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 subjetivizados 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; Gunavala; 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.

A senior woman suggested I head towards a little museum run by a family named Davies. In a small open space in the densely packed village, I came on a crowd of children sitting on the ground admiring a tableful of brightly wrapped gift packages, with a chair set out for a foreign visitor. When Santa himself arrived a few moments later, he received what seemed to me a rather sober welcome from a young member of the Davies family, after which Santa, assisted by the young man, read the identifying label for each gift on the table. In response the children trooped up to the table in turn to receive their gifts.

It surprised me that Santa never addressed the children directly, instead announcing the name of the donor and recipient: "This is a present from Aunt Siabibi to Manuel" all of which underlined the importance of exchange in Guna society.

In Gunayala it would make no sense to receive gifts from a stranger, even a well-known stranger in a red suit and a false beard. What would he expect in return? What would his future intentions be? Whose interests would he be representing? The Guna are not comfortable receiving a gift for nothing. If a person offers something to someone else, whether food, affection, or favors, he or she is establishing the basis for future exchanges and an ongoing relationship.

Most Guna like to create relationships between humans and they do this in various ways: exchanging food with their relatives, visiting each other from house to house or creating egg siblings. When babies are less than a year old, they make them share a boiled egg so that throughout their lives they will have someone of their generation to exchange with.

It is a striking fact that in Guna society exchange relationships are established with non-humans as well as humans. In this article I address such relationships between humans and trees; the latter are seen as sentient, feeling beings, repositories for life marking the destiny of humanity. In the Guna world, the forms of relationship characteristic of *dules* (Guna persons) extend not just to trees but to the personified beings called *nudsugana* that come from those trees: carved wooden figures kept by every Guna household and called on for curing and protection.

In the Isthmo-Colombian region these sorts of complex relationships between humans and trees have attracted little research attention. This neglect by no means indicates the absence or lack of consequence of such relationships, which have been studied to good effect elsewhere, for instance in the work of Karen Shiratori (2019) on plants and humans among the Amazonian Jamamadi. The present article, focusing on the same domain, is intended as the first step towards understanding those complex relationships among the Guna.

Modes of relationship, anthropology beyond the human and life force. Thinking the vegetal world from ethnography.

I situate this work in the "ontological turn," an approach advanced in the work of Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, as well as in the actornetwork theory of Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, which have transformed social science perspectives. Instead of restricting their focus to social conventions and relationships among humans, ethnographers have widened their view to include interactions with non-human others, including animals, plants, trees, objects, images and beings of other sorts.

Descola's approach to the study of ontologies (2005) is based in part on questions of identity and modes of relationship. If like Descola we understand identity as a stance that sets the boundaries between humans and others in terms of similarities and differences in appearance and behavior –between how we see ourselves and how we see those others– then that stance gives content to interactions between selves and others. Descola identifies six varieties of such relationship according to the equivalence of the beings in question and the reversibility of their relations. Exchange and predation are typical of animism, in which actors are equivalent, while production, protection, and transmission characterize naturalism, a system based on a hierarchy among beings.

It is appropriate to point out that in this new conceptualization the notion of exchange replaces that of reciprocity to emphasize the obligation to return a counter-transfer as a defining element. The gift, in contrast to the usage established by Mauss, consists of a consensual transfer without the obligation of a counter-transfer. Finally, predation is characterized by taking something without offering anything in return.

In studying relations between humans and non-humans, anthropologists trained in the French structuralist school have been confronted by the fundamental role of symbolism. As Descola notes (2014), since Levi-Strauss first set out his approach, he has taken language as a model for social life. The linguistic properties of symbols were seen as fundamental, to the extent that humans were said to make sense of the world by organizing distinctive features into contrastive sets.

In recent years, anthropologists who have studied animal-human relations in this structuralist framework have been trapped in anthropocentrism. In their view, non-humans, without the capacity for language or symbolism, remain passive objects of human cognition and invention. This flawed model is evident in the volume edited by Laura Rival (1998), whose contributors tried to explain why particular trees or classes of trees were selected in the cases they studied.

A solution to this problem has been proposed by Kohn (2013) by taking anthropology "beyond the human". Kohn wants to convince us that non-human life forms also have the capacity to represent the world but that we are unable to see it because the social theories from which we start associate representation with language. Following Peirce's triadic semiology, he argues that iconic signs (which share similarities with what they represent) and indexical signs (are in one way or another affected by or correlated with the things they represent) have to be taken into account by anthropology because they are the ones used by non-human organisms to represent the world and communicate.

Kohn argues that representation as well as purpose and future are shared by humans and non-humans. All living beings have agency, not just humans. In practice, however, when we do fieldwork in tropical indigenous societies, it is difficult to go beyond assessing whether the relationships that our local interlocutors have with non-humans are envisioned in terms of exchange, gift, or predation. Finding out whether trees have agency or not seems to be a goal far outside our scientific agenda. As anthropologists we limit ourselves to trying to understand how human collectives think about the agency of trees.

In answering these questions, we should consider what forest ecology scientists are proposing to understand trees. The first thing that strikes one when reading some of their work is that they are questioning the paradigm that has allowed the development, consolidation and expansion of a production-based form of relationship. As the popular book by Peter Wohlleben (2016) argues, in recent years numerous scientists have shown that trees are social beings: they connect with each other through their roots, share food with members of their own species and even with those of others, they communicate through smell, they send each other electrical impulses, they restrict light to the youngest to promote dependence among them; some species, such as mimosas have been shown to have memory, others emit noises when they are thirsty. Thanks to these new perspectives on the plant world, we now know that plants have human-like senses and that they also have about fifteen more senses that allow them to be much more sensitive than us: they can calculate electromagnetic fields, humidity or analyze chemical compounds (Mancuso & Viola, 2018, p.14).

These questions concerning if and how trees and other plants communicate, think, or represent the world fall outside the purview, either of this article or of anthropology as a whole. I attempt instead to understand how in the guna world, as in other societies of the Isthmo-Colombian region, humans perceive and interact with trees. In this context, Stephen Gudeman (2019), proposes that energy or vital force operates as a guiding principle in the rural economies of Panama and Colombia. According to Gudeman, economies in this region revolve around the idea of the material acts related with it –horticulture, stock-raising, gathering,

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 cosmovision 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 Olokuknipippilele, the father of the trees called balsas.

his departure, the trees continued to grow and were classified according to their qualities. The oldest served to give strength to men and strengthen their spirit (burba ebied).

In the world-creation stories compiled by other researchers, the ancestry of trees is also mentioned. As William Smith, of the community of Ustupu, told anthropologist Mac Chapin in 1969, the creator, Bab Dummad, came to the center of the darkness and with his breath created the wind that swept the darkness away. He then created the sun, the moon and the stars, made the earth round and arranged on it trees endowed with *burba* (spirit). The trees grew, and Bab Dummad formed the clouds, rivers, fish, animals, mountains and plants. When everything was ready, he created Olobilipiler, the first man to walk the earth (Chapin, 1989, p.2).

Another version compiled by Aiban Wagua (2000) also refers to an age of darkness that came to an end with the creation of the sun, moon and stars by Bab Dummad and Nan Dummad. The mother earth was changing its name as it was formed with different layers of gold, silver and seeds that made flowers and aromatic plants sprout on it. After the creation of a river that divided the waters into streams, vegetation emerged, and the mother's body became populated with trees. When the earth was complete, Baba decided to send an emissary named Wago to behold his handiwork. Wago, however, is not considered the first man, the first human person on the face of the earth; the first human couple was named Olonaikabaler and Olonailasob, beings created by Baba out of different kinds of clay, to care for the trees, the animals, the sea and the stars (Aiban Wagua, 2000, pp.11-17).

Stories of this type always include allusions to the interdependent relationships established between humans and trees: if there had been no trees, the Guna would not have been able to inhabit the world, and equally, the trees depend on humans, who were sent by Baba to care for his work (trees, plants, animals, rivers, hills, etc.). These stories connect with the present time because trees are still indispensable for life: they are the ones that receive winds, emit breezes, making the environment fresh. Like human beings, they have a *burba* (soul), a heart, blood, and they are conceptualized like the human body itself.

In telling us about the trees, both Arias and Inaiduli also mentioned another mythical tale, the story of Nele Gubiler, one of the great *nergan* (shamans) of the past who specialized in plants, trees and lianas. In talking of the trees, both Arias and Inaiduli also referred to another mythical tale, the story of Nele Gubiler, one of the great *nergan* of the past who specialized in plants, trees and lianas. Gubiler explained to the ancestors that, just like humans, these beings breathed, ate, sweated, suffered and felt pain. They lived in an organized community, under the command of their father, Olobengeggaliler. Their resemblance to humans

forces the Guna to show them respect; thus even today when a tree is going to be felled, it must first be awakened so that it is prepared and does not cause damage. The danger in felling trees derives from invisible threads that connect them. The Guna describe these threads as invisible clotheslines that, if tangled, can cause damage. To minimize the effect of breaking these invisible threads and to protect the men who fell the trees, guna women take apart the hammock ropes that normally hang from the central poles of their dwellings. Failure to do so, they say, could put the men's lives at risk. These actions manifest the connections between domestic space and the forest, between masculine and the feminine realms, and between humans and non-humans.

The quest for balance and the connection between the actions of humans and trees also show themselves in other ways. As I was writing this article, James Howe told me about a situation he observed in Gunayala during the 1970s. The Panamanan state flooded a large territory in the Bayano watershed –occupied by indigenous Guna, Embera, Afro-descendants and peasants– to build a hydroelectric dam; a few months later there was a pervasive infestation of flies in the Bayano that even reached the islands of Gunayala. The Guna said that the trees, furious at being submerged under the waters of Lake Bayano, had inflicted the plague⁸. This episode suggests that there is a relationship between the welfare of trees and that of humans. If the trees are harmed, diseases, pests or accidents may arise and cause harm to humans.

In the past, special practices like those in tree-felling governed harvesting of other plants. One example can be found in descriptions of collecting *sabdur* (the

fruit of the *Genipa americana* tree) that Nele Kantule dictated to Rubén Pérez Kantule, which were published in the posthumous work of Erland Nordenskiöld edited by S. Henry Wassén (Nordenskiöld & Pérez Kantule, 1938, pp. 243-245). *Sabdur* fruit, used to paint the bodies of pubescent girls during puberty ceremonies, had to be collected through a complex ritual procedure involving several men, including the girl's father and several *sabdurguanetgana* (*genipa* specialists). They followed a ritualized process that involved sharing food and tobacco, performing a chant, voicing a warning cry for the tree, and a cutting protocol oriented to the four cardinal points.

Another practice governing the use of plants has to do with their naming. In addition to their colloquial names, plants receive a second name in ritual chants (*igar*), and some receive an alternate designation as well. In the case of the peach palm (*Bactris gasipaes*), whose trunk is covered in thorns, its fruit must be named one way (*nalub*) during daylight hours and another (*iggosan* "thorn-fruit") at night. Observing this taboo prevents the peach palm from retaliating against the collector by causing thorns to sprout from his body.

Although some of these practices are no longer in use, in some Guna communities the question of whether to fell a large forest tree must be debated in the local congress (assembly). It is an important decision that requires consensus. In recent years I have witnessed several such discussions.

One notable controversy concerning the treatment of trees occurred in 2011, during negotiations between the Guna General Congress (the highest regional authority) and Wildlife Works Carbon, a corporation pioneering in the development of REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) projects, for which corporate clients bought carbon credits based on forest lands to be set aside. The REDD+ Pilot project proposed for Gunayala called for conservation of 99,415 hectares of forested land in one district (*Corregimiento* No.1), with biodiversity monitoring and detailed analysis of carbon inventories. The corporate clients would acquire carbon credits (one credit = one ton of Co2) which the Guna would cede to the company. The Guna would for their part benefit from a fund to invest in their own development.

In addition to difficulties in working with abstract and unfamiliar concepts like "carbon", one of the main stumbling blocks that arose in the negotiations was the proposal made by the company's forestry technicians to clear a number of huge old-growth trees. According to these experts, old-growth trees are ecologically inefficient, so they should be felled to encourage younger trees and thus capture more carbon. These recommendations displeased many Guna, who insisted that these senior trees deserved respect and protection. In the end, the company's proposal was rejected by the General Congress.

More recently, in a Guna community in the central part of the comarca there was another case illustrating this attachment to old-growth trees. In the context of project proposal for improving cultivation of cacao, a non-indigenous agroforestry technician explained to community members that older cacao trees were blighted and had to be weeded out to protect younger trees from the disease called witch's broom. Although most of his listeners recognized that cacao harvests had declined greatly in recent years, they rejected his proposal, arguing that these trees had been planted by the elders and deserved respect.

Everyday exchanges between humans and trees: co-residence with the nudsugana

Trees and plants, in addition to their salience symbolically, play a leading role in shamanic chants. They figure prominently in a number of chant texts –such as *Sabdur igar* (the Genipa Way), *Sia igar* (the Cacao Way), *Gabur igar* (the Hot Pepper Way), *Masar igar* (the White Cane Way), *Nibar igar* (the Way of the Nibar palm), *Biseb igar* (Sweet Basil Way)– and in most of those chant cures the chiefs

of some plants are invoked by the chanter. (See for instance the transcriptions of two shamanic chants published by Holmer & Wassén, 1963). Another curing specialist, the *inaduled* (medicine-person) prepares concoctions from tree bark, leaves, or plant stems for his patients to ingest or bathe in.

Trees also participate in healing in the form of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures carved from more than twenty types of wood (see Fortis, 2012; Chapin 1983). The *nudsugana* as they are called, are statuettes typically between two and twelve inches in height, which represent men with hats, women with headcloths, and birds and other animals. These carvings all belong to individual or family owners, and they assist the *nelegan* (shamans) and other curers in their negotiations with the spirit world (*neg burbaled*). Most inhabitants of Gunayala consider the *nudsugana* as alive and rely on the care given to them by their human owners.

In addition to the *nudsugana*, there are other animate figures, such as the *suar mimmigana*, carvings of about three-quarters of an inch to an inch and a half that are attached to a necklace or to one end of a hammock to ward off *bonigana* (diseases, invisible evil beings) during sleep or a trip. There are also very large anthropomorphic carvings (more than twenty inches in length) fashioned from balsawood and painted with natural dyes in black and red for mass ceremonies for which a ritualist called *absoged* officiates. These figures, called *uggurwar* (balsa), are discarded after the ceremony in an isolated place on the mainland.

The *nudsugana* are not featured in the myth-narratives collectively known as Bab Igar (Father's Way) until the arrival of Ibeorgun, a prophet or culture hero who descended to earth to show the ancestors of the Guna, among other things, how to use the figures in healing. In accordance with Ibeorgun's teachings, depending on the shape, size and kind of tree from which wood for nudsugana is extracted, a being of a specific sort shelters auxiliary spirits, protects individual humans with whom it becomes associated, and helps the shamans (*nergan*) in their healing processes.

A feature common to all these figures, one that distinguishes them from anthropomorphic carvings from other regional indigenous groups, is that they are all represented with their heads covered, males by hats, females by headcloths. Carvers fashion figures so that their heads come from the part of a tree trunk closest to the roots. According to Gilberto Arias, covering the head to protect the brain was another of Iberogun's teachings. All these wooden figures are brought to life, not when they are first carved, but when they are animated through a chant performed by curer who knows the language of the spirits (Perri, 2007, p. 92, Chapin, 1983).

Once animated, the *nudsu* or *suwar mimmi* is delivered to its owner, who places it in a wooden or plastic box with other *nudsugana*, all of them joining in an intimate exchange relationship with their owner. Through daily contact, the *nudsugana* become allies of the humans, charged with protecting them. Human

owners owe their spirit protectors specific kinds of care. The *nudsugana* must be bathed with aromatic plants, and smoked in the fumes of cacao, hot pepper or tobacco so that they can enjoy good health.

The air they breathe is very important for these beings. A personal anecdote illustrates this requirement: in 2004 there was a major outbreak of malaria in Gunayala. The Panamanian government, in its attempts to control the epidemic, carried out a fumigation campaign throughout the region. While I was in the field, on the island of Gardi Sugdub, they sprayed the house of the family where I lived. I observed how the women became worried about the safety of their pets (parakeets, parrots, iguanas, cats, puppies, chickens, etc.), of their children and of the family's *nudsugana*, since they had no idea how to protect them from the foul-smelling sprays. After a few nervous minutes, they resolved to put everything, including the *nudsugana*, in a dugout canoe and to send them out to sea for a while to preserve them from the contaminated air.

This anecdote illustrates the crucial nature of the physical maintenance of the animated carvings. Although their interior reality is invisible, their external, material being is supremely important, such that a crack or break in the surface or some other sign of physical damage or deterioration may mark their death.

In fulfilling the mission of the wood carvings, material form and interior nature are both important, to help curing specialists combat the incursion of the harmful *bonigana*, who constantly threaten human life (Chapin, 1983, p.95). In a spiritual relationship shaped by human hands, a spirit being is preserved and maintained by the humans with whom it coexists. The life that animates a *nudsu* is like a fire: to ignite it requires fuel, but to continue burning it needs to be fed. Its continued existence depends on human beings, though it is not itself human but a being of another sort –a being capable of autonomous thought but within limits set by humans, and a being that can be dangerous if abandoned or neglected– in effect, human traits in a non-human being.

Nudsugana may not be human, but like trees they share cultural traits with humans: they form societies. They are generally not individualized, and their strength depends on their cohesion (Perrin, 2007, p.92). This is not to say that they are all the same. As Mac Chapin showed, ritual specialists address the most important *nudsugana* using proper names (Chapin, 1983, p.95).

The beings represented by the wooden figures, as they encounter invisible threats⁹, from the *bonigana*, remind us that the world has a double dimension, material

⁹ An example of the protective function of the suwar mimmigan: in May 2016, I was in New York in the company of one of the sailgadummad of the Guna General Congress. One day we went to visit the site of the Twin Towers, ground zero, and when we began to remember the events of September 11, 2001, he showed me the suwar mimmi hanging from his necklace to confess to me that he was not afraid, he was protected.

in the *neg sanaled*, and invisible, in the *neg burbaled*, dimensions that do not oppose each other, but rather are two sides of a coin. *Bonigana* belong to the non-visible world and do not have an origin similar to that of humans. Like trees and plants, *bonigana* were created by Baba and Nana independently of humans and animals. They are, therefore, anti-human beings. What makes them different is that one class of beings, the trees, were created to make Guna life on earth possible, while the other, the *bonigana*, came to put an end to it. Another point of differentiation is that with the *bonigana*, communication is not possible. To make them stay away, the Guna must resort to other non-human entities: the trees. By giving carvings the form of a bird or a person the Guna try to humanize them; in a certain sense they are domesticating them, attracting them to their world, socializing them in their domestic units. But even though they treat the carvings as family, they do not consider them human. As a speaker noted in the congress house (see Howe, 1986, p.48): the spirits of the carvings are lesser beings, and they will never see heaven¹⁰, even if they act better than humans.

In the language of the chants, the Guna call themselves the Inaibgan, the masters of medicines. If they occupy a position of centrality in the cosmos, it is not because they were created before any other being. As we mentioned earlier, trees and plants are the primordial beings. If the Guna are anthropocentric, it is because they possess, they dominate, the medicines. They are able to fight against the *bonigana* by controlling the plants and trees in their physical and spiritual dimension.

At this point, what do the *nudsugana* tell us about the relationship between human persons and trees? To begin with, that, among the Guna, animated wood carvings do not produce an identification between subject and object. The *nudsu*, *suwar mimmi* or *uggurwar* is animated by the human being and cared for by him, but it has an independent life. Although the daily relationship is based on exchange, it does not produce identification. The *nudsu* does not die with the caregiver, it survives the death of the caregiver and is inherited by the next of kin. Many times the person decides in life who is going to keep it. In a certain way we could say that it follows the logic applied to a domestic animal: it is inherited by someone trustworthy who can guarantee its optimal care.

This lack of identification between *nudsugana* and human persons confirms that we are not dealing with ontologically identical beings. The trees are not conceived as humans, but as beings with similar social traits that help humans in their struggle against the *bonigan*. The *nudsugana* are a part of the tree that coexists with humans, they receive attentions from the men and women of Gunayala, but these attentions should not be considered as a gift, they are an exchange. The *nudsugana* are kept alive to help heal sick people.

¹⁰ Although some Guna use the notion of "heaven" to refer to the place where the souls of humans travel after death, it is more commonly referred to as "Bab nega". This is another dimension of the cosmos not necessarily located on a higher plane.

In the Guna relational universe, trees and some plants participate in human sociability because they bring well-being and balance, but they need mediating being –the *nudsugana* – to make the exchanges explicit. Returning to the example of Christmas-Day gift-giving with which this paper began, we could say that the *nudsugana* mediate between trees and humans much as Santa Claus does between children and their caregivers. That is, when a child receives a gift from Santa Claus, the gift ultimately comes human relative, when a human is healed with the help of the *nudsugana*, he is receiving care from the trees. From relationships such as these, based on exchange, there are forms of nurturing and healing that go beyond the merely human.

Conclusions

Trees preceded us on earth, and we have always been dependent on them, a conclusion shared by Guna sages and Western scientists. Trees, in fact, are complex and ancient organisms that first appeared on Earth at least 385 million years ago, vastly preceding the appearance of the Homo genus three million years ago (Albert, 2019, p. 275). Our existence has depended on them, and still does, because without photosynthesis, the oxygen that made animal life possible would never have appeared on the planet (Mancuso & Viola, 2018, p.14).

For the Guna, this primordial dependence conditions how they define the essence of trees: trees are more than the physical resources that make material life possible (in the construction of dwellings, canoes, utensils, tools, etc.); they are not soulless beings, regulated by mechanistic natural laws. As among the Jamamadi as described by Shiratori (2019, p.174), plants are not limited to the realm of biology, to our notion of nature; rather they form a significant part of the cosmos, one that shapes persons, sociability, and humanity.

When analyzing the ontologies of the indigenous societies of the isthmo-Colombian area, we should take into account the vegetal beings. As I have shown on a another occasion (Martínez Mauri, 2020) among the Bri-Bri, Emberá and Ette, the presence of animated wood carvings is common, a fact that indicates that, despite the fact that in American ethnology, especially in Amazonian ethnology, animals and hunting have occupied a central part in the ontological analysis, the role of plants and horticulture seems to be equally significant. In this regard it is appropriate to quote the conclusions reached by Shiratori (2019, p. 176) after his study of Jamamadi cosmology. The particular interrelationship between the vegetal and the human in multiple dimensions of the Jamamadi experience of life, makes this researcher critical of the images produced by recent ethnology in relation to the conceptual universe of Amazonian peoples. Of particular concern is the emphasis given to the

animal world, both from the practical (hunting) and symbolic-cosmological (mythology, ritual, shamanism) points of view, to the detriment of other forms of life, particularly plants¹¹.

Shiratori's work is inspiring. It opens up new perspectives for research. However, as it could not be otherwise, the experience he describes is particular and differs in some aspects from that of the Guna. One important difference is that among the Jamamadi the human condition would come from the plants, that is, vegetation would be the original condition common to human beings, animals and plants. On the other hand, in the guna world humans were never plants, they are not plants. Humans and trees do not share the same origin. They are similar: they have blood, heart, breathe, feel, think; but they do not occupy the same position in the ontological system. Trees were created before humans to enable them to live on earth. They are their allies, but the human being uses them as medicine to fight against other anti-human beings, the bonigana. Those beings carved in wood are not conceptualized as *ibmar* (things), nor as *dulegan* (human persons), but as *suarnergan* (shaman trees): beings capable of assisting the Guna in the healing process.

Regarding the place of humans and trees in the world, both were created by Baba and Nana, both live in community, feel and think, but the human persons, the Guna, are the beings who are in a central position in this universe. The trees were created so that the Guna could inhabit the world, and the humans are the *inaibgan* (the owners of the medicines) who must take care of the work of the creators. Both maintain an interdependent relationship.

In the guna context we see how a tree part when crafted, animated and maintained by humans can have life and agency (*nudsu*, *suwar mimmi*, *uggurwar*). Materiality is important in order to understand why wood carvings can harbor life. *Nudsugana* are not only human creations, but are at the same time powerful trees. By carving and sculpting them with anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms the Guna try to humanize them, but they do not pretend to change their nature. Following Niño Vargas (2020), we can affirm that in this ethnographic context there is a relational model based on subjection. Vegetable beings (plants, trees) would be

¹¹ Some researchers who have worked in the Amazon have taken into account the plants, especially those that originate powerful auxiliary spirits for the shamans. This is the case of Bruce Albert (2010) (Albert , 2016) who has shown that among the Yanomami there is a legion of plant spirits, generic and multitudinous xapiri pë of trees (huu tihiri pë), lianas (thothoxiri pë), roots (nasikiri pë) and foliage (yaa hanari pë) that, at the beginning of shamanic initiations, come down to dance on the chest of the novices to sweep and cleanse the site of their future "house of the spirits" (Albert, 2019, p. 69). Some notable trees in the forest are distinguished by the attribution of shamanic image beings whose power is measured by the majesty of their bearing or the importance of their properties. Several trees, such as Anacardium giganteum, Cedrelinga cateniformis, Ceiba pentandra, Hymenaea parvifolia and Peltogyne gracilipes, also give rise to warrior spirits mobilized to defeat pathogenic evil beings (në wări pē) during shamanic cures. All of them are among the largest Amazonian trees.

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metaphorical humans, while animals and lifeless objects (called *ibmar*, things with an owner) would be metonymic humans. The *bonigana* would occupy the position of anti-human beings.

In today's Gunayala, only true humans –the *dules*– can hold animals and things, only they can use trees to fight the anti-humans. In this context animated trees play an important role in defining the human. But they are not important because they become part of the human person by incorporation, predation or accumulation, nor because a process of identification takes place, but because the subjectivized trees, in this relational and processual context, serve to confirm the true humanity of the Guna. Through co-residence with the *nudsugana* they make evident their position as caretakers of the work of Baba and Nana.

If we take into account the approaches discussed above, we could conclude that according to Guna ontological premises, trees do not use (Cohn to the contrary) either iconic or indexical signs to communicate or represent the world. Although according to the Guna trees have agency and share purpose with human beings, they act invisibly, as is evident with the invisible threads binding trees together, which can have dire consequences if they are brought down by humans. On the other hand, the existence of the nudsugana –beings shaped by humans, not by trees– shows the extent in Guna society of a hierarchical symbiosis (Halbmayer, 2020, p.19) between those who cultivate or create medicines and those who are cultivated or serve as medicine. Such a relationship involves aspects of protection (Descola, 2005), subjection (Niño Vargas, 2020) and reciprocity (Kaviany, 2020). Overall, we note the existence of a strong interconnection between human and non-human actions, one that promotes the renewal of the energy or vital force of which Gudeman (2019) writes, a force that in the Isthmo-Colombian area transcends the division between human society and the environment.

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