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FORCED MIGRATION AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE OF DISPLACED EMBERÁ AND UITOTO POPULATIONS IN COLOMBIA: AN ETHNOBOTANICAL PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

Relatively little attention has been given to documenting changes in the ethnobotanical knowledge of displaced indigenous groups in Colombia. Such information is highly valuable because it contributes to our understanding of the changes that occur during this process of displacement, cultural transformation and loss, and because it eventually could shed some light in designing social, economic, and educational policies that would facilitate their incorporation into mainstream culture, through ways that validate their indigenous identity, knowledge, and traditions. Based on our on-going research, herein we summarize ethnobotanical information of two indigenous groups currently residing in the city of Florencia (capital of the Department of Caquetá) in the Northwestern Amazon basin: the Emberá, originally from northwestern Colombia, and Uitoto, originally from the Colombian Amazon. By focusing in the indigenous ethnobotanical knowledge of these two displaced groups, we intend to show the revitalization of ethnobotanical knowledge, resilience, and multiple resources in form of ancestral knowledge that are brought and transmitted by these groups as they struggle for survival, in many times hostile urban environments. We hope to draw more attention to and encourage similar studies on other displaced indigenous populations in Colombia as well as in other areas of Latin America.

Keywords: *Caquetá; handicrafts; medicinal plants; Northwestern Amazonia; seeds; violence; Uitoto; Emberá.*

MIGRACIÓN FORZADA Y CONOCIMIENTO INDÍGENA DE POBLACIONES DESPLAZADAS EMBERÁ Y UITOTO EN COLOMBIA: UNA PERSPECTIVA ETNOBOTÁNICA

Resumen

Relativamente poca atención se le ha dado a documentar los cambios en el conocimiento etnobotánico de los grupos indígenas desplazados en Colombia. Esta información es muy valiosa porque contribuye a entender los cambios que ocurren durante este proceso de desplazamiento, transformación y pérdida cultural, y porque eventualmente podría ayudarnos en el diseño de políticas sociales, económicas y educativas que faciliten la incorporación de estas comunidades a la cultura mestiza occidental, a través de formas que validen su identidad indígena, conoci-

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miento y tradiciones. A partir de nuestras investigaciones en curso, en ese documento resumimos la información botánica de dos grupos indígenas que actualmente viven en la ciudad de Florencia (capital del Departamento del Caquetá) en la cuenca amazónica noroccidental: Los emberá, originalmente ubicados en el noroccidente de Colombia, y los uitoto, originalmente ubicados en la Amazonia colombiana. Al enfocarnos en el conocimiento indígena de estos grupos, tenemos la intención de mostrar la revitalización del conocimiento etnobotánico, resistencia y múltiples recursos en forma de conocimientos ancestrales que son transmitidos y conservados por estos grupos en su lucha por la supervivencia, en muchas ocasiones en entornos urbanos hostiles. Esperamos que este trabajo promueva estudios similares en otras poblaciones indígenas desplazadas en Colombia y en Latinoamérica.

Palabras clave: *Amazonia noroccidental; artesanías; Caquetá; plantas medicinales; semillas; violencia; uitoto; emberá.*

Introduction

Although covering about twice the size of the state of Texas in the US, Colombia is among the most ecologically and culturally diverse countries in the world. Owing to its position in northern South America, geological history, altitudinal gradient, and variable topography, Colombia contains a great diversity of climates and ecosystems, including tropical rain forests, deserts, cloud forests, and even snow-covered alpine habitats year round at the top of the Andes (e.g., Rangel & Aguilar 1995). Such an environmental diversity is equally inhabited by a unique, extremely diverse biota and indigenous peoples. Colombia is home to more than 40 000 plant species, over 1800 bird species, and nearly 600 amphibian species, about 15% of the world's species for these groups (Salaman et al. 2008; AmphibiaWeb 2011). The indigenous population of Colombia is relatively small in comparison to that of other countries in the Americas albeit highly diverse. Accounting only for a little more than 3% of the Colombian population, the nearly one and half million indigenous peoples of the country belong to 90 different ethnic groups that inhabit diverse ecosystems, have adapted to varying diets and climates, have different cultures, religions and beliefs, and speak at least 66 Amerindian languages in 12 linguistic families and 10 isolated languages (Kaufam 1994; Landaburu 2004). The Uitoto and Emberá, the focus of this paper, are widely known because of their historical and recent displacements.

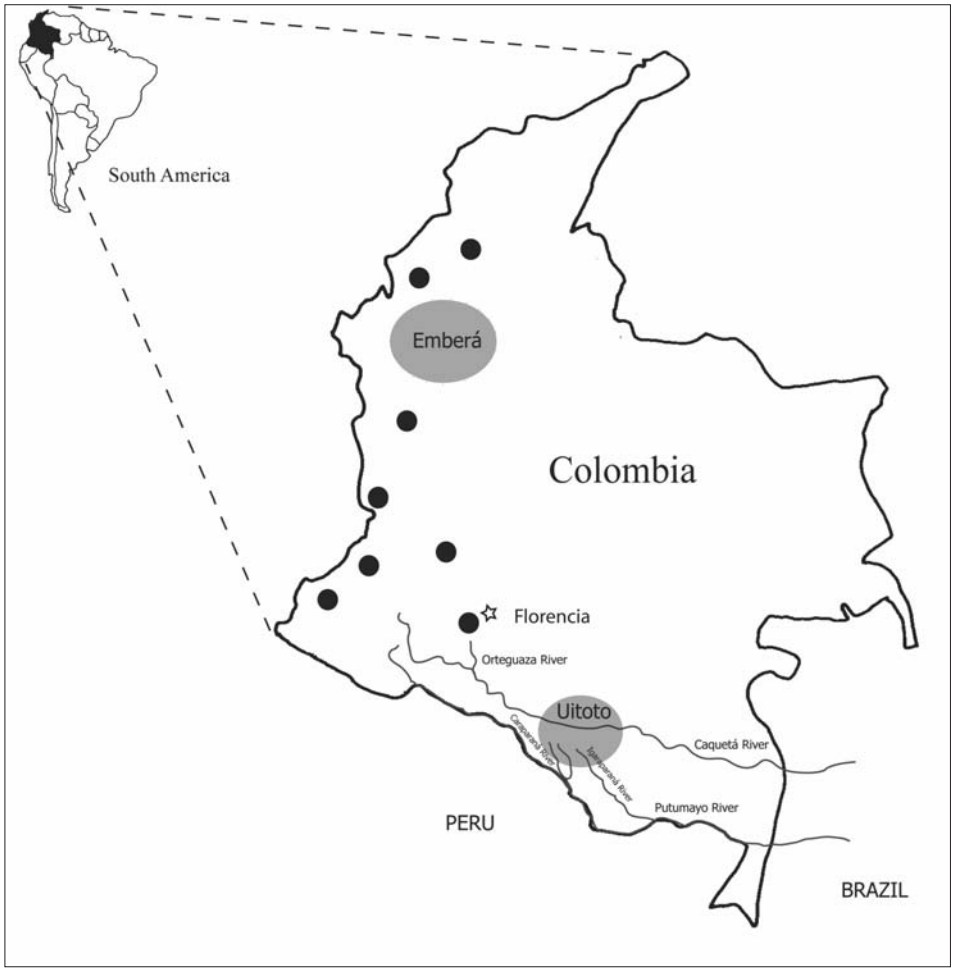
Presently, Colombia is better known for its continuous political and economic instability during the last five decades due to drug trafficking and guerrilla warfare. At this time, as many as 41 000 Colombian indigenous people have been forced to leave their ancestral territories and migrate to regional urban centers. At least 74% of Colombian municipalities have experienced expulsion or reception of displaced

populations (e.g., Engel & Ibañez 2007). In 2009, the Emberá fleeing during the first three months of the year in the Department of Chocó almost equaled the 2400 displaced in all of 2008 (Romero 2009). According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, at least 27 of the 90 Colombian indigenous groups are now considered to be at risk of extinction. Despite this recent indigenous displacement in Colombia, little has been documented of the impact that forced migration and displacement has had on their indigenous knowledge systems, specifically on their ethnobotanical knowledge, as these groups have been displaced towards urban centers. To our knowledge, most available information on displaced groups in Colombia has focused in documenting political, cultural, and social issues, but relatively little attention has been given to documenting changes in their ethnobotanical knowledge. Such information is also highly valuable not only because it contributes to our understanding of the changes that occur during these processes of displacement and cultural transformation and loss but also because it eventually could shed some light in designing social, economic and educational policies that would facilitate their incorporation into main stream culture, through ways that validate their indigenous identity, knowledge and traditions. For example, most displaced indigenous populations live in extreme poverty, relying in some plants to treat common ailments or in the sale of handicrafts as an important source of income (Frausin et al. 2008, 2010; Trujillo & Gonzalez 2011). Thus, information on these plants, their uses, and how and where they are collected is relevant for understanding how they are adapting to urban environments. From a practical point of view, local or national and territorial governments could use this information to improve their health services and facilitate their engagement in local or national market economies.

Based on our on-going research, herein we summarize ethnobotanical information of two indigenous groups currently residing in the city of Florencia (capital of the Department of Caquetá) in the Northwestern Amazon basin: the Emberá, originally from northwestern Colombia, and Uitoto, originally from the Department of Amazon, further south in the Colombian Amazon (Fig. 1).

Florencia is a city of more than 150.000 people and is likely the Colombian city with the highest proportion of displaced population in the country. According to a recent news report published by a local newspaper (El Líder, March 28, 2011), the office of humanitarian affairs of Florencia estimates that at least 30% of its current population have fled from rural areas due to armed confrontations between the guerrillas and paramilitary groups. By providing an overview of the current challenges of Colombia's indigenous diversity and a brief historical account on the pre- and post-colonial migrations in the Northwestern Amazon basin, we hope to draw more attention to and encourage similar studies on

Figure 1



Approximate historical and present distributions of the Emberá and Uitoto peoples in Colombia. Gray areas represent their original distribution. The current distribution of the Emberá is indicated by black dots (modified from Frausin et al. 2008). The present distribution of the Uitoto is not shown but isolated populations are found along the Ampiyacu River in Peru and the Colombian Amazon basin, especially in the upper Putumayo, Caquetá, and Orteguaza Rivers, and the Amazon Trapezium.

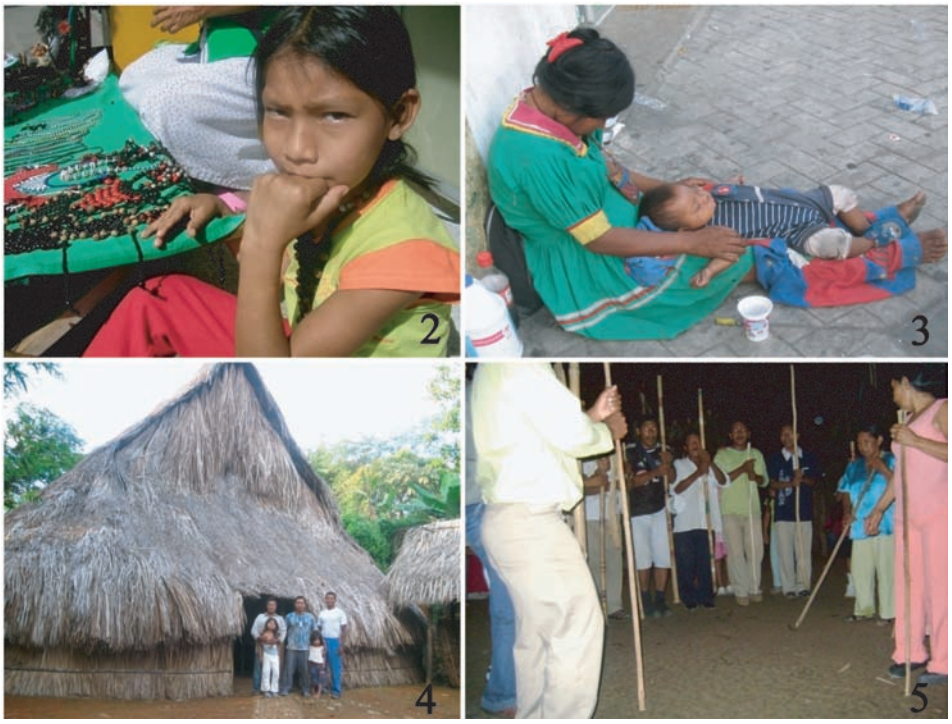
other displaced indigenous populations in Colombia. Likewise, by focusing in the indigenous ethnobotanical knowledge of these two displaced groups in the Amazon basin, we intend to show the resilience and multiple resources in form of ancestral knowledge that are brought and transmitted by these groups as they struggle for survival, in many times hostile urban environments.

The Emberá and Uitoto of Florencia

Like many other displaced indigenous groups in Colombia, the Emberá and Uitoto residing in Florencia live in extreme poverty and are socially marginalized (Figs. 2, 3). Although each group has its own story, they share the same tragedy. Members of each group have fled to the city at different times during many years and for many reasons, especially due to violence and colonization.

The Emberá, which belong to the Chocó linguistic family, are primarily found in tropical lowland forests along the pacific coast of the Chocó bioregion, from southeastern Panamá to northwestern Colombia (Arango & Sánchez 2004). However, they are now sparsely located throughout most of the western and southern areas of Colombia (Fig. 1). The Emberá members traditionally have a

Figures 2-5



Emberá (top) and Uitoto (bottom) of the city of Florencia (Colombia). 2, 3: Most Emberá make their living by selling jewelry and handicrafts but some depend on soliciting charity on the streets 4, 5: The *maloca* of the Uitoto, located on the outskirts of the city, is used for different purposes including mambing coca, meetings, and ceremonies.

semi-nomadic lifestyle as hunter-gatherers that include subsistence horticulture and fishing (e.g., Herlihy 1995). Several Emberá groups are named according to their place of origin. The Emberá of Florencia are composed of Emberá-Chamí and Emberá-Katío, Emberá that inhabited or inhabit the southern area of the modern-day Department of Córdoba, northwestern area of the Department of Antioquia, and Risaralda. Some members are from San José del Palmar (Department of Chocó) while a few are from Mistrató, Department of Risaralda.

The Colombian government relocated four Emberá populations 36 years ago onto reservations near Florencia. La Cerinda is one Emberá reservation created in 1996 which is located about 100 km southeast of Florencia (Trujillo & Gonzalez 2011). On each reservation, the number of people does not exceed one hundred. In Florencia, about 80 people, including women and children, live permanently in four houses and an old school building in one of the poorest and most violent neighborhoods in the city. The Emberá of Florencia have become urban artisans. The sale of handicrafts embellished with seeds, fruits, and natural fibers is an important source of income. Plant materials from 34 plant species, most of them locally abundant and widespread in the Neotropical region, are gathered from small patches of secondary forests near or within Florencia; in few instances, seeds are traded or purchased from other local indigenous groups such as the Koreguajes and Uitoto (Frausin et al. 2008). All members of the community participate in this activity but women and children are mostly in charge of selling them on the streets and at festivals in Florencia and other cities (Figs. 4, 5).

The Uitoto, also known as Huitoto or Witoto, are an indigenous group originally located along the Caraparaná, Igaraparaná, and Caquetá rivers (e.g., Urbina 1986; Pineda 1987) (Fig. 1). Today several isolated populations are found along the Ampiyacu River in Peru and the Colombian Amazon basin, especially in the upper Putumayo, Caquetá, and Orteguaza Rivers (Echeverri 1997). About 99 families (352 persons) live in Florencia, most of them displaced from the municipality of Solano, in the middle and lower Caquetá River (Nieto 2012). The displacement has occurred during many years, as early as the 1870's with the rubber boom. Unlike the Emberá, members of this group live in several neighborhoods across the city and hold different jobs, ranging from low paid workers to university instructors. They are organized in the "Cabildo Monaya Buinaima" and since 2004 they regularly meet at a maloca, or longhouse, located on the outskirts of the city on the property of Emilio Fiagama, the leader of the Uitotos. The maloca is used for different purposes, including teaching the language to their children, performing ceremonies and dances, rituals with the hallucinogenic vine ayahuasca, and mambing (=chewing) of coca with ambil or tobacco paste (Figs. 4, 5). The maloca has also become a local attraction as it is often

visited by high schools, universities, and a few tourists; sometimes it also function as a meeting place of all three displaced indigenous groups of Florencia with local authorities. The Uitoto also make and sell handicrafts, but the community does not depend on this activity (Frausin et al. 2010).

Displacement and indigenous knowledge

Indigenous knowledge is how traditional cultures in many diverse ways have organized their ancestral knowledge concerning their cultural beliefs, linguistic practices, and the historical interpretations that have given meaning to their lives (Cajete 2000; Semali & Kincheloe 1999; Battiste & Henderson 2000). This form of indigenous knowledge construction is transmitted through oral tradition and is based on the holistic perspectives of the interconnectedness of all areas of life as seen by indigenous perceptions of the world. It comes out of the direct experience with the environment and within the native cosmologies and values that interpret and frame its construction. It is this knowledge that defines indigenous identity and how they perceive and transmit their understanding of the world (Ortiz 2009a).

A number of researchers have emphasized the close relationship between indigenous knowledge and place (e.g., Posey 1985, Berkes 1999; Ellen & Harris 2000; Athayde et al. 2009). Although territorial displacement may result in the erosion of indigenous knowledge, in some cases it has also led to its transformation, innovation, and revitalization (Athayde et al. 2009). Such a dynamic process can be more easily seen in the ethnobotanical knowledge related to handicrafts and medicine; in some cases it appears to have disappeared but in others it seems to have been transformed or reinforced.

An obvious consequence of displacement and migration to the city is the loss of land and therefore of natural resources that play an important role in shaping the culture of indigenous displaced groups. For instance, 54 plant species have been reported to be used for different purposes by the Uitoto of Florencia (Frausin et al. 2010). This corresponds to 19% of the total number of plants recorded by another Uitoto community that lives in a forested reservation in the Department of Putumayo (Marín-Corba et al. 2005). Although this difference is neither a direct measure nor an indication of the amount of a loss of ethnobotanical knowledge, it may give us an idea of its potential loss. Some plants used by the Uitoto of Florencia were also heavily used by the Uitoto from Putumayo (e.g., *Astrocaryum chambira* Burret), suggesting that certain culturally important

species and perhaps locally abundant tend to be located and rapidly used. Some species that cannot be cultivated are either purchased or replaced. For instance, two varieties of cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), used frequently in preparation of traditional foods and drinks, and coca (*Erythroxylum coca* Lam.), a plant that plays an important role in the Uitoto culture (Echeverri 1997), are often purchased from peasants and farmers from other regions of Caquetá. Natural paints and dyes from roots, fruits, and tree bark commonly used in decorative crafts and clothing are replaced by artificial dyes purchased from local markets. Because of seasonal shortages, replacement of some seeds and fruits by plastic beads sometimes also occurs in the handicrafts manufactured by the Emberá of Florencia (Frausin et al. 2008, 2010).

As a result of relocation from a different biogeographic region, the Emberá of Caquetá, including those from Florencia, do not have a *Jaibaná* (medicine man) as well as some of their native medicinal plants. For example, the Emberá living in the reservation La Cerinda use about half the number of medicinal species recorded for an Emberá group living in the Panamanian Darien, a place within their original biogeographic region (Trujillo & Gonzalez 2011). At least since 1993 members of this group have reported experiencing magic spells caused by evil *Jaibanás* with whom they have had a problem. Children and teenagers between 12 and 23 years of age are often affected, experiencing panic attacks, a loss of consciences, or acting as though they are possessed. The cause of the disease is unknown, although medical doctors from the Instituto Nacional de Salud (National Institute of Health) diagnosed them as having collective hysteria due to current displacement conditions (Vasco & Palacios 1995). On several occasions, *Jaibanás* from their ancestral territory have visited Florencia to perform healing ceremonies, which have failed because, according to them, the right conditions or the plants commonly used in the treatments are not available. However, pharmacopoeias are not static but are constantly changing (Bennett & Prance 2000). This is evidenced by the use of *Piper tricuspe* (Miq.) C. DC., an endemic plant of the Chocó bioregion widely used by the Emberá (Kane 1995), which was recently recorded from La Cerinda to treat snake bites (Trujillo & Gonzalez 2011). The illness of cultural origin of the Emberá may be related with the displacement and loss of ancestral practices. It is possible that other illnesses of cultural origin similar to those experienced by this community are also occurring in other displaced indigenous communities in Colombia.

The number of plant species used by the Emberá of Florencia to manufacture handicrafts (34 species) appears to be a good example of revitalization of ethnobotanical knowledge of this community perhaps driven by the dependence of this group to this activity. At least since 2002, they have also participated in Expo-

artesanías in Bogotá, an international annual festival organized by Artesanías de Colombia (Handicrafts of Colombia). This festival assigns 86 stands for all Colombian indigenous communities, four of them to the groups from Caquetá (Constanza Mondragon, pers. comm.). To date, only members of the Emberá of Florencia as well as from others reservations in Caquetá have participated in this event, selling sometimes up to $10.000 USD in crafts in 2002 (Trujillo & Gonzalez, unpublished data). Evidently, the sale of handicrafts represents an important activity that has facilitated the engagement of the Emberá to the regional and national market economy.

We do not know exactly how many plant species are being used in handicrafts by other Emberá because most ethnobotanical studies on this group have focused on plants used for food, medicine, and housing materials. However, the 34 species used in handicrafts alone by the Emberá of Florencia seems to be a relatively high number when compared to a total of 44 species reported for medical purposes by a Panamanian Emberá group (Kane 1995). Because most plants used by this displaced Emberá group are native and widely distributed in the Neotropical region, it seems that despite nearly four decades of relocation to the city at least some cultural knowledge about native plants is still maintained.

Final considerations

Like many other displaced indigenous groups in Colombia and Latin America, the Emberá and Uitoto of Florencia live in extreme poverty and are socially marginalized; many have been murdered. Child prostitution, violence, and drug and alcohol abuse are not uncommon. Each group was forced to organize its own *cabildo*, a political figure to make themselves visible and receive benefits from the local government. But in a city where they account for less than 1% of the population, and local monuments and anthems still eulogize the pioneers that displaced them, it is not surprising they remain ignored (Del Cairo & Rozo 2006). A primary concern among leaders and elders of both communities is the loss of indigenous identity and language, especially in their youth. “We do not want our kids to stop dancing reguetón, but we want them to know our rituals”, says, Emilio Fiagama, the leader of the Uitotos.

Intercultural bilingual indigenous education may enhance the recognition and validation of their indigenous background but it has not been undertaken yet. Several studies have shown that indigenous education in schools plays a fundamental role in learning because it is the knowledge base that indigenous children have acquired in their families and communities (Ortiz 2009b). It is

the knowledge base of their self-esteem and identity with which they come to the learning process in the formal classroom, and it is the cognitive base above which they will acquire and connect the relevance of newly learned concepts (Díaz-Coliñir 2004; Aikman 1999; Smith 1999).

Nevertheless, in practical terms, local forms of community-based knowledge continue to provide a network of support to many indigenous people in the world by contributing to the solution of health problems, agricultural production and education, in contexts in which they are not addressed by the public policies of the states. The incorporation of indigenous knowledge into the curriculum and classroom instruction links the previous knowledge base and experiences of indigenous students with the current knowledge that is being discovered in the classroom and creates a dynamic dialog of critical comparative perspectives between the Western forms of knowledge production prevalent in schools and the indigenous forms of knowledge production, coming from the indigenous communities (Ortiz 2009a, b).

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