

“All Within the Same Thought”: Embera People Relations with Sacred Places in Polines and Yaberaradó Reservations in Chigorodó (Antioquia)

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2019 - After harmonization ritual. The first expedition preparation
Justico Domicó Bailarín. Tulenapa (Antioquia)

Abstract:

The spiritual and environmental importance of the sacred places at the headwaters of rivers is based on the relationships that Embera people establish with spiritual beings through dreams, songs and rituals of harmonization, so as to obtain forest resources and knowledge on the uses of plants. *Pākðré*, a powerful entity from the sacred place, is treated as closely related kin subject to the rules of reciprocity; this entity formerly received the strength of many beings of the different cosmic levels, thanks to which it was able to teach the Embera people the rituals and healing practices that they know nowadays. The Jaibaná is a direct trustee of its wisdom, closely linked to the smallest plants in the forest, hence Embera's respect for sacred places and the Jaibaná's effort to fulfill the demands that both *Pākðré* and other spirits, plants and animals from those solitary places ask him in his dreams.

Keywords: Embera people; sacred places; *jaibaná*; indigenous research; ethnoecology.

«Todos en el mismo pensamiento»: las relaciones del pueblo embera con los sitios sagrados de los resguardos de Polines y Yaberaradó en Chigorodó (Antioquia)

Resumen:

La importancia espiritual y ambiental de los sitios sagrados en las cabeceras de los ríos se fundamenta en las relaciones que los embera instauran con los seres espirituales a través de sueños, cantos y rituales de armonización, para obtener recursos del bosque y conocimientos sobre los usos de las plantas. *Pākðré*, entidad poderosa en el sitio sagrado, es tratada como una parienta afín sometida a reglas de reciprocidad; esta entidad recibió antiguamente la fuerza de muchos seres de los distintos niveles cósmicos, por lo cual pudo enseñar al pueblo embera los rituales y prácticas curativas que conocen ahora. El jaibaná es depositario directo de su sabiduría, ligada estrechamente a las plantas más pequeñas del bosque, de ahí su respeto por los lugares sagrados y su esfuerzo por el cumplimiento de las demandas que le hacen en sueños tanto *Pākðré* como los demás espíritus, plantas y animales de esos parajes solitarios.

Palabras clave: embera, sitios sagrados, jaibaná, investigación indígena, etnoecología.

“Todos no mesmo pensamento”: as relações do povo embera como os sítios sagrados dos territórios de Polines e Yaberaradó em Chigorodó (Antioquia)

Resumo:

A importância espiritual e ambiental dos sítios sagrados nos nascentes dos rios se baseia nas relações através dos sonhos, cantos e rituais de harmonização dos embera, para ter recursos da floresta e conhecimentos sobre os usos das plantas. *Pākðré*, entidade poderosa no sítio sagrado, é tratada como uma parenta próxima subordinada às regras de reciprocidade. ; Esta entidade recebeu antigamente a força de muitos seres dos diferentes níveis cósmicos, por isso pôde ensinar ao povo embera os rituais e práticas curativas que conhecem hoje em dia. O jaibaná é agente custódio direto de sua sabedoria, estreitamente relacionada

às plantas menores da mata, daí o seu respeito pelos lugares sagrados e seu esforço pelo cumprimento dos requerimentos que lhe fazem em sonhos tanto Pákdřé como os outros espíritos, plantas e animais dessas paragens solitárias.

Palavras-chave: embera, sítios sagrados, jaibaná, pesquisa indígena, etnoecologia.

Introduction

In 2018, Colciencias invited several research groups to present projects on characterizing the flora and fauna of the indigenous people of Colombia with the requirement of training them as researchers. The initiative emerged from a round table between Colciencias, as the governing body of scientific and technological research in the country, and the representatives of indigenous organizations. The Universidad de Antioquia then presented a project together with the *Cabildo-Mayor* Indígena de Chigorodó (CMICH), which gathers the Embera people of this municipality. The project characterizes the flora and fauna from three sacred sites: Polines in the reservation with the same name and the Chigorodocito and Guapá sites in Yaberaradó. This article, derived from that research, studies the relationship between the Embera and a class of spirits they recognize¹¹ as dwellers of *drua wāndra*, the sacred sites. The findings of this research study come in the wake of the ethnographic literature on Embera cosmology and territoriality (Vasco, 1985, Pardo, 1986; Hernández, 1995; Ulloa et al., 1996; Losonczy, 2006; Jaramillo, 2006). The subject of sacred sites is found within ontology as an approach that reassesses the idea of multiple cultural representations about the same universe, proposing alternatives to the nature or culture dualism of modern naturalism and that brings back concepts of nature silenced by dominant anthropocentric and naturalistic views (Ruiz Serna & del Cairo, 2016). The literature allows us to understand that the Embera people are animists to the extent that they accept for non-human beings an interior aspect identical to that of humans (Descola, 1996). They are also perspectivists in that the definition of the other depends on one's viewpoint: humans without shamanic powers only see animals and plants as natural species devoid of intersubjectivity, and the same happens to them with regard to us (Viveiros de Castro, 1998). The Embera people unequivocally believe that animals see us as animals and not as people. As a specialist, the jaibaná manages to transcend the corporality of other species and see them as people (*Embera*) to

¹¹ It is impossible to fully explain the concepts of jai and de jaure here, which have been discussed in various studies on healing and aggression processes with spirit interventions. See Vasco, 1985, Pardo, 1987, Pineda and Gutiérrez de Pineda, 1999, Losonczy, 2006, Arias and López, 2014, among others.

converse with them, although it is the discretion of the plant and animal species to communicate with lay people of the community. The inner subjectivity, the condition of people, makes it possible to understand the relationship between humans and other sentient beings as kinship relationships. The *Pākðré* (mother-in-law) figure, in her capacity as a master of jaibanism, has led the *drua wāndra* area since ancient times. Herein, human presence is subject to restrictions, although the jaibaná can engage in dreamlike negotiations with the spirits who own the sites to benefit human mobility, hunting, fishing, or gathering plants and fruits. The relationship between the *drua wāndra* spirits and human beings is ambivalent since they oscillate between predation and affinity: on one hand, these spirits take on the appearance of a tiger or other beasts that pursue the Embera as if they were the prey. On the other hand, they announce themselves as mothers-in-law who generously offer animals and plants, which are their children, to their Embera allies.

The Embera ethnography that we present here is not only representative of the mountain range areas of northwestern Colombia and Panama's Darién (Loewen, 1960, Kane, 1994 and 2015) but also has aspects in common with Amazonian ethnography (Londoño Sulkin, 2017, Reichel, 2012). The Embera ontology departs from the difference between a subject with agency capacity and an object lacking it, which is typical of modern ontology. We will see this in the characterization of the relationship between people and beings at sacred sites, potentially dangerous in their entirety. For Panama's Darién, Kane (1994) proposes a scale of sentient beings present in indigenous narratives. This scale is open, negotiable, and equivalent to the spatial distance between the home understood as the center and the river headwaters, the "demon" territory, and the scene of ancient geography, that of origin myths. In his argument about Embera shamanism in Chocó, Losonczy (2006) questions the relationship of the jaibanás with the mothers of animals, understood as the fiercest element of each animal species (*chi vandra*). Losonczy indicates that the jaibaná can even surround the animals to the detriment of the community that is left without food as punishment for having hunted excessively. In this sense, their behavior is likened to that of *chi vandra*, which directly sanction excessive hunting. Animal "confinement" has also been reported as retaliation by the jaibaná for not having received some of the preys obtained from hunters (Duque et al., 1996). However, our ethnography shows how the actions of the jaibaná in Chigorodó play a role opposed to what was mentioned in the previously cited sources in that they never lock up animals for their own benefit. Instead, they encourage the ritualized exchanges of the Embera with the *wandras* and other forest spirits, benefiting the community with their affinity for *Pākðré*, from whom they have collected their knowledge of medicinal plants.

The Embera of Polines and Yaberaradó: territory and culture

Although the Embera traditionally settled in northwestern Colombia and eastern Panama, populating the riverbanks and mountain ranges of the Pacific’s tropical rainforest, the effect of fragmentation and diaspora across 11 Colombian departments in small communities evicted from their land due to decades of conflict cannot be overstated. The Embera people are identified by the Constitutional Court as one of the indigenous people at risk for physical and cultural survival (Organización Indígena de Antioquia, 2012). The Embera’s Polines and Yaberaradó reservations are located in the macro-region known as biogeographical Chocó, particularly in Serranía de Abibe (Figure 1) in the far northwestern part of Colombia. It is a neotropical area with direct influence from the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. Its geomorphological conditions consist of sharp and steep slopes, narrow valleys, alluvial terraces, and river-lake plains. The climate is very hot and with high amounts of rainfall. The rivers of short currents and vast denudation make their way from the headwaters toward the alluvial plains, with waterfalls symbolically considered the headquarters for spiritual entities. In this precise location, in the very humid tropical forest in the foothills of the Serranía, the sacred sites can be found¹².

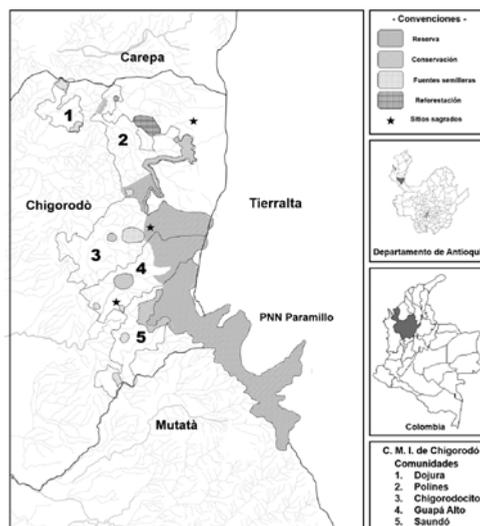


Figure 1. Indicates the location of the five Embera communities in Polines and Yaberaradó and the distribution of areas of cultural importance. C.M.I. of Chigorodó = Cabildo-Mayor Indígena de Chigorodó. Source: CMICH & PNN-DTC (2013).

¹²The hill-cave-natural spring complex in indigenous Oaxacan towns is a dominant symbol of territoriality that takes on multiple meanings. The sacred mountain is the cosmic center: high, vertical, close to heaven, and therefore transcendent, it serves as a liminal pillar between earth and sky. It attracts water and from its summit, the four cardinal points are visible. The masters and guardian ancestors dwell in its spring and cave formations (Barabas, 2017: 75).

Indígena de Chigorodó. Fuente: CMICH & PNN-DTC (2013). These characteristics are expressed as exuberant vegetation, with diverse families of great taxonomic groups that are useful in the indigenous people's medicinal and spiritual practices. The fauna, adapted to these environmental conditions and integrated into the complex ecological dynamics, includes a wide variety of reptiles, birds, and mammals that take on full meaning in the Embera society where hunting is essential to male status. This geographical and environmental panorama corresponds to three municipalities: Mutatá and Chigorodó (Antioquia) and Tierralta (Córdoba), which have national political-administrative units such as Paramillo National Natural Park and the territorial jurisdiction of the Polines and Yaberaradó Embera reservations, the latter also known as Abibe Chigorodó (CMICH & PNN-DTC, 2013). The Polines reservation comprises a single community of the Embera linguistic subgroup *eyabida*, while the Yaberaradó reservation comprises four communities in two linguistic subgroups: the *eyabida* Embera in the communities of Chigorodocito, Guapá Alto, and Saundó and the *chamí Embera subgroup* in the Dojura community¹³. There are approximately 1,829 inhabitants in 376 homes (CORPOURABA, 2019). They share the territory with some settlers and rural inhabitants. The traditional Embera settlement is dispersed, with the extended family being the most important social unit, followed by relatives where both descendent lines and the community converge, sometimes grouped in small towns or in isolated country inns with buildings raised on stilts to protect them from moisture and floods.

The foothills of the Serranía de Abibe are characterized by agrosystems that are important for food production on small parcels of land, while the mountainous area and riverside headwaters support the forests that involve conserving biodiversity, carbon fixing, collecting and releasing water, and providing forest products. Although ancestral use of the territory was based on non-intensive practices and then left behind due to migration in order to live there after the land recovers naturally, this method is no longer viable due to pressure from rural inhabitants and because the legal structure of the reservations limits the expansion of ancestral territory. Families cultivate small parcels of banana, rice, corn, and yucca, and some raise a small herd of cattle. The ideal hunting and fishing scenario is faced with the reality of scarcity of wild animals and fish.

Research methods

In 2017, the Chigorodó *Cabildo-Mayor* created a Communication and Research Incubator called *Krincha U Numua* where youth and spiritual leaders were trained using reflection and collective action in discussions and epistemological procedures

¹³ Summarizing from several authors, Vasco (1985) suggests that the term Dojura refers to the source of the river where the water beings.

of the *juruida Embera*: their own knowledge and research. This intergenerational group was established through political, spiritual, and epistemic positions on self-determination, and several of its members joined this research study on the flora and fauna of sacred sites. The flight of the hummingbird, a bird of wisdom with a leading role in the search for water hidden by *Jenzerá* (bullet ant, *Paraponera clavata*) in ancient times, was the metaphor of choice for the *juruida Embera*. Another guiding metaphor was the search for *oará* (correct path) to interact with the environment and *drua wāndra*. The emphasis on self-research emerged in the 1960s with the philosophical basis of "critical ethnography" and experiences of postcolonial social movements. Questioning research techniques that produce objective results shows how introspection, memory work, and dreams as more intuitive or subjective forms of wisdom can be sources of knowledge when researching (Foley & Valenzuela, 2012). During the joint preparatory phase by the Universidad de Antioquia-CMICH, the agreements to study the Embera culture "from the bottom up" were shared in the Embera and Spanish languages, revisiting the experience of native peoples such as the Maori (Smith, 2017, p. 213). The challenge of recent methodologies included discussions and decisions regarding sensitive information from fieldwork considered under the Embera people's reservation and their spiritual leaders; the presence of indigenous voices in the process of writing results; and Embera academics, interlocutors and, co-researchers using a collaborative framework to revise the manuscript, etc.¹⁴. In the first phase of the research or pre-field work proposed by the Embera co-researchers to analyze the viability of the project on the reservations, the reservations emerged through the *drua wāndra*: Blanca Domicó, a woman from Guapá Alto who is considered a wise woman by her people, explained during the project's first socialization meeting that for the Embera, the sacred site "[...] is up in the forest, jaibaná is the one who knows about that forest, what spirits they are taking care of, or what spirits come down to do evil, that's why one must be very careful [...]." Whether the sacred site could be entered without precautions to extract unauthorized knowledge was questioned, provoking the anger of the spirits. The wise woman warned that after the visit, the sacred site should be "very nice and without problems." The jaibaná stayed up late, sang, and dreamed to converse with the spirits¹⁵. "The *wāndra* asked who they were going to study and the jaibaná replied plants and animals and not *drua-wāndra*, *chimorna*, *chimorna*, *yhaberara*, or *oangaramia*. They then indicated which way they could go freely and which way they could not, because it was

¹⁴ The COVID-19 crisis interfered with fully completing these expectations. Confinement measures in Colombia have been extended up to this article's final submission. <https://www.facebook.com/182932361743080/posts/2811261278910162/?sfnsn=scwspmo&ctid=di5WOIWg7rxa8o0x>.

¹⁵ In the dreamlike aspect of the jaibaná, the ability to withdraw from ordinary dreams and enter a different space, capturing a progressive quantity and variety of jais in crevices elusive to daytime viewing stands out. The jaibaná will also be able to see the spirits in unusual places in the Embera geography (Losonczy, 2006).

their home.” The warning “not to take things” or to take them only based on what the jaibanistic dreams prescribed regulated the collection procedures in the sacred perimeter, entrance, stay, and exit of *drua wāndra*. Harmonization became an emerging ritual directed by the jaibaná to promote the *wāndras*, which included sprinkling medicinal plants¹⁶. A brief harmonization was also conducted at the Universidad de Antioquia in Medellín to mark the start of project activities with the *kapunia* (not Embera) researchers. In the Embera language, harmonization is translated as *amba kein yeira*: “like-minded.” As a ritual practice, harmonization (enriched by affectivity) refers to movement, interdependence, or energy, a relationship that connects all beings to maintain balance with each other and with the creators. The rupture in that system of connections is indicated by ailments and disharmony appears (Arias & López, 2014). Prior to the fieldwork, two-way training in ethnobotany, ethnozoology, and ethnography was conducted, and the Herbarium at the Universidad de Antioquia was visited. The training was held at the Medellín and Tulenapa (Urabá) campuses.

Sacred sites: *drua wāndra*

In territorial law, protected natural areas have esthetic and spiritual value as well as ecological and biodiversity conservation value, but when people state that a site is sacred, it means something more. Sacredness is associated with terms such as religious, veneration, sacrifice, healing, magic, ritual, totemic, traditional medicine, animist, ancestral spirits, and other similar expressions (Pungetti, 2012). The sacred, as a transcultural anthropological category, founds the religious experience related to deities and supernatural and mysterious entities separated from everyday life that give rise to a range of emotions that can be demonstrated as respect, happiness, gratitude, fear, etc. The sacred allows us to understand the links between indigenous society and spiritual beings that intervene in human affairs and accept responsibility for the current reality.

The Embera language reserves a special name, *drua wāndra*, for sites that ecologically structure their territory and are surrounded by a mystical aura. These spaces remain pristine and ensure refuge for wildlife, regulate water levels, and shelter spirits. In 2009, Embera authorities from several municipalities of Urabá met and stated that there are 16 historical hill sacred sites or *katuma*, including *katuma Yaberaradó* in Chigorodó¹⁷. In fact, the peaks of the Serranía de Abibe form an ecological corridor that connects all the sacred sites. The impact of the

¹⁶ Rituals are a codified system of practices with high symbolic value for the actors and with a specific relationship to the sacred (Maisonneuve, 1991 in Barabás, 2017:19) that is aimed at maintaining or creating collective action models (Barabás 2017). The harmonization rituals are also practiced by other indigenous peoples such as the Cauca, the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, and the Putumayo.

¹⁷ <https://www.cric-colombia.org/porta/los-sitios-sagrados-patrimonio-embera-para-el-mundo>

sacred sites comes from the expansion of the border for agriculture and livestock, mining, deforestation, climate change, and transit by armed groups. The threat to the integrity of *jaide*, or the spirits' homes, attracts misfortune and illness, many of them mental, which are a reaction to the confinement to which the Embera are subjected by armed groups, to physical and psychological violence in the family environment, and to the challenges they face in the midst of poverty (Valencia *et al.*, 2010; Ruíz Eslava, 2015; Sepúlveda López, 2008).

Sacred sites provide a comprehensive context for the relationship between humans, animals, plants, and spiritual entities and are highlighted for their value in the cultural continuity of the Embera people. The study of the relationship between humans and spiritual beings is part of the indigenous understanding of the cosmos made up of three interrelated levels populated by different types of beings¹⁸. This cosmos was the scene of the execution of the gods Karagabí and Trutruicá in crucial times. After the intense activity carried out in the generation of his people and organizing the landscape from the fall of the *jenene* tree, Karagabí went to the world above and permanently moved away from humans. Trutruicá, the second character, went to the underworld and is credited with the origin of shamanic wisdom embodied in the figure of *Imamá-Pákðré* (tiger–mother-in-law) and the origin of animals such as snakes, bats, peccaries (*Tayassu albirostris*), and cultigens such as the peach palm (*Bactris gasipaes*), corn (*Zea mays*), and banana (*Musa sp*). Before leaving, Karagabí and Tutruica had a lasting effect on the world by establishing interdependence between plants, animals, and humans, which explains why the Embera and hunting animals are "reciprocal prey" (Hernández, 1995). In Chocó myths, lonely men become animals with solitary habits, and groups of men become herds of wild pigs (Pineda Giraldo & Gutiérrez de Pineda, 1999). The Embera and the animals share a common social organization, as Nordenskiöld referred to it, "who from the *jaibaná* Selimo heard the legend that wild pigs had a kind of chief or captain, *huántra*, who healed them when they were wounded. The captain of the tigers [...] was called *imamáhuántra*" (Pineda Giraldo & Gutiérrez de Pineda, 1999, p. 317).

The ontological condition of *deus otiosus* then leads the creation gods to withdraw into other worlds, abstracting themselves from the events of the societies they are involved with in crucial times (Schaden, 1982). According to Pardo (1986), they are not owed reverence or asked for favors. The empty space left by gods is nowadays fully occupied by multiple spiritual entities, including those that distinguish the *drua wáandra* (*drua* = land, a place that cannot be entered; *wáandra*

¹⁸ In the world above there is, for example, the macaw, *bagará*, playing the role of the messenger of the deity *Ankoré*. The middle world is that of the Embera and the underworld includes many entities, among them the *yhaberará* people. Relationships with each type of being are marked by interdependence. Information or news about the future are expected from the beings above; those in the middle are expected to observe a moral code to access various goods, and the beings of the underworld are expected to offer wisdom, knowledge about plants, and dispensation to obtain prey through hunting.

= guardian spirit or owner of the territory). Dialogue with the cosmos, understood as the dwelling of all visible or invisible life forms, rests today in the *jaibaná* (from *jai*, which means spirit or disease and *bbaná* meaning possession: “the one who has the spirits”) (Pardo, 1987a), who also heals and protects the community in risky situations or conflict. The meaning in Castilian for “master” given to the *jaibaná*, expresses the recognition it receives from them.

During the fieldwork in Chigorodó, *Pákðré* emerged as a figure that gravitates around *drua wáandra*, protecting the spirits that gather in these places (*wáandras*) and those who are underwater. Together with the *jaibanás*, she watches over the Embera people’s exchanges with animal and plant species and with other people of spirit-people who have settled there. In agreement with Barabas (2017), we can say that they are entities aligned with both points of the sacred site’s symbolic geography. The Embera’s communication with them flows through smells, visions, traces of animals, and jaibanistic dreams to receive information about the plants, species to be gathered, and places suitable for hunting¹⁹. This last activity depends on *Pákðré*, also called *Imamá-Pákðré* (*tiger–mother-in-law*), mother or patroness of the prey animals of the underworld:

“She kidnaps the hunters to unite them conjugally with a Yambéra woman, especially a zaino or peccary female, since they are the hunters’ favorites. Therefore, as the mother of animals, she easily justifies her nickname of mother-in-law²⁰. The fact that *Pankoré* acts like a tiger to hunt the Indian hunters does not mean that she loses her identity as a woman. It is only a tactic and formation to accomplish the kidnapping” (Hernández, 1995: 145).

We will now look at the composition of the inhabitants from the sacred sites of the Chigorodó reservations.

The inhabitants of the sacred drua wáandra sites

The foundational accounts of the current Chigorodó reservations occupied by Embera people from the Sinú and San Jorge basins in the department of Córdoba find the fate of the indigenous settlement to the “confinement of beasts” in the pristine forests. Between the water *ba*, *sokerrá*, *dojemíá*, *nuci purrú*, *coré*, and *coré purru* lived ready to devour newcomers. The “confinement” was carried out by the “first *jaibanás*” when those territories were still jungle (Bailarín, 2006)²¹. These

¹⁹ In Chocó, *Vidowuandra*, mother of the wild pig, is actively related to other mothers of animals; the *jaibaná*, related to *chi bari*, owners, controls the process of enclosing and uncovering as a territorial strategy for wildlife management (Rubio *et al.*, 1988).

²⁰ Our underlining.

²¹ The Embera who lived in Chigorodó during the 20th century are speakers of the language that is a dialect of northwestern Antioquia and Córdoba, which also includes the Embera speakers of Alto Atrato and Panamanian Darién (Pardo, 1987b). Until the end of the 19th century, the Embera were essentially the only inhabitants in that region of Urabá, until the road from Antioquia’s interior to the Caribbean opened.

“beasts” turned into spirits and are some of the entities of the *drua wāndra* from the Chigorodocito upper river, from Polines and Guapá. From the beginning of this research study, jaibaná Arnulfo Domicó introduced the story of *Pākǒré* who, due to the burden of loneliness, wondered about his identity and his role in the world. He first looked for answers from the beings in the world above: the sun, the moon, the wind, the lightning, the mist, the rainbow, etc. He asked each of them the same question and then went to sleep, waiting in vain to receive the answer as he slept:

“Then, since he was alone, he thought of asking someone else. He first thought of asking the people above, that is, those who live above. [...] One morning when the sun came out so bright that its rays were filtered [...] he came out as if to speak to the sun. When the sun rose [...] he would face it [...] and ask it what he was doing, who he was, where he was from, and he told the sun that he had a head [...] eyes [...] nose, mouth, feet, hands, and asked it why it came out in the morning and why did it fall back in the afternoon, disappear in the evening, arrive in the morning, and disappear in the afternoon. He said this and then he went to bed at night, he did not dream anything, they did not say anything, they did not respond [...].”

He then asked the beings and entities in the middle world: the sea, rocks, ravines, rivers, large trees, medium ones, etc. Almost a year after that useless attempt, he got a response from the small plants. They sent him to travel to the same places where he had passed by to become covered in the force, energy, and power of each of the entities to whom he had asked questions. Finally, they told him that he should go down to meet the people and share all his knowledge:

“[...] Then he wondered why those small, short plants were on top of that earth [...] why did they grow like this [...], then he went and asked them [...] he touched them, spoke to them and asked the same thing: why does he have a head, why does he have eyes, why does he have a nose, mouth, hands, feet, why do they grow so small, why are they [smaller] than the others. Then he asked the same question and [...] around midnight [...] someone said to him in the dream [...]: ‘Why do you bother? What do you need?’ [...] ‘I need someone to answer my question’ [...] ‘I need someone to accompany me’ [...] That person in the dream answered him: “You must bathe when there is a full moon, then when the sun rises in the morning and the trees reflect their shadow on the water, you must collect the water and bathe with it... when the rainbow rises and reflects its colors on the water, you must collect that heat and bathe [...] so that you have more knowledge, more strength, and with all those you have traveled with, the moon, the thunder, the animals [...].’ When they were at the top, smaller plants said: ‘You must go down and there you will find people and there, you must teach [...]’”: (Jaibaná Arnulfo Domicó, abridged version).

In the community, *Pākðré* teaches rituals for living well, imparts knowledge of jaibanismo to all those present, teaches how to conduct the initiation ritual for young women, how to paint their bodies with the jagua paint (*Genipa americana*), and asks that they perform memorial ceremonies in *Pākðré's* name. While people were drunk and celebrating, he returned to *drua wāndra*: “we do not see it there physically, but spiritually it's there, *Pākðré* has always lived there,” says the *jaibaná*. The story of *Pākðré* confirms the spiritual power of plants for the Embera: “If they want to see me, it is through those plants [...]” and their meddling in the creation of jaibanismo²². As previously stated, the name *Pākðré* is a kinship term meaning “the wife's mother.” The *jaibaná* Arnulfo explains that the owner of the forest is called this because the mother-in-law offers her daughter “for the benefit and joy of man” and in return, she receives respect and obedience from her son-in-law. In the same way, he said, *Pākðré* in the mountain space is “the mother of spirits who bears fruit” in exchange for our care and respect.

Plinio Chavarí, governor of the Guapá reservation, described *drua wāndra* saying: “in general, everything is connected there, the soul of a tree, the soul of a rock, the soul of an animal, the soul of the grandparents who have been there.” Sinigüí (2013) indicates something similar, maintaining that everything is alive and that each being has “its own *wādra*,” i.e., specific powers, virtues, and values. None of the beings is superior to another: strength and power are demonstrated when there is union. A good number of the *drua wāndra* beings frighten indigenous people given their multiform appearance, so they try to avoid them. The inhabitants of the sacred sites are responsible for the accidents and diseases that hunters careless with their moral obligations experience. However, the indigenous people do not always first succumb to fear due to a chance encounter with spirits in the jungle. The persecuted people can buy time by leaving strips of their shirt and locks of hair that, tossed on the road, slow the spirit down. To outwit *Drua toko*, they can make a wooden doll and place it in front of the ravine where that spirit lives. Thus, while it attacks the doll, the people can escape. These protection measures are common. In the Sambú river basin, in Panama, a hunter with shaman powers is said to have devised strategies to delay a spirit's persecution. He makes four puzzle-like objects out of tree bark, which he leaves hanging along the path. The spirit will have to solve the riddle if it wants to swallow the hunter. Thus, the hunter will buy a little time for his escape (Loewen, 1960).

Based on Barabas' (2017) analysis, for Oaxaca, the capacity for *wāndras* to cause damage results from not fulfilling reciprocity with the sacred, the lack of or poor performance in the rituals for permission, gratitude, or offerings. Aware of the risks that run deep in the forests, one of the first actions of any *jaibaná* to open

²² In a story by Alto Baudo, *Pākðré* cuts out the soul of a *jaibaná* who killed young Auka's family. The second act shows how *Pākðré* trains the boy called “grandson,” as a great *jaibaná* (Pardo, 1984).

a new territory is to make a spiritual enclosure. In Chigorodó, they say that a jaibaná that arrived many years ago did it “so that the generation would not end, because if it did not do so, the jaibaná thought, it was going to end, especially for every embera that went hunting in the mountains.” The specialist intervenes to cure the affections of men injured by *wándra* and explains to them that they have not fulfilled their duties towards them. Its work comprises “the dual ethics of territorial soul entities” (Barabas, 2017), that is they offer good, but also punish bad²³. In the *drua wándra* areas, there are liminal points considered passages between the worlds above, in the middle, and the underworld: caves, rocks, ponds, headwaters, waterfalls, etc. These places allow spirits such as jaibanás to enter, spirits of some dead to travel, of the feared *Antumiá* of the underworld, without forgetting the men and women belonging to the *Yhaberará* people.

The casuistry available in environmental studies of the Embera territory focuses on the relationship between the jaibaná and “the mothers of animals” (Hernández, 1995, Ulloa et al., 1996, Rubio et al., 1998) but without delving into the heterogeneous composition of the entities of the sacred sites. Beyond understanding *drua wándra* as a place that provides environmental goods and services in the usable space of the Abibe mountain range, we must reconsider the socio-territorial dimension of these sacred sites that constitute “a repository of revitalized memory” in the words of Hervieu-Léger (2005). Three peoples of spirit-people live in the sacred sites: the *oangaramia*, the *yhaberara*, and the *chimorna*. The *oangaramia* are large, black animals. The trees around them do not have leaves because they eat them. The *ongaramia* people are owned by *Oangano*. According to the Embera of Chajeradó (Atrato central Antioquia), the word *oanga* indicates the enthusiasm and pleasure of eating alone, without sharing (Duque et al., 1997). The *yhaberara* are people from the underworld with a human appearance who lived in the Chigorodocito river. Sometimes, they go to the town carrying gold to exchange for clothes in the stores, communicating using signs. The Yaberaradó reservation (*yhaberara* river) was named in their honor. The wise women Teresita and Laura de Polines remember them in their songs as “ancestor spirits” who did not eat salt. The *chimorna* are a symbol of the Embera escaped slaves in their travels at the end of the 17th century to inaccessible places in the jungle. Diving into the waters, the indigenous peoples who escaped colonial subjection found protection in the underworld, where they survive (Hernández, 1995, p. 58-59). The *chimorna* are always surrounded by squirrels, armadillos, and other small animals, but also by dangerous tigers as “guards.” Going to the

²³ Reichel, E. (2012) suggests a similar situation derived from experience with the tanimuka and yukuna of the Vaupés, who prohibit consuming sacred species in improper quantities or when they are seasonally vulnerable. In these cases, the guardian of the sacred place steals the spirit of the evildoer or makes other people who live with him in the same maloca sick, in order to teach them a lesson and claim compensation for the loss of lives and spirits of its own people (plants or animals).

sacred site of Chigorodocito, they said that “[...] the indigenous fishermen saw the trail of a *chimorna* woman on the riverbank. A woman from the middle world, courted by a *chimorna* who, at night, brings her beautiful flowers that smell good, *kerá bíá*, she wanted to see him in the day, but this never happened. As a reminder, she called the flowers he brought her *chimorná*.” This is what the centennial Teresita Carupia sang in the meeting with Nataly Domicó during the pre-field work in Polines. Observing the footprints of the *chimorna* people in Chigorodocito marks the border between the end of the humanized space in the middle world and the entrance to the sacred site.

Path and visit to the drua wāndra

At the end of 2019, the sacred sites of Polines and Chigorodocito were visited and in February 2020, the sacred site of Guapá was visited. Before leaving for the sacred site of Polines, the *jaibaná* dreamed of the macaw, *bāgārā*, who, carrying seeds in his beak, and said: “... ‘come and sow seeds [...] sow seeds where there are no large trees, for example, the *choiba*, look, yellow ceiba’ [...] what it produces here, that eats everything, fauna, animals, worms [...]” The *jaibaná* knew that “the gift” was not in fact for *bāgārā*, the macaw, but for “the owner of them, the spirit, it is the owner who asks²⁴.” The day before the ascent to *drua wāndra*, the participants were warned by the *jaibaná* of the encounter with “wind, river, earth, ravine, medicinal trees...”. The *jaibaná* invited everyone to sleep, asking the spirits “... for the visit to go well and have a spiritual connection.” Finally, he snorted a snuff of tobacco and other plants to counteract the darkness, purify the individual body and the body of “mother earth.” Before leaving, the *jaibaná* prepared a bucket with plants soaked in plenty of water and sprinkled the group of seven Embera researchers, two guards from the local council, a researcher from the Universidad de Antioquia, and the council’s advisor. During the journey, the *jaibaná* chose eight plants for gathering after permission was granted by the spirits, reporting names and uses, noted by the other Embera researchers. Before gathering each one, he ordered to greet the plant so it would be calm, so that it knew that they would take it to the Universidad de Antioquia herbarium and that nothing bad was going to happen to it because the expedition members were its relatives. The arrival point to the sacred site was a waterfall. There, the *jaibaná*

²⁴ The issue interested the officials of Paramillo Natural National Park and the Corporation for the Sustainable Development of Urabá, Corpourabá, who at a meeting in Chigorodó heard for the first time, from the *jaibaná* about a proposal to restore the forest based on the will of the spirits. Thus, the macaw could be a “flagship species” as much as the jaguar has been for the conservation of the forests in Serranía de Abibe (Certificate # 13 Project Drua Wāndra 299-2018, 11-14-2019). The spirit of the macaw fulfills the role of warning in myths and is an ally of *Ankoré*, a deity of the world above (Hernández, 1995). Among the Embera of the Panamanian Darien, Kane (2015) found that macaws mediate between the human world and the invisible world with their songs that travel through space. They announce births, deaths, and other everyday affairs, in addition to events from ancient times, when they were people.

displayed his walking stick (a symbol of his trade) and used tobacco and snuff and again sprinkled the visitors with the prepared plants. They all gathered to receive the water where the plants had been soaked, to inhale the snuff, which is to the Pakoré's liking, and to hear his recommendations for dealing with plants and animals. The *jaibaná* spoke to the spirits, waved his stick, guided it toward the four cardinal points, and released tobacco smoke as a gesture of recognition of the spiritual guardians who joined the event from each cardinal point and from the center. The *jaibaná* asked the participants to place their personal decorative objects on the stone slab splashed by the waterfall's spray, interspersed with small local plants. A rainbow cast light on the exposed set of items. Adorned with vegetation designs made of jagua (*Genipa americana*) on her face and upper and lower extremities, Clarissa, wife, and assistant of the *jaibaná*, sang during the harmonization ritual, with the following: "We are going to sing about this stream, the water that came, you really are from here, we thank you for having allowed us to come to this place." The song she sang is from the *truambi* genre²⁵. Clarissa herself had already composed another *truambi* inviting the people who lived at the foot of the waterfall to come with a good heart to help the sick man who was "in the middle of the canoe house" (Domicó, 2018).

To visit to the sacred site of Chigorodocito, the team was divided into two groups. The first group consisted of 10 members of the indigenous police force who had to complete a territorial control exercise. The other group included the *jaibaná*, two indigenous governors, the Embera cameraman, two researchers from CMICH, and two from the University, who had to walk along the riverbed toward the mountains. The two groups left the small town at eight in the morning after "harmonizing" with plants. As eight plants had been gathered on the first visit, this time, it was decided that the botanist from the Universidad de Antioquia team would go gather plants along the way, before reaching the site to progress in a more complete portrayal of the forest's floristic composition. A total of 17 samples were gathered and, although they were not chosen by the *jaibaná*, he described each one in detail and indicated their names and uses. As the group approached the sacred site, the governor told stories of the *jaibanás* that came to live in Chigorodocito and the forced confinement of the "wild animals in the sacred site," so that the newly arriving families could settle down peacefully. In the afternoon, the governor said that we could not continue up, not only

²⁵ The *truambi* is an especially feminine lyrical genre that expresses feelings in a poetic way (Domicó, 2018). It is performed in falsetto and without instrumental accompaniment. The songs evoke the territory, plants, animals, spirits, feminine beauty, health, name selection, the joy of consuming guarapo or chicha at parties, etc. They are sung when someone dies, as an outlet for amorous sorrows, when a young woman is ritually initiated, when there is a disagreement, during a healing ceremony to summon the spirits allied with the *jaibaná* (Domicó, 2018; Martínez, 2019). The *truambi* often compares female beauty and behavior with that of natural species. Today, there are few older adult women who compose and sing them and they are considered wise. The son or wife of the *jaibaná* can compose them and the *jaibaná* sings them (Martínez, 2019).

because it would have been impossible to return before dark but also because it was dangerous. Gathered around the jaibaná and the governor, the group listened to their detailed conversation about the sacred site. The *jaibaná* blew snuff on the expedition members before returning to the small town.

The visit to the sacred site of Guapá took two days to travel from the village. The group of expedition members was made up of four researchers from the Universidad de Antioquia, Embera co-researchers of both genders, council police force, the local governor of Guapá, the jaibaná, and his wife Clarissa. The journey began on the first day by going up and down the mountains until reaching a ravine where, according to the jaibaná, the group had to remain silent so as not to disturb “the spirits of the forest.” The jaibaná stopped to harmonize the group with the plants he prepared *in situ*. Then he said: “now we are entering the forest, in the territory of the ancestors, we must ask permission.” It was time to distribute the snuff and plants to chew to get the words flowing. On the second day, the *jaibaná* hurried forward until reaching the place where he fixed his gaze: it was a waterfall, a very large waterfall, whose water formed a well. “The walls that broke the waterfall were vertical, almost infinite towards the world above. But this did not seem like a door to the world above, but instead to the world below. It seemed like a door to another world, the world of spirits” (field diary). This passage clearly shows the symbolic geography of *drua wāndra*, where the sacred mountain’s waterfalls are perceived as a transition between worlds, enhancing their liminality. There, the *jaibaná* Arnulfo took the plants that he had in his backpack and immersed them in the fresh and transparent waters while he spoke with the site’s spirits. Then, he tossed the plants in front of him, toward the waterfall and picked them up with his hands, an action that he repeated twice. His wife suddenly plunged into the well and kept going until she was standing with her arms raised under the stream of water from the waterfall. Then several members took some small stones from the well to carry them back. The jaibaná then said: “Now we have permission to be here, this waterfall is the sacred site.” With the ritual immersion in the well, the visit was over and the group started to head back. From this moment on, plants could be gathered.

Conclusions

Within their territory, the Embera of Chigorodó distinguish liminal areas that communicate the intermediate space of the cosmos with the underworld. The *wāndra* live there, a generic term for the variety of owners of the forests, who are “jealous and surly” and hide from human sight or appear as male or female entities. They are present in the rivers of the Serranía by Abibe watershed and the underwater world. From there, they protect all the place’s animals and plants. The main *wāndra* is *Pākðré*, the first jaibaná, giver of knowledge on medicinal plants

and instructor in the practice of body painting and women's ritual initiation. The *oangano*, the *chimorna*, and the *yhaberará* also live there. The *oangano* are more similar to animals and the others are more similar to humans. The *jaibanás*, masters of thought, dreams, and ritual action drive the exchanges of the Embera people with non-human beings from *drua wāndra* and they mandate various reciprocity formulas that neutralize their danger, allow them to obtain their benevolence to be successful in hunting and fishing, and promote the gift of knowledge on the medicinal use of plants. The *jaibanás* become guardians of the mountain range to watch over, along with their people, and care for the *drua wāndra* and its inhabitants. In this sense, they replicate in this world the figure of *Pākǒré*, mother of animals, predatory tiger, mother-in-law of men, connoisseur of rituals, and knowledge repository for plants. The ethnography of Embera sacred sites endorses Bartholomew's assessment (2004 in Barabás, 2017) on ethnic religions that are foreign to the presence of both theologians who synthesize the doctrinal corpus and pantheons. Rather, it is about communities with processes related to diverse experiences with the polymorphic sacred rather than with the gods themselves. These experiences are supported by a philosophy of the universe that grants equal ontological status to a wide variety of beings. This explains the importance of dream negotiations, harmonization rituals, and songs. Permission must be granted to enter the sacred site, to take plants, or to record the animals with camera traps. *Drua wāndra* as a place where the sacred is harmonized receives the homage of the Embera with the *truambi* in tune by the women and with the word of the *jaibaná*. The spiritual beings that live there are potential enemies when they assume the form of the tiger or another predator. They are related when they appear as *Pākǒré*, owner of plant knowledge; and they are related by affiliation when it comes to the *chimorna* and *yhaberará*, considered ancestors of the Embera. These types of relationships determine the type of reciprocity. So, for example, with *oangano*, which has a predatory behavior, there is negative reciprocity; with *Pākǒré*, who can offer wisdom, there is direct reciprocity that follows the mother-in-law–son-in-law model; and with *bagará*, who communicated the need to plant large fruit trees at the sacred site, there is widespread exchange on a long-term horizon that contributes to the future of the Embera people in the Serranía de Abibe.

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