

Livelihood Change, Land Tenure and the Struggle for Autonomy Outside the Ngöbe-Buglé Comarca

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Background

In 1997, the Panamanian government passed the *Ley 10*, a law that created the Ngöbe-Buglé indigenous *comarca*, a semi-autonomous region in which indigenous groups have exclusive land rights and extensive administrative authority. However, the land included in the *comarca* only approached half of the land historically occupied by the Ngöbe and Buglé peoples, thus leaving many areas and communities out of the protections afforded by the *comarca*. One such area is the region North of Santa Fe, including Caloveborita, El Cuay, and Rio Luis. These three districts, separated from the *comarca* by a river, have created their own branch of the *comarca*'s traditional administrative and political body. One small community, Playitas, which lies outside of these three districts, has actively chosen to participate in this traditional organization. Playitas is where the field research for this project took place. Because Playitas is slightly apart from the other politically active indigenous communities in the region and is closer to the "outside world" (meaning the bus-accessible road), its population and the land itself are considerably influenced by external contact. Nonetheless, the *cacique*, or traditional leader, is an inhabitant of Playitas, and is leading the struggle for territorial recognition in the area, with help from the administrative branches that reside in other communities. Those involved in this movement are fighting for a form of legal recognition, though they are not sure which yet, that would resemble the autonomy and protections of the *comarca*. At present, very few families in this region have any form of formal title and this makes them vulnerable to land grabs and exploitation. The mapping component of this research is also intended to give them a tool with which to document their inhabitation and management of the area. The research focused on tenure systems, cultural change, agricultural productivity, environmental health, the sustainability of the livelihood, and the *lucha*, or struggle, for territorial autonomy.

Field Work Methodology

Phase 1: Field Research (Summer 2016)

1. Collection of GIS data points
 - ❖ Visiting family homes and plots and taking GPS points around the perimeter of the land.
 - ❖ Participative mapping – the presence and authority of at least one member of the family was necessary
 - ❖ Informal boundaries – reliance on the family members' memory of the plot perimeter, usually demarcated by a tree stump or a crop
 - ❖ Territorial conflicts – due to the informal nature of property, there were some instances in which neighboring plot owners would disagree over the boundaries of their land
2. Agricultural Survey
 - ❖ Survey conducted after each plot about the conditions of the plot
 - ❖ Crops and varieties – collected info on what was cultivated on that plot to get an idea of the diversity of cultivars
 - ❖ Harvest yields – this was a little bit of a challenge. Because none of the crops are commercial, they are not practiced in giving exact measurements of their yields. It was also hard to come up with a unit of time over which to measure the yields because many were harvested year round.
 - ❖ Crop health
 - ❖ How and when the land was acquired – intended to explore the facets of land ownership
3. Community interviews
 - ❖ Conducted both with families who participated in the mapping component and community members who didn't
 - ❖ Cultural change – the questions addressed change in agricultural practices, eating habits, language and livelihoods
 - ❖ Environmental change and health – interviews also touched upon observed changes in natural surroundings and the environment
 - ❖ Expectations for the future – we asked participants about perceived threats to the community, culture and the environment and suggestions to handle these threats



Phase 2: Data Assimilation and Analysis (Fall 2016-Winter 2017)

- ❖ Cleaning up and presentation of data
- ❖ Creation of map of land plots (preliminary example below)
- ❖ Produce and translate a document accessible to community members, for their future use
- ❖ Providing the tools for future work in Playitas and for students at McGill
- ❖ Literature review on key topics of interest and legal and cultural context
- ❖ Assimilation of field and primary research into document to be used as Honors thesis.

An Example of the Data

Sample plot data - PLIDPL15C

- ❖ In cultivation for 30 years
- ❖ Divided into 3-4 smaller parcels, on which crops are rotated in different years
- ❖ Soil and plant health are generally good
- ❖ Herbicide (donated by the government) used on rice plot

Crop	Varieties	Harvest Yield
Plantain	Martinico, cuadrado, primitivo	30 bushels/year
Rice	En fanguero	10 quintales/year
Pifa		20 bushels/year
Coconut	Verde	7 plants (still growing)
Otoe	Criollo	2 quintales/year
Yucca	Amarillo	1 quintal/year
Coffee	Rebusta	1 quintal/year

Selección de parcelas en Playitas, Panamá



A plot collectively owned by 9 nuclear families, who are all the descendants of the original owner. Each year, any family member with rights to the land may claim a parcel in this plot to "clean" and begin cultivation, after consultation with the rest of the owners.