

Socio-political effects of the Urra I hydroelectric construction in the Embera Catio indigenous community (Colombia)

Efectos sociopolíticos de la construcción de la hidroeléctrica Urrá I en la comunidad indígena Embera Catío (Colombia)

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ABSTRACT

The Embera Catio people live in the Nudo de Paramillo (High Sinu River, Western Mountain Chain at Colombian Andes) since ancient times. Despite the circumstances that have surrounded them, they retain part of their culture and have sought to keep their forms of government and social relationships that govern life in community. However, the construction of the Urra I hydroelectric encountered the Embera Catio with the deterioration of a significant part of their territory, losing sacred sites and lands for cultivation, as well as the emergence of social conflicts they were previously unaware of. This situation forced the Indigenous group to change its social and organizational behavior, and to adapt to new environmental conditions. This work shows a parallel between before and after the construction of the Urra I hydroelectric and subsequent effects on social and political organization brought by the river damming.

Key words: indigenous peoples, electric power generation, social and political characteristics.

RESUMEN

El pueblo embera catío del Alto Sinú habita en el Nudo de Paramillo (curso alto del río Sinú en la cordillera Occidental de los Andes colombianos) desde tiempos ancestrales. Pese a las circunstancias que los han rodeado, conservan parte de su cultura y han procurado mantener sus formas de gobierno y las relaciones sociales que rigen la vida en comunidad. No obstante, la construcción de la hidroeléctrica Urrá I, enfrentó al pueblo embera catío al deterioro de una parte importante de su territorio, perdiendo lugares sagrados y tierras para cultivo, así como al surgimiento de conflictos sociales que anteriormente desconocían. Esta situación obligó a este grupo indígena a modificar sus costumbres sociales y organizativas, y a adaptarse a las nuevas condiciones del medio. Este trabajo muestra un paralelo entre el antes y el después de la construcción de la hidroeléctrica Urrá I y los efectos posteriores que sobre la organización social y política, trajo el represamiento del río.

Palabras clave: pueblos indígenas, generación energía eléctrica, características sociales y políticas.

Introduction

The Embera Catio people of Alto Sinú River inhabit the southern part of the department of Córdoba, in northern Colombia. Since ancient times, this indigenous group has occupied part of the territory of the Nudo de Paramillo, currently under the figure of indigenous reservation. They have sought to preserve the particular vision of their world by using their own autonomous government rules managed by their authorities. However, the start of the Urra I hydroelectric construction, in 1997, sets a new stage in the customs of this indigenous people, since both socially and politically focuses.

This work analyzes the effects of the hydroelectric construction on the social and political characteristics of the 21 Indigenous communities in the reservation, seeking to

respond to the question: if there were changes in the socio-political issues of the Embera Catio people, what effects did they have on their lifestyle?

The objectives of this study aim at: Analyzing the effects of the Urra I hydroelectric construction on the social and political issues of the Embera Catio Indigenous communities, and furnishing elements that contribute to the process of adaptation to the new conditions of that community from the reservation.

The Embera Catio Indians

The Embera Catio Indians are located to the south of the department of Córdoba on the Sinú, Esmeralda, and Verde rivers. Their reservation occupies approximately 103,000 ha and it was created through Resolution No. 052 of November 1998; it is at 51 m a.s.l., with an average annual

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rainfall of 1,525 mm and an average temperature of 28°C. The Embera Catio reservation of Alto Sinú is inhabited by an approximate population of 2,400 people, grouped into 450 families, distributed in 21 Indigenous communities along the Sinú, Verde, and Esmeralda rivers (DANE, 2005; Plan Jenene, 1997).

The Embera people can be divided into three major categories: 1. River people –*Embera dobidá*– (their life cycle revolves around big river basins); 2. Forest people –*Embera oibidá*– (settled along the streams farther from main waterways; their territory is the most inaccessible to settlers, maintaining relative isolation); and, 3. Mountain people –*Embera eyábida*– (their communities are located very near urban areas, with very strong acculturation processes). The Embera Catio, the Chamí, and the Embera Indians from Alto Andaguada belong to the last group (UAESPNN, 2009).

The river, along which their *tambos* or traditional houses are constructed, is also an important of their worldview. Worldview is understood as an individual's inclusive conception or image of the world and the relations that individual has with it. The worldviews generally shared by all the members of a society make up that that society's worldview. The river is then the element that permits interrelationships amongst men and with nature. The river is nature, and also culture. Without rivers, the Embera community would perhaps not exist (Plan Jenene, 1997; OREWA, 2002).

The social structure of the Embera Catio is based on extended families, on a kinship system that recognizes relatives from paternal and maternal lineages. According to their social norms, it is forbidden to marry any member of *parentela* (household), a term used by this community to refer to the group of relatives: the set of family members of an individual for up to four degrees of consanguinity, or with a non-indigenous person. The internal social control is exerted by the family chief, generally the eldest, who guides the settlement site, assigns productive lands for the family members and solves internal conflicts; problems generated by other crimes are resolved by the respective Indigenous Council (Vargas, 1993; Vasco, 1993, 2004).

In this sense, Article 2 of Decree 2164 of 1995 defines the Indigenous Council as “a special public entity, whose members belong to an Indigenous community, elected and recognized by such, with a traditional sociopolitical organization, whose function is to legally represent the community, exert authority, and carry out the activities attributed by the laws, its uses,

customs, and the internal guidelines in each community” (Agricultural Ministry, 1995).

Within the whole kin (all the family from the father and mother's side), there are subsets who live in the same region; these local kinships constitute the base of the Embera Catio social organization, who are organized within a sector of the river inhabited by a series of families related to each other.

The social organization revolves around local groups of relatives and neighbors participating in common social activities like *mingas* (collective work) and festivities. But the limits of the social group and the territories do not have a strict definition (Martínez and Marín, 1995).

Regarding the political organization, the figure of the chieftain, essential for the organization in ancient times, started getting replaced in the 1980s by local and zonal councils, allowing the communities to demand land titling, education, healthcare, agrarian production programs, and legal mechanisms to confront conflicts with external players who threatened the territory. Initially, it was suggested that the local councils, whose members are elected by the community, to select young people who knew how to read and write, spoke Spanish, and were perceived as leaders. Nevertheless, the remoteness of said councils forced the promotion of larger councils, seeking to encompass several communities at the same time. Although the figure of the council is fundamental for the external relationships of the community, intimately, its development depends highly on the traditional authorities to establish forms of social control. Nowadays, the Larger Councils of the Sinú and Verde rivers of the Embera Catio Reservation from Alto Sinú are conformed by two *Noko Mayores* (elder *Nokos*) or elder governors (one for each river), two *Nokoweras* or women governors, and the coordinators from each of the social, productive, and organizational programs conducted by the Council. Likewise, the governors of each of the Indigenous communities inhabiting the reservation are part of the assembly.

The Urra I Hydroelectric Project

The Urra Hydroelectric Central is located in northwestern Colombia, on the Sinu River, 30 Km south of the municipality of Tierralta in the Department of Córdoba. Its main source of water supply is the Sinu River and its tributaries, which originates in the Paramillo Natural National Park. The Urra I hydroelectric Central has land access, through a paved 110-Km road, from the municipality of Montería. The hydroelectric has an installed annual capacity of 340

MW, flooding 7,400 ha at a cost of 800-million US Dollars financed by the World Bank (Molano, 2008).

The company in charge of managing the hydroelectric plant (Urrea S.A. E.S.P.) was created in 1992 and its main objective was the construction of the Urrea I Multipurpose Project. Construction began in 1997 and the plant began operations on February 15, 2000, when it began commercializing with energy; it was finally officially inaugurated in July of the same year. In May 2007, it was certified by the Research and Technological Development Center (*Corporación Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo Tecnológico del Sector Eléctrico*) a Power Sector Corporation (CIDET for its name in Spanish) through NTC-ISO 9001:2000 Norm (Empresa Urrea, 2008).

Methodology

The data collection presented is supported by fieldwork experience carried out in the Embera Catio reservation in Alto Sinu River; the data was obtained by using social mapping, polls, interviews, and direct observation as tools.

The Reservation is made up of 21 communities. The information for the analysis of this work was obtained from 17 of these communities over a six-month research period, during which time there was support from the Indigenous organization: Embera Catio Main Council (CAMAENKA).

The discussion centers on changes taking place in the social and political aspects of the Indigenous communities inhabiting the reservation after the construction of the Urrea I hydroelectric.

Results and discussion

Based on fieldwork experience with the Indigenous communities from the Reservation, the data analysis was done by discussing the results in two parts: the first part shows the effects on social aspects (Tab. 1), and the second part shows the political aspects (Tab. 2).

The construction of the Urrea I hydroelectric brought a number of positive and negative effects, which influenced upon the social aspects in many ways. The role of women in the community changed: they went from being wives and mothers to holding positions of authority according to their experience and age, leading processes of social change like access to education, training on health issues (previously delegated to the authority of the *Jaibaná*), which until

then had been unknown to them. Likewise, the men had to learn to share the power and authority they traditionally had over the family group and accept new insertion forms in the society and in managing resources.

Both men and women learnt to speak and write in Spanish, because this was the way they could socialize and communicate with individuals foreign to their culture; it was the means by which they could express their nonconformity against what they considered an invasion of their territory and demanded for their basic needs to be satisfied. However, this incursion into the “non-indigenous world”, broadened the gap between the power of the *Jaibaná* (which they began to perceive with fear) and the sociopolitical management of the territory, given that the *Jaibaná* is no longer who directs and coordinates the daily activities and states the rules of coexistence and social control (Tab. 1).

Another significant change noticed is that related to the family structure, which goes from being a meeting point to being a point of conflict. In several of the communities visited, we evidenced abandonment of families by the father figures, given that they had another family nucleus in another community and when not being able to take on the responsibility for both families, they abandon one, consequently leaving the women as heads of household, albeit their not being prepared to assume the dual role of mother and father.

In the 17 communities visited, there is consensus in that one of the greatest effects on the Catio people is the change in their feeding habits. With the loss of the fishing resource and the few opportunities for hunting, the food safety the communities enjoyed has seriously deteriorated as they have had to replace traditional foods (fish, forest-animal meat) for foods foreign to the tradition that in most cases they did not consume or did not know how to prepare (*Bienestarina*, feed product with corn meal and grains such as lentils and chickpeas). The consequences are evident in infant malnutrition, given that those foods are also used to feed domestic animals (pigs and chickens). Many of their eating habits have changed; for example, they stopped extracting molasses (and/or collecting honey) to end up consuming sugar, which they do not produce and must buy at high prices in nearby urban areas.

Probably, one of the most damaging effects on the Indigenous communities is the financial compensation, which Urrea S.A. has to pay for the Environmental Permit: the enterprise has to make payments to each family to compensate for damages caused by the flooding. In most cases, this money is issued through a check payable to the head of household,

TABLE 1. Hydroelectric construction effects on Embera Catio social aspects.

Item	Before flooding	After flooding	Effects
Women's daily activities.	Care for food garden, care for the <i>Chagra</i> (farm). Child rearing. Teach and learn traditions and cultural values (<i>Chicha</i> preparation, use of body paint, food preparation)	Care for food garden, care for the <i>Chagra</i> (farm), care for domestic animals. Child rearing. Teach and learn traditions and cultural values (<i>Chicha</i> preparation, use of body paint, food preparation). Learn another language (Spanish)	Women must learn and go to school, many without parental or partner consent. They assume leadership roles within their communities. Upon losing some foods, they also lost part of their traditional knowledge, which are replaced by new values
Men's daily activities	Care for the <i>Chagra</i> (farm). Fish. Hunt. Teach activities like construction of <i>tambos</i> and canoes. The children selected become <i>Jaibaná</i> apprentices	Care for the <i>Chagra</i> (farm). Teach activities like construction of <i>tambos</i>	The men begin a process of organizational leadership and policy learning. In some cases, respect for the elderly and <i>Jaibaná</i> is lost
Family organization	Men can only have a family when they demonstrate to the parents of the woman that they can hunt an animal, fish, plant a crop, build a <i>tambo</i> and a canoe. And women can only find a partner when they show they know how to keep and care for a house, prepare and use body paints, and prepare basic food (especially <i>Chicha</i>). Every man can have one or more wives, if and only if, he shows that he can build and maintain a home for each one	Men and women have put aside many of requirements needed to start a home and join without regard for tradition. Many men organize several families, but they are not capable of supporting all of them because they do not have enough financial capacity to assume the responsibility for two homes	Single mothers, women heads of household, orphans or abandoned children, family conflicts
Housing	The <i>tambo</i> is a symbolic representation of worlds that make up the Embera cosmogony. <i>Tambos</i> are round constructions, without walls, covered with palm leaves, with a kitchen area and broad central space for the room	<i>Tambo</i> is no longer a representation of their world; it takes on characteristics of a rural house: a square structure with walls dividing rooms, and wooden structures resembling beds. Likewise, the concept of schools is also introduced, as well as prisons, and cement-built latrines for the benefit for the whole community	Cement, bricks, and zinc become part of their everyday life; traditional construction elements are lost along with their significance
Food and nutrition	Forest-animal meat and fish are part of their basic diet, supplemented with corn, cassava, plantain and fruits providing a proper nutritional balance	Upon losing part of their hunting and fishing possibilities, protein is lost and replaced by other foods (especially canned foods)	The culture of consuming other foods foreign to the traditions and local knowledge (powdered milk, tuna, canned sardines, sugar, alcohol, vegetables)
Others		Among the Urra S.A. responsibilities there are: indemnity to the Embera Catio people with a monthly payment for each family	This cash indemnity results in alcoholism, fights, prostitution, along with fraud from local merchants (who charge the Indigenous community higher prices for their products)

who cashes it and uses it in celebrations that include alcohol and prostitution. Few cases have been identified where part of the money has been destined to buy food and/or goods useful for the entire family. With this situation, many young indigenous women left their reservation to work in bars and taverns in nearby villages, abandoning their traditions and exposing themselves to what their own culture sees as a punishable fault, in that sense, many do not return and decide to live in the places where they work.

According to what was stated by Hernández (1993), the socio-economic processes that have affected the regions where the Embera Indigenous communities inhabit have led to the reduction of plant and animal species and to so-

cial changes. Among others causes, we can list mining and quarry industries, increased black agricultural population and indigenous population, and urban growth demanding all kinds of natural resources.

Table 2 shows the effects on political aspects brought by the construction of the hydroelectric.

The Farewell to the River (*Do wanburá*) brought as a favorable consequence not only the visibility of Embera Catio people, but it also managed to gain world solidarity. The problem and the discussion against the construction of the Hydroelectric plant transcended borders and different governments and international organizations joined the

TABLE 2. Hydroelectric construction effects on Embera Catio political aspects.

Item	Before flooding	After flooding	Effects
Visibility	Contact of Catio Tribes with the outside world (non-indigenous) was minimal, it was limited to exchange or sale of agricultural and consumer products (like salt) in towns closest to the reservation (Crucito, Saiza, Tucurá)	On the imminent flooding and damming of the river, the communities organize a “Farewell to the River”, which the call ‘ <i>Do wamburá</i> ’ in Embera language. They came from the most remote parts of the reservation (Sorando and Kapupudo communities) to the town of Lorica, manifesting opposition to the construction of the hydroelectric plant	Until prior to the “Farewell to the River”, many residents of the riverbank and the department were unaware of the presence of the indigenous communities, this manifestation made them visible to the world
Political organization	They are an indigenous people who inhabit the riverbanks of the Sinú, Verde and Esmeralda rivers, joined by their beliefs, language, and traditions	They achieve official recognition of their reservation, which includes all the communities from the three rivers. Governors and legal representatives of their Indigenous organization were named. The autonomy of the Catio people was consolidated to govern through their own rules	Urrea company incites a political-administrative division of the Embera Catio people and negotiates with fraction of the group the amounts of compensation and alternative projects for the communities. A process of internal division and struggle for power and recognition as the highest authority was produced
Others			The world recognized the autonomy and freedoms of the indigenous people and expresses solidarity with the Embera cause. Great indigenous political leaders surged, who become targets of illegal groups. Many of these leaders are missing or have been killed

Indigenous cause, as pointed out by Kimy Pernia (missing leader) when explaining the importance of the Canadian government support: "there we were hosted by senators and people from high government who listened closely to our claims..., while here in this country the governments do not have ears for our problems..."

Nevertheless, this male leadership marked the history of the Embera Catio indigenous people against the armed conflict, given that they became targets for the illegal armed groups, who controlled the territory or were in favor of the construction of the hydroelectric plant. The Indigenous people were caught in the cross fire, and for this reason many are missing, several were threatened and many others tortured and killed. This contributed to changes in the structure of the family group and in the role of women within the indigenous organization. They went from being disenfranchised individuals to leading government and authority processes and reclaiming a preponderant role in decision making.

Another aspect worth highlighting is the Urrea intromission into the political organization of the Indigenous authorities; initially, they were a single large Embera Catio reservation, but when they started the process of negotiation and agreement with the company, already evident divisions within the Indigenous organization merely deepened,

which favored the agreement between Urrea enterprise and the Indigenous faction that decided to separate from the rest of its people. By 2005, the Embera Catio territory had been divided into five Indigenous reservations, the largest of which was the Embera Catio Indigenous reservation from Alto Sinu, with whom this research was conducted, and which has 21 Indigenous communities.

Conclusions and recommendations

The discussion of the results revealed that while some effects were positive for the Embera Catio Indigenous communities (political and organizational enhancement, for example), but most of its consequences seriously affected the social and cultural structure (sacred concerns) of the Indigenous people. Other negative consequences of the construction of the dam have been the effect associated with prostitution and alcoholism, derived from the financial compensation provided to “compensate” for the environmental damages caused in the flooded area of the reservation, and although not everything having to do with this indemnity is bad, many of its effects have caused more damage than benefit.

Regarding the social aspects, it may be concluded that:

- The preponderant role played by women should be strengthened in social and political aspects, respecting

their traditions, but inviting them to seek training and get involved with the different activities that are changing for the Embera Catio people.

- Reevaluate and assess the role of the *Jaibaná* as a traditional authority and consider recovering his ancestral knowledge (wisdom) through the “creation of schools for Jaibanás”, which involve children and young members of the community in their customs, which seeks to not only reestablish land management, but also retakes the course of the Embera Catio spiritual world.
- Given that it is not feasible to avoid the payment of the financial compensation, there will have to be mechanisms established to contribute knowledge in managing financial resources, thereby, looking to educate the community about the concept of savings.
- Seek support from programs in education, culture, social enhancement, healthcare, nutrition, and gender perspective.

Regarding the political aspects, it must be pointed out that:

- The visibility of Embera Catio people must be exploited by recovering the bonds of trust with governments and partner organizations to uphold the legislation that protects them and prevent its continued violation by the enterprise and the National Government.
- It is necessary to exploit the political and social situations and maintain the conviction with respect to the demands for their rights as an Indigenous people.
- The human capacity of the group should be promoted, given its great potential in organizational terms, as well as the emergence of new leaders, men and women, who support the restructuring process of Catio people.
- Seek to strengthen the internal organization, its autonomy and governance, and try to restore the broken ties with other local Indigenous governments, looking to retake the course of a single Indigenous political structure.
- Reorient the Embera Catio Life Plan (Ethno-development Plan or *Jenene Plan*), through monitoring the adaptation processes of the socio-geographic conditions.
- Consolidate organizational processes of local autonomy and government.

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