

# Murderous returns: armed violence, suicide and exhumation in the Emberá Katío economy of death (Chocó and Antioquia, Colombia)

Anne Marie Losonczy Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes  
alosonczy1956@gmail.com

## Abstract

Since the early 1990s, armed actors have invaded territories in the Chocó and Antioquia departments of Colombia, inhabited by Afro-Colombians and Indians whose collective rights in these territories had recently been legally recognised. Based on long-term fieldwork among the Emberá Katío, this article examines social, cosmological and ritual alterations and re-organisation around violent death. Following a national policy of post-conflict reparations, public exhumations and identifications of human remains reveal new local modes of understanding and administration. In particular, suicide, hitherto completely unknown to the Emberá, broke out in a multitude of cases, mostly among the youth. Local discourse attributes this phenomenon to the number of stray corpses resulting from the violence, who are transformed into murderous spirits which shamans can no longer control. The analysis focusses on the unprecedented articulation of a renewed eschatology, the intricate effects of an internal political reorganisation and the simultaneous inroad into their space of new forms of armed insurrectional violence. Thus the article will shed light on the emergence of a new transitional moral economy of death among the Emberá.

**Key words:** paramilitary, guerrilla, reparation, shaman, spirits

*In memoriam:*

*Italiano Dumása and Custodio, Emberá Domico, shamans from Upper Chocó*

A grey morning at the edge of a muddy-bottomed pit in March 2011, in an Emberá Katío village surrounded by a thick tropical forest on Choco's river Jurado in north-western Colombia; the exhumation team of the *fiscalía* (public prosecutor) had arrived from Medellín the day before, along with an ethnologist and a few journalists. The team was charged with carrying out an exhumation for the purpose of identifying the remains of two Emberá leaders, as well as the little son of one of the leaders and nine other indigenous people. Having been accused of collaborating with the FARC guerrilla group, they had been murdered by a paramilitary unit in 1999. Although the brother of the leaders, a survivor of the massacre, had made

an application for the exhumation and was hastily showing the team where they had been buried, he was no more willing than the village's other inhabitants to be nearby for the opening of the grave, and he refused to help with the digging. Before the open pit, a short and hurried ritual was led by an Emberá woman. It seemed improvised, and it mixed traditional funeral words and tears with prayers from popular Catholicism. Once it had finished, everyone rushed back to their homes. As they did so, they called out to the team: 'The spirit of the dead seeks conflict with the soul of the living' and 'The dead take everything'. A heavy silence fell over the site, interrupted only by the sounds of shovels and the words exchanged between the team and the improvised group of gravediggers, who were of African descent, hastily recruited from the nearest village. The team left the village before nightfall. The exhumed remains would be sent to the Medellín forensic anthropology laboratory straight away, and then returned to the families a year later.

I stayed in the village for several days to hear a few sporadic words and to rebuild, fragment by fragment, a history of a massacre similar to so many others – one that no inhabitant had ever mentioned since and that the national authorities had found out about only after the surviving brother had filed an exhumation request a few months earlier. While the brother maintained a silent and subdued attitude during the opening of the pit, the other members of the group avoided me more discreetly, until I started talking to no one in particular about my visits to other parts of Chocó, mentioning interlocutors' names and demonstrating my (basic) knowledge of the language and social customs. The women from the victims' families eventually brought up the group's confusion in whispers, being caught as they were between the need to 'pacify the spirits of the dead' and the inefficacy of traditional rituals. They then began to drip-feed the details of that August 1999 morning that had ripped apart the fabric of their existence and the meaning of their lives. As I had done during other visits since 2008, and to distinguish myself from the processes of outside agents such as state and NGO officials or journalists, I asked few questions and refrained from using recording devices or photos, taking down the words and things observed outside of Emberá individuals' presence.

These women remembered P., the surviving brother, fleeing towards the forest. Hit in the shoulder by a bullet, he jumped into the river, swam under the water and hid under a waterfall. Having stealthily returned to the village in the evening, he found only a few domestic animals. He thought that all of the villagers had been murdered. Upon reaching the nearest mestizo village the next day at dawn, he found his relatives, either living or dead. The corpses, wrapped in borrowed sheets, were awaiting a dugout canoe at the pier in order to be transported to another Emberá village further upstream for a hurried and anonymous burial by the families. The widow of one of his brothers also gave him the paramilitaries' order: never return to the village: 'It no longer exists for us: never go there again.' They moved away to the Emberá village of Dos Bocas, where the dead were hastily buried. From that moment, they would be one of the two local Emberá groups among the ten in the Jurado *municipio* that would collectively become 'internally displaced persons', on the paramilitaries' orders.<sup>1</sup> Within and around these fleeing families, who

struggled to survive and were dispersed among other indigenous villages and the outskirts of the region's towns, nobody would ever speak again of these deaths, or of the past. A community of silence seems to bind the Emberá people, whether they are senior figures of the ethnic leadership (*cabildo*) or villagers. As a result, twelve years after the killings, the *fiscalía* deemed it prudent, over and above the family's exhumation request under the Victims Act (2011), to seek the agreement of the ethnic leadership, which was reluctantly given.

The ambivalent and evasive attitude of the Emberá during this exhumation seems to be linked to a perception of a clash of temporalities,<sup>2</sup> represented here as a danger of the livings' being invaded by *bad deaths*. It reflects other accounts reported by the Colombian press of the opening up of mass graves in their lands, including those requested by the leaders of the *cabildos* themselves. This attitude contrasts with that of other rural mestizo and indigenous groups, who seem to experience the exhumation and identification of the local victims of violence as an awaited return of the bodies that could relieve uncertainty and provide an anchor for the tasks of mourning and of territorialising their memory. Beyond the harrowing ambivalence of the Colombian post-conflict context, which broad sectors of the country experience on the two simultaneous and painfully conflicting levels of locally continuing conflict and post-conflict legal and political developments, the Emberá attitude in response to the return of these dishonoured dead is linked to unprecedented reconfigurations of their collective relationship with death. This is the subject that I will examine here.

The appearance of new institutional norms on the Emberá social and cultural horizons seems to have broken the Emberá community of silence centred on their victims of multiform armed violence. For example, the *Justicia y Paz* Act of 2005 facilitates and oversees the collective demobilisation of paramilitary fighters and guerrillas through relatively short prison sentences, though it requires 'full confession and reparation' in return. Its paradoxical effect is that, along with the victims' families and human rights organisations, the demobilised prisoners have come to make up a significant element of the informants of the new 'exhumation unit' of the *fiscalía nacional* through being charged with locating mass graves and pits in Colombia's rural regions. The other cornerstone of transitional justice, the Victims and Restitution of Lands Act of 2011, has made the exhumation and identification of victims the main lever for speeding up the return of lands that had been occupied by illegal armed actors to the inhabitants who fled their violence. It also offers an idiom through which the traumatic repercussions of the violent events can be voiced and given legitimacy in the national and international spheres. Many ethnic leaders view the issue of exhuming and identifying the victims as guaranteeing a return to the abandoned territories and access to the financial resources of the public policy of reparation, in order to resume community life. They are therefore most often behind requests for exhumation and sometimes put pressure on the relatives of the victims to encourage them to support the requests.

The eruption two decades ago, within the previously isolated indigenous social worlds, of unprecedented forms and scales of violence – such as torture, rape, massacres, forced recruitment of children and disappearance – can be read as a *chain*

*of events* that has produced a fracture in the meaning of the world's order, paving the way for new modes of understanding.<sup>3</sup> Exhumations, being the return of these dead persons under pressure and through external agency, have brought about a new cognitive rupture. This in turn has produced effects of meaning that shape emerging practices and ritualisations that, in turn, have tended to migrate into the relational particularities of the interface between victims' family members, institutional actors and experts.

Over the decades, the entry of armed actors fighting for resources and zones of passage in territories that are now recognised to be collectively owned by Afro-Colombians and indigenous groups has produced devastating and deadly effects, and created a large corpus of documentary information produced by anthropologists, legal experts, NGOs and the national and international media. They have reported and denounced massacres; torture; disappearances; destruction of villages, fields and livestock; travel bans; abduction of young people for armed combat or prostitution; and the consumption of illicit drugs, which have caused ruptures in the *resguardos* and mass flight to the anonymity of cities. They have also denounced the effects of the activity of multinationals that have exploited mineral and forest resources or undertaken intensive agricultural colonisation that has 'encircled' and shrunk indigenous lands. They have attested to displaced indigenous people's deprivation, starvation and poverty and reported on the NGO-backed efforts of many Indian organisations to maintain or rebuild community links and recover lands. In contrast, the question of the cosmological and ritual reconfiguration and reorientation of practices and discourses related to death that were caused by the upsurge of unprecedented modes and degrees of killing in indigenous societies by new actors has stimulated barely any analysis. This article therefore proposes to examine the emergence of a new Emberá moral economy of death via the unprecedented connection between traditional eschatology, the joint and overlapping effects of an internal political reorganisation based on legal norms emanating from the state, and the concomitant entry of new forms of insurrectionary armed violence into the Emberá space.

### The Emberá social archipelago: from warriors to victims

The Emberá societies of Chocó and Antioquia<sup>4</sup> live in a historically interethnic environment with groups of descendants from African slaves and mestizo villages.<sup>5</sup> These societies are characterised by a long-standing dialectal fragmentation; high mobility and intra- and interregional expansion; a shamanistic system that is represented as fundamentally ambivalent and often feared, which creates constant internal divisions; and their production of shamanistic carved benches, body art, basketry, necklaces and staffs, as well as shamanistic songs. All of these elements attest to the historical porosity of these societies in terms of diverse extra-ethnic cultural influences.

Legislation arising out of Colombia's new constitution of 1991 has imposed on the political diversity of indigenous groups a single entity of collective territoriality, the *resguardo*, and a single body of political authority, the *cabildo*. Both of

these are reformulations based on colonial administrative entities. Basing ethnic legitimacy on the emergence of a new internal political hierarchy, the fixing of territorial arrangements and a concentration of living space has hindered traditional Emberá modes of resolving conflicts through mobility and residential atomisation. As a result, old internal conflicts – between young and old and between men and women – labelled as new, have been reactivated, exacerbating a long-standing but low-intensity factionalism. Moreover, the institutional proliferation of interethnic contacts, controlled and formalised by the Indian organisations, has strengthened interethnic rivalries over the appropriation of national and international financial resources and contributed to the emergence of ethnic, regional and national hierarchies in terms of supra-local prestige and visibility.

Their history-focused mythical stories<sup>6</sup> depict the Emberá as constantly mobile and active players who have deployed multiple initiatives and strategies with regard to contact with different representatives of alterity (Kuna Indians, Afro-Colombians, missionaries and traders): lightning attacks, negotiation, trade, avoidance, defence and fleeing. In conjunction with a mobilisation of identity, political and territorial reorganisation with a view to obtaining legal recognition of minority status has created new school programmes and produced new forms of political rituals – for example, ‘cultural-empowerment meetings’ and ‘ancestral-knowledge workshops’. Within these frameworks, a new teleological reading of Emberá history is transmitted by native teachers, ethnic leaders and ‘assessors’: lawyers, government officials, NGO personnel and anthropological activists. Within this reading, past and present extra-ethnic contacts all appear as an overwhelming and lethal antagonism. In this society, whose traditional political organisation values kinfolk autonomy and territorial expansion through residential dispersion, this new reading brings out an increasingly victim-based vision of the collective self that has been reinforced by the multiform insurgent violence experienced by the Emberá since the early 1990s. Although this violence has affected women, children and the elderly in indigenous groups everywhere, including those belonging to the Emberá of Chocó and Antioquia, a significant number of killings and disappearances have involved ethnic leaders.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, a policy of control, enforced compliance and sanctions has often been deployed by the young leaders of the Emberá *cabildos* in response to shamans and their rituals. Suspected and often accused of witchcraft by members of their local group, they are sometimes perceived as dangerous and ineffective in the face of the threat of armed violence and diseases attributed to new contacts. The *cabildos*’ policy of backing the diffuse community suspicions, which curtails shamanistic legitimacy, has contributed to a substantial decrease in vocational appeal to young people. Furthermore, the mass flight of Emberá in response to armed conflict, their reduction to urban begging and impoverishment and recent waves of suicides of young Emberá in rural and urban areas have projected an image in the national media of ‘displaced indigenous people’ or ‘indigenous beggars’. This image places them at the bottom of the scale in the emerging hierarchy of Indian societies, from the point of view of both institutions and neighbouring Indian groups.

### Malfunctioning ritual manufacturing of death: Emberá bad deaths

‘Caragabí created all the Emberá; there are no new ones. The Emberá will never come to an end; they will always be reborn.’ With these words, the telling on a moonless night of the story of one of the Emberá origin myths by Italiano Dumása, the Emberá Shaman of the River Capá in Upper Chocó, came to an end.<sup>8</sup>

For the Emberá, a child’s conception is determined by the ‘rising’ of an anonymous deceased person’s soul – one who died a ‘good death’, received a ritual burial and found a place in the World Below, a mythical realm ‘across land and water’ – into the body of a young woman during the act of love. But to go down into the World Below, a slow agony – a long prostration to which this thinking attributes the virtue of ‘making the body heavy as the earth’ – must ‘weigh down the body’.<sup>9</sup> The corpse is buried in a small dugout canoe in Chocó, or wrapped in a coloured cloth in the mountainous regions, its head turned westwards. This placing of the body into the ground, which is preceded by marking the corpse with red-and-black body art and accompanied by ritual lamentations by the women, is the essential condition for a smooth passage into the World Below.

Although the Emberá Katíos of Chocó traditionally buried their dead under stilt houses, the transformation and the increased population density of their living environment – trends related to the delimitation of collective territories known as *resguardos* by the multicultural legislation – has resulted in the creation of cemeteries on the outskirts of villages. However, Emberá graves continued not to record names until recently. The singularity of the *jaure*, a vital component that animates so many bodies – animal and human alike – and an intangible mobile double represented by the shadow, is thought to be linked to its condition as a living thing: its sign and one of its carriers are the person’s own name. To contribute to the detachment of the *jaure* from the corpse – a condition of its availability to rise into a woman’s uterus and ensure Emberá reproduction – the name should be wiped away with the life of the individual. The dead person must therefore become anonymous. Pronouncing a dead person’s name means ‘reanimating’ him or her and delaying the post-mortem dissolution of his or her identity, a condition for that person’s transformation into a birth resource. It creates the risk of projecting him or her among the living in search of ‘company’, thereby turning him or her into a figure of misfortune.

The bodies of those who die a sudden or violent death in the forest or river are ‘too light’: the lack of agony and ritual burial that create ‘weightiness’ makes their descent towards the World Below an uncertain one, casting them into an intermediary space between the human world and the World Below, which in Emberá Katío geography takes the material form of caves, isolated coves and crevices in the rocks.

Although in both cases death means a dissolution of the unity between the body and the *jaure*, the Emberá distinguish a ‘good rotting’ of the body – one that makes the soul available to ‘rise’ into the womb of an expectant mother – from a sort that they describe as ‘animal’. The latter type corresponds to a body that has not been weighed down or buried, but results from a sudden or violent death which prevents

the *jaure* from separating from the corpse and from achieving the floating mobility that characterises the beings of the World Below and allows them to rise up to animate a new human in gestation. Moreover, the lack of burial exposes both body and *jaure* to intermixing and blending with the plant and animal elements of the land or water. This contact will eventually transform the dead person's *jaure* into *jaï*. The word 'spirit' is not a good translation for this term, which refers to a kind of condensation of vital energy that is an element of all living things and that can take on a human, animal or plant appearance. Its capacity to affect humans through abducting the *jaure* or penetrating a bodily organ is the cause of most diseases. The *jaï* captured by the *jaïbaná* (shaman) through attracting or fighting them are locked in shamans' *jaïdé* (*jaï* house) in the forest or in shamans' staffs. They are called up during rituals through singing, dancing and food, and they can heal the evils caused by another shaman's spirits.

However, *jaï* from bad deaths beyond shamanistic control lurk near humans. The dominant figure among this group of *jaï*, whether they are 'free' or 'imprisoned' by a *jaïbaná*, is Aribada, a name given to the spirits of dead shamans, who lead and command in their wake a very large number of spirits from anonymous bad deaths, which make up villages of *jaï*. During a shaman's initiation, the master can ritually transform them into *jaï zarra* (*jaï* warrior, *jaï* guardian) and place them in both the body of the new *jaïbaná* and one of the shaman's staffs. Upon the shaman's death, they are free once more and often appear as jaguars. The lethal predatory danger that they represent to humans can be avoided only by another shaman 'imprisoning' them again. The *jaïbaná*, who are all held to be 'eager' to increase their power permanently, enrich their stock of *jaï* by capturing free ones, buying spirits or even seizing a human *jaure* and turning it into a *jaï* by feeding and familiarising it in their *jaïdé* (*jaï*'s house in the forest). If a ritual urgently carried out by a rival shaman is unable to retrieve the *jaure* that has been 'concealed' in this way before it is transformed into a *jaï*, this loss of the soul, a feared element of shamanistic witchcraft, will lead to a quick death. Acquiring *jaï* through this form of witchcraft – a desire that all shamans are accused of harbouring – is the basis of the traditionally ambivalent representation of Emberá *jaïbaná* and of the halo of fear and suspicion that it surrounds.

Soul (*jaure*) and spirit (*jaï*) therefore appear to be interdependent and linked by a transformative relationship. Whereas the movement of *jaure* from good deaths between the World Below and the human world is the basis of the social reproduction of the living, bad deaths that have led to *jaï* beyond shamanistic control are held to become *kachirua* (mean) and to want to 'take without giving'. The relations of the living with these two post-mortem figures are part of a bigger system of reciprocal predation that is in an unstable equilibrium. The positions in terms of predators or prey of the multiplicity of spirits and of humans within this system are mobile and reversible. Shamanistic power is what ensures its positive balance for group members. As long as that power is legitimised by 'capturing' and controlling *jaï* to cure human ills and protect the group from dangers, the reproduction of human life prevails over its destruction. Evidence of this is found in the traditional perception of a lower number of accidents producing bad deaths relative to the number of births.



For *jai kachirua* – those harmful spirits from bad deaths that, while carrying inside themselves the traces of the human *jaure* that they once were, wish to capture the *jaure* of the living to ‘make themselves stronger’ – humans’ sleeping hours offer a way in. In the eyes of the Emberá, dreaming is the recurring separation of the body and the *jaure*. Its fabric is woven by autonomous wandering and meetings with various other figures. This delicate time for individual integrity is traditionally the subject of a standard learning process, through both the morning recounting of adults’ dream stories and the art of nocturnal awakenings to ‘leave the dream’.<sup>10</sup> When the dreamlike encounter of the sleeper’s *jaure* with unknown or unusual-looking humans in strange places is accompanied by pleasant visual, auditory and olfactory perceptions, which are often described in the same terms as prenuptial attraction between boys and girls, giving in to dreamlike sexual desire may mean the abduction of the *jaure* by the *jai* that has resulted from a bad death, the manifestation of which is a daytime weakening that can be lethal. But as long as the dangerous and attractive confusion between life and death is confined to the nocturnal dream space, shamanistic ritual is always effective in recovering the lost *jaure*.

### **New figures from bad death: new spirits in the village**

From the beginning of the 1990s, the multicultural regime and the neoliberal globalisation of the Colombian economy made the resources of previously isolated regions on the fringes of the national economy visible and accessible. The subsequent entry of multiform armed conflict between guerrilla movements, paramilitaries, drug traffickers and the Colombian army into these regions has since that era filled the Emberá territories with bad deaths of a new kind: the corpses of armed actors and mutilated, fragmented and abandoned remains that often result from ritualised dismemberments of the corpses carried out by the murderers.<sup>11</sup> Such a practice has remained remarkably constant since the civil war between the parties of the 1950s and continues to characterise all the violent groups now present. The dismemberments are often preceded by public killings, in which excess and hyperbole are prominent features. Furthermore, during the last two decades in many parts of the country, even burying corpses from village massacres has come to constitute an act that often makes those who carry it out the next victims. Consequently, this additional threat has heightened fear by bestrewn new figures of terror, in the form of fragmented, torn and scattered corpses, across familiar landscapes. At the same time, it expresses the prohibition of the territorialisation of the dead that funerals and burials – the traditional anchors of the business of mourning and the positive post-mortem status of the deceased – represent.

From the beginning of the 1990s, the close presence of changing armed actors who aim to recruit the young and sow mistrust among members of the community began to impose on daily life new restrictive norms that have drastically reduced Emberá mobility or transformed it into retreat. Accompanying the increase in bad deaths resulting from violence in their territory, a new phenomenon related to a reconfiguration of the traditional representation of sudden or accidental death has



emerged.<sup>12</sup> For the Emberá, the proliferation of bad deaths that have become *jai* – whether they are free or reputedly sent through the involvement of a shaman – means that their harassment spills over from the dream space of sleep into daytime life. The result is cascading attacks, called *wawamia* in Emberá and *ataques* in Spanish; these mainly affect young people, whose *jaure* is not yet sufficiently ‘compact and well fastened’.<sup>13</sup> An inopportune daytime sighting of a *jai* is supposed to trigger these attacks, an experience previously reserved only to shamans, whose training allows them to have safe and direct visual contact with spirits.

This unprecedented and pathogenic relational modality is linked with a new spirit figure. This spirit, called the *jai de la tontina* (giddiness *jai*) – its name is always said in Spanish – is described as a tall and strong man who is either *kampunia* (white) or black and who has a rope on his shoulder. It ‘harasses’ young people, particularly girls.<sup>14</sup> Convulsive attacks become widespread and are accompanied by diarrhoea, vomiting and fever. They alternate with prostration and spectacular manifestations of anger, crying and plaintive words, which impact on the reserve and emotional mastery which are cornerstones of the Emberá ethos. They may lead to a state of *aburrimiento* (depression, boredom) that causes people to ‘think badly’, separate themselves from others, refuse to eat and speak, sing in an unknown language and sleep for increasingly long periods. The danger of this state is conceived as the transfer of the individual’s life into dreams. Pushed by the *jai* into progressive confinement within a dream space populated by the victims of bad deaths, he or she is captured in it through their charm and harassment.

The press has seized on the topic, shamans have been pressured by *cabildos*, and families have struggled to curb the attacks. At the same time, shamans are suspected of having instigated the attacks to punish young people’s extra-ethnic sexual relations. Their already maligned reputation has been affected by Emberá families’ ambivalence between considering these relations as a danger to their community life and their ‘culture’, on the one hand, and concern for their children, on the other. As a result, shamanistic legitimacy has become increasingly damaged, while Evangelism among Afro-Colombian or mestizo neighbours has begun to gain followers in many *resguardos* affected by suicides.

The *jai* have turned against us. No *jaibaná* can control them any longer. We are victims of our dead.<sup>15</sup>

Seven recent Emberá suicides, six of which were by hanging, have been attributed by the *jaibaná* of Chocó to evil spirits caused by the unburied dead of the armed conflict that has unfolded throughout the region. The village of Unión Emberá Katio on the River Salaquí has just built a large cross made of *jaguá*, the sacred tree of the Emberá, to protect them from evil.<sup>16</sup>

From the beginning of the new millennium, the phenomenon of suicides – completely unprecedented within the Emberá Katio world – arrived in waves. It has continued until today. From *resguardo* to *resguardo*, village to village and region to region, and even on the outskirts of the towns where many Emberá families took refuge after fleeing armed violence, cases of suicides that are a repeat of the

same scenario proliferate. And then, after a lull of several months, they reappear in another village and another region.<sup>17</sup> Numerous young people aged between ten and thirty, most of them young girls, have hanged themselves on the beam of their house with a *paruma*, a piece of cloth used for the traditional skirt.

The Emberá language does not have an equivalent word for 'suicide'. Stories use the term 'to kill oneself'. Following the first deaths, the indigenous authorities further strengthened their control over and the regulations on *jaibaná* therapeutic ritual, imposing *cabildo* 'certification' on *jaibaná* or joint ritual activity with other shamans and requesting them in an increasingly imperious manner. The powerlessness of *jaibaná* to prevent suicides has further contributed to increasing suspicions of evil spells upon them. According to numerous testimonies, in a number of *resguardos* they have been forced to flee if they have not been killed or bathed in a decoction made of a complex combination of plants that is intended to remove their shamanistic power. Neither *jaibaná* invited from distant Emberá villages nor the Evangelical presence, particularly in the mountainous regions of Antioquia, has been able to stop the suicides for long. The Evangelists frame their interpretation in terms of divine punishment for sins and demonise the *jai*. They offer preventive public exorcism rituals that belong to a matrix of 'spiritual war'.

Even more so than in the case of external violence, the ethnographic approach to suicides must deal with silence and what is left unsaid by young people and adults – intense expressions of powerful and held-back emotions. As days pass, and with some knowledge of the Emberá language, being able to capture and hastily intercept whispered and scattered words and phrases as well as gestures and signs used as means of expression, the paradoxical omnipresence of this phenomenon takes shape. It is one that telescopes time between the past when suicides have already been carried out and the fear of others to come. A reminder of the ethnographer's presence in the region since the late 1970s is what seems to have finally allowed older interlocutors to recall the unprecedented and not 'ancestral' nature of the suicides and even to be able to justify, in their view, outside intervention.

After observing that neutralising local shamans had not curbed the phenomenon, most Emberá Katio *cabildos* eventually appealed to outside institutions, agreeing to break the intracommunity silence surrounding these events. National and international NGOs (including Oxfam and the Red Cross) and national institutions with substantial financial resources have sent their agents, social workers, psychologists, nurses and doctors only to *resguardos* from which armed actors have temporarily moved away. A large number of Emberá villages would therefore barely receive any visits from these institutions.

The institutional approach first assigns suicides to the area of 'public health' and classifies them in the category of 'mental disorders', sometimes associating them with new marijuana use and sometimes even with crack-cocaine use by young Emberá who work as labourers on farms and in nearby mestizo villages.

Some programmes, sometimes supervised by the state agency for child protection, then go into greater depth in three areas: psychosocial support, productive projects and political strengthening of the *cabildo*. The first involves organising workshops for community meetings, individual psychotherapy sessions and

mutual-aid groups, supplemented by campaigns for medical treatment of common diseases. It was probably in these short but intense interactions with biomedicine that the term 'epidemic' was appropriated by the Emberá to talk about the spread of suicide. The adoption of this term projects a new dimension, namely contagion, onto the phenomenon.

The second component provides financial and technical assistance for revitalising agriculture, supporting ethnic crafts and local schooling, and even building football pitches and community houses. With regard to the third element, beyond an effect of a supralocal legitimisation of the leaders, holding meetings between representatives of the institutions and leaders of the *cabildos* has the aim of producing a 'life plan' – a multiyear local development project intended to reflect the majority needs of the inhabitants – authorised by the institutional representatives. The implementation of these activities, as well as the on-going presence of outsiders, who are viewed both as material and symbolic resources and as buffer figures between the residential group and the armed actors, calms the waves of suicides for a while and seems to mitigate conflicts between men and women, families, and generations inside the *resguardos*.<sup>18</sup> However, tensions and suicides reappear, sometimes even during the programmes, but more often following the end of the outside actors' short presence or a new arrival of armed actors.<sup>19</sup>

Post-death accounts given by the relatives of people who have committed suicide continue to call upon new figures from violent bad deaths that have become uncontrollable spirits as a result of shamanistic rituals, as well as upon daytime invasions of these in the social space of the villages. However, 'killing oneself' constitutes a new outcome of *wawamia* (attacks)<sup>20</sup> and *aburrimiento*, a dread of the dangerously attractive dead who want to take the living away with them. The act occurs as a result of the experience of another relational form that is unprecedented between *jai* and human: the entry of the former into the body of the latter and its progressive taking possession of both the body and the *jaure*. It produces a new pathological element designated by a term that comes from outside vocabulary: *locura*, madness, for which there is no word in Emberá. It is resistant to the therapeutic ritual of *jaibaná*. Far from capturing and hiding the *jaure* or injuring the body's organs as in the traditional aetiological model of reversible diseases, the new *jai* merge with the sick person and push him or her to the act of self-murder in ways that blur the boundaries of the Emberá universe. Using the traditional skirt as a lethal weapon and projecting violence inside the home by carrying out the hanging on the central beam reinforce the collective perception of an invasion of the cultural reserve by this element of deadly violence. Moreover, the outcome of this possession, violent death, contributes to increasing the number of local victims of bad deaths. These in turn are able to invade the Emberá social space and body.

The upsurge of this lethal relational face-to-face encounter between spirits and humans is linked to a transformation of the representation of the collective self. Having been partners in a relationship with the spirits that was once mediated by protective shamanistic power, the Emberá have become its victims. In this process, the delegitimising of the shamanistic institution has gone hand in hand with reducing the traditional multiplicity and polyphonic profile of the *jai*. They first of

all tended to blend into the new category of bad deaths resulting from armed violence. This category then appeared to crystallise in the single figure of a new spirit, described in the 1990s as the giddiness *jai*. In the new millennium, it became *como paraco* (like a paramilitary), dressed in the green trousers of a uniform and military boots.<sup>21</sup> The representation of this figure, whose new agency can haunt, ‘charm’ and then possess people to push them to suicide, seems to merge the profile of executioners with the category of shamanistic spirits resulting from their victims. This category, reconfigured to accommodate the deaths by armed violence, has been demonised through Evangelical influence. In this way, executioners simultaneously enter the heart of Emberá corporeality and social space. Once internalised, this dangerous telescoping creates the risk of an indefinite reproduction of violent destruction.

### **Unearth and identify: the new economy of death as a moral economy?**

The final metamorphosis, which reveals the symbolic dynamics of this process, appears to be the exhumation and identification of victims’ remains, something which explains the deep ambivalence that the Emberá feel towards them. For the Emberá, exposing the cadavers and bringing the remains of corpses up to the world of the living means duplicating their fearsome effectiveness as bad deaths produced by violence. Exhumation accelerates their transformation into *jai* beyond shamanistic control, which are formidable carriers of death. In addition, the names of the victims, resurrected by legal identification and registered during the return of their remains to the family, further contribute to ‘reanimating’ them and to projecting them into the world of the living as elements of a contagious death. From the Emberá perspective, exhuming and identifying victims only feeds suicidal self-destruction.

A true circular economy of violent death has therefore emerged. Far from feeding the reproduction of the living as souls from good deaths do, *jaure* victims produce killer *jai* that invade the Emberá dream and social space, pushing children and young people to kill themselves and to join them through violence. From this standpoint, public acts such as exhumations that stem from the external logic of humanitarian reason and are supposed to symbolically mark the end of the armed violence that produces bad deaths are therefore transformed into a means through which killer *jai* are produced.<sup>22</sup>

On a sociological level, this economy of death rests on a common physical destruction and a great social weakening of two rival authority entities: the recent and political figure of leaders and the traditional figure of shamans. The image of the former has become ambiguous and equivocal through their post-mortem transformation into predatory figures. Meanwhile, the traditional perception of the latter as being ambivalent and dangerous has been extended to include shamans’ inability to control the damage caused by the new *jai*, which are often perceived as evidence of their complicity with the murderous spirits, leading to their being repudiated.

According to accounts from numerous ethnographic and ethno-historical works, suicide was absent from the Emberá postcolonial trajectory.<sup>23</sup> A historically unprecedented phenomenon, its cascading appearance in their social space amounts to a rupture in meaning that requires unprecedented collective elaboration. But for a thread of meaning to be rewoven within the Emberá microcosm, it seems necessary for it to be formulated in culturally familiar and non-borrowed terms that form part of implicit local knowledge. Accordingly, a reconfiguring of the *jai* and their modes of relationship with humans continues to associate them with spirits, the figures of a familiar alterity. The new agency assigned to them allows choices, acts and unusual or abnormal desires, including self-inflicted death, to be justified. Responsibility for these acts is attributed to an external superhuman force whose power is imposed on them, and so is no longer borne by humans.

This vicious circle created by the interlocking of violent acts is related to the entry of an external logic of massacre into the heart of Emberá cultural intimacy, within which it takes the form of youth suicides seen as murders diverted towards the self and blamed on bad deaths that act as killer spirits. Is this fracture in the succession of generations linked to the impossibility of revenge, as negative reciprocity against armed violence?

However, the Emberá appropriation of the term ‘epidemic’ to capture the expansive, contagious and unpredictable nature of suicides creates a gateway to the interpretations of the phenomenon produced by certain external agents, social workers and anthropologists. These discourses, which are sometimes challenged by the *cabildos*, link suicides to the strong internal conflicts within local Emberá groups, which take the form of deep intergenerational divisions between shamans, men and women, and leaders and members of the *resguardo*. These conflicts, exacerbated by the isolation and the poverty produced by the presence of violent actors, may disrupt the groups. Such interpretations, which are relayed by the press, reflect the experience of daily life in many *resguardos*. But above all they offer a new supralocal idiom for discussing the issue. It is an alternative to the community’s silence and its tendency to leave things unspoken, which are traditional strategies of self-defence. Moreover, these interpretations hint at a template for exiting the circular economy of death through social voluntarism in human hands. Accordingly, these discourses, certain elements of which are contextually called upon by the Emberá, reject suicide as a culturally accepted strategy in response to adversity. However, they leave in the shadows the background to this *chain of events*, which indigenous unravelling, by contrast, addresses: this is the identification of triggering nonhuman agents and their modes of action.

At the same time, new composite rituals have been emerging to try to ‘pacify’ the dead who have been exhumed, identified and returned. During the opening of graves and the reburying, these combine, often in an improvised way, elements of shamanistic *parafernalia* and traditional funeral lamentations and prayers from popular Afro-Colombian or mestizo Catholicism with an evocation of neo-Indian elements such as the *Madre Tierra*. The initiative here is often taken by the mothers of the victims. This new prominent role contrasts with their traditionally more

discreet place in funeral rites. There is also a funerary ritualisation of leaders' political discourses summoning up commemorative formulations from mestizo culture. Moreover, a number of older interlocutors are eager to recall what in their eyes is evidence of a continued 'rising' by *jaure* from good deaths: the recent growth in the number of Emberá siblings, something that many *cabildos*' statements have encouraged and valued in the name of 'defending the culture and identity'.

Is this Emberá economy of death, articulated around victim figures that have become predatory without limitations or reciprocity, part of a moral economy? If this latter notion is defined as 'the production, distribution, circulation and use of moral feelings, emotions and values in a society',<sup>24</sup> it is clear that the profile, the meaning and the social and narrative uses of new bad deaths that turn into *jai* with unprecedented agency convey and reveal not only a new representation of the collective self in victim-based terms, but also a management of values and emerging forms of emotional expression that are linked to it. But the coexistence and contextual activation of heterogeneous and contradictory discursive and pragmatic registers that configure Emberá cognition of new forms of death and mourning also serve to support emerging modes of collective reparation and resilience. Within these, the intervention of external third-party actors and language seems essential to serve as mediators and buffers between the Emberá and their spirits. A *moral economy of transition* is therefore emerging.

In this tragic tangle of violent acts that confuses the ethnographer and questions the conceptual tools of anthropology, the new Emberá relationship with death prompts an examination of the ability of these endangered societies to invent forms, functions and new meanings for their spiritual repertoire out of traditional cosmological representations, by receiving new figures into it. These configurations are perhaps better able to express and account for the unexplained and the contradictory than are compassionate discourses from the national and global spheres. They may provide completely new remedies that allow the moral economy of these societies to yet be rebuilt.

## Notes

- 1 According to the guiding principles of the United Nations, 'Internally displaced persons are individuals or groups who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their home or usual place of residence because of armed conflict, situations of widespread violence or violations of ... human rights and who have not crossed a state's internationally recognized borders. ... Internally displaced persons remain citizens of the state and are entitled to its protection.' After bitter debates, and despite part of the political class's reluctance, Colombia incorporated these principles into its Victims Act in 2011. It should be recalled that between 1997 and late 2013, 5,185,000 displaced persons were recorded: indigenous people and Afro-Colombians are overrepresented within this figure. URL: [www.acnur.org/t3](http://www.acnur.org/t3) (accessed 17 December 2015).
- 2 K. Verdery, *The Political Life of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1999).

- 3 A. Bensa and E. Fassin, 'Les sciences sociales face à l'événement', *Terrain*, 38 (2002), 5–20.
- 4 The Emberá, who are also called the Eperä and have been known as *chocoos* since the colonial era, are one of Colombia's largest indigenous groups. Although these historical documents attest to their ancient and remarkable demographic stability, strong population growth has increased their numbers, as is the case with many other native peoples since the 1980s. As a result, the two major dialectical subgroups (the *Katíos* and the *Chamí*) number around seventy thousand people. See *Censo Nacional de Población*, DANE, 2005; their residential groups, now organised in *resguardos*, live on the Pacific coast of western Colombia; in the jungle region of Chocó; in the mountains of Antioquia; and on the plains of the Córdoba region (the *Katío*), Risaralda and the Valle del Cauca (the *Chamí*). However, their expansion has also led them to the Amazon (Putumayo region), to north-western Ecuador and to Darién in Panama. The Emberá categorise themselves into *Dobidá* (inhabitants of rivers and tropical forests), *Eyabidá* (inhabitants of deforested plains), *Oibidá* (inhabitants of the Andean forests) and *Purabidá* (inhabitants of the coastline). Since around twenty years ago, many Emberá families have lived in the suburbs and neighbourhoods of certain towns.
- 5 A. M. Losonczy, *Les Saints et la forêt: Rituel, société et figures de l'échange entre Noirs et Indiens Emberà (Choco, Colombie)* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 1997).
- 6 This is referred to in C. Pinto, *Los Indios katios: Su cultura y su lengua. I.–II.* (Medellín, Compas, 1978); M. Pardo, *Zroara Nebura. Literatura oral emberá por Floresmiro Dogirama* (Bogotá, Centro Cultural Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, 1985); G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, 'Notas etnográficas sobre los indios del Choco', *Revista Colombiana de Antropología*, 8 (1960): 73–158; A. M. Losonczy, 'Le Destin des guerriers. Aggression guerrière et agression chamanique chez les Emberà du Choco', *Journal des Américanistes*, 71 (1986), 157–83.
- 7 For the period between 1984 and 2014, the National Registry of Victims recorded 6.2 million Colombian victims of the different forms of violence (massacres, disappearances, forced displacement, landmines, kidnappings and abductions) that characterise the multiform armed conflict. These abuses relate primarily to poor rural populations and Afrodescendant and Indian groups. The National Indigenous Organization of Colombia's 2008 report puts the number of Indians killed between 1998 and 2008 at approximately 1,980. According to the region's Red Cross bodies, among the Emberá Katíos of Chocó and Antioquia (the subjects of this study), the number of persons who were murdered and disappeared before, during and after this period is in the hundreds, with ethnic leaders overrepresented within the figures.
- 8 See A. M. Losonczy, 'Le Nom et l'origine: constitution de l'identité individuelle chez les Emberà du Choco', *Civilisations*, 37 (1987), 229–48. Between 1986 and 1990 on the Capá, Mumbarado, Tutunendo, Neгуá and Bebará rivers in Middle and Upper Atrato (Chocó), I collected the first ethnographic materials on Emberá representations of birth, death and post-mortem fate. In this region where armed violence had not yet broken out, I was able to attend several funeral rituals. Between 1993 and 2006, the presence of multiple armed actors in Chocó and



Antioquia prevented on-going ethnographic research. The research began again in 2008 through successive visits to communities in Chigorodó, Murindó and Guapa Alta (Antioquia), and then to Unión Emberá Katío on the River Salaquí (Lower Chocó) and to Jurado. In 2013, I made contact with Emberá families from Chocó and Valle who had taken refuge in the La Favorita neighbourhood of Bogotá. I was also able to consult the photographic archive of the forensic team of the public prosecutor in Medellín, as well as the archives of the newspaper *El Colombiano*, which is also based in Medellín.

9 *Ibid.*

- 10 A. M. Losonczy, *Viaje y violencia: la paradoja chamánica emberá* (Bogotá, Universidad Externado de Colombia, 2006).
- 11 A. M. Losonczy, 'Violence sociale et ritualisation de la mort et du deuil en Colombie', in Y. Goudineau (ed.), 'Sociétés dans la guerre', Special issue: *Autre Part*, 26 (2003), 187–99; M. V. Uribe, *Antropología de la inhumanidad: ensayo sobre el terror en Colombia* (Bogotá, Editorial Norma, 2004).
- 12 T. Roelens and T. Bolanos, 'La Revolucionera de los jaïs', in M. V. Uribe and E. Restrepo (eds), *Antropología en la modernidad* (Bogotá: ICANH, 1997), pp. 167–92.
- 13 In Unión Emberá Katío in 2009, I learned of a mythical tale that seems to be a recent creation. It is about an Emberá village whose entire population are affected by convulsive attacks due to the intrusion of a 'bad jaí'. A *jaïbaná* arrives and cures the entire village through a long therapeutic ceremony that calls upon 'good jaí'. See M. Tobon Yagari and P. Tobon Yagari, 'Estudio de caso: Suicidios de jóvenes emberá', in *Suicidios adolescentes en pueblos indígenas: tres estudios de caso* (Panama City, UNICEF-IWGIA, 2012).
- 14 C. A. Hernández, *Ideas y prácticas ambientales del pueblo emberá del Choco* (Bogotá: COLCULTURA-CEREC, 1995).
- 15 Shaman quoted in R. I. Sepúlveda López de Mesa, 'Vivir las ideas, idear la vida: adversidad, suicidio y flexibilidad en el ethos de los Emberá y Wounaan de Riosucio, Choco', in C. A. Uribe (ed.), 'Creencia y verdad en los sistemas terapéuticos contemporáneos', Special issue, *Antipoda*, 6 (2008), 245–70.
- 16 J. C. Herrera, *El Tiempo* newspaper, 12 October 2003.
- 17 Although suicides primarily affecting young people appeared sporadically at the start of the new millennium among Colombia's other indigenous peoples, such as the Wounaan and the Kuna, neighbours of the Emberá Katío, as well as the Tucano, Desana and Cubeo of Vaupés in the Colombian Amazon (see R. D. R. Castro, 'Suicidios indígenas espantan al Vaupés: en cuatro años 24 jóvenes se han ahorcado', *El Tiempo* [Villavicencio], 5 August 2009), the recurrence, growth and mass nature of the phenomenon among the Emberá, particularly in Chocó, Antioquia and Córdoba, explain the institutional and media attention that it has received. However, there are no statistics that provide a total of the number of victims in this Indian group. There are at most a few estimates from social workers and anthropologists (including those grouped in the Colectivo Jenzara), and they concern specific *resguardos*. On this basis, the figure of around one hundred Emberá Katío suicides within the past fifteen years may be put forward.

- 18 Sepúlveda Lopez de Mesa, 'Vivir las ideas, idear la vida'.
- 19 Yagari & Yagari, 'Estudio de caso'.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Sepúlveda Lopez de Mesa, 'Vivir las ideas, idear la vida'.
- 22 D. Fassin, *La Raison humanitaire: une histoire morale du temps présent* (Paris, Gallimard/Seuil, 2010).
- 23 H. Wassen, 'Notes on Southern Groups of Choco Indians in Colombia', *Etnologiska Studier*, 19 (1952), 35–182; G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, 'Notas etnográficas sobre los indios del Choco', *Revista Colombiana de Antropología*, 8 (1960), 73–158; G. Stipek Jr., 'Relaciones inter-étnicas en el Chocó colombiano', *Revista Universidad de Antioquia*, 1:193 (1975), 79–94; S. E. Isacson, *Indios cimarrones del Choco (Colombia)* (Gothenburg, Etnografiska Museet, Arstick, 1973).
- 24 Fassin, *La Raison humanitaire*.