers: a) the place of trees in guna creation, b) their role in curing practice, and c) the co-residence of the *nudsugana*. Human and spirit existence, though intertwined, obey different imperatives and are framed in a hierarchical symbiosis.

Key words: Humanity, trees, Gunayala, ontology, exchange

Intercambios entre humanos y árboles en el área istmo-colombiana. Aportaciones etnográficas desde Gunayala (Panamá)

Resumen:

Las relaciones que se establecen entre colectivos humanos y vegetales ha sido un aspecto poco explorado por la etnografía del área istmo-colombiana. En este artículo, a partir de

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una experiencia etnográfica de más de veinte años entre los gunas de Panamá, se analizan los modos de relación entre humanos, árboles y seres subjetivados que provienen de éstos últimos, los llamados *nudsugana*: tallas antropomorfas y zoomorfas de madera que albergan vida. Después de explicitar que el caso de estudio será analizado desde una perspectiva ontológica, se describen tres elementos: a) el lugar que ocupan los árboles en la creación del mundo guna, b) su función en los procesos de curación y c) la co-residencia de los *nudsugana*. En las conclusiones se analizan las relaciones de interdependencia entre humanos y árboles, mostrando que sus vidas, a pesar de estar entrelazadas, obedecen a lógicas de sujeción y se enmarcan en una simbiosis jerárquica.

Palabras clave: humanidad; árboles; Gunayala; ontología; intercambio.

Trocas entre os humanos e as árvores na região istmo-colombiana. Contribuições etnográficas desde Gunayala (Panamá)

Resumo:

As relações que se estabelecem entre coletivos humanos e vegetais têm sido um aspecto pouco pesquisado pela etnografia da área istmo-colombiana. Nesse artigo, a partir de uma experiência etnográfica de mais de vinte anos entre os gunas de Panamá, analisam-se os modos de relação entre os humanos, as árvores e os seres subjetivados que se originam desses últimos, os chamados *nudsugana*: esculturas antropomorfas e zoomorfas de madeira que abrigam vida. Depois de aclarar que o caso de estudo será analisado desde uma perspectiva ontológica, descrevem-se três elementos: a) o lugar que ocupam as árvores na criação do mundo guna, b) sua função nos processos de cura e c) a co-residência dos *nudsugana*. Nas conclusões se analisam as relações de interdependência entre os humanos e as árvores para estabelecer que suas vidas, ainda que estejam entrelaçadas, obedecem às lógicas de sujeição e se enquadram em uma simbiose hierárquica.

Palavras-chave: humanidade, árvores, Gunayala, ontologia, troca, coabitar com não humanos.

The logic of exchange

I have had the good fortune to spend two Christmases with the Guna, in 2002 and 2007, both times in my regular field site of Gardi Sugdub in the Comarca de Gunayala (Panama)⁴. On the first occasion, the ambience –with tropical heat, palm trees, and the warm Caribbean Sea– did not feel like Christmas, until a guna Santa Claus burst on the scene. What his role was I was not sure, whether to deliver gifts to village children or merely play a joke.

⁴The Gunayala comarca (also known as Kuna Yala or San Blas) has 402 small islands and a coastal strip of more than 200 kilometers. It is home to 30,308 people who define themselves as Gunas or Dule. It was recognized by law as an autonomous indigenous territory in 1938. The Guna people, with a population of 80,526 people, is one of the seven indigenous peoples of Panama and has a population of 1,290 in Colombia.

cooking, consumption, taking care of others-. Imbued with significance: these activities evoke strength. Men and women are in charge of maintaining, not creating this force, by establishing complementarity among them. In such a system, accumulation is limited by the forms of exchange between households. Fundamentally, food must be shared with others, thus sharing energy as well and incorporating the strength of others. Maintaining one's own household thus entails sharing with the rest of the community and with the environment.

According to Gudeman's theory, this current of vitality, by creating links between people and the natural world, erases the divide between human society and the non-human environment. Sharing rather than reciprocity is thus the fundamental economic practice that makes individual livelihoods possible, an idea with special relevance to the work of Kohn (2013), where he argues that our distinctively human thoughts are in continuity with forest thoughts insofar as both are products of the semiosis intrinsic to life (Kohn, 2013, p.50).

In sum, according to some recent works, in the lowlands of Central and South America, humans relate to non-humans by exchanging, preaching, sharing or communicating. Let us see, based on the experience of the Guna of Panama, what place trees occupy in this system of relationships and what role they play in the maintenance of human life.

The role of trees in the creation and life of the Dule

What role do trees play in the life of the Guna? I have had many conversations with Guna friends, acquaintances and indigenous leaders about this complex question. When I queried the chief Gilberto Arias⁵, he pointed out, first of all, that trees matter because they are medicine, and thus they make human life possible. Both for Arias and for Inaiduli⁶, another specialist with whom I spoke, it was impossible to talk about trees without referring to the origins of life. When humans arrived, they said, trees were already there on earth. Baba and Nana, the creators, planted trees when the earth was young -still, cold and covered with mist-. Trees then were managed by a leader, also a tree, named Ologunadiler, who was to prepare the world for humans by providing them with building materials and medicines. But the trees, as they grew, quarreled among themselves, so Baba punished their chief, whose name was changed to Olobengeggaliler, sending him to Sapibenega (the mother's womb, on the fourth level of the world above⁷). After

⁵ Gilberto Arias was cacique of the Gunayala comarca during the period 1999-2010. He passed away on 24/1/2018 in his community: Mandi Ubigandub. This article collects some of the elements that emerged in conversations held during 2015 and 2016.

⁶ Argar (interpreter of the tradition) of the Myria Ubigandub community.

⁷ In the Guna cosmivision of the world there are eight layers (billigan) above and below the surface of the earth. This version is also confirmed by the account reproduced in Howe (1986, p.33-49), although it refers to Olokunpippilele, the father of the trees called balsas.

