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"We are fine here":

Ngäbe Perspectives on Urban Living, Poverty, and Well-being in Bocas del Toro, Panama

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Abstract

This dissertation explores urban indigenous notions of poverty and living well among Ngäbe residents of Bocas del Toro, Panama. I examine how these notions relate to Ngäbe urban living conditions and their endeavours to live well in the urban environment. Based on 16 months of ethnographic research among indigenous families in the mangrove neighbourhood of La Solución, I demonstrate that Ngäbe ideals of how to live well are based on indigenous notions of generosity, cooperation, hard work, and autonomy. The act of cultivating vegetables, in particular, embodies the values that underpin Ngäbe visions of the proper way to live and of what constitutes a good life. In the urban environment where cultivation is not possible, Ngäbe individuals express the ideals imbued in cultivation practices by emphasising household autonomy, by cooperating and sharing with neighbours, and by nostalgically invoking the *finca* (farmland) and the way of life it allows.

My research contributes to the anthropology of indigenous urbanisation by analysing how urban Ngäbe residents' notions of poverty and living well shape and are shaped by their experiences and inter-ethnic encounters in the urban environment. As I demonstrate in this thesis, hierarchical inter-ethnic relations and discriminatory political approaches engender experiences of precarity, discrimination, and marginalisation among urban Ngäbe residents. These experiences challenge Ngäbe residents in their abilities to live well. Yet, while urban Ngäbe households are commonly reported to live in conditions of poverty, Ngäbe individuals themselves often reject the idea that this is the case. Although urban Ngäbe residents often lament about the urban inconveniences and challenges they face, they largely focus on their personal responsibility and endeavours to live well within their given circumstances.

My ethnographic narrative offers an engagement with indigenous Ngäbe voices and perspectives that is often missing from government assessments of urban indigenous living conditions. I provide an account that prioritises local experiences and the political and social processes that structure local livelihoods. This perspective from the grassroots illustrates how conditions and understandings of poverty are socially and politically generated. In this respect, my dissertation contributes to key debates in development and post-development theory. I argue that an externally imposed identification of Ngäbe as poor disregards indigenous perspectives and masks the unequal power structures and political approaches that create their adverse conditions.

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Glossary

Balsería	A large multiple-day event widely practised by Ngabe in the past, during which men threw sticks at each other's legs in a ritual game
Bobre	poor (Ngäbere)
Brindis	A drink, snack, or meal offered to a house visitor
Buchú	Small banana; the main staple for Ngäbe on the coast
Casa humilde	Humble or poor house
Chakara	A bag woven from plant fibre (or plastic strings) and used primarily to carry harvested vegetables or other food items
Chapear	To weed with a machete
Chicha	A drink made from (fermented) peach palm fruit or maize
Comarca	Indigenous territory recognised as such by the Panamanian State.
Conjunto	An event with live music at which people can dance
De bajos recursos	Poor; having fewer resources. Literally: of low resources
Directiva	An elected leadership committee which represents the residents of the neighbourhood of La Solución to the state and other non-residents
Finca	Farmland or agricultural land. For Ngäbe it is the land that they use for cultivation and often a reference to their 'home'
Gente humilde	Poor people
Humilde	Humble, poor
Humildemente	Humbly; with humility and generosity
Invasiones	Invading lands
Jira	A slender palm tree (*socratea exorrhiza),* traditionally used to make houses. The interior part of the tree trunk was (and is still in some places) used to sleep on

Junta	A collaborative labour gathering organised by one household requiring assistance to complete a particular task (e.g. clearing a field, constructing a house, or a large harvest)
Kreng	Laziness (Ngäbere)
Krun	Balsería (Ngäbere)
Muelle	Dock or pier. In the case of La Solución, it generally refers to a boardwalk or wooden walkway
Mestizo	Of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry
Michila	A Sweet drink made from mashed ripened banana and coconut milk
Páramo de comida	Food shortage
Pereza	Laziness
Pifá	Peach palm fruit
Pobre	Poor
Precarismo	Squatting
Precarista	Squatter
Ti a bobre	I am poor (Ngäbere)
Verdura	Items that Ngäbe people cultivate and that constitute their staple food sources, including banana, peach palm fruit, and various root crops (direct translation: vegetables)

Introduction

This dissertation is concerned with urban indigenous notions of poverty and living well among Ngäbe peoples. It follows the lives of Ngäbe residents of La Solución, an indigenous neighbourhood in the town of Bocas del Toro, Panama. I explore, in particular, the ways in which Ngäbe residents' notions of poverty and well-being relate to their urban living conditions and their endeavours and abilities to live well in the urban environment. Based on 16 months of ethnographic research among Ngäbe families in La Solución, I describe the various ways in which urban Ngäbe residents strive to live well, the urban challenges they face, and the strategies they use to overcome those challenges.

The Ngäbe are the largest of eight indigenous groups in Panama (INEC 2017). They are Ngäbere-speakers and part of the Chibchan language family. Despite their relatively large population size, they are underrepresented in academic research and literature (Karkotis 2012). The most significant contributions to the anthropological literature on Ngäbe people have come from Young (1971; 2014), Bourgois (1988), Gjording (1991), and Karkotis (2012). Philip Young (1971) produced the most comprehensive account of Ngäbe culture and history based on his fieldwork among Ngäbe families living in dispersed hamlets in the 1960s. Nearly two decades later, Philippe Bourgois (1988) added to this anthropological literature by reporting on Ngäbe labourers' living and working conditions on a banana plantation in the 1980s. Chris Gjording (1991) also conducted research among Ngäbe during this time and produced an account of Ngäbe communities' struggles with extractivist activities on their lands. Alexis Karkotis (2012) provided additional insights on village formation among the Ngäbe based on his doctoral fieldwork in a village community in the late 2000s. This thesis makes a contribution to the limited body of literature on Ngäbe people by focusing on Ngäbe experiences of urbanisation and of their living conditions in an urban area. As Ngäbe individuals and households are increasingly moving to and settling in urban areas (Quintero and Hughes 2007; Davis 2010), it is important to gain insights into their experiences of living in such settings.

Ngäbe are not unique in their recent upsurge in rural-to-urban migration. Indigenous urbanisation is rapidly increasing in Lowland Central and South America. Until recently, this trend had been largely neglected in scholarly research and by indigenous and international organisations (McSweeney and Jokisch 2015; Alexiades and Peluso 2015). However, both academics and policymakers have shown a growing interest in the urbanisation of

indigenous groups globally over the past decade (McSweeney and Jokisch 2015). Various scholars have argued for the urgent need to enhance our understanding of this under-researched phenomenon (e.g. McSweeney and Jokish 2007; Alexiades and Peluso 2015). Such understanding is essential because Indigenous Peoples' territorial rights are often associated with place-based identities (McSweeney and Jokish 2007; 2015; O'Driscoll 2014). An increasing number of Indigenous Peoples moving away from their territory may put indigenous territorial claims in danger, as such moves can easily be misunderstood as an erosion of ties to indigenous lands and identities (ibid.).

My fieldwork among Ngäbe families in the neighbourhood of La Solución addresses these timely issues pertaining to indigenous urbanisation by discussing the significance of farmlands (*fincas*) and practices in Ngäbe residents' urban lives, experiences, and perspectives of the good life.[1] This thesis further contributes to the emerging body of literature on indigenous urbanisation by examining how Ngäbe notions of poverty and living well shape and are shaped by their urban experiences.

I provide an ethnographic account that engages indigenous voices, experiences, and perspectives that are often excluded from quantitative assessments of local living conditions and from political rhetoric (Escobar 1995; Feiring et al. 2003; Zoomers 2006).[2] Indigenous Peoples worldwide are considered to constitute the poorest sectors of society (Cariño 2005; Vinding 2003) and Ngäbe are no exception. Ngäbe are commonly reported to be the poorest group in Panama (Davis 2010; Jaén 2001) and accounts describing their impoverishment abound (e.g. Castillo Guerra 2009; Jordan-Ramos 2010; Moreno Rojas 1983; Sieiro de Noriega 1968; Thampy 2013). Yet, several scholars have recently established that Indigenous Peoples themselves do not always consider their living conditions to be poor and suggest that such labelling may negatively impact them (e.g. Feiring et al. 2003; Vinding 2003; Sarmiento Barletti 2015). Post-development theorists have asserted that development research and approaches commonly fail to capture the unequal power relations that generate and exacerbate conditions of poverty (Green 2006; O'Connor 2001). Such approaches thereby enable power inequalities to persist or even exacerbate (Green 2006; Radcliffe 2015; Valdivia 2018). My research findings suggest that Ngäbe residents'

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[1] Although the translation for *finca* is farmland or cultivated land, this does not capture the full meaning of the term. To Ngäbe people who live in La Solución, the term *finca* means much more than just farmland. It is the land that they use for cultivation and often a reference to their 'home'. I describe this meaning in greater detail in chapter three.

[2] In this engagement, I aim to represent the multiplicity of voices, experiences, and perspectives among Ngäbe people (Overing et al. 2015).

experiences of precarity, discrimination, and marginalisation – commonly identified as poverty – are engendered by hierarchical social relations and long-standing discriminatory political approaches. This study thereby provides empirical support for the theory that conditions and experiences of poverty are socially and politically generated. These findings demonstrate the critical need for development and poverty assessments to engage local indigenous experiences and understandings as well as to critically consider the broader social and political factors involved in the creation of adverse conditions.

In the ethnography that follows, I aim to demonstrate the limited usefulness and applicability of the concept of poverty to Indigenous Peoples. I argue that applying the dominant concept of poverty uncritically and without involving the perspectives of the people whose lives it involves masks the unequal power structures and political approaches that create adverse conditions. An identification of poverty often involves identifying economic sets of conditions and assumes these adverse conditions to be resolved through economic measures alongside an 'improvement' of lifeways (Legoas and Arenas Barchi 2014; Green 2006; Zipin et al. 2015). Such an economic approach often pathologises poverty and associates it with the inferiority of poor people's lifeways (ibid.). Externally imposed classifications of poverty naturalise such assumptions and take for granted the objectivity of ethnic hierarchies. These classifications of poverty thereby disregard the ways in which unequal social relations and associated structural violence produce the conditions identified as poverty. I attempt to discredit ideas of cultural, social, or economic inferiority associated with poverty by demonstrating that conditions of poverty are politically and socially generated conditions with economic and socio-cultural repercussions. I aim to demonstrate that far from being inferior, Ngäbe lifeways help Ngäbe residents endure urban challenges and live well within the limitations of the urban environment. Rather than labelling conditions as poverty, I suggest calling the adverse conditions among (urban) Indigenous Peoples by the terms that describe their experiences and the socio-political processes that generate these experiences – e.g. social, economic, and political marginalisation, discrimination, exploitation, inequality, and precarity.

A limited but emerging body of anthropological literature engages with Lowland South American indigenous perspectives of well-being and the good life (e.g. Overing and Passes eds., 2000; Santos-Granero ed., 2015; Sarmiento Barletti 2011; Walker 2015), and secondarily with their notions of poverty (Conklin 2015; Micarelli 2015; Santos-Granero

2015b; Sarmiento Barletti 2015).[3] Several anthropologists have examined the ways in which these indigenous understandings interact with dominant ideology and classifications of poverty and well-being (e.g. Micarelli 2015; Santos-Granero 2015a; Sarmiento Barletti 2015; Whitten and Whitten 2015). These scholars have found that such dominant notions often disagree or even clash with indigenous perspectives of well-being and poverty. Yet according to these scholars, various Indigenous Peoples have managed to incorporate aspects of the dominant ideology into their perspectives and life worlds without subscribing to this ideology in its entirety. The literature discussing indigenous perspectives of well-being and poverty centres on indigenous Amazonians residing primarily in rural indigenous or ethnic communities. Engagement with urban indigenous residents' perceptions and experiences is limited within anthropological scholarship on poverty and well-being among indigenous Lowland South Americans. Yet, it is in the urban inter-ethnic context where engagement with dominant non-indigenous perspectives intensifies. This increased inter-ethnic engagement stands to impact and reshape indigenous understandings and experiences of poverty and living well.

Various scholars have demonstrated that ethnicity more generally, and indigeneity, in particular, become more relevant in the inter-ethnic (urban) environment (e.g. Barth 1969; Cohen 1974; O'Driscoll 2014). Others have outlined how such inter-ethnic contexts are often hierarchically structured according to ethnic and racial determinants (e.g. Bourgois 1988; Guerrón Montero 2006a; Holmes 2011). Indigenous Peoples often find themselves at the bottom of such ethnic hierarchies, by virtue of their indigeneity and associated perceived 'backwardness' (ibid.). Increased exposure to such hierarchical inter-ethnic environments and dominant ideology may impact indigenous experiences and notions of poverty (Escobar 1995; Feiring et al 2003; Zoomers 2006). Additionally, inter-ethnic relations and comparisons may influence Indigenous People's assessments of their own living conditions.

In this thesis, I address the role of indigeneity and inter-ethnic relations in the construction of urban indigenous poverty. I describe and analyse urban Ngäbe residents' inter-ethnic

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[3] I include Ngäbe in the regional literature on Lowland South American Indigenous Peoples and indigenous Amazonians as Ngäbe peoples resemble many of the qualities which characterise indigenous Lowland South Americans or Amazonians. These characteristics include a preference for dispersed settlement, a general aversion against hierarchy or central authority and relatedly a tendency to ascribe little authority to leaders, a strong emphasis on personal autonomy and responsibility, an avoidance of anti-social emotions such as anger, and the significance of hard work and physical strength, the everyday concerns of the household, and the sharing of food (see Karkotis 2012; Young 1971; cf. Overing and Passes 2000; Santos-Granero 2015).

encounters and their narratives about these interactions. These encounters and narratives include experiences of differential treatment, discrimination, exploitation, bureaucratic indifference, and other forms of structural violence. I examine in particular the kinds of structural constraints Ngäbe residents experience in their urban lives and how these experiences inform their notions of poverty and the way they feel about their urban living conditions. I further examine how the day-to-day experiences of living in an urban area influence Ngäbe understandings of what it means to be poor and to live well. I pay special attention to the ways in which Ngäbe speak about their current urban living conditions and how they compare their conditions with those of non-indigenous others, with their memories of their rural living conditions, and with their ideas about 'the good life'.

My research shows that Ngäbe ideas of living well are based on how they believe one ought to live: *humildemente* (humbly), generously, hardworking, and autonomously. Cultivation practices particularly embody the values that underpin Ngäbe visions of the 'proper' way to live and of 'the good life'. More than a set of ideal circumstances to attain, living well for Ngäbe comprises a set of ideal practices which they continuously strive to exercise. It is thereby an individual's personal responsibility to live well, or as well as one is able to within the given circumstances. In the urban environment where cultivation is not possible, Ngäbe residents find other ways to express the ideals and values imbued in cultivation practices. They do this primarily by emphasising household autonomy and secondarily by cooperating and sharing with neighbours when they are able to. Additionally, many urban Ngäbe residents endure the urban challenges they face by visiting their *fincas* regularly, maintaining them, and retaining aspirations to return. Ngäbe individuals continuously reinforce ideals and expectations of how they believe one ought to live by nostalgically invoking and idealising the *finca* and way of life it allows. I argue that this kind of nostalgia helps urban Ngäbe individuals to live well according to their ideas of the 'proper' way to live.

Despite Ngäbe residents' endeavours to live well in the urban context, they experience various obstacles to their well-being. In this thesis, I demonstrate how urban experiences of inequality, unfairness, and marginalisation challenge Ngäbe residents in their abilities to live well. I highlight how experiences of poverty are impacted by inter-ethnic social and political relations and unequal power structures in the urban sphere. I analyse how discriminatory political approaches of a state-planned relocation project, which plans to eventually displace all the residents of La Solución to another area of the island, contribute

to the ongoing marginalisation of Ngäbe residents. Their marginalisation is further upheld by the ethnic hierarchy in place in Bocas del Toro, within which Ngäbe residents are situated at the bottom. Awareness of their limited economic resources and opportunities within this hierarchy leads some Ngäbe individuals to feel poor in comparison to others. The statement "our race is poor" most commonly expresses this condition. Nonetheless, I demonstrate how urban Ngäbe do not generally consider themselves to live in poverty. Although urban Ngäbe residents may invoke discourses and images of poverty in various instances, they largely reject the idea that they are poor. I argue that when Ngäbe residents reject the classification of their urban living conditions as poor this is an expression of their autonomy in which they assume their personal responsibility to live well.

Getting acquainted with La Solución: Images of urban indigenous poverty

It was early June 2015, only a few weeks before I would head off into the field, when I stumbled upon a blog-post by a North-American medical volunteer about her work in the majority indigenous neighbourhood in the town of Bocas del Toro. "I found my fieldwork site" I exclaimed in joy to the few colleague-friends that had not yet left for the field, waving a print-out of the blog-post. I had confirmed that Bocas del Toro counted a significant number of indigenous Ngäbe before starting my PhD research and I had taken notice that they resided primarily in a few residential clusters. Yet, more specific information about these areas and their exact location had remained elusive until I found this post.

In her blog-post, medical volunteer Rosabelle Conover (2012) described the neighbourhood as: "a mangrove swamp where the indigenous community of La Solución teeters atop houses and shops built on stilts over a few feet of brackish seawater, precariously clinging to access to clean water, if not electricity." The Ngäbe residents, she stated, live in "abject poverty… forced into the swamp by the construction of the airport" and their voices are "forgotten, overlooked, or trampled by those in power" (ibid.). She provided visuals of the neighbourhood and its residents, their houses built on stilts, the rubbish stuck in the mangroves, and the planks that rise above the swampy mud forming walkways. Like Conover, anyone using a mainstream definition and economic indicators of poverty would not doubt that the residents of this indigenous neighbourhood and their living conditions are poor.

Figure 1: Residences in the mangroves of La Solución
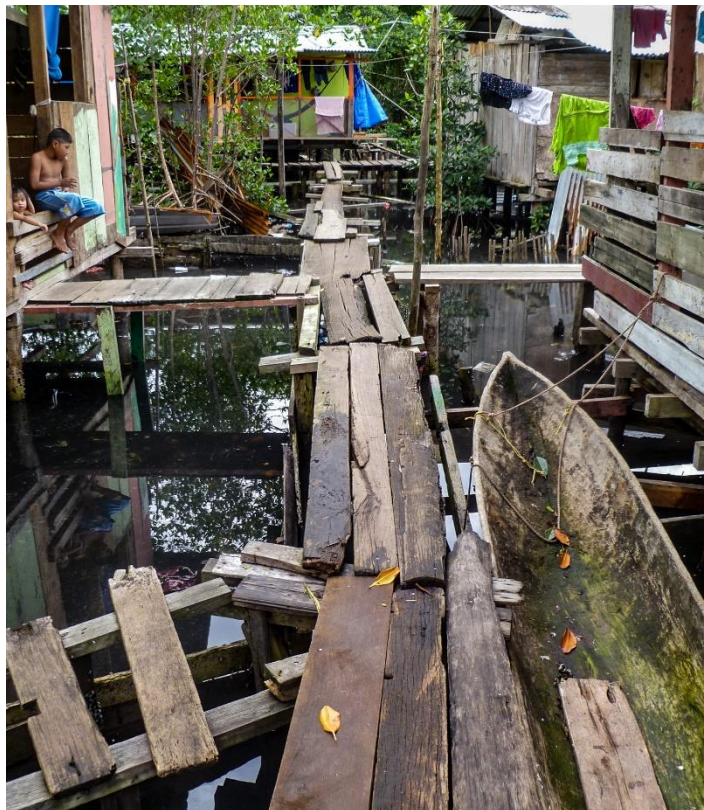
Figure 2: Wooden walkways over the swamp

Figure 3: Houses on stilts

Figure 4: House on stilts

The Panamanian government certainly subscribes to the vision that the indigenous residents of this neighbourhood live in poverty. Upon learning the name of the indigenous neighbourhood, La Solución, I continued my search of the World Wide Web with this new piece of information and came across several news posts by Miviot, the Panamanian Ministry of Housing (Miviot 2014a; 2014b).[4] These posts described the living conditions in La Solución to be precarious, unhealthy, and poor. Miviot (2014b) further reported that it had conducted an inspection of this neighbourhood in 2014 and had ordered the relocation of its residents to an area where residents can "count on the basic services that they require to live a worthy life".[5] Several Panamanian news organisations picked up on these reports by Miviot. They informed the Panamanian public of the 'precarious', 'unhealthy', and 'unattractive' neighbourhood, located right behind the airport of the popular tourist destination of Bocas del Toro (e.g. Día a Día 2014; Lorenzo 2014; Machuca 2014). They further reported that Miviot intended to resolve this problem and offer residents 'better', 'safer', and 'more dignified' housing conditions (ibid.).

At that time, I understood that the proposed relocation would be an important topic for my research. Yet, I did not realise precisely how significant it was and how much impact it had on many aspects of residents' lives. I soon came to learn that many Ngäbe residents were against the relocation and were suspicious of the government's true intentions and motivations behind it upon starting my fieldwork. The relocation project has generated anxiety among residents and heightened their suspicion of outsiders' intentions more generally, as the following description of one of my first visits to the neighbourhood demonstrates:

27th August 2015 @ La Solución:

I met with Antonio to walk around La Solución. We planned to collect signatures for a petition to start a recycling program on the island. Antonio, a young Ngäbe man in his early twenties, was involved in this petition through his work for a local conservation NGO. He lived elsewhere on the island, but we had met a couple of weeks before at a recycling fair where he

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[4] These posts have been taken off the Ministry of Housing's website since I last accessed them in 2015. However, several online articles by various Panamanian news organisations covering the Minstry's reports remain accessible (e.g. Dia a Dia 2014; Lorenzo 2014; Machuca 2014; Redacción La Estrella de Panama 2014). Additionally, a Youtube video posted by the Ministry of Housing in 2014 reports on the same topic (see Vivienda Panama 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eta8cR8QAUQ>).

[5] This quote was extracted and translated in 2015 when the post by Miviot was still accessible.

told me about this petition. We agreed to go from door to door in La Solución together to collect signatures for his petition and for me to inform residents about my research and my English classes.

At the first few homes we visited, residents were hesitant to sign and wary of our intentions. We soon discovered why this was the case after visiting several houses. The woman who opened the door asked if we were collecting signatures to evict them from the neighbourhood. The resident of another house explained that many outsiders had come to request signatures in the neighbourhood. She explained that in several cases residents came to learn later that they signed for something other than what these visitors had said it was for, which led her and other residents to imply that signatures were collected to mislead the local people. "They want to throw us out," residents repeated several times.

The female resident continued to explain that she and many of her neighbours were against the relocation, but no one had asked them what they wanted. "The problem is that the houses will not be free," she stated. "They will charge us, like $25.000 or $30.000. We don't have that. We don't even have $200 or $100 to pay for our food, so how are we going to pay that money? So when people come here to ask for signatures, we are very wary".

I came to understand that residents commonly perceived the planned relocation as an attempt to evict them from the neighbourhood, rather than a project that served to improve their lives. Ngäbe residents, on their part, have resisted the relocation and asserted that they are 'fine' in La Solución, challenging claims that their living conditions are unhealthy and their residences inadequate. The theme of the relocation surfaced in many of my conversations with Ngäbe residents and as my fieldwork period moved along, I became increasingly aware of the relevance of the relocation project to my initial research topic – urban indigenous experiences and perceptions of poverty and living well. As I describe in this dissertation, the prospected relocation penetrates various aspects of residents' well-being and their abilities to live well in the urban sphere. It projects experiences of poverty onto Ngäbe residents and disregards indigenous ideals, notions, and endeavours to live a good life.

Entering La Solución: approaches to ethnographic fieldwork

The vignette about the collection of signatures describes one of the various approaches I took to entering the neighbourhood and gaining familiarity with residents. Going from door to door to collect signatures was evidently not the most effective way to gain residents' trust. When I discussed this plan with Antonio, he expressed that walking with a foreign person would give him (and his petition) more credibility. His idea corresponded well with my assumption that it would be good for me to explore the neighbourhood with a local Ngäbe person. In hindsight, however, it would have been better for me to conduct such an initial exploration with a Ngäbe resident of the neighbourhood who was known and trusted by other residents. However, while this particular incident may not have yielded the desired outcomes, it provided me with valuable insights and did not negatively impact my chances of establishing trusting relationships with residents.

Luckily, I had prepared for potential challenges entering and establishing myself in the neighbourhood as a non-resident outsider. The blog-post I came across before embarking on my fieldwork described the entrance to the neighbourhood as a paved road turning into rocks and gravel once it passes the airport, eventually leading into the swamp, where a few wooden walkways continue to the different residences. Additionally, Conover (2012) noted that the residential area remains unidentified on any tourist maps and is instead marked as a "swampy region". Indeed, Google Maps marks the neighbourhood as a green area without any infrastructure. Conover's description and the absence of the neighbourhood on any official maps indicated to me that the settlement was not formally recognised as a neighbourhood and was separated from the main part of town. I imagined that because of this geographical obscurity, the neighbourhood would not be easily accessible for non-residents and that residents might be cautious of outsiders. I had therefore planned to enter and familiarise myself with the community in various complementary ways. In this section, I describe the different approaches I took to enter the neighbourhood of La Solución and develop relationships of trust with residents. Additionally, I discuss the various ethical and methodological considerations pertaining to this study.

Prior to initiating my fieldwork in the urban neighbourhood of La Solución, I had planned to stay with a Ngäbe family in a mangrove community on another island to become familiar with Ngäbe language and customs and potentially establish contacts in La Solución. This month-long stay with my 'host-family' in this more rural setting provided me with valuable experiences and insights into Ngäbe ideas about the 'proper' way to live. I visited their *finca*,

learned to carry *chakara*, and developed a liking for 'proper' Ngäbe food.[6] My host-father told me many stories about his life as well as about Ngäbe people and customs, while my host-mother taught me proper child-rearing practices and essential Ngäbere words and phrases, although they often imparted to me that I would not be able to speak Ngäbere in La Solución, as residents allegedly only spoke Spanish. In their opinion, then, La Solución was not a 'proper' Ngäbe community. Although several members of my host-family had lived in La Solución, they did not actively maintain contact with the neighbourhood and its residents. While I had hoped to get introduced to residents in La Solución by my host-family and establish contacts that way, it resulted that I had to make my own entry.

During my stay in this island community, I had become acquainted with a local educational non-profit organisation that was looking for an experienced volunteer teacher to teach English to local adults in Bocas del Toro. Having been a professional ESL teacher for several years, I was immediately appointed as a volunteer English teacher and was able to negotiate my ideal teaching conditions. The non-profit organisation provided the teaching materials and spaces, while I recruited my students: Ngäbe residents of La Solución. Needing to recruit my own students provided me with an incentive and motive to visit the neighbourhood, start conversations, gain familiarity with residents, and even visit people in their homes. Many residents came to know me as 'La Teacher'. Furthermore, this recruitment process enabled me to build personal relationships with my students, as I saw them not only in the English classes but also in their residential environment. I established friendships with nearly all my students and often visited them in their houses, chatting informally about a variety of topics. Several of my students-turned-friends invited me to visit their *fincas* and I happily accepted their invitations.

While teaching English allowed me to establish connections with my students, these connections were limited to those residents who found the time and commitment to regularly attend classes. I therefore complimented my teaching activities with another approach to 'enter' the neighbourhood and interact with residents. During my first week in Bocas del Toro I met with Basilio, the president of the neighbourhood *directiva*, to discuss my interest in assisting with or undertaking a project in the community.[7] Basilio, in turn,

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[6] A *Chakara* is a bag woven from plant fiber and used primarily to carry harvested vegetables or other food items. Carrying *chakara* refers to carrying this bag on one's back by putting the strap around one's forehead. The ability to carry *chakara* indicates physical strength and Ngäbe individuals generally speak with pride about Ngäbe women's strength and ability to carry *chakara*.

[7] The *directiva* is an elected leadership committee which represents the residents of the neighbourhood of La Solución to the state (the municipal and even national government) and other non-residents.

invited me to attend a community meeting to discuss the various options for a potential project. During this community meeting, the first of many that I would attend during my fieldwork, I presented my doctoral research project as well as my intention to 'do something for the community' in the form of a collaborative communal project. From then on, I was known in the neighbourhood not only as 'La Teacher', but also as a volunteer or 'humanitarian worker'. I saw this as a beneficial association at the time: there are many Peace Corps Volunteers in Panama and they are often well-received and respected by the communities that they serve and reside amongst. However, I did not realise at the time that this association accompanied ideas about what I would be able to do for the community. I soon came to learn that residents saw this project, which they had decided would involve the construction of a communal house, as 'my project' and they assumed that I would be able to provide or gather the necessary resources.[8] These ideas did not align with my intentions to work together with residents on a project that mattered to them and would thus be 'theirs', as a way to establish interrelationships of cooperation, trust, and mutual respect.

During the early stages of my research, residents who were involved in the project often referred to me as the boss ('*la jefa*') or manager of the project, a common association local Ngäbe individuals have with white foreign residents in Bocas del Toro.[9] Yet, this hierarchical relationship was not the kind I intended to cultivate with local Ngäbe residents. Furthermore, while I had anticipated helping the community through this communal project, community members instead helped me with 'my project'. This project thereby resulted in my indebtedness to individual community members, through these individuals helping me and thus doing personal favours for me. Nonetheless, my leadership of this project as 'outsider' as well as my indebtedness turned out to be fertile grounds for the development of more personal interaction with residents. I later came to understand that residents who became involved in the project, did so because they felt called upon to help with the project or because they wished to establish personal relationships with me. It was these personal relationships that grew out of the project that were incredibly valuable for

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[8] I later came to understand that in many Panamanian indigenous communities 'Western friends of the community' are seen as 'volunteers' or NGO-workers, who are expected to contribute by completing particular community projects (Theodossopoulos 2015).

[9] I later came to understand that working for a foreign 'boss' is a hierarchy that Ngäbe people generally seem to feel comfortable with to a much greater extent than working for another Ngäbe person. Killick (2007:472) describes a similar preference for outside leaders among the Amazonian Ashéninka: "by choosing to follow an outsider, rather than one of their peers, Ashéninka individuals are able to retain egalitarian relations between themselves".

me personally and or my research. Additionally, as a foreign 'leader' of this project, I was offered the privilege of attending all community meetings and many otherwise private *directiva* meetings and I gained significant insights into community organisation, leadership, and politics.

Many Ngäbe residents, and particularly women, remained reserved and withdrawn in their stances toward me during the initial months of my fieldwork. Yet, as my fieldwork progressed and residents became accustomed to my presence in the neighbourhood, I received many requests from male and female residents to teach them English in their homes or help their children with English homework. Whenever I was able to, I heeded to these requests. I was happy to share my language skills with local residents and such private English classes or tutoring proved good entryways into conversations about topics that were relevant to my research. These conversations often evolved into narratives about residents' past experiences in the *finca* and their life histories. These histories and narratives presented me with context for particular observations and utterances that I did not understand immediately (Rubenstein 2002). They further provided valuable accounts of how residents understood their social worlds, viewed themselves in relation to others, and constructed their social identities (Small et al 2010; Somers and Gibson 1994).

I had planned to complement my daily observation of and participation in community affairs, household activities, informal conversations, and life histories with organised interviews and groups discussions. This was not an easy task I had set for myself. It was challenging enough to get students to regularly attend my English classes, despite their being highly motivated to learn. Ngäbe residents' long work hours and numerous household commitments left them with little time and space to undertake many other activities and my research was not among their top priorities. When I organised various group discussions toward the end of my fieldwork period, several individuals participated primarily because I had 'done so much for the community' or to reciprocate for teaching them English. After organising a handful of group discussions and a dozen formal interviews, I realised that I had already gathered the information, views, and accounts participants presented to me through other means, by participating in residents' day-to-day lives and conversing informally. Nonetheless, these more formal discussions served to confirm various previous observations and accounts. Additionally, the recordings from these discussions provided me with valuable quotes and statements that I had heard many residents utter before, but of which I may not have noted or remembered the exact

wording. These formal meetings therefore helped me triangulate data and feel confident about my research findings. I further enhanced this confidence by conducting a survey of 135 households during the last month of my fieldwork. In this household survey, I asked residents about their household composition, their communities of origin, their *fincas* and how often they visited these, their official place of residence, and their perspectives on the principal problems in La Solución. The responses served to triangulate and confirm data obtained through unsolicited conversation and to gain a sense of the prevalence and distribution of local concepts, resources, and practices among residents.[10]

Re-entering and residing in La Solución: Methodological challenges and changes

I had initially planned to stay in Bocas del Toro and conduct my field research for an uninterrupted period of one year. It turned out that my life had other plans for me. Ten months into my fieldwork, I unexpectedly had to leave the field, due to extenuated personal circumstances. Feeling that I had not been able to properly complete and close off my field research, I made two subsequent return trips to Bocas del Toro in autumn 2016 and winter 2017-2018, interspersed with teaching commitments at the University of Kent in Spring 2017. Although I had not planned to interrupt my fieldwork in this manner, the multiple field visits proved to be favourable for my friendships with residents and my research.

During the first fieldwork period, I resided with my partner in an air-conditioned flat overlooking the airport, a 5-minute walk from La Solución. My Ngäbe friends visited my typical 'foreign residence' with great interest and curiosity to see how I lived and what my house looked like. However, while I was in La Solución daily, I felt that I was lacking the experience of actually living there. In 2016 and 2017, I returned by myself and was able to reside in the neighbourhood. In 2016, I rented a room from an Afro-Panamanian resident in her house along the main road of the neighbourhood, next to the communal house, which had just been completed at that time. Being a resident in the neighbourhood allowed me to experience life in La Solución more uninterruptedly, including the inconveniences residents had to endure, which I outline in the following chapters. During my last fieldwork trip in 2017, I lived with my Ngäbe friend and her family in her house in the centre of La

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[10] See appendix 1 for an overview of the survey questions and a map of the area surveyed.

Solución. Joining my friend's household provided me with a more holistic experience of daily life and valuable insights into the daily functioning of urban Ngäbe households.

These experiences of residing in La Solución also brought me closer to my Ngäbe friends and acquaintances, my research participants. They were now my neighbours rather than merely residents of La Solución. And I went from being an outsider; a foreign person who works and volunteers in La Solución and showed solidarity to their plight, to a fellow resident; a neighbour. Furthermore, by returning to the field several times, I proved my interest in and commitment to the residents of the neighbourhood and the friendships I built with them. When I returned, my friends realised I would not stay forever, but that I would leave again, which enhanced their sense of urgency to undertake certain activities with me while they had the opportunity to, such as taking me to their *fincas*. Finally, by returning to the field several times over three years I gained a clearer perspective of the time frame within which changes, shifts, and transformations occur. Nonetheless, the stories and representations I provide of the neighbourhood and its residents provide only a snapshot of the situation. It represents 16 months spread over three years, which is still merely a fraction of the lifespan of this neighbourhood and residents' lives.

Researching in La Solución: Ethical considerations

Before my fieldwork, I had naively aimed to look for and take advantage of opportunities to involve participants in the research and the "knowledge-production process" (Bergold and Thomas 2012:193) in order to limit the bias inherent in data collection, offer a more multi-vocal reflection of local realities, and allow for the project to be more useful for the people it is concerned with (Lassiter 2005). I realised the naivete of this intention soon after entering La Solución, when I began presenting myself and my research in community meetings and conversations. When I presented my research intentions alongside my interest in undertaking a communal project during my first community meeting, attendees responded only to my suggestions regarding the communal project. I therefore more explicitly invited attendees to participate in my research and informed them of the research topic and ways in which I planned undertake my research at the subsequent meetings and in English classes, and I continued to do so throughout my fieldwork.

I was aware of the limitations of prior informed consent, including the difficulty of communicating and translating cross-culturally the complex concepts that are embedded

in the research and the structural inequalities that surround the social relations in which the research is embedded (Alexiades and Peluso 2002). I was also cognisant of the obstacles to obtaining written consent from participants. The vignette I described earlier demonstrates residents' distrust of signing any documents presented by outsiders. Additionally, many older Ngäbe residents are illiterate. In response to these limitations, and following Alexiades and Peluso (2002:222), I approached prior informed consent as "a dynamic and interactive process" that develops along with relationships of trust and mutual understanding. As I gained familiarity with Ngäbe residents and recurrently talked to them about my research, their understanding of my research and its potential implications increased. I frequently asked my interlocutors for their opinions about my research, whether they disapproved of or disagreed with anything and how I could make it more useful for them. They consistently consented to participate in my research. In a few instances, particularly towards the end of my fieldwork, interlocutors shared specific ideas for topics or perspectives they thought I should include or messages they wanted me to communicate to the world. I have continuously strived to include their ideas, messages, and voices in the research and this thesis.

I am furthermore aware of my responsibilities as a researcher to ensure that my writing does not allow identification of individuals which would put their lives, well-being or reputation at risk (ASA 2011; Bourgois 2001; Nader 1972). I have taken great care to anonymise my interlocutors where possible. Although all names used in this thesis are pseudonyms, several individuals may be identifiable through their role within the community or other particularities. I have been particularly careful with my representation of these individuals and have omitted any potentially sensitive and personal information about them.

Chapter outline

This thesis consists of one contextual chapter, one theoretical chapter, five ethnographic chapters, and a conclusion, in addition to this introduction. Following this introduction, I provide an outline of the theoretical framework that underpins this research. In chapter two, I delineate the ethnographic context of this research by summarising the most relevant regional, historical and anthropological literature pertaining to Panama and the Ngäbe. The

remaining chapters (three to seven) draw on the ethnographic material collected over sixteen months of fieldwork.

The first two ethnographic chapters (three and four) discuss Ngäbe notions of the good life and poverty and how urban Ngäbe residents relate these notions to their urban living conditions. In chapter three, I examine the role of the *finca* in urban Ngäbe residents' daily lives and ideas of the good life. I highlight how the *finca* (their cultivated land) and the way of life the *finca* allows epitomises Ngäbe ideas of living the way they believe one should live. Urban Ngäbe residents often nostalgically invoke images of the *finca*, which I argue serve to foster a continued identification with Ngäbe culture and ways of life. I argue that Ngäbe ideas of living well are based on a set of ideal practices, which include sharing, cooperating, working hard and observing household autonomy. These ideas and ideals of living well are similar to other Lowland South American groups' notions of 'the good life', as documented by the different contributors to two edited volumes on conviviality (Overing and Passes, eds. 2000) and well-being (Santos-Granero, ed. 2015) in indigenous Amazonia. I outline the various ways in which urban Ngäbe residents endeavour to live well in the urban mangroves of La Solución.

Chapter four provides an analysis of urban Ngäbe residents' discourses, notions, and experiences of poverty. In contrast to other Lowland South American Indigenous Peoples, who perceive poverty mainly in social terms (e.g. deprivation of social skills, networks, and support – see Conklin 2015; Santos-Granero 2015a; Sarmiento Barletti 2015), Ngäbe consider poverty to imply a lack of basic necessities. These basic necessities consist of food, a home, and the ability to offer visitors a drink. In the urban context where food and the resources to construct one's house need to be purchased, poverty entails not having any work or a monetary income. I demonstrate that while Ngäbe individuals strategically employ discourses of poverty in some instances, more commonly they reject the idea that they live in poverty.

Chapters five, six, and seven analyse the challenges that Ngäbe residents encounter in their urban lives and how these challenges constrain their abilities to live well. In chapter five, I examine the significance and challenges of communal living to urban Ngäbe residents. I establish that the identity of the urban community is ambiguous, which makes the community a precarious one. This precariousness is further exacerbated by the relocation project. The uncertainty about their future residence inhibits residents from connecting with and caring about their physical environment and the 'community'.

In chapter six, I analyse the hierarchical inter-ethnic context, which structures Ngäbe residents' urban lives. I outline how the ethno-racial hierarchy in Bocas del Toro impacts Ngäbe individuals' aspirations, opportunities, indigeneity, access to resources, and experiences of unfairness. This ethno-racial hierarchy constrains their fields of opportunities (de L'Estoile 2014) and thereby their capacities to aspire (Appadurai 2004). I demonstrate how resources are diverted up to those higher up in the hierarchy, thus further constraining Ngäbe individuals' already limited access to these resources. Comparisons with non-indigenous others taking up higher positions in the hierarchy make urban Ngäbe residents aware that they have fewer opportunities and experience greater challenges and difficulties in their lives.

Chapter seven provides an analysis of the state-planned project that allegedly aims to improve La Solución's residents' living conditions by relocating them. I argue that the ways in which the Panamanian State has historically and more recently interacted with Ngäbe are forms of structural violence. I demonstrate how the state's approach in this project has infused Ngäbe residents' lives with precarity and has thwarted their efforts to live well in La Solución. The state's discriminatory approaches, evasive politics, and bureaucratic indifference towards Ngäbe, exemplified by the relocation project, limit the capabilities of Ngäbe residents to create their own terms of engagement (Appadurai 2004). I further demonstrate how Ngäbe residents have resisted this project and ideological domination by striving to live well in La Solución despite the challenges they face. Finally, I conclude this thesis by highlighting the main arguments and suggesting possibilities for further research.

CHAPTER ONE

Theoretical framework

In this chapter, I lay out the principal theoretical scholarship that has informed this thesis and how the various theories interlink. The three primary research themes that underpin this thesis are poverty, well-being, and indigenous urbanisation. For each of these broad concepts, I provide a brief overview of the common understandings and conceptualisations. I then describe the anthropological approaches and research. Finally, I shift my focus toward the more specific regional ethnographic literature pertaining to questions of indigenous notions of poverty, the good life, and the urban environment.

1.1 Poverty

The past four decades have seen various shifts in the common understanding of poverty. It has increasingly come to be understood as an entity —a problem facing humanity— and has gained ever more political significance worldwide (Green 2006). The eradication of poverty has progressively become a political project in addition to an economic project (Corsín Jimenez 2008; James 2008). It has become the principal focus of international development and politics, being the first on the list of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

The World Bank, as the leading institution in international development, has been instrumental in fostering this understanding of poverty as a threat to society and in directing the global 'war on poverty' (Green 2006; Sachs 2010). The Bank actively advocated for this attack on poverty in the 1970s during McNamara's presidency. The discourse on poverty also began to take political appeal and momentum during this decade (Finnemore 1997). The Bank's "systematic ways of representing, analysing and theorising poverty" gained international significance through their promotion of academic research on poverty issues and the introduction of poverty reduction strategies in the early 2000s (Green 2006:1109; Mehta 2001). As Green asserts, the ever-increasing and continuous monitoring of poverty on national and international scales as a result of the Bank's efforts alludes to the supposed "facticity" and "tangibility of poverty" (2006:1111). It substantiates the

existence of poverty "as an objective subject about which facts can be determined and known" (ibid.).

Defining poverty

In order to analyse perceptions and experiences of poverty among urban Ngäbe and how these relate to dominant notions of poverty, it is critical to understand how poverty is commonly defined. Poverty has been defined variously since its rise in prominence as a political project. The dominant definition of poverty was initially framed in economic terms and based solely on income and material possessions (see the discussions by Alkire and Santos 2013; Alkire and Fang 2019). The apparent failure of economically oriented development approaches in the late 1970s and 1980s prompted an evaluation of the social aspects of development. The definition of poverty then came to include other indicators based on basic human needs (Alkire and Santos 2013; Escobar 1991; Feiring et al. 2013; Green 2006).[11] Amartya Sen's (1987) influential capabilities approach gave rise to new views on poverty in the following decades, shifting away from a focus on utility and commodity possession and toward other aspects of inequality and well-being (Alkire and Santos 2013; Foster et al. 2013; Small et al. 2010).

Sen's (1987:16) capabilities approach focuses on the "living conditions we can or cannot achieve" (functionings) and the ability or freedom people have to achieve those living conditions and the life they value and wish to lead (capabilities). This approach sees poverty as the absence of such power over one's destiny, the lack of freedom or capabilities to be or do the things that one may value (Foster et al. 2013:1; Fischer 2014). The influence of Sen's capabilities approach is reflected in the rise of multidimensional approaches to poverty such as the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, which considers poverty to consist of multiple deprivations or "missing dimensions" (Alkire and Santos 2013; Green 2006).

These more recent definitions denote a shift toward a more holistic understanding of poverty. Yet various scholars have argued that they do not accurately capture the specific contextual factors contributing to conditions of poverty, nor the lived experiences of those who are labelled as poor and their particular challenges to well-being (Carr 2008; Feiring et

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11 In Latin America these basic indicators generally included access to clean water and improved sanitation, type of dwelling, school attendance, level of education, and dependency ratio (Alkire and Santos 2013).

al. 2003; Green 2006; Klitgaard 1997; Ruggeri Laderchi et al. 2003). These definitions often conceive of poverty as "a singular problem with universal causes and are generally externally imposed upon 'poor' populations" (Carr 2008:726; Klitgaard 1997), including Ngäbe peoples as I demonstrate in chapter four. Rugeri Laderchi et al. (2003) point out that transferring indicators of poverty from one context to another and comparing across these contexts is highly problematic. Carr (2008:727) further argues that, as a result of such efforts, local voices are being "lost to preconceived understandings of poverty". These insights indicate the significance of engaging local Ngäbe voices and perspectives in analyses of their poverty.

Yet the majority of poverty studies, including those of Ngäbe populations, aim to be comparable and are based on measurable data, such as life expectancy, income, literacy and education levels, and infant mortality rates. Various anthropologists have argued that such studies use "measurable factors to assess immeasurable factors" and view people as numbers and figures rather than as human beings (Jackson 2011:183; Mathews and Izquierdo 2009). Izquierdo (2009:69) asserts that such approaches assume that well-being is something that can be measured and if it can be measured "it can also be improved". Many poverty assessments indeed see poverty "as a problem that must be eliminated to maintain social functionality" (Green 2006:1116).

Researchers in anthropology, in contrast, see poverty as the outcome of particular social, political, and economic relations. They largely consider it to be a social categorisation instrument rather than an entity or absolute condition (Green 2006). This divergence in perspectives has incited a (more profound) separation of academic anthropology from the field of international development and development studies (ibid.; Horowitz 1996). The limited body of research within academic anthropology conducted specifically on poverty is partially due to this separation (ibid.). In the following section, I outline the approaches to poverty within the discipline of social anthropology and how they relate to this research.

1.1.1 Anthropology and poverty

Anthropologists tend to dissociate and distinguish themselves from economic and development perspectives in their refusal to measure and objectify poverty (Johnston et al. 2012; Muehlebach 2013). In this refusal, anthropology scholars have distanced themselves

and the field of anthropology from the study of poverty. In her overview of anthropology's engagement with poverty, Green even asserts that "social and cultural anthropology has not yet prioritised poverty as an object of study" (2006:1109). The fact that "[n]o anthropological journals are dedicated exclusively to the subject of poverty" seems to attest to this claim (Davis 2012). Anthropologists' unease with dominant definitions, assessments, and objectification of poverty may have contributed to their avoidance of poverty as a primary research focus. Another factor contributing to anthropologists' unease with the study of poverty is anthropology's historical engagement with the concept through the 'culture of poverty' theories in the 1960s (Green 2006; Small et al. 2010).

Poverty and culture

Oscar Lewis coined the term 'culture of poverty' in his seminal book *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (1959). Lewis theorised that poor families shared a distinct set of beliefs, values, practices, and attitudes generated by their conditions of poverty. He argued that this culture of poverty was passed down from generation to generation, perpetuating itself and contributing to multigenerational poverty (Frerer and Vu 2007; Small et al. 2010). This theory was taken up and popularised by Moynihan (1965), who argued that African-American families lived in a culture of poverty (Frerer and Vu 2007). He described this culture of poverty as a set of 'pathologies' resulting from their historical experiences of suffering and sustained poverty (Moynihan 1965; Small et al. 2010). Culture of poverty scholars were considered to blame—or pathologise—the persistence of poverty on the lifeways and values of its victims. This negative association with the culture of poverty theory has therefore likely dissuaded various generations of anthropologists from taking up poverty as a primary research topic.

The majority of theories and studies linking poverty and culture since the controversial culture of poverty debate have been put forward by sociologists (see for instance Harding 2010, Lamont & Small 2008, Small et al. 2010; Streib et al. 2016). However, several anthropology scholars have tasked themselves with studying poverty and devising alternative theories over the following decades. Hannerz (1969) theorised repertoires or cultural tools as sets of meanings and modes of action that individuals can call upon when needed. In his ethnography named *'Soulside'*, he argued that Washington D.C. ghetto residents have access to both mainstream and ghetto cultural repertoires, the latter being adaptations to structural poverty (Harding and Hepburn 2014; Swidler 1986; Waller 2002).

Although the theory of repertoires may be helpful to identify the potential responses of Ngäbe individuals to their structural conditions, this theory fails to explain why certain repertoires are selected in particular situations (see Lamont 2010; Small et al. 2010).

Furthermore, several anthropologists have employed Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) theory of cultural capital to examine the disadvantages that poor individuals experience due to their limited access to the dispositions needed to get ahead (Small et al. 2010). The concept of cultural capital helps to identify ways in which urban Ngäbe are disadvantaged vis-à-vis other ethnic groups, as I explore in chapter six. Others have taken up the concept of frames, the roots of which can be traced to the sociologists Schutz (1962), Berger and Luckman (1966), and Goffman (1974). Frames are used by individuals to perceive, categorise and understand their social world, based on their prior experiences and observations (Small et al. 2010). Benoit de L'Estoile (2014:64) uses the concept of 'frame of reference', which he defines as "the cognitive and normative frame used by people to make sense of their world and act on it", to understand different conceptions of the good life and future orientations. This theory helps to conceptualise Ngäbe notions of poverty and well-being and their aspirations toward the good life as existing within their frames of reference.[12]

Perhaps the most prominent contribution to the conception of poverty in anthropology in the 1970s was made by Sahlins (1972) and his theory of the "Original Affluent Society". Sahlins (1972:3) challenged the notion that 'less developed' societies are necessarily less well-off and argued that the idea that there is an "inadequacy of economic means" is a creation of the capitalist economy that does not reflect lived reality. This theory provides significant insights for the present study as it demonstrates that the understanding of poverty as a lack of economic resources is based on capitalist economic assumptions that are not necessarily universally valid. The theory thereby offers space for alternative interpretations of local conditions. Two main critiques of Sahlin's theory pointed to the (false) assumption that all societies distinguish between work and leisure as the 'West' does as well as the underlying premise that hunter-gatherer societies were less developed than 'modern' societies and were isolated from the modern world (see for instance Overing 1989; Walker 2015).

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[12] I explore this concept in greater detail in section 1.2.1.

The Political Economy School fervently challenged this idea of isolated or traditional societies. Scholars such as Wolf (1982) stressed that all societies are interconnected in a global web of social, political, and economic relations. Wolf and other scholars influenced by the political economic approach considered culture to be continually changing and societies to adapt their ways to their socio-economic and political environment. These scholars introduced the role of historical economic and political relations to anthropological theories of social and cultural structuring principles. Such a focus on political and economic relations provides the foundation for the analyses presented in this thesis. In order to examine Ngäbe individuals' understandings and experiences of their urban lives and of poverty and well-being, it is essential to analyse the role of economic and political relations in shaping their urban experiences.

Poverty and post-development theory

Building on the political economy and dependency theories of the 1980s, post-development theorists made significant contributions to anthropology's understanding of poverty in the 1990s. Scholars such as Arturo Escobar (1995), James Ferguson (1997), and Wolfgang Sachs (2010) problematised poverty and highlighted the adverse economic effects that development has had on the global poor. They challenged several assumptions inherent in development discourse on poverty. These challenged presuppositions included the following: (1) that there was a continuum from poor to rich countries; (2) that development signified an upward movement on such a continuum; (3) that such movement would be achieved by poor countries through economic growth and the replication of the conditions of mature capitalist nations, and: (4) that the United States and Western European nations were the benchmarks against which to measure the level of development of other regions and nations.

Post-development theory considers the notion of global poverty to be socially and politically constructed by the discourse of development. Key post-development scholars maintain that development discourse was popularised through President Harry Truman's speech in 1949 (Escobar 1995; Sachs 2010). Truman declared the nations in the Southern hemisphere to be "underdeveloped areas" and proposed that "greater production is the key to prosperity and peace" (Quoted in Escobar 1995:3). Non-Western regions, including Latin America, came to be seen as underdeveloped and poor and its populations as needing to be 'saved' by the west (Escobar 1991; Ferguson 1997). Poverty then came to be

associated with underdevelopment. Such an association is evident in Panama where members of the dominant society commonly consider Ngäbe and other Indigenous Peoples as both underdeveloped and poor.

Post-development anthropologists further consider poverty as a condition in the 'Third World' to be a consequence of international development approaches and politics. They have argued that development has increased poverty and made Indigenous Peoples, in particular, poorer in two distinct ways. First, they maintained that increased interaction with the World Market system has caused a greater dependency on the market system and has damaged local systems of subsistence sharing and communal labour (Ferguson 1997; Sachs 2010; Sillitoe 2000). Second, they consider development efforts to have altered people's perspectives of what they need to live well and therewith increased their own perceived poverty (Escobar 1991; 1995; Feiring et al. 2003; Zoomers 2006). As Indigenous Peoples increase their interaction with the market economy, the dominant society's perception of their impoverished conditions may gradually impact how they perceive their own economic conditions (ibid.).[13] The present research builds on this theory by examining how increased interaction with dominant ideology impacts Ngäbe perceptions of their economic conditions.

Building on post-development theory, various anthropologists have recently critiqued the common representation of poverty within development discourse as being "remarkably similar across geographical regions and national boundaries" (Green 2006:1111; Green and Hulme 2005; Feiring et al. 2003). These scholars assert that such homogenised representations of different conditions and experiences of poverty abstract "poverty from people and obscures the social processes that make certain people subject to its effects" (Green 2006:1112; O'Connor 2001). According to Green, such obscuring of the specific social relations and other contextual factors involved in producing poverty has led to the vision of poverty as an 'abnormality' and a pathological condition (2006:1113).

A post-development framework has further allowed its proponents to critique the conceptualisation of poverty as a worldwide threat to society by demonstrating how this representation has been employed as a political tool and justification for intervention (Escobar 1991; Green 2006). Corsín Jimenez (2008) outlines how within the political arena

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[13] Zoomers (2006) demonstrates for instance how among Quechua speaking indigenous communities in Bolivia poverty in material terms is often regarded as a result of local development efforts, for before the arrival of development organisations to the area the term poverty was scarcely used.

of nation-states poverty is often depicted as a common enemy in order to unite the people in the process of fighting against this enemy. Additionally, Arndt and Tarp (2016) reveal how poverty assessments may inform or justify certain policy-agendas by identifying symptoms of 'impoverished' living conditions and by designing strategies to alleviate them.

Many scholars have pointed out how this process of identifying poverty and its common symptoms, victims, and solutions serves to reinforce and solidify existing unequal power relations (e.g. Green 2006; Radcliffe 2015; Valdivia 2018). This process of identification is generally completed from a Western perspective and without the involvement of the people whom it concerns (Feiring et al. 2003). Not surprisingly, various scholars have emphasised the need to focus on local people's perspectives and categorisations of their social worlds. These scholars have called for studies which reveal the social and economic processes involved in producing the conditions that are commonly defined as poverty and in constraining people's abilities to live fulfilled lives (Feiring et al. 2003; Quispe 2003; Vinding 2003).

Building on a post-development framework, the research discussed in this dissertation responds to these calls for more nuanced, critical, and contextual approaches to studying experiences and constructions of poverty. My research critically challenges development ideology, by examining and revealing the historical and contemporary social processes involved in producing the conditions identified as poverty. Development ideology commonly assumes poverty to constitute a lack of resources and capabilities and considers it to be a problem which can be resolved through generic development approaches. Such an ideology fails to capture the unequal power relations that generate and exacerbate conditions of poverty. Development approaches also commonly fail to engage with local people's experiences and perspectives of their conditions. As post-development theorists have argued, such disregard for local forms of meaning-making enable prevailing power inequalities at best and exacerbate them at worst. This dissertation responds to the urgent need for research on poverty that engages with local people's categorisations and notions and critically questions externally imposed labels. Rather than taking the external identification of poverty among Ngäbe for granted, this research examines how Ngäbe individuals perceive and experience their own conditions and the contextual factors that shape these conditions.

The concept of human capital is intertwined with development ideology. Human capital theory assumes that individuals can raise their (economic) value and therewith increase their opportunities for well-being by developing their human capital, for instance through education (Legoas and Arenas Barchi 2014; Zipin et al. 2015). Legoas and Arenas Barchi (2014) observe the implementation of such theories of human capital in Latin America in the vast array of state benefit programmes for which beneficiaries have to meet specific requirements and commitments to 'improve' their levels of health, nutrition, and education. An example of such a programme in Panama is the *Red de Oportunidades*, which provides families in 'poverty' and 'extreme poverty', as identified by the state, with conditional monetary transfers. Many Ngäbe families make use of this programme. Additionally, the Panamanian State has extensively promoted education as a way to enhance upward mobility.

Various scholars have pointed out how through discourses and practices of human capital development, the poor become responsible for their own poverty: poverty is considered to be a failure to develop one's human capital and to achieve economic success (Green 2006; Legoas and Arenas Barchi 2014). Individuals are thus made "responsible for the perpetual appreciation of their 'value'" (Zipin et al. 2015:230). Theories of human capital view poverty not only as a failure to develop but as an attribute of people. They consider poor people to be underdeveloped, lacking social capacity, and of low economic value because their notions, values, and ways of life are seen to have no value in the national or global neoliberal context (Legoas and Arenas Barchi 2014; Green 2006; Zipin et al. 2015).

These are important insights for the present study, as several of the ideas on human capital have found their way into narratives voiced about and by Ngäbe. The Ngäbe have generally embraced education and it is one of the main motivations for many Ngäbe families to have moved to Bocas del Toro and certainly noted as a key driver for indigenous urbanisation (Alexiades and Peluso 2015; 2016; Peluso 2015 and others). Many individuals have the wish for their children or themselves to 'become a professional' or to 'become someone'. They view education and Spanish literacy to be ways to develop one's economic opportunities and one's 'worth', as I demonstrate in chapter six.

In the absence of clear frameworks for major poverty theories, sociologist David Brady has usefully categorised the majority of theories of poverty into three principal families: behavioural, structural, and political theories (2019). The theories discussed in the previous section can mostly be categorised, although not all as neatly, as behavioural or structural theories of poverty.[14]

The remaining category of political theories considers poverty to be an outcome of the power relations involved in the distribution of resources. These theories emphasise the relationship between political power and poverty. They study the influence that the state or political parties and institutions have on conditions of poverty among the population that they serve (Brady 2003; 2009; Brady et al. 2016). Institutional explanations highlight for instance how political institutions which govern the distribution of economic resources often structure, shape and reinforce potential economic inequalities (ibid.). Power resources theorists maintain that the distribution of political power in a capitalist democracy by default favours business and (economic) elites, thereby politically disadvantaging those with fewer economic resources (Brady et al. 2016:120).[15] This power resources theory corresponds with the views of various urban Ngäbe residents, who feel that politicians and people in powerful positions primarily employ political power for the benefit of economic and political elites and thereby reproduce inequality and poverty.

A significant contribution within anthropology to political theories of poverty comes from Akhil Gupta (2012). Gupta combines the Foucauldian concept of bio-politics with the concept of structural violence (Galtung 1969), to explain the persistence and normalisation of poverty in India. Bio-politics is, according to Foucault (2003 [1976]:245; 241), a function of the modern state which sees "the population as a political problem", whereby the state governs "the right to make live and to let die". Gupta reveals how political and bureaucratic inaction exacerbates poverty, which he sees as a form of structural violence, and allows it to become normalised and concealed. He does not consider such inaction by state actors to resemble indifference, for he observes the Indian State to be attentive to the plight of the poor. While bureaucratic indifference (Herzfeld 1992) refers to the specific actions and intentions of state actors, Gupta points to the workings of the bureaucratic system in the

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[14] Particularly the political-economy and post-development approaches do not allow clear categorisation within this framework, as they can be considered structural as well as political theories.
[15] One example of such a political theory is the perversity thesis as put forth by Somers and Block, which sees government aid to create dependence and thereby increase poverty (2005; Small et al 2010).

production of poverty. He builds on Foucault's theory of bio-politics by demonstrating how the state treats poverty as a bio-political fact and allows poor people to die while arguing that this is not the intended outcome (2012; 2013). Gupta explains that the Indian State is not a coherent and efficiently functioning entity like Foucault's theory might hold. He observes the Indian State to be incoherent, inefficient, and inconsistently present in people's lives (Pillay 2014). Gupta (2012) considers this inconsistency and inefficiency to render the state ineffective in combating poverty and thereby causing structural violence.

Many of the concepts and notions Gupta (2012) engages are pertinent to this dissertation. In chapter seven, I identify the ways in which the Panamanian State has historically and more recently interacted with Ngäbe as forms of structural violence. However, I cannot say with the same certainty that the structural violence produced by the actions and inactions of state actors is unintended. In the context of a state-planned relocation project of the majority Ngäbe neighbourhood of La Solución, Ngäbe residents have continually been faced with different forms of bureaucratic indifference which seem to indicate an intentional political strategy whereby misinformation might be allowing the state to persist with their own agendas that may in the long-term disadvantage Ngäbe people. In the experiences of urban Ngäbe residents, this bureaucratic indifference and the resulting inconveniences these residents experience are far from unintended. Various urban Ngäbe residents consider the state to deliberately reproduce unequal power structures and uneven distributions of resources.

Ethnographies of poverty

Anthropologists have researched experiences of exclusion and marginality (Alsayyad 2004; Bourgois 1988; Herzfeld 1992; Radcliffe 2015; Tsing 1993); suffering and structural and every-day violence (Arendt 1970; Bourgois 2001; Das et al. 2001; Farmer 1996; 2003; 2004; Kleinman et al. 1997; Scheper-Hughes 1992); structural vulnerability, heightened uncertainty, and precarity (Auyero 2011; Butler 2006; 2009; 2012; 2016; Casas-Cortés 2014; Lorey 2015; Meuhlebach 2012; Prout Quicke and Green 2017; Rosa and Cirelli 2018; Weston 2011; Quesada et al. 2011; zlolniski 2019); and dispossession and deprivation (Harvey 2008; Hinkson 2017).[16] These scholars by and large describe such concepts as conditions

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[16] This is not to be taken as an exhaustive list of scholarly literature on these topics. Many other scholars have contributed to the literature on these topics. I have referred solely to those scholars who have influenced and contributed to the arguments laid out in this thesis.

disproportionally experienced by 'the poor' as well as contributing to and reinforcing their poverty.

However, these scholars have generally not considered poverty to be their primary topic of research. Green (2006) argues that anthropological studies may offer significant insights into the causes of poverty while focussing on the lived experiences of individuals classified as poor. Such studies may emphasise the diversity of experiences among 'poor people' and examine the processes and effects of external categorisation of poverty on 'poor' communities (e.g. Cho 2012; Passaro 1996; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Shrestha 1995). However, such studies have been limited and the majority of anthropological studies on the experiences of 'the poor' do not directly engage theories of poverty.

My dissertation contributes toward the ethnographic study of poverty by examining the impacts of externally imposed labels of poverty on Ngäbe lived experiences and on their notions of poverty. In this thesis, I relate Ngäbe experiences and perceptions of their living conditions to their ideas on poverty. I thereby examine how their notions and experiences are impacted by the structural conditions they live in, as well as by externally imposed labels. While engaging with the various theories of poverty laid out in this chapter, I continually highlight the limited applicability of generalised and universalised notions and theories of poverty. The mismatch between dominant and local notions of poverty and the inapplicability of poverty labels to local contexts is particularly evident in cases of indigenous poverty.

1.1.2 Indigenous poverty

Indigenous Peoples are considered to be the "poorest sector of society" worldwide (Vinding 2003:4). Research on the conditions of Indigenous Peoples commonly states that "Indigenous Peoples are disproportionately represented among the poorest in both developed and developing countries" (Cariño 2005:35). Such research considers Indigenous Peoples in Latin America to have a higher probability of being poor than any other group in a given country (Psacharopoulous and Patrinos 1994). However, various anthropologists have argued that such studies fail to focus on different indigenous conceptions of poverty and wealth that may exist outside of the dominant economic framework (Feiring et al. 2003; Matthews and Izquierdo 2009). Indigenous Peoples' views are often overlooked and

omitted from poverty assessments and dialogues about their conditions (Feiring et al. 2003). The Ngäbe are no exception, as I demonstrate in this dissertation.

The issue of indigenous poverty is often indirectly implied in anthropological studies of lowland South American peoples by discussing how Indigenous Peoples are economically disadvantaged. However, several scholars have recently established that Indigenous Peoples themselves often do not consider their living conditions to be poor and even dislike such labelling (Vinding 2003; Sarmiento Barletti 2015). Diana Vinding argues for instance that Indigenous Peoples often "consider that they have resources, unique knowledge and know-how" (2003:5). Sarmiento Barletti confirms this perspective in the title of his chapter in *Images of Public Wealth or the Anatomy of Well-Being in Indigenous Amazonia* (Santos-Granero 2015), for which he borrowed a quote from his Ashaninka friend: "It makes me sad when they say we are poor. We are rich". Following the work of post-development theorists, Sarmiento Barletti (2015:146) argues that the logic of economic development which many Latin American States have adopted has led Indigenous People to be classified as poor and uncivilised. Through this classification, he asserts, the "'developed', 'modern', and 'civilized' claim their normality".

Santos-Granero's (2015) edited volume is part of an emergent body of literature on indigenous perspectives of poverty and well-being where the contributors provide crucial insights on Lowland South American definitions of poverty. They discern an absence of importance attached to material possessions within these definitions. The majority of groups discussed experience poverty primarily in social terms. For instance, for Wari' poverty signifies ill health, food insecurity, and the lack of a social network (Conklin 2015). Yanesha people similarly equate poverty to being deprived of social support and the ritual means necessary for overall vitality (Santos-Granero 2015b). People of the Center associate poverty with orphanhood, laziness, and the failure to share productive labour (Micarelli 2015), while Ashaninka relate it to anti-social accumulation, stinginess and dishonesty (Sarmiento Barletti 2015).[17] Such insights on indigenous Lowland South American conceptions of poverty provide a solid basis upon which to examine Ngäbe notions of poverty. They reveal a significant emphasis on social aspects of poverty among various indigenous groups. These ethnic groups emphasise the importance of social relations, the

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[17] As Micarelli (2015:182) explains, "People of the Center is a linguistically diverse but culturally relatively uniform cluster of ethnic groups" in Colombia and Peru.

sharing of food and labour, generosity, and honesty and they mostly consider poverty to be a lack of these attributes.

My research data shows that while these attributes are all vital aspects of Ngäbe social life, their lack does not make a person 'poor'. When speaking with Ngäbe, they most commonly associate poverty with not having the resources to obtain food or a proper house. Poverty may occur because of a structural lack of resources or because one does not expend their resources wisely or socially, which may leave the household without food or a proper house.

1.2 Well-being

Well-being is often equated with the sense of living a fulfilled life or the ability to construct such a life for oneself. This notion of well-being corresponds with the Aristotelian ideal of *Eudaimonia* (happiness). The roots of *Eudaimonia* carry the meaning of having benevolent power over one's destiny – "the power to construct a life that one values" (Fischer 2014:2). Alberto Corsin Jimenez reveals how, following this conception of well-being, politics appeared as a regulatory system of ethical or moral life (2008:12). Well-being (as in 'the good life' or happiness - *Eudaimonia*), he argues, came to be seen as a 'right', for which the state became the political and institutional guarantor (Corsín Jimenez 2008:15; see also Quispe 2003). The principal strategy to guarantee and protect this 'right' has been to 'fight' poverty (ibid.).

Although well-being as a political project has a long-standing history, more recently, with the rise of political liberalism, it also became an economic pursuit (Corsin Jimenez 2008; James 2008; Lambek 2008). Wendy James (2008) asserts that well-being is commonly believed to be obtained through a collection of goods and services, as exhibited by an ever-increasing array of consumer ads promoting well-being-enhancing goods and services. James (2008) and other scholars have pointed out that the well-being of the whole and the well-being of the individual or segment of the whole do not necessarily coincide (e.g. Castrillón Zapata 2002). Castrillón Zapata (2003) provides an account on the incongruence between the well-being of the indigenous Emberá and that of the Colombian national society. This account demonstrates that any individual that was opposed to the Urrá hydroelectric dam in an Emberá community was considered to be opposed to the well-being and development of the national society as a whole. Yet it clearly did not benefit the

Emberá households living in the surroundings of the dam, whose livelihoods it destroyed. I demonstrate in chapter seven that a similar incongruence between Ngäbe well-being and the development of the Panamanian national society through economic development projects is at play in the case of a state-planned relocation project of the majority Ngäbe neighbourhood of La Solución.

Various scholars have noted that recent decades have seen an increased academic interest in and research on well-being (Corsín Jimenez 2008; Fischer 2014; Santos- Granero 2015a; Thin 2008). Fischer points out how in the 'developed world' much of this research has taken the shape of 'happiness studies', while in the 'developing world' such academic interest has assumed the forms of 'multidimensional approaches to poverty' and Sen's 'capabilities approach to development' (Fischer 2014; Sen 1987). In other words, a focus on the ways in which people pursue a good life in the 'developed world' is reframed to a focus on poverty or the lack of capabilities to live a good life in the 'developing world'.

Several assumptions are inherent in such a correlation of research on 'Third World' poverty and 'First World' well-being, of which two are particularly relevant to this dissertation. First, that well-being is associated with the freedoms that people enjoy to live a life they themselves value and that poverty marks the absence of such freedoms or abilities (Alkire and Santos 2013). Second and consequently, that poverty inhibits people, either as individuals or as a collective, from pursuing or experiencing well-being (Corsin Jimenez 2008; Feiring et al. 2003). Indeed, well-being has generally been conceptualised as the ability to live a satisfying, valuable, or 'good' life. In the following section, I discuss this conceptualisation of well-being in greater detail.

Conceptualising well-being

Conceptualising well-being or living a good life is far from straight-forward, as Amartya Sen (1988:1) makes clear:

> *"You could be well off, without being well. You could be well, without being able to lead the life you wanted. You could have got the life you wanted without being happy. You could be happy without much freedom. You could have a good deal of freedom, without achieving much."*

Sen associates well-being with prosperity, health, fulfilment, happiness, freedom, and achievement. These have indeed been the principal ways in which well-being has been

conceptualised in material, psychological, and economic terms (Fischer 2014; Mathews and Izquierdo 2009). Various anthropologists have noted how such conceptions of well-being are limited and insufficient for understanding well-being in various contexts and among different peoples (Feiring et al. 2003; Mathews and Izquierdo 2009; Narotzky and Besnier 2014). For example, Carolina Izquierdo (2009) reveals that while international development agencies have concluded that there is greater well-being among the Peruvian Matsigenka than a few decades ago, the Matsigenka themselves see their well-being as having deteriorated over the past decade and being presently in decline. The contrary can also be the case, as I demonstrate in this thesis. While state authorities and members of the dominant society consider urban Ngäbe living conditions to be inadequate to be able to live good lives, Ngäbe residents themselves assert that their living conditions are fine. To fully grasp the various understandings and notions of well-being and the good life, some scholars argue that it is necessary to adopt broader definitions (Feiring et al. 2003; Mathews and Izquierdo 2009; Fischer 2014). They encourage research that focuses not only on material conditions but also on people's "desires, aspirations, and imaginations – the hopes, fears, and other subjective factors that drive their engagement with the world" (Fischer 2014:5). As a social phenomenon, well-being must be studied within its social context, rather than in isolation (Lambek 2008; James 2008). Here, Mathews and Izquierdo (2009:5) suggest that anthropology can contribute by providing "one more essential piece to the puzzle of well-being considered worldwide". In the following section, I lay out anthropological approaches to studying well-being.

1.2.1 Anthropology of well-being

There has been limited anthropological research on what well-being or a life worth living means in different contexts and how people pursue it. Anthropological literature of the 'developing world' has primarily focused on ill-being (e.g. poverty and suffering) rather than on well-being (Robbins 2013; Thin 2009; Zoomers 2006). Neil Thin (2008) has called this focus on poverty and suffering as a focus on 'negative minimalisms'. Similarly, Narotzky and Besnier have argued that such a focus on limitations conceals the fact that individuals whose political, economic, and other decision-making capacities are limited are nonetheless "capable of developing sometimes complex individual or collective strategies to enhance their own well-being and the well-being of future generations" (2014:4). In

other words, even if poor people have limited economic and political resources, they may still find ways to live well.

Recently, however, there have been various calls for a focus on well-being or 'the good', and on what living a good life involves in different contexts (e.g. Maurer 2012; Robbins 2013; Quispe 2003). For instance, Narotzky and Besnier are concerned with what individuals "understand by 'a life worth living' and what they do to strive toward that goal" (2014:5). However, others have argued that a commitment to perceiving 'the good life' risks masking or neglecting the violences and sufferings that people experience on a daily basis as well as the contributions anthropology has made to documenting such everyday experiences (e.g. Das 2013; Singh 2015). Therefore, as Clara Han (2018:341) asserts, scholars need to "pay attention or attune to the textures of vulnerability… so that we can see the diverse forms of politics that are already before us". A politically engaged approach to studying the good life, as I strive to employ in this dissertation, would analyse the ways in which people perceive and pursue well-being as well as the ways in which they are hindered, obstructed, or constrained in this pursuit (de L'Estoile 2014). This dissertation examines the ways in which urban Ngäbe understand well-being and strive to live well and how they are hindered in their endeavours.

Beyond the economy – other forms of (well) being in the world

To study what well-being means for different people in diverse contexts, as the scholars I have previously discussed suggest (Narotsky and Besnier 2014; Robbins 2013; Quispe 2003), it is necessary to extricate well-being from its dominant (neoliberal) economic context. Contributors to a special issue of *Current Anthropology* (Narotzky and Besnier 2014) have argued for the need to 'rethink the economy'. In that issue, de L'Estoile (2014:72) argues that in order to 'rethink' the economy, one first needs to "unthink 'the economy' as a given framework". Such an endeavour involves acknowledging that the economy is the public's own "framework for perceiving the world and acting on it" (ibid.:62). Edward Fischer (2014:17) seems to agree with this perspective in his ethnography about 'the good life' in Guatemala and Germany when he notes that "economic systems are built on assumptions – often taken-for-granted and naturalized assumptions – about what is good, desirable, worthy, ethical, and just". He points toward the moral economy as a framework for moving beyond our taken-for-granted assumptions and for acknowledging the role of desires, cultural values, and social norms in economic decision-making

processes. Yet this approach still assumes that the economy is a universally held framework within which the various notions, visions, and ideas of the good life and well-being exist. De L'Estoile (2014) instead suggests identifying other ways of constructing worlds that are not necessarily guided by the economy.

Narotzky and Besnier (2014) propose to rethink the economy by focusing on social reproduction and the activities aimed at sustaining life across generations. These authors refer to the economy as "making a living", which they take to mean "'making people' in their physical, social, spiritual, affective, and intellectual dimensions" (ibid.:14). This perspective corresponds with Santos-Granero's (2009b) identification of indigenous Amazonian economies as 'political economies of life', in which economic activities are geared toward reproducing the social and cosmic order. Such a reproduction, according to Narotzky and Besnier, involves a "continuity that brings generations together around microprojects of making a living and enhancing future opportunities and around macroprojects of social configurations of power and asset distribution" (2014:8).

Anthropological theories on well-being are generally differentiated from dominant economic perspectives on well-being. Anthropologists have called not only for more encompassing perspectives on well-being, but also for wider perceptions of 'the economy, or even to look for understandings of well-being outside 'the framework' of the economy (de L'Estoile 2014; see also Narotsky and Besnier 2014). This dissertation strives to understand indigenous Ngäbe notions of well-being which may not exist within an economic framework. In the section that follows, I discuss various anthropological approaches to well-being that aim to move beyond the limiting 'economic' perspective.

Anthropological conceptions of well-being

Within their proposed remake of the economy, Narotzky and Besnier (2014:4) see "well-being as the accomplishment of socially reasonable expectations of material and emotional comfort that depend on access to the diverse resources needed to attain them". From this necessarily vague definition of well-being, it can be extrapolated that notions of well-being contain material and emotional aspects and are socially (or culturally) informed as well as dependent on what is considered to be attainable within a given context. This definition corresponds with Matthews and Izquierdo's (2009) definition, which they put forth in their edited volume on "Well-being in anthropological perspective". They see well-being as "an optimal state for an individual, community, society and the world as a whole". Well-being,

they argue, is conceived of and experienced individually and yet "influenced by various structural arrangements in which individuals are embedded" (2009:5-6). The authors do not clarify whether they perceive such an 'optimal' state to be attainable and sustainable, or whether they consider it to be an unachievable goal to continuously strive for. The term 'state' indicates that it is indeed attainable. However, I perceive the likelihood of any individual or community to sustain such an 'optimal' state very low. Attainability (or unattainability) of well-being is a significant aspect of anthropological and other scholarly conceptions of well-being, as I explore further below.

Michael Jackson (2011), for instance, considers well-being to be unattainable by definition. He maintains a similar definition to that of Narotzky and Besnier in his monograph on well-being in Sierra Leone, *Life within Limits* (2011). Building on the work of psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, Jackson (2011:156) sees well-being as "the possession of existential power" or potency.[18] He considers this existential potency to lie partly within oneself, "manifest in the conviction that one has what it takes to endure one's lot, survive a setback, improve one's fortune, or turn one's life around" (ibid.). However, well-being or existential power, Jackson argues, is "equally contingent on one's relationships with others, and on what the world affords one as an opportunity" (ibid.). Jackson makes his conception of well-being more specific by concentrating on three primary aspects, which he calls 'pre-conditions' to well-being: aspiration and hope, agency, and a sense of being with others.

Fischer (2014:210) builds on Jackson's conceptualisation of well-being by reframing the subjective elements of aspiration, agency and social networks and combining them with the more "objective material conditions as measured by income, health, and physical safety". Fischer (2014) identifies the subjective domains of well-being to involve aspiration and opportunity, dignity and fairness, and commitment to a larger purpose. These elements, he argues, are informed by notions of the good life and enabled or limited by opportunity structures and family and community networks (ibid.). These various aspects or 'pre-conditions' to well-being broadly overlap with Mathews and Izquierdo's (2009:261) four dimensions of well-being, which they base on several accounts of well-being among indigenous societies: a physical dimension, "involving how individuals conceive, perceive and experience their bodies in the world"; an interpersonal dimension, "involving how individuals conceive, perceive and experience their relations with others; an existential

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[18] Frankl states that well-being has three sources: work, relations with others and the "attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering" (2006:111).

dimension, "involving how individuals comprehend the values and meaning of their lives"; and a global dimension, "involving how national institutions and global forces shape how well-being is conceived, perceived and experienced among individuals".

What can be usefully deduced from the different yet similar conceptualisations of well-being by Narotsky and Besnier (2014), Matthews and Izquierdo (2009), Jackson (2011), and Fischer (2014) is that they understand that different peoples have certain pre-conditions to well-being, conditions that make life a 'good life'. The various scholars (ibid.) consider these pre-conditions to be subjective and individual while they also see them as broadly categorical. They primarily categorise them in terms of social, existential, structural, and physical aspects. The different scholars all agree that notions of well-being are informed by ideas of 'the good life' and impacted by the opportunities afforded to individuals within their social, cultural, political, and economic environments. These insights correspond with my research findings about urban Ngäbe residents' well-being, which is based on Ngäbe ideas of living a good life and impacted by the social, political, and economic relations that structure their urban lives.

Benoit de L'Estoile (2014) usefully distinguishes between 'frames of reference', which shape notions of the good life, and 'fields of opportunities', which shape ideas about reasonable expectations for life. De L'Estoile (2014:64) defines individuals' frames of reference as "the cognitive and normative frame used by people to make sense of their world and act on it". These frames of reference are in part shared within sociality, through 'cultural systems' (norms, values, dispositions, and practices) which inform expectations and perceptions of how one ought to live or act and how one ought to be a good person (Appadurai 2013:292; de L'Estoile 2014). Additionally, such ideas and frames of reference are shaped by individual and collective experiences and memories of the past (de L'Estoile 2014; Narotzky and Besnier 2014). Conditions for a good life may be further impacted by what individuals perceive to be possible and reasonable within their given social-structural context. These ideas about reasonable expectations for the good life shape and are shaped by their 'fields of opportunities' (de L'Estoile 2014), or "what the world affords one as an opportunity" (Jackson 2011:156). The concepts of frames of reference and fields of opportunities are particularly useful for analysing Ngäbe notions of well-being and assessments of their living conditions. In chapter three I discuss Ngäbe people's frames of reference which give rise to their notions of the good life, while in chapters six and seven I analyse Ngäbe residents' fields of opportunities which affect their abilities to live well.

The 'pursuit' of well-being

The anthropological theories of well-being discussed above take well-being to be a universally useful and applicable concept. Inherent to these theories is the assumption that peoples all over the world consider well-being to be important and something to 'strive' for. They commonly write of the 'pursuit' of well-being or 'the good life'. Anthropological literature on well-being describes it as something to be achieved, as a "landscape of discernible ends and of practical paths to these ends" (Appadurai 2013:292), a dream that needs to be realised or a desire that needs to be gratified (Mathews and Izquierdo 2009), or an "ongoing aspiration for something better that gives meaning to life's pursuits" (Fischer 2014:2).

I briefly touched on the aspect of the attainability of well-being and how this is an important theme within several anthropological conceptualisations of well-being, even if it is not always explicitly mentioned. Many of these theories consider well-being or 'the good life' to be desired and yet unattainable, much like a utopia (Bloch 2000; Jackson 2011). Jackson (2011:xi), for instance, defines well-being as a "condition of existential dissatisfaction", which "reflects a sense of discontinuity between who we are and who we might become" (2011:xi). Hope for future well-being, Jackson (2011:xi) argues, reflects the "sense that one may become other or more than one presently is or was fated to be". Such striving for a better future, in turn, stems from "a sense that something is missing in our lives, and that there is more to life than what exists before us in the here and now" (Jackson 2011:xii). Following Ernst Bloch (2000), Jackson (2011:93) refers to this search for 'more' as "the human anxiety", indicating that it is universal and constant. Such a vision sees individuals across all societies as constantly "trying to become better people and live better lives" (Fischer 2014:218). Inherent in this vision is the idea of the here and now "being not enough" (Jackson 2011:xi). This idea of being concerned with 'having enough' in the future suggests a general sense of not having enough in the present. Jackson (2011:99) asks whether it is "in our nature to desire more than we have, to be more than we are, to do better than we are presently doing, to be perennially dissatisfied". Although Jackson (2011:xi) leaves this question unanswered, he hints at the universality of such a "sense of insufficiency" and dissatisfaction through his conceptualisation of well-being as a "condition of existential dissatisfaction".

I suggest that these ideas of 'having enough' and the present 'being not enough' exist within a specific "framework for perceiving the world and acting on it": a framework of the economy (de L'Estoile 2014:62). Economist Amartya Sen (1987:10-11) asserts that the absence of desire for things beyond one's means reflects a lack of courage and hope and a "fear of inevitable disappointment". Such a vision implies that we ought to desire what we do not have and are unable to obtain. Such desires beyond one's means and the idea of 'not enough' are the driving force of the capitalist economy. Senses of insufficiency and scarcity are at the foundation of the idea that we need to compete – for resources, for desired goods, and even for such intangible things as prestige, acknowledgement, respect, and attention. James (2008:72) notes how consumer ads and marketing tools give us the impression that "'success' follows on from the attainment of well-being" and that such well-being can be achieved by purchasing ever more goods or services. Guided by the framework of the economy, we continuously get reinforced the idea that we are not and do not presently have enough and that we ought to desire 'more' in order to 'achieve' well-being. Yet, as this desire is constant, actual well-being (having and being 'enough') can never be attained. Within this economic framework, well-being is indeed a "condition of existential dissatisfaction" (Jackson 2011:xi).

The attainability of well-being is an important question to be attentive to and mindful of, as it draws attention to the economically oriented assumptions of many anthropological notions of well-being: that, although well-being may have different meanings in diverse contexts, it is something that we (constantly and actively) ought to desire and pursue. Anthropologists of Lowland South America have indirectly touched upon questions of the attainability and the pursuit of well-being. As I discuss in greater depth below, these scholars have found the indigenous groups they lived among to associate well-being with living beautifully, peacefully, or convivially (e.g. Overing 1989; Overing and Passes 2000; Santos-Granero 2015a; Sarmiento Barletti 2015). They generally describe such conviviality or harmonious coexistence as a collective rather than an individual pursuit. It is strived for continuously and attained periodically (Overing and Passes 2000; Santos-Granero 2000). These findings indicate that well-being is indeed attainable for various groups, although not necessarily as a permanent state or condition. In the section that follows, I discuss these findings and the emerging body of literature on indigenous Lowland South American conceptions of well-being in greater detail.

1.2.2 Indigenous conceptions of well-being and 'the good life'

Anthropologists of Lowland South America have increasingly taken up an interest in the concepts of well-being, living well, and "the good life" (e.g. Belaunde 2001; Overing and Passes, eds. 2000; Santos-Granero, ed. 2015; Sarmiento Barletti 2011; 2016; Walker 2015). This sparked interest may be attributed to the increasing use of indigenous notions of *Buen Vivir* (living well or 'the good life) in indigenous activism and policy-making. For instance, various nation-states have included references to indigenous notions of *Buen Vivir* in their constitutions (e.g. Bolivia and Ecuador, see Bold 2017; Rojas 2009; Valdivia 2018; Whitten and Whitten 2015). Joanna Overing led the way in demonstrating the relationship between morality and aesthetics among Lowland South American Indigenous Peoples in her study on the "aesthetics of everyday life" (1989). Other anthropologists have underlined this relationship, demonstrating that for indigenous Amazonians, the 'good life' is the 'beautiful life' (Overing and Passes 2000; Seeger 2015; Walker 2015).

Studies of well-being in indigenous Lowland South America have particularly revealed that living well is about productive and reproductive power, as Narotzky and Besnier (2014) suggested in their reframing of the economy. Overing and Passes (2000) put the good life in anthropological view in their edited volume: *The Anthropology of Love and Anger: The aesthetics of conviviality in Native Amazonia*. They suggested that "a fertile community is a sign in Amazonia of its high morale" (2002:17). Yet they argue that well-being in Greater Amazonia is not solely about physical reproduction, but also about social reproduction and creating "good/beautiful" people (2002:2). Overing and Passes (2000), alongside other contributors, demonstrate that the creation of 'good people' and the 'good life' is performed primarily through conviviality and harmonious social relations. The authors agree that rather than an unrealisable ideal, such peaceful coexistence is achieved temporarily, yet constantly undermined by (potential) negative or antisocial emotions and behaviour (see also Santos-Granero 2000).

Contributors to a more recent volume on well-being in indigenous Amazonia, *Images of Public Wealth or the Anatomy of Well-Being in Indigenous Amazonia* (Santos-Granero 2015), substantiate this emphasis on convivial social relations. They further reveal how Lowland South American Indigenous Peoples link well-being to hard work and the abundance of 'public wealth' (Guzmán-Gallegos 2015; Micarelli 2015; Santos-Granero 2015a; Sarmiento Barletti 2015). Such public wealth is primarily generated through

relationships of care, cooperation, and the sharing of productive labour or the products of such labour.

The same scholars also reveal that money has progressively become an important aspect of indigenous economies and their abilities to live good lives (see particularly Micarelli 2015; Santos-Granero 2015a). This increasing use of and reliance on money does not necessarily denote a departure from indigenous notions of the good life. Sarmiento Barletti (2015), for instance, found that while a certain degree of material wealth was necessary for Ashaninka well-being, wealth accumulation negatively affected communal well-being when it was attained through anti-social practices and not shared. Micarelli (2015:177) additionally shows how money can represent "a token of a successful incursion into the world of Others" while others also note that "money can be absorbed into the internal circuits of production, reciprocity, and commensality and contribute to the domestic process of people making" (Santos-Granero 2015a:18; cf. Bloch and Parry 1989). Such incorporations, Micarelli (2015:163) argues, "show the vitality of indigenous cultures".

These various insights on indigenous Lowland South American ideals of well-being and the good life provide a solid foundation to analyse Ngäbe notions of living well. In my reading of the various ethnographies, well-being is considered to be a continuous striving to live as 'well' as one can according to the norms and values of one's group, rather than the 'pursuit' of an (unattainable) future goal. The good life is an ideal version of convivial living. It provides a set of guidelines for how to live properly and (re)produce a society full of healthy, productive, and moral people. This notion concurs with my observations of Ngäbe ideas of living well. My Ngäbe interlocutors were primarily concerned with living the way they believe is the best way and being 'good' or 'real' (Ngäbe) people. Their emphasis was more on living well or living properly than on *being* well. Being well, in turn, appeared to flow from living well – when one lives well, one is well.

My research findings about Ngäbe ideas of living well correspond with the abovementioned insights about well-being among indigenous Amazonians. Living well for Ngäbe increasingly requires money but remains primarily centred around hard work and conviviality attained through relationships of care, cooperation, and generosity. Another crucial element of living well for Ngäbe is personal and household autonomy. Urban Ngäbe residents' daily concerns are centred on household needs and commitments and these generally take precedence over communal matters. The household represents the locus of autonomy and independence. Respecting personal and household autonomy not only allows Ngäbe to live

convivially, but household autonomy and personal responsibility are also considered necessities to live properly.

1.2.3 Factors impacting abilities to live well

Besides ideas and ideals of the 'good life', various other aspects may impact people's ideas of and abilities to live well. Based on my research findings and the different pre-conditions to well-being discussed above, I discern three additional elements that significantly affect Ngäbe well-being: Aspiration, autonomy – which relates to Jackson's (2011) conception of agency–, and fairness. I discuss each of these elements briefly below.

Aspiration

Fischer (2014:207) provides a clear and straightforward definition of aspiration as "a hope for the future informed by ideas about the good life". Jackson (2011) argues that such aspiration or hope for the future is critical to the ability to endure the challenges and harsh conditions that life can provide. In the words of Jackson (2011:147), it provides "the necessary illusion that… everything will work out for the best".

My research concurs with Jackson's (2011) contention that aspirations for the future help individuals endure adverse conditions. I have found that urban Ngäbe residents' aspirations to return to their *fincas* in the future allows them to endure the urban challenges and inconveniences they face.[19] In chapter three, I suggest that nostalgia is a form of aspiration or hope for the future. Although it has not been distinctly theorised as such, various scholars have proposed that nostalgia can be prospective as well as retrospective (Angé and Berliner 2015; Boyer 2012; Boym 2008). Nostalgia may represent an idealisation of a past that people strive to realise in the future (Boym 2008). Alternatively, it may involve a desired preservation or reconstruction of collective social identity, particularly of those aspects that are deemed to be lost or deteriorating (Angé and Berliner 2015). In such circumstances, nostalgia may give rise to hope and aspiration for social reproduction and future well-being.

Yet, aspirations are often limited by what individuals perceive to be reasonable expectations of future possibilities given one's socio-economic and political context

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[19] The translation of *Finca* is agricultural land. For Ngäbe it is the land that they use for cultivation and often a reference to their 'home'. For a full description of what f*inca* means for Ngäbe individuals, see chapter three.

(Appadurai 2013). Appadurai refers to such expectations as 'collective horizons'. He notes that these collective horizons enable or constrain people's 'capacity to aspire', which he sees as the power and possibilities to act toward one's desired future. He argues that poor people have substantially more limited and fragile networks of possibilities and hence limited capacities to aspire (ibid). Following Appadurai, various scholars consider constrained aspirations or limited capacities to aspire to hamper individuals' well-being by preventing them from attaining or even envisioning the lives they wish to lead (e.g. Fischer 2014; Jackson 2011; Zipin et al. 2015).

Following Appadurai (1990; 2004; 2013), Zipin et al. (2015) point out how poverty is often addressed as a problem of low aspirations in which case the proposed solution is to raise aspirations. Based on Bourdieu's notions of *doxa* and *habitus*, Zipin et al. argue that such an approach results in a combination of *doxic* aspirations on the one hand and *habituated* aspirations on the other hand. Doxic aspirations are based on "dominant norms about worthy futures" and yet unrealistic for many people given their social-structural positions (ibid.:234). The scholars suggest that such aspirations often lead individuals to believe they are inept because they are unable to reach their aspirations and are not achieving what they think they ought to. Habituated aspirations are based on "tacit senses of what is and is not possible," grounded in individuals material and cultural conditions of "given social–structural positions" (Zipin et al. 2015:234). Zipin et al. (ibid.) theorise these "latently felt estimations of probable futures" as deeply internalised senses of "self-limiting possibility". As these scholars reveal, well-being may not only be affected by individuals' capacities to aspire but also by the types of aspirations they sustain. This distinction between *habituated* and *doxic* aspirations provides a useful framework to examine urban Ngäbe aspirations. As I discuss in chapter six, various urban Ngäbe residents hold one or both types of these aspirations.

Autonomy
The majority of scholars theorising well-being agree that it is dependent upon a certain capacity or power to make decisions or some degree over one's life course, which they often refer to as agency. Jackson (2011:184) sees agency as a "sense that one is able to act on the situation that is acting on you". He considers this agency to be a pre-condition to well-being. Following Jackson and based on a capabilities approach (Alkire 2005), Fischer (2014:11) sees such agency as "the freedom to act on behalf of what one values and has reason to value". Mathews and Izquierdo (2009:154) further note that individuals "tend to seek freedom from coercive control, especially if that control is thought to be not intrinsic

to oneself but externally imposed". Similar to other Lowland South American groups (see e.g. Killick 2007; Overing and Passes 2000; Rosengren 2002) Ngäbe highly regard individual and household autonomy (Karkotis 2012). The observation of household autonomy serves, in part, to avoid the imposition of external authority, as I highlight in chapter seven. It allows individuals and families to make decisions about their livelihoods and to live good and proper lives. Autonomy is thus a significant aspect of indigenous lives and of their abilities to reproduce the social order in the ways they envision (Narotzky and Besnier 2014). Colonial and post-colonial relationships have unmistakeably constrained these abilities for Indigenous Peoples. As Conklin and Graham assert, indigenous groups have "actively sought, and often found, ways to preserve a degree of autonomy by taking the skills and resources acquired from outsiders and turning them to indigenous purposes" (1995: 706). However, they largely find themselves in positions with limited political and economic resources to negotiate within the wider socio-structural contexts that affect their living conditions.

Appadurai refers to this as "a matter of operating with extremely weak resources where the terms of recognition are concerned" (2013:185). He defines these terms of recognition as "the conditions and constraints under which the poor negotiate with the very norms that frame their social lives" (ibid.). He argues that 'the poor', and Indigenous People among them, are often urged to subscribe to norms which negatively affect their access to resources and exacerbate their structural inequality. According to Appadurai (2013), people in power-marginalised positions may alter their terms of recognition by rejecting such dominant norms, discourses, or ideology. I draw on Appadurai's theory in chapter four to demonstrate how urban Ngäbe use images and discourses of poverty to alter their terms of recognition and take responsibility (or agency) for their own lives.

Many factors may constrain people's ability to negotiate with the norms that frame their social lives. One major factor is exclusion from bureaucratic decision-making processes and dominant sectors of society. Herzfeld refers to such processes of exclusion by the state and state actors as bureaucratic indifference (1992). Such indifference involves a rejection of those who are different and a denial of their identity and selfhood, enacted through bureaucratic approaches and representations (ibid.:1). Such bureaucratic indifference can lead to conditions of state-manufactured vulnerability (Zlolniski 2019) or precarity (Butler 2009).[20] While some scholars maintain that conditions of precarity provide a potential for

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[20] Precarity refers to structural and unequally distributed vulnerability (Butler 2009).

activism and resistance (e.g. Lorey 2015; Scott 1985), others argue that it may obstruct any possibilities for its victims to contest their conditions (e.g. Spivak 1988). Spivak (1988) argues for instance that subalterns do not possess the discourses, nor the concepts of the normalising liberal society to express themselves in a way in which the dominant society can understand them (See Crehan 2016; Valdivia 2018). From this perspective, 'subalterns', or those in power-marginalised positions, are unable to voice their political agency or to alter their terms of recognition. Various scholars have contested this notion of an inability to speak and have instead emphasised the structural lack of hearing and forms of mishearing that indigenous and other potentially marginalised people face (e.g. Byrd and Rothberg 2011; Radcliffe 2015; Rival 2016; Turner 2006). When Indigenous Peoples speak, their words may not be heard, understood, or acknowledged within the dominant system of representation (Valdivia 2018). I discuss state bureaucratic approaches of indifference involving a lack of hearing and various forms of mishearing that constrain urban Ngäbe residents' abilities to challenge their collective conditions of precarity and the unequal power relations that shape those conditions in further detail in chapter seven.

Fairness

In this dissertation, I demonstrate that comparisons with others affect how individuals feel about their own conditions for life. Urban Ngäbe residents' comparisons of their opportunities with those enjoyed by members of other ethnic groups lead many of them to conclude that Ngäbe individuals have fewer opportunities and more difficult lives. These observations generate senses of unfairness among Ngäbe residents, as I outline in chapter six. According to Fischer (2014:7), well-being "builds on cultural valuations of fairness and dignity". Fairness and dignity involve freedom from discrimination as well as a sense of being treated fairly (ibid.). Psychologists have found that experiences of discrimination and unfair treatment often lead to reduced levels of life satisfaction (Major and Dover 2016; Schaafsma 2013). Schaafsma (2013) reveals, for instance, that discrimination generates feelings of unfairness and injustice, and thereby affects victims' well-being.

Indigenous Peoples in particular often face sustained discrimination because of their indigeneity or cultural identity, which likely causes them to experience marginalisation, distress, and unfairness. Such discrimination can be seen as a continuation of colonialism within a now post-colonial setting, in which the dominant party identifies, objectifies, and projects the pathologised 'other' (Frankenberg and Mani 1993; Hall 1996). Indigenous Peoples often find themselves at the bottom of ethnic or racial hierarchies. Arredondo explains how such hierarchies are "built on an historical ideological discourse that

consolidated social domination by legitimating the existence of races and a hierarchical relationship among these" (2014:79). At the bottom of such hierarchies, Indigenous Peoples frequently find their access to material and symbolic resources severely constrained by virtue of their perceived indigeneity (Holmes 2011). The taken-for-granted arrangements that frame such hierarchies often impose conditions of physical and emotional distress upon those at the bottom, ranging from exploitation and social exclusion to hunger and infant mortality (Bourgois 2001). Following Galtung (1969) and Farmer (1996), Phillipe Bourgois (2001) argues that these conditions result from the structural violence implicated in the inequalities perpetuated by the political-economic organisation of society.

Bourgois (1988) studied the experiences of Ngäbe plantation workers situated at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy on a banana plantation in Panama. He found that Ngäbe workers experienced ethnic domination and oppression due to their indigeneity and alleged cultural 'backwardness'. He argued that they deemed ethnic domination to be "their most immediate daily problem since it is most visible and insulting" (ibid.:342). While Bourgois did not specifically refer to Ngäbe well-being, his account reveals that the discrimination, exploitation, and other forms of structural violence that Ngäbe workers experienced significantly constrained their abilities to live well on the plantation. In my research, I have found that urban Ngäbe residents of Bocas del Toro experience similar forms of structural violence because of the position they occupy in the ethnic hierarchy. I discuss their experiences and senses of unfairness associated with this hierarchy and how these affect their abilities to live well in chapter six.

1.3 Indigenous urbanisation

Indigenous urbanisation is intensifying in many parts of the world and cultural processes of urbanisation are increasingly shaping indigenous identities (Jacobs 2012; McSweeney and Jokisch 2015; Obinna et al. 2010; Patrick and Budach 2014). Rising numbers of Latin America's indigenous lowland peoples have been migrating to urban areas in search of better opportunities (McSweeney and Jokisch 2007; Peluso and Alexiades 2005; Rubenstein 2001; Virtanen 2010). Panama is no exception: a considerable number of Panamanian Indigenous People now live in urban areas (Alvarado 2002; Bort and Young 2001; Chackiel, 2005; McSweeney and Jokisch 2007).

Indigenous urbanisation, or the increased presence of Indigenous Peoples in urban areas (Peluso 2015:59), is not a new phenomenon in Latin America. However, until recently, indigenous rural-to-urban migrants have primarily originated from highland regions (McSweeney and Jokisch 2007). The increasing presence of lowland South American Indigenous Peoples in urban areas is a much more recent trend and has particularly accelerated over the past few decades (ibid.; McSweeney and Jokisch 2015; Peluso and Alexiades 2005). The Ngäbe are no exception to this trend. A growing number of Ngäbe individuals and families have taken up residence in urban areas over the past two decades (Quintero and Hughes 2007; INEC 2010).

1.3.1 Anthropology and indigenous urbanisation

An emergent body of anthropological literature on indigenous urbanisation documents the forms that rural-to-urban-migration may assume and the principal reasons for taking up temporary or permanent residence in urban centres (McSweeney and Jokisch 2007; Peluso 2015; Virtanen 2010). This literature identifies enhanced economic opportunities and the pursuit of (higher) education as the primary reasons for taking up urban residence (McSweeney and Jokisch 2007; 2015; Peluso 2015; Urrea Giraldo 1994). Economic opportunities and education are also the two primary motivations for Ngäbe families to move to urban centres. Other reported motivations for indigenous urbanisation in Lowland South America include reduced land availability and land conflicts, political leadership and participation, and a desire to participate in urban life (ibid.).

McSweeney and Jokisch (2007) usefully map out the trend of recent rapidly increasing urbanisation among lowland South American Indigenous Peoples in a review article. The authors demonstrate that indigenous urbanisation in Lowland South America distinguishes itself from the dominant rural-urban migration waves of the mid-20th century in various ways. What sets indigenous urbanisation apart is its concurrency with increased political participation regarding territorial matters, the reinforcement of place-based identities through the urban-bound moves, and the particular ties maintained with the homeland (McSweeney and Jokisch 2007; 2015; Alexiades and Peluso 2015). McSweeney and Jokisch (2007) argue that indigenous urbanisation can easily be misunderstood as an erosion of ties to indigenous lands and indigenous identities. Such misunderstanding can have severe political consequences, particularly regarding territorial claims. Therefore, the authors call for further research on "how indigenous identities are shaped in urban and transnational spaces, and how they are articulated by and through social, economic, and political currents in rural homelands" (McSweeney and Jokisch 2007:174).

Various scholars have recently taken up this call. Contributors to the edited volume *Mobility and Migration in Indigenous Amazonia* (Alexiades 2009) have examined the ways in which "indigenous notions of self, place, space and territory have been shaped by the historical experience of movement and displacement" (ibid.:21). In the introduction to this volume, Miguel Alexiades (2009) demonstrates that indigenous urbanisation is a continuation of a historical predisposition of Lowland South American Indigenous People to high levels of mobility (See also Alexiades and Peluso 2016). Pinedo Vasquez and Padoch (2009:89) further argue that "apparently discrete rural and urban categories have actually always been, and remain today, indistinct and inextricably linked in numerous ways".

Contributors to the special issue *Indigenous Urbanization: The Circulation of Peoples between Rural and Urban Amazonian Spaces* (Peluso 2015) provided additional insights that enhance our understanding of indigenous urbanisation. They reveal that rural-to-urban migration in indigenous Lowland South America can be multi-sited, cyclical, or temporary as well as permanent and semi-permanent (McSweeney and Jokisch 2015; Peluso 2015; Alexiades and Peluso 2015). These findings suggest that such migration does not necessarily denote full-time absence from rural spaces. Daniela Peluso (2015) particularly shows how the multi-directional flows and movements between urban and rural landscapes and the creation of urban selves give indigenous belonging a new, more encompassing meaning. McSweeney and Jokisch (2015) further theorise indigenous urbanisation as a

form of 're-territorialisation' rather than 'de-territorialisation'. They point to "the ways in which urbanization of Amazonia's native populations is interconnected with their political struggle for rights to territory".

These contributions vehemently challenge the still popularly held urban-rural dichotomy, by demonstrating the various ways in which rural and urban spheres are linked in the urbanisation process. The scholars all agree that indigenous identity remains important for Lowland South American Indigenous People as they increasingly move toward urban areas. It may even have greater significance in interethnic urban environments, as several anthropologists have recently argued (Alexiades and Peluso 2016; O'Driscoll 2014; Virtanen 2010). Alexiades and Peluso (2016), for instance, speak of re-indigenisation, while O'Driscoll (2014) reveals how living in an urban area may in some cases increase Indigenous People's ethnic pride and their awareness of the 'value' of their indigeneity.

My research interacts with this literature and its findings in several ways. The various ties urban Ngäbe residents retain with their communities of origin and the aspirations many of them have toward returning to these communities (discussed in chapter three), concur with the cited literature. Many Ngäbe residents return to their communities of origin with varying frequency to maintain their *fincas* and to retain the possibility of a return in the future. Furthermore, Ngäbe residents often refer to cultivation practices and life in the *finca* as the right way to live according to Ngäbe values. By nostalgically invoking images of the *finca* and cultivation and by aspiring to return, they bring the *finca* and the values imbued in cultivation practices into the urban sphere. I argue that such nostalgic aspirations serve to foster a continued identification with Ngäbe values and ways of life. Urban Ngäbe attach great importance to the way of life that the *finca* and cultivation allow, which they consider the way they 'ought to live'. However, urban Ngäbe residents' continued identification with Ngäbe culture and lifeways exists alongside senses of shame about their indigeneity and the stereotypes associated with it in their inter-ethnic urban context, as I highlight in chapter six.

1.3.2 Indigenous urbanisation, poverty, and well-being

Accounts of the living conditions and social situations of Indigenous Peoples have primarily focused on communities residing on their indigenous lands, that is, rural areas, or on the

struggles they encounter relating to their territorial rights (Dahl and Jensen 2003). Yet, urban Indigenous Peoples are considered to be the most marginalised and poverty-stricken groups in their respective urban areas (ibid.). As I discussed earlier, the literature on indigenous urbanisation identifies the economic and educational opportunities that urban settings offer as the two primary motivations for Indigenous Peoples to take up residence in urban centres (Cariño 2005; Garcia Castro 2000; McSweeney and Jokisch 2015; Peluso 2015; Virtanen 2010). These findings indicate that motivations for migration to urban centres are closely connected to ideas of economic wellbeing. Urbanisation has indeed been positively linked to social and economic development by economists and development scholars alike and has even been suggested as "part of the solution to reducing …poverty" (Tacoli et al 2008, p.50).

Yet, the same body of literature finds that urban Indigenous People are often found in positions of exclusion and discrimination (Plant 1998) and considered to be living in conditions of marginalisation and poverty (Dahl and Jensen 2003; Alvarado 2001). Anthropologists have also found urban indigenous communities to be affected by conditions of heightened precariousness, lacking infrastructure and services, and a prevalence of health and nutritional problems (Alexiades and Peluso 2016). Philip Young (2014:206) even writes of Ngäbe women living in urban areas that "they have simply exchanged the rural poverty of the comarca for the urban poverty of the city, which is often more severe".

As Alexiades and Peluso (2016:7) discuss, urban Indigenous Peoples are often assumed to be victims of modernity, territorially and culturally displaced, and "robbed of their legitimacy". Urban and indigenous are still commonly considered to "stand at opposite ends of a spectrum" and Indigenous People who migrated to urban centres are thus often believed to have left behind their indigenous identity (O'Driscoll 2014:35). O'Driscoll (2014) found that, In contrast to this common assumption, indigeneity becomes more relevant in an urban context where multiple ethnicities interact, as it can be used to connect with fellow indigenous urban dwellers but also be a feature of differentiation from other ethnic groups. Yet, indigeneity is also a source of social and economic marginalisation in the urban environment (Virtanen 2010). Virtanen (2010) demonstrates that this marginalisation may lead urban indigenous residents to conceal their indigenousness in some circumstances, while at other times they may emphasise their indigeneity as a means to challenge prejudices. Conversely, Peluso (2003) describes how indigenous Ese Eja might flaunt

poverty to evoke urban generosity in one moment and discard it in other instances where they seek better integration in urban life. Garcia Castro (2000) identifies such strategic employment by Indigenous Peoples of their perceived poverty as a modification of ways of being in order to incorporate and be incorporated into the urban centre. These complex senses of indigeneity may have profound impacts on and an intricate interrelation with the ways in which urbanised Indigenous Peoples perceive their urban living conditions and how they might distinguish these conditions from those of other city dwellers who are considered to be poor.

In this dissertation, I discuss indigenous urbanisation among the Ngäbe and argue that ideas about poverty and well-being are linked as their ideals and meanings shift over time. In chapter four, I outline how urban Ngäbe strategically foster perceptions of poverty in certain contexts, while rejecting the poverty label in other instances. In the following chapters, I further examine how such strategic positioning interrelates with potentially shifting notions of poverty and well-being. This study links research between indigenous poverty and well-being and indigenous urbanisation to make an original contribution to the indigenous urbanisation literature.

CHAPTER TWO

Ngäbe within Panamanian history and society

This dissertation seeks to understand urban Ngäbe residents' notions of poverty and living well and how these notions shape and are shaped by their urban experiences. It examines the interactions between indigenous Ngäbe ideals and dominant ideology, as well as those between Ngäbe people and non-indigenous others in Bocas del Toro and how these interactions impact Ngäbe well-being in the urban sphere. In order to analyse these interactions, it is essential to understand the historical, political, economic, and social contexts within which they take place. Although the research described in this thesis centres on Ngäbe people's daily lives in the urban sphere, the majority of urban Ngäbe residents have moved from rural areas over the past two decades. They have brought their past experiences with them into their urban lives, remain strongly connected with their homelands, and may return to these lands in the future, or retain residences in both places. Furthermore, as I demonstrate in chapter three, the way of life in Ngäbe agricultural lands (*fincas*) constitutes the basis for Ngäbe ideas about the good life in the urban environment. An exploration of Ngäbe notions and daily life in the urban sphere, therefore, necessarily involves an inquiry into rural life and more general Ngäbe lifeways, customs, and ideals.

This chapter provides a contextual overview of Ngäbe socio-cultural worlds alongside their historical and more recent interactions with the state, the national economy, and indigenous as well as non-indigenous others. It aims to understand how the Ngäbe community came to occupy the political, economic, and social positions they hold within the wider society and in the imaginary of dominant sectors of this society. The chapter starts with an introduction to Ngäbe people's social worlds and lifeways. I then discuss how Ngäbe have been represented in the anthropological literature, before providing a historical perspective of Ngäbe people's interactions with colonial and national politics and economy. This chapter ends with an outline of Ngäbe urbanisation and the particular urban setting of Bocas del Toro.

2.1   Getting acquainted with Ngäbe people

Ngäbe people are one of eight indigenous groups currently identified in Panama, the southernmost nation in Central America (Davis 2010; INEC 2017). They primarily live in the East of Panama, where they have been found to live for the past five decades alongside other Indigenous Peoples. These various indigenous groups occupying Eastern Panama have historically been referred to collectively under the name Guaymí. However, considerable disagreement exists among historical records about the groups contained within this collective and their languages (Herrera 1982; Karkotis 2012). While several historical records identify a number of different groups speaking mutually unintelligible languages (e.g. León Fernandez 1886; Pinart 1882), more recent accounts refer to only two culturally similar groups, Ngäbe and Buglé, who occupied distinct regions, with the Ngäbe to the West and the Buglé to the East (see Jimenez Miranda 1984; Young 1971).[21] The languages of these two groups (Ngäbere and Buglere) are mutually unintelligible.[22] Yet, they form part of the family of Chibchan languages, along with twenty-two other languages (historically) spoken by groups in the area extending from eastern Honduras to western Venezuela (Cooke 1982; Cooke and Ranere 1992; Pache 2018).[23] Ngäbe and Buglé people increasingly referred to themselves by the names of their individual groups rather than as Guaymí, as they became more politicised in recent decades (Karkotis 2012; Young 2014). As is the case for the majority of Indigenous Peoples in Lowland Central and South America, Ngäbe means 'people' in Ngäbere (Karkotis 2012; Young 1971; Bort and Young 2001).

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[21] Ngäbe are still sometimes referred to as Guaymí in literature and speech. Additionally, different variations of spelling exist, including Ngöbe and Ngawbe. Although Ngäbe people themselves are often seen to write Ngöbe, Ngäbe is the most commonly used spelling, particularly in official documents and by indigenous political groups.

[22] Ngäbere is also commonly known as Guaymí and sometimes referred in historical records as Movere or Valiente. Buglere (like the Buglé people) is sometimes referred to as Murire, Sabanero Norteño or Bokotá (Eberhard et al. 2020). Bokotá and Buglere are considered dialects of the same language and for this reason Bokotá and Buglé people are often referred to as the same indigenous group (IWGIA 2011). However, they are officially considered to be two distinct indigenous groups (Davis 2010; INEC 2017).

[23] According to Cooke (1982), the linguistic diversity among the Chibchan speaking groups, and even among Ngäbe in different regions, is characteristic of agricultural indigenous groups of Lowland areas in Central and South America, which constantly fission and regroup.

1 Paya   13 Kuna
2 Rama   14 Kogi
3 Guatuso 15 Damana
4 †Huetar 16 Ika
5 Cabécar 17 †Atanques
6 Bribri   18 Chimila
7 Teribe/Térraba 19 Barí
8 Boruca 20 Tunebo
9 †Dorasque 21 †Nutabe
10 †Chángena 22 †Duit
11 Guaymí 23 †Muisca
12 Bocotá
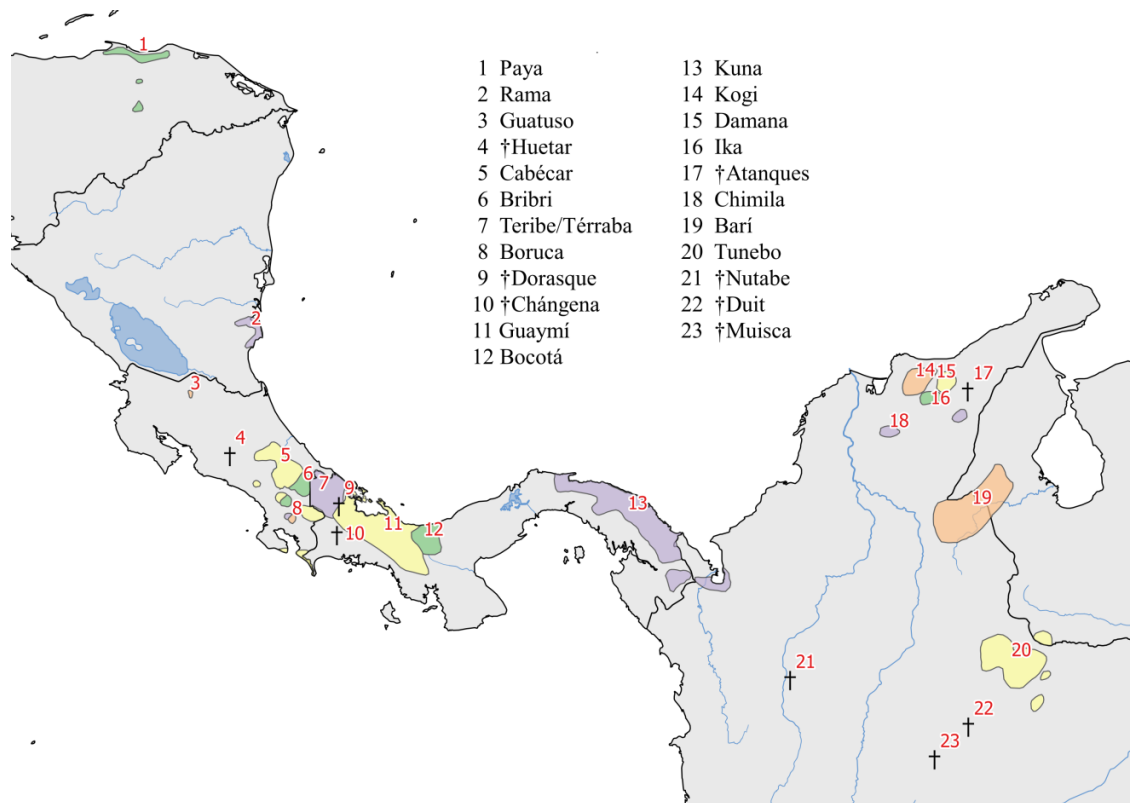
Figure 5: Distribution of Chibchan languages (Pache 2018). Ngäbere is referred to here as Guaymí. Obtained from:
https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/events/2018/12/contributions-to-chibchan-historical-linguistics

The anthropological literature commonly describes Ngäbe as an egalitarian society that lives in small hamlets occupied by single kin groups dispersed over a large rugged area (e.g. Bort 1976; Bort and Young 2001; Reverte 1963; Torres de Arauz 1980; Young 1970; 1971). Households within these hamlets are considered economic units. However, cooperation of labour amongst kin within and among hamlets is highly valued and the land is owned collectively by the members of a kin group (Young 1971). Hamlets are dispersed in order to have sufficient land available for each group of households to practice slash and burn agriculture. Archaeological material suggests that the indigenous groups living in present-day Ngäbe territory have been practising some form of agriculture alongside hunting and gathering for at least 1500 years (Cooke 1982). However, subsistence patterns have developed differently in the coastal plains and in the mountainous areas. In the coastal regions, subsistence practices include fishing, the collection of crabs and mussels, and bird hunting, while in the mountains subsistence relies heavily on cultivation, including the cultivation of rice, corn, and beans (ibid.; Border 2011). The majority of Ngäbe households in Bocas del Toro originate from coastal areas and primarily lived off fishing and the

cultivation of root vegetables, *pifá* (peach palm fruit), and bananas before their urban-ward moves. They consider fish, root crops, *pifá,* and *buchú* (small banana) to represent good and real food and, as I demonstrate in chapter three, the cultivation of these foods embodies the 'proper' Ngäbe way to live.

Land and residence

Virilocality has traditionally been the preferred residential pattern among Ngäbe households. Anthropologist Philip Young (1970) observed in the 1960s that a woman generally lived with her husband and his patrilineally related kin in a hamlet. However, he adds that "the circumstances of everyday life lead to deviations from the ideal" (1970:86). My interlocutors often stated that there was no 'rule' on residential locality and that couples can decide whether to establish residence in the man's hamlet or the woman's hamlet or community. According to my interviews, various households in La Solución had resided in both the man and woman's communities before moving to Bocas del Toro. They also stressed that they could farm both partners' land or *finca* (cultivated land). While Ngäbe kin groups own land collectively, usufruct rights are inherited individually, both patrilineally and matrilineally (Bletzer 1988; Herlihy 1997; Thampy 2013; Young 1971). In theory, a household thus has access to four plots of land. However, in practice, rights to land can only be transferred when the land has been actively farmed (Young 1971). As such, a plot of land has to have been farmed by an individual's parent in order for him or her to have rights to use it. Households are sometimes seen to farm in two locations to retain usufruct rights to the land (ibid.). An individual or a household has to continue to actively farm the land in order to retain rights to it. This particular aspect presents significant implications for households who temporarily move away from their *fincas* and may not be able to work the land for a considerable period of time, as they may be considered to have abandoned the land and lose their rights to it. As I highlight in chapter three, this poses challenges to urban residents' abilities to live well, which is in large part associated with access to the *finca* and cultivation.

Social organisation

Ngäbe highly regarded polygyny up until the 20th century. Ethnologist Alphonse Pinart (1882) observed that polygyny was an indicator of hard work: "if [a man] has only one [wife], it is for being little attentive to the work, such that he cannot afford to have others" (Pinart 1882:11 *translated from Spanish*). Young (1971) later argued that polygyny was an indicator of social and economic status and inferred that it was traditionally considered to denote a man's wealth. Young (1971) still observed polygyny among the Ngäbe families he lived and worked with in the 1960s (cf. Reverte 1963). However, the practice has been declining since the mid-20th century (Young 2014). While several of my Ngäbe interlocutors came from polygynous households, many others claimed that polygyny was no longer practised, because they are now 'civilised' people. They commonly rejected the idea that it was an indicator of wealth in the past, although this rejection may stem from the currently prevalent idea that practising polygyny is uncivilised.

Another previously significant social practice that has been in decline is marriage exchange, which served to create or maintain ties between kin groups (Young 1970, 1971; Torres 1980). Young (1971) describes that kin groups related by marriage could call upon each other to participate in group labour. The only type of group labour among members of an extended kin group still practised by the 1960s was reciprocal labour. When one household required assistance with a particular task, such as a large harvest, they would organise a *junta*. The person holding the *junta* had to provide food and *chicha*, a drink made from fermented *pifá* or maize, to the work party and would owe each participant a day of labour (Karkotis 2012; Young 1971). Apart from these *juntas*, Ngäbe residing in dispersed hamlets had few collective interests beyond the immediate kin group or hamlet. Households were mostly independent and autonomous (ibid.).

This strong emphasis on household autonomy forms the foundation for Ngäbe sociality, alongside ideals of generosity, cooperation, care, hard work, and egalitarianism (Karkotis 2012; Young 1971). There is no group or collective that can exercise pressure on an individual to make a particular decision or to follow a certain course of action beyond the immediate kin group (Bort and Young 1982; Linares 1987). Decisions that affect a larger collective are traditionally and preferably made by informally negotiated consensus and any individual who disagrees would likely withdraw, as conflicts are strictly avoided (ibid.). Men obtained status and prestige by being generous with food and labour, showing intelligence in resolving conflicts and disputes, and by displaying courage and physical skill at *balseria*

events – large multiple-day events where men threw sticks at each other's legs in a ritual game (Young 1971; Reverte 1963; Torres de Araúz 1980). However, as is common in Lowland South and Central America, these men would not typically become leaders that represent the community or have a following (Fray Adrián 1965; Fray de la Roche 1964; Pinart 1882; Young 1971; cf. Killick 2007). Instead, each household makes its own decisions and is individually responsible. The observance of such household responsibility and autonomy, combined with the values of generosity, care, cooperation and hard work, represent Ngäbe ideals of living well or the way they believe they should live, as I demonstrate in chapter three.

Social gatherings

Ritual events called *Balsería* or *Krun* traditionally provided men with an opportunity to gain prestige. These four-day events centred on the drinking of *chicha* and involved ample intoxicated and ritualistic fighting between members from different hamlets*.* The principal activity took place on the third day of the event and involved a ritual game at which men from one hamlet threw sticks at the lower part of the legs of their opponents, who represented another hamlet. Young describes this ritual as a "manifestation of aggression under carefully controlled conditions in a ritually structured context" (1976:49). Reverte (1963) further indicates that the *Balseria* event was not only used to select the men who were most capable and courageous to be in charge of defending their group against other groups, but also to settle disputes or to revenge an offensive. Although not specifically described as such in the literature, one may see the controlled expression of aggression in the stick throwing game (*krun*) as well as the ritualistic fighting throughout the event as serving to limit the manifestation and escalation of aggression in daily life. Such prevention and avoidance of aggression and other negative expressions of emotion are common among Lowland South American Indigenous Peoples (Overing and Passes 2000; Santos-Granero 2000).[24]

Another essential aspect of the *Balseria* event was the giving and sharing of food and drink, which formed "the basis of friendly relationships in Guaymí society" and demonstrates the

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[24] Even though Panama is officially not part of South America, I use the terms Lowland South American and Greater Amazonian to refer to those indigenous groups who are guided by similar cosmologies, including the Ngäbe. I hereby follow the approach taken by several anthropologists of Panama who work with the Guna,for example Margherita Margiotti (see Gow and Margiotti 2012) and Paolo Fortis (2010).

importance of reciprocity (Young 1976:50). It was one of the only occasions at which both men and women gathered with others beyond their kin groups. The event was thus not only significant for men to demonstrate their skills and obtain prestige, but it was also an important event for Ngäbe society more broadly (Jessome 2008). However, the ritual gathering was condemned and prohibited by various missionaries at different points in time, as they generally considered the fighting and intoxication to be uncivilised (Young 1976).[25] The *Balseria* event is no longer practised, in large part due to its prohibition by the various missionaries, as well as by the nativistic Mama Chi movement in the 1960s (Bort and Young 1982). Yet intoxicated fighting remains a popular activity among Ngäbe, although it does not generally provide men with prestige (Bourgois 1988). As I highlight in chapter six, such intoxicated fighting among Ngäbe men and women is commonly seen by non-Ngäbe individuals as self-degrading, publicly humiliating, and uncivilised behaviour (see also Borgois 1988). However, I suggest that this fighting needs to be understood within the context of a long-standing ritual tradition that provided a means to release negative emotions. As I demonstrate in chapter six, an awareness of this context helps to understand intoxicated fighting among Ngäbe individuals as a form of release rather than merely an example of (symbolic) violence and aggression. When common awareness of the historical and cultural contexts within which Ngäbe individuals' actions and interactions are embedded increases, negative stereotypes can gradually dissolve. I deem this embedded awareness to be a necessary aspect of any anthropological analysis and the remainder of this chapter strives to contribute to such embedded understanding.

2.2   Ngäbe in anthropological literature

As the largest indigenous group in Panama, Ngäbe have been underreported in anthropological literature. One well-known Panamanian anthropologist, Reina Torres de Araúz (1980), and an amateur ethnographer, José Manuel Reverte Coma (1963), have written extensively on the Indigenous Peoples of Panama, but only a small proportion of their writing has been dedicated to Ngäbe people. The majority of Panamanian anthropological literature has focused on the indigenous Guna, who are considered to have

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[25] Fortis (2015) similarly describes how missionaries attempted to prevent indigenous Guna men from getting drunk at puberty ritual gatherings and how Panamanian Police opposed (and even banned) these ceremonies in the early twentieth century because of the alleged uncontrolled behaviour of intoxicated men. These puberty ceremonies, or *inna*, were, akin to *balseria* events for Ngäbe, significant for Guna sociality, as they tended to bring together people from various families and communities (Fortis 2019).

been most successful in retaining their distinctive customs, dress, and way of life and are often noted for their resilient and well organised internal political structures. The writing of these two authors on Ngäbe people contrast significantly in their representation of Ngäbe. While Reverte's (1963) work is opinionated and hints at the inferiority of Panama's Indigenous Peoples, including Ngäbe, Torres de Araúz' (1980) writing is measured, descriptive, and devoid of political context and historical analysis (see also Howe 2009, Theodossopoulos 2016). However, taken together, these accounts serve to gain basic insights into Ngäbe cultural, social, and political life and as a basis for comparison.

The anthropological literature on the Ngäbe most relevant to my research is provided by Philip Young (1971), Philipe Bourgois (1988), and Alexis Karkotis (2012). These scholars are concerned with social change in Ngäbe society and inter-ethnic relations. In 1971, Philip Young wrote the most significant and complete overview on Ngäbe ethnography to date, based on his fieldwork among a few small hamlets the mid-1960s. Although his later work diverges from this approach, his early writing is rather empirically driven and positivist. Nonetheless, his observations and ethnographic accounts serve the purpose of understanding Ngäbe social and political organisation, traditions, economic activities, history, and experiences of change and continuity, as well as getting a sense of daily life. Young (1971) encountered an egalitarian society that lives in small hamlets occupied by single kin groups dispersed over a large rugged area. He found that due to their egalitarianism, Ngäbe had a fragmented and in-cohesive political organisation. Furthermore, Young asserts that Ngäbe had become dependent on the cash economy by the 1960s, but did not have the means and accessibility to fully participate in this economy. He estimated that there would not be sufficient arable land available to support the population by the 1980s (ibid.). In his ethnography, Young depicts an image of increased dependency and of victims of society facing a problem that is beyond their control.

Two decades later, Bourgois (1988) paints a similar picture of victimhood and dependency among Ngäbe labourers on a banana plantation in Bocas del Toro. Based on ethnographic research on this plantation in the 1980s, Philipe Bourgois (1988; 1989) demonstrates how Ngäbe plantation workers consistently performed the most dangerous and heavy jobs, which they were given because of their perceived inferiority and assumed lower physiological needs. They were considered to be and treated as inferior even to indigenous Guna labourers. Bourgois (1988) attributes Ngäbe labourers' enhanced vulnerability to exploitation to their unawareness of their legal rights, their limited experience and poor

understanding of the cash economy at the time, and their supposed lack of unity and organisation.

This image of 'poor', unaware, and disunited Ngäbe people is a familiar one. Scholarly literature on Ngäbe people often describes them as a passive people lacking unity and social and political organisation, particularly in comparison with Guna people, whose strategic and organisational competence is often noted (Castillo Guerra 2009; Gjording 1991; Helms 1976; Jimenez Miranda 1984; Sieiro de Noriega 1968; Thampy 2013). Furthermore, Ngäbe are often reported to live in poor conditions. For instance, anthropologist Moreno Rojas (1983:79) states that "without a doubt, the Ngäbe population constitutes one of the populations of most rural poverty in Panama". Ngäbe are commonly considered to be the poorest indigenous group in Panama (Davis 2010; Jaén 2001; Longacre 2017). Census data reports ninety-three per cent of residents in the Ngäbe Buglé comarca to live in poverty and seventy-nine per cent in extreme poverty (Davis 2010). Scholar Castillo Guerra (2009:340; 535) further asserts that "living standards are deplorable in the indigenous Ngäbe areas" and that the Ngäbe "are severely impoverished", lacking the "wherewithal for basic subsistence". He concludes that Ngäbe poverty is caused in part by oppression, expulsion from their territories, imposed cultural assimilation and unsuccessful participation in the national economy and politics, and in part by their dispersed settlement pattern, alcoholism and political divisiveness (Castillo Guerra 2009:353-355).

However, the most recent anthropological account on Ngäbe people offers a different perspective. Based on nearly two years living with the Ngäbe in a village community in their recently established *comarca,* Karkotis (2012) describes active resistance and solidarity among Ngäbe families in their fight against unwanted state intervention. He portrays Ngäbe not as lacking political organisation, but rather as participating in a coordinated effort to remain anti-hierarchical (ibid.; 2013). Karkotis further found Ngäbe families to have sufficient food and resources for their subsistence needs. Karkotis fervently challenges dominant stereotypical notions of disunity and lack of organisation among Ngäbe. He also questions, although less vocally and directly, the idea that Ngäbe families are poor, dependent, and unable to satisfy their subsistence needs (ibid.).

The present research is, in part, triggered and encouraged by Karkotis' (2012) divergent perspective on Ngäbe people's economic conditions and abilities to live well. If outside observers disagree on whether Ngäbe people are able to live well or live in conditions of poverty, a question that needs to be asked is: how do Ngäbe people perceive, understand,

and experience their own living conditions? It is precisely this question upon which my research is based and which I strive to answer in this thesis, albeit within an urban context. My research thereby contributes to the limited body of literature on Ngäbe, by examining Ngäbe notions of poverty and living well and perceptions of their own well-being in an urban environment. The remainder of this chapter describes the historical and more recent developments and interactions that provide the backdrop to the ways in which Ngäbe people are held in the popular imagination, as well as the position they occupy vis-à-vis other ethnic groups within society.

2.3   Ngäbe people within the colonial and post-colonial political landscapes

Little is known about the Indigenous Peoples occupying Eastern Panama in the pre-conquest period (Karkotis 2012; Young 1971; Bort and Young 2001). Pache (2018) proposes that Chibchan languages migrate from Lowland South America, suggesting that Chibchan speaking groups, including Ngäbe people, have historically migrated from South to Central America. Several historical records further point to the existence of interconnected chiefdoms and rank societies in pre-conquest Lower Central America, which gradually became more egalitarian in the centuries following Spanish conquest (Cooke and Ranere 1992; Helms 1976; Johnson 1948; Lothrop 1950; Young 1971).

Ngäbe are reportedly one of the first groups encountered by the Spanish (Cooke 1982; Lothrop 1950; Johnson 1948; Young 1971). On his fourth journey (1502-1503) Columbus' expedition found several small and dispersed communities on the various coastal and river shores in the north-west of Panama where Ngäbe would have lived at that time (Cooke 1982). The region that is now central and western Panama saw significant colonial exploration and conquest in the years following Spanish arrival in the 16th century, particularly in lowland areas (Helms 1976, León Fernandez 1886). Ngäbe people in coastal and lowland areas, therefore, experienced more intense and heavy colonisation than Ngäbe communities in mountainous areas and other indigenous groups in Eastern Panama (Helms 1976; Young 1971). Ngäbe communities on the outskirts of the central mountains towards the pacific plains of Veraguas and Chiriquí were largely assimilated into a majority *mestizo* (mixed Hispanic-indigenous) population (Cooke 1982; León Fernandez 1886). According to Helms (1967:11), other Indigenous Peoples, including Guna and Emberá, were

"less disrupted and had time to effect a more positive adjustment to the new colonial order". These divergent levels of colonisation that different indigenous groups experienced represent the first of a series of historic events and circumstances that cumulatively disadvantaged Ngäbe people.

Spanish colonisers were drawn away from the isthmus soon after the conquest, toward present-day Mexico and Peru, as they found little mineral wealth in the area (Helms 1976). However, several Spanish settlements remained on the Pacific side of the region, while the central mountains and the Caribbean lowlands remained unsettled by the Spanish (Guerrón Montero 2002; Helms 1976). Various small English settlements later appeared on the Caribbean coast in the 16th and 17th centuries, leading to a colonial landscape of three different regions: a Caribbean coastal area sparsely settled by English speaking and Indigenous Peoples, a pacific region occupied by Spanish colonists, and a central mountain range which was home to various Indigenous Peoples, including Ngäbe people (Guerrón Montero 2002; Helms 1976). Ngäbe families residing in the central mountains were to a large extent able to maintain their cultural independence, adapting their life patterns to the broad range of outside influences, including various religious infiltrations, *mestizo* communities, and governmental institutions (Cooke 1982; León Fernandez 1886).[26]

Figure 6: Colonial Landscape Western Panama

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[26] The term *mestizo* is commonly used in Latin America to refer to people of mixed European and indigenous ancestry.

In the 17th century, English privateers and pirates began raiding and attacking Spanish settlements and posts, receiving support from indigenous Miskitu and Guna men in exchange for trade goods (Helms 1976; León Fernandez 1886). The Miskitu, in particular, made use of this status to raid other indigenous populations, amongst which Ngäbe and Buglé people, who lost territory as a consequence (Helms 1976; Young 1971). In response to the raids by the Miskitu on Spanish colonial posts, the Spanish established mission communities on the pacific side close to the central mountains, for which they recruited Ngäbe residents as a 'buffer zone' to protect the Spanish posts (Helms 1976; León Fernandez 1886). Upon attacks from Miskitu raiders, the indigenous residents of these mission towns fled the towns into the mountains. The Ngäbe mission town dwellers brought the newly gained religious information with them upon fleeing into the mountains, which, according to Young (1971), led to the infiltration of Christianity into Ngäbe religion and lifeways. Furthermore, Spanish settlers attempted to pacify Ngäbe by having them submit to Christianity (León Fernandez 1886:235-236). As a result, Ngäbe reportedly experienced more profound acculturation pressures over the centuries than other groups (Cooke 1982).

Such acculturation pressures have continued in more recent decades since Panama's independence as a nation. Panama became politically independent of Spain in the early 19th century and became an independent nation in 1903 when it separated from Colombia. The United States supported this separation in order to obtain rights to the future Panama Canal (Zimbalist and Weeks 1991). The Canal Zone thereby became official U.S. territory and the nation became economically and politically dependent on the United States (Horton 2006, Velásquez Runk 2012). The influence of the United States in Panama involved intervention with political affairs, development of the area for banana production and export, and the construction of the Panama Canal (Helms 1976). Panamanian middle and lower class labourers became increasingly dissatisfied with the United States' political and economic interference in the early 20th century and a sense of nationalism, *Panameñismo*, emerged (Sigler et al. 2015). This nationalism accompanied a monolithic and homogenising construction of cultural identity and national efforts to 'whiten' the nation (Guerrón Montero 2006a; Horton 2006; Sigler et al. 2015; Velásquez Runk 2012). The Panamanian State thus sought to 'civilise' and integrate its indigenous populations in the mid-twentieth century (Sigler et al. 2015; Horton 2006, Herrera 2012).

In the wake of this sense of nationalism and opposition to United States neo-colonialism, political power wavered between commercial ruling classes and military intervention with U.S. aid. The military retained power under the leadership of General Omar Torrijos. Torrijos' regime (1968-1981) sought to incorporate Indigenous Peoples into the nation voluntarily, through increased political and economic participation, in what Horton (2006) identifies as a corporatist multiculturalist approach (Moreno Rojas 1983). This approach assumed 'underdevelopment' of indigenous communities to be caused by certain psychosocial and cultural aspects (ibid.). Torrijos' government, therefore, sought to develop Indigenous Communities socially, culturally and economically. For instance, the state expanded the agricultural sector, as well as health service and education in Ngäbe territory (Bort and Young 1985). However, education was delivered solely in Spanish following a curriculum far removed from Ngäbe students' everyday reality (Young and Bort 1999). Furthermore, expansion of the agricultural sector has added low wage jobs for Ngäbe and therewith intensified their involvement in the cash economy (Bort and Young 1985). According to Bort and Young (1985), this increased involvement in and dependence on the cash economy has strained subsistence agriculture among many Ngäbe families. Furthermore, Torrijos' development approaches caused Indigenous Peoples' and other subsistence farmers' plots of land to decrease in both size and quality.

Although Torrijos sought to incorporate Indigenous Peoples into the national economy and politics, this approach did not involve political support for Indigenous Peoples nor their inclusion in planning and decision-making (Bretón Solo de Zaldívar and Martínez Mauri 2014; del Rosario 2011; Jordan-Ramos 2010; Moreno Rojas 1983). Following the World Bank's position against collective landholdings, national policies promoted encroachment by non-indigenous Panamanians onto indigenous lands and indigenous participation in logging and cattle ranching (Horton 2006). Furthermore, Torrijos' government also sought to improve the national economy through foreign investment, international development schemes, and several national development projects (Wickstrom 2003). Such development projects included a hydroelectric dam and copper mine on lands inhabited by the Ngäbe (Finley-Brook and Thomas 2011; Gjording 1991; Young and Bort 1999).

Initial unawareness of the magnitude of impacts that the extractivist projects would bring, according to Bort and Young (1985), encouraged support on the part of many Ngäbe families. Over time, several Ngäbe families began to see the negative implications of the planned development. However, their dispersion over a vast region inhibited Ngäbe from

forming a collective resistance body and Ngäbe representatives from gaining widespread support (Gjording 1991). Anthropologist Chris Gjording (1991), based on his investigation of mining activities on Ngäbe territory in the 1970s and 80s, concludes that land shortage was a more immediate problem for Ngäbe families and many Ngäbe were too busy with their day-to-day survival to be able to organise themselves in response to more abstract issues. Ngäbe representatives later requested help from a catholic group to assess the impacts of the planned development projects. Gjording maintains that with this support, they were able to frame a more coherent argument and reassess their goals. Influenced by dependency theory, Gjording further asserts that before receiving outside support the Ngäbe had not organised themselves sufficiently to oppose the government and that their later successful organisation was (solely) in response to an imminent threat. He thereby does not acknowledge Ngäbe preference to remain egalitarian and refrain from selecting individuals to represent and make decisions on behalf of the collective (Karkotis 2012), which resonates with a wider Amazonian concern to prevent leaders from becoming exceedingly powerful actors within a given group (see Clastres 1989).

Karkotis (2012), instead argues that the Ngäbe community has resisted incorporation into the political system as well as the national economy exactly by refraining from uniting behind and bestowing power upon leaders. Ngäbe have further resisted political and economic incorporation through the nativistic Mama Chi or Mama Tata movement (Jordan-Ramos 2010). A young Ngäbe woman, Besico, or mama Chi, began this movement when she received a vision and message from God in 1961 (Guinneau-Sinclair 1987; Young 1971). This religious movement took many aspects from Christianity, as well as from Ngäbe cosmology (Karkotis 2012). It prohibited polygyny, the consumption of alcoholic beverages and the *Balsería* ritual (Karkotis 2012; Young 1971). The movement also enhanced awareness of Ngäbe dependency on the national economy. It advocated partial disengagement from social and economic relations with mainstream society, including state education, to restore Ngäbe society (Guinneau-Sinclair 1987; Young 1971, Torres 1980). Politically, the Mama Chi movement advocated for the improvement of social and economic conditions and political autonomy. The movement brought about heightened politicisation and political consciousness that transcended kin groups, mostly with the common goal of establishing a *comarca*, as this was one aspiration shared by the

overwhelming majority of Ngäbe (Jordan-Ramos 2010; Young 2014; Young and Bort 1999).[27]

The fight for a *comarca* went hand in hand with the fight against resource extraction on Ngäbe lands. General Torrijos promised the Ngäbe and Buglé *comarca* status for their territory in 1979, to gain support for his regime, and in the context of inaugurating large scale development projects (Herrera 2012; Linares 1984). Torrijos' approach was a continuation of a long-standing political strategy in which Indigenous Peoples were promised protection of their lands in exchange for votes (Jimenez Miranda 1984; Jordan-Ramos 2010). The Ngäbe and Buglé did not attain *comarca* status for their territories during the Torrijos regime. Disagreements about the exploitation of copper deposits within the area of the *comarca* and disputes between the Ngäbe and government officials, as well as non-Ngäbe area residents about the size of the area of the *comarca* impeded negotiations (Herrera 2012). The state later placed the responsibility for this failure to reach an agreement about the *comarca* on Ngäbe leaders, stating that these indigenous leaders had been using the fight for the *comarca* as a flag for their leadership and had not intended to reach an agreement (República de Panamá 1996). The political strategies the Panamanian government employed in the negotiations about the establishment of the Ngäbe-Buglé comarca are significant to note, as they are similar to the tactics used in the planned relocation of the indigenous neighbourhood of La Solución in Bocas del Toro, which I describe in chapter seven. In both cases, the political strategies form part of a long-standing discriminatory political approach and stem from a dominant ideology, which considers Indigenous Peoples to be backwards and impeding national progress.

By the 1980s, the Ngäbe still did not see any progress in obtaining this status and began restructuring their political organisation, arranging meetings and requesting support from outside groups (Wickstrom 2003:57). Increased awareness about and experiences with the negative impacts of the resource exploitation projects on their lands and livelihoods enhanced Ngäbe politicisation and opposition to the government (Young and Bort 1999). They organised several mass protests in the 1990s. However, conflicting interests between Ngäbe and state actors escalated at several points in time and led to various violations of Ngäbe individuals' rights and fatal confrontations with police (Castillo Guerra 2009; Lutz 2007; Cultural Survival 2008; 2009; Quiel 2016).

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[27] A *comarca* is a political-administrative unit "wherein indigenous political structures are granted legal recognition by the state" (Herrera 1998:13).

After decades of struggle and several protests that eventually brought national and even international attention to the cause of the Ngäbe, the Ngäbe-Buglé *comarca* was finally established in 1997 (Young 2014). However, it only included half of the territory they demanded and the government retained the right to exploit the natural resources (Jaén 2001; Wickstrom 2003). Ngäbe communities have continued to resist such extraction activities and their struggles have received increasing international attention over the past two decades (Cambell 2014; Finley-Brook and Thomas 2011; Jandreau 2011; Reynolds 2013; Velásquez Runk 2012; Watts et al. 2014; Whiteman and Mamen 2002; Wickstrom 2003). Successful protests have resulted in a law banning mining in the *Ngäbe-Buglé Comarca* (Arghiris 2014, Cansari and Guasset 2013; Karkotis 2012, Velásquez Runk 2012). Whereas these protests are seen as a hopeful sign by some scholars (e.g. Cansari and Guasset 2013; Karkotis 2012), others remain sceptical (e.g. del Rosario 2011; Jordan-Ramos 2010; Velásquez Runk 2012; Watts et al. 2014).

Ngäbe people's struggle to attain comarca status for their territory stands in stark contrast to the relative ease with which indigenous Guna have attained this status for their lands in Eastern Panama. Five years after the Guna held a successful rebellion against the state in 1925, the indigenous reservation of San Blas was created, likely under pressure from North American officials (Herrera 2012). This reservation became a comarca in 1938 (Asamblea Nacional 1953). The legacy of its success has inspired and guided other Indigenous People in Panama in gaining similar recognition in the late 20th century (Kane 1994; Howe 2009; Theodossopoulos 2016). Guna people are generally found to have been more successful in politically organising and defending their cultural and social life and to hold superior political and economically positions vis-à-vis Ngäbe people (Thampy 2013). This relative success is often attributed to the comparatively high strategic and organisational competence among Guna.

Literature comparing the political situations of Ngäbe and Guna peoples often describe Ngäbe as a passive people lacking unity and social and political organisation (e.g. Bourgois 1988; Castillo Guerra 2009; Gjording 1991; Helms 1976; Jimenez Miranda 1984; Sieiro de Noriega 1968). However, various historical factors need to be taken into account in such a comparative project, including the support Guna people received from a North American explorer and former secretary of the U.S. embassy in Panama, Richard Marsh, in their revolt against the state and subsequent support from the United States government in their negotiations with the Panamanian State (Fortis 2016; Howe 1998; 2002). As Paolo Fortis

(2016:437) explains, Marsh convened a meeting between Guna and Panamanian authorities, which represented "the first step in a negotiating process that led to the recognition of the Guna territory as a reserve in 1938 (*comarca* in Spanish) and to the establishment of the Guna General Congress as a representative body that was recognized by the Panamanian government". In contrast to Ngäbe people, Guna "became progressively involved in negotiating their future as a people within Panama" throughout the twentieth century, which required new forms of unity and political representation (Fortis 2016:442). Additionally, Guna people's long history of trade with Europeans and Colombian traders has provided an earlier and more gradual entry into the national economy (Helms 2014; Langebaek 1991). A treaty between the head of the U.S. army in the Canal Zone and Guna leader Nele Kantule established the hiring of Guna people as civil workers in 1930. Guna men subsequently worked in the Canal Zone until the 1990s, which led various generations of Guna people to become familiar with the U.S. military world and many Guna men befriended North-American soldiers, learned English, and attained various specialised skills (Fortis 2016; Howe 1998). Here, they also observed the organisational capacities of the U.S. military (ibid.). These various factors have contributed to the relatively advantaged economic and political position Guna enjoy vis-à-vis Ngäbe people. As I have described in this section, Ngäbe have been more severely disadvantaged in their interactions with Spanish settlers and dominant society.

2.4   Ngäbe people within the national economy

Ngäbe involvement in the national economy has intensified over the past century (Bort 1976; Young and Bort 1999). While Johnson (1984) asserts that Ngäbe did not fully understand the use of cash in the 1930s, Young (1971) reports frequent cash-based exchanges among Ngäbe in the 1960s (see also Bort 1976). Bort and young (1985) attribute increasing dependence on the national economy among Ngäbe to various factors: (1) rapid population growth placed increased pressure on land and resulted in land shortage in many areas, (2) gradual shortening of the agricultural cycle caused land fertility to decrease and enhanced economic stress, and (3) an increasing desire for and consumption of manufactured goods required cash incomes (see also Bort and Young 1982; Young and Bort 1999; Rojas 1983).

Ngäbe households became increasingly dependent on wage labour in the second half of the 20th century (Behmel and Palacios 1996; Bort 1983; Bort and Young 1985; 2001; Karkotis 2012; Sarsaneda del Cid 1978). As Young and Bort (1999) highlight, this increasing dependence on wage labour placed mounting pressure on the Ngäbe system of reciprocal labour and exchange of food and goods. When the men were far away from home, they could not participate in cooperative labour or provide for kin in need (ibid.; Bort and Young 1985). Additionally, the financial benefits of wage labour were generally low, as the cost of living is high in labour areas (plantations). The men returned from wage labour, consequently, without much cash, yet with an increased desire for commodities (Bourgois 1988; Young 1971, Bort and Young 1985). At the plantations, where they performed wage labour, Ngäbe were further exposed to economic exploitation and ideological domination (Bourgois 1988).

Wage labour on plantations indirectly triggered the formation of Ngäbe community villages. Ngäbe labourers often brought their families with them to live on the plantations (Bourgois 1988; Karkotis 2012). Alexis Karkotis (2012), based on his doctoral fieldwork in one community village in the Ngäbe-Buglé *comarca,* found that Ngäbe labourers and their families, normally living dispersed over a large area, became accustomed to living closely together with Ngäbe from outside their kin group on the plantations. Upon returning from wage labour, many labourers and their households formed or settled in community villages, rather than returning to their dispersed hamlets (ibid.). Living in concentrated communities also served to reduce the pressure of the diminishing availability of fertile ground to cultivate. Karkotis (2012) further explains that Ngäbe experiences of discrimination and domination on the plantations deepened labourers' aversion to authority. This aversion toward authority has helped to retain household autonomy and prevent the centralisation of power within the village communities (ibid.).

In addition to forming concentrated communities, Ngäbe men and households have increasingly moved to urban and semi-urban areas to settle and work (Quintero and Hughes 2007; Davis 2010). Ngäbe have the highest rate of rural to urban migration among Indigenous Peoples in Panama, making up 53 per cent of all indigenous migrants (ibid.) According to census data, 33,493 Ngäbe lived in urban areas in 2010, compared to 15,115 in 2000 (Davis 2010; INEC 2010a). While many Ngäbe men had been absent from their home communities for several months to perform wage labour, the more recent urbanisation trends appear to be for longer periods or permanent (ibid.). A study conducted in 2004-

2005 reported that incentives for indigenous migration from *comarcas* to urban areas include precarious income conditions in places of origin as well as increased work opportunities and access to education and health in the urban centres (Quintero and Hughes 2007).[28] However, only 23% of respondents in the study reported having improved their economic situations and conditions of health and education, whereas many have not achieved what they expected. The study indicates that these urban Ngäbe residents live in deprived conditions (Quintero and Hughes 2007). Young (2014:206) further observes that urban Ngäbe residents, particularly Ngäbe women, have "simply exchanged the rural poverty of the comarca for the urban poverty of the city, which is often more severe". My research builds on these observations by asking whether urban Ngäbe residents consider themselves to live in poverty. In chapter four, I examine how urban Ngäbe residents relate their urban experiences and living conditions to their own notions of poverty. The setting within which I examined Ngäbe experiences and conditions is the town of Bocas del Toro, which I introduce in the following section.

2.5   Urbanisation in Bocas del Toro

One of the urban areas that Ngäbe are migrating to is the Bocas del Toro archipelago and Bocas Town in particular (Guerrón-Montero 2006a), given its proximity to the *Ngäbe-Buglé comarca*.[29] The town of Bocas del Toro, also commonly referred to as Bocas by Spanish speakers or Bocas Town by English speakers, is the capital of the province of Bocas del Toro and a popular tourist destination. The town, located on the South-eastern end of the island named Isla Colón, the largest island of the Bocas del Toro archipelago, counts a population of 5,380 (INEC 2010a).[30][31] The population consists of Afro-Antilleans, Indigenous Peoples (primarily Ngäbe), Latino-Panamanians, Chinese-Panamanians, and foreign residents mostly originating from North American and Europe (Guerrón Montero 2006b; 2011).

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[28] This study was conducted by the National Office on rural indigenous affairs (CONAPI).

[29] Whereas a census conducted by the Ministry of housing counted only 360 indigenous families in Bocas del Toro in 2012, this number had increased to close to 600 in 2014 (Miviot 2014b).

[30] This number is likely to have increased significantly since the last census in 2010. The total population of the district in which the town is located increased from 16,135 in 2000 to 20,881 in 2018. Unfortunately there are not any any updated statistics available on the population of the town.

[31] The National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC) considers an area with a population of 1.500 or more an urban area (INEC 2010b).

Figure 2.3: From the comarca to Bocas del Toro

Many Ngäbe and several Buglé individuals and families have moved to Bocas del Toro over the past three centuries to take advantage of the work opportunities provided by the tourism industry and the educational opportunities in town, although various Ngäbe families had established themselves in the archipelago earlier in the 20th century. When Ngäbe individuals and families increasingly started moving to Bocas del Toro in the late 20th century, the archipelago was inhabited primarily by Afro-Antilleans, who claimed their superiority as original inhabitants. Afro-Antilleans came to the archipelago in various waves, starting in the 1800s as enslaved plantation workers for British plantation owners and later in the 19th century to work on banana plantations (Guerrón Montero 2011; Stephens 2008).

The United Fruit Company opened an office in Bocas del Toro in the 1890s, upon which the port town became the centre of activity of the province and a prosperous city (Jaén Suárez 1998; Stephens 1987; 2008). The city, built over mangrove swamps, expanded rapidly and the swamps were filled between 1900 and 1910, transforming them into a network of paved streets (Stephens 2008). However, Panama disease, a fungus, affected the banana plantations in Bocas del Toro in the early 20th century, which led the United Fruit Company to move out of the archipelago along with many residents (Bletzer 1988; Stephens 1987; 2008). The previously prosperous capital city of Bocas del Toro rapidly declined (Jaén Suárez 1998; Stephens 1987; 2008). Many Afro-Antillean labourers stayed and were able to acquire land and establish themselves as a rural middle-class in Bocas del Toro (Guerrón Montero 2006b).

The majority of the Afro-Antillean population lived primarily from fishing and subsistence agriculture with little interference from other sectors of society until 1990, when the government started promoting the archipelago as a tourist destination (Stephens 2008). Resultantly, tourism and foreign migration to the archipelago has spiked in recent decades (Guerrón Montero 2006b; 2011; Spalding 2013). The Afro-Antillean population has been able to capitalise on tourism using their cultural heritage and fostering an image of "Caribbean beauty" (Guerrón Montero 2014). The archipelago thereby became known for its Afro-Caribbean heritage alongside its pristine beaches. When Ngäbe started migrating to the archipelago in greater numbers more recently, they entered the social and economic scene at a disadvantaged position vis-à-vis the resident Afro-Antillean population (Guerrón Montero 2006a; Thampy 2013). This positioning was in part due to Afro-Antilleans having already established themselves as a middle class and within the tourism industry. However, this positioning is also a continuation of historical relations between the two groups whereby although the Afro-Antillean population has historically been marginalised and discriminated, they have generally enjoyed higher socio-economic status and greater access to resources and education than Ngäbe (Guerrón Montero 2006a). During the 20th century, several Ngäbe families sent their children to live with Afro-Antillean families in order for these children to have an opportunity to receive education, learn to read, write, and speak Spanish and English (Young 2014).

Since Bocas del Toro's tourism boom in the early 2000s, a growing number of foreign residents settling in the archipelago have complicated the hierarchical social scene (Spalding 2013). Bocas del Toro's development as a highly desired tourist destination occurred in an expedited, disorganised, and uncontrolled manner (Guerrón Montero 2014). The influx of foreign tourists and residents has provoked various cases of land speculation, disputes and dispossession, as well as social and economic polarisation in Bocas del Toro (Guerrón Montero 2014; Prado 2011; Seifert 2006; Spalding 2011; Thampy 2014). This social and economic polarisation is most strongly felt by the indigenous population, of which the majority are Ngäbe individuals and families (Seifert 2006; Thampy 2013). In chapter six, I describe the hierarchically structured social and economic relations between the various ethnic groups in Bocas del Toro and examine the ways in which this hierarchy impacts Ngäbe residents' daily lives.

The indigenous population of Bocas del Toro, predominantly Ngäbe, reside in various small settlements scattered over the islands and in a number of neighbourhoods located in the

mangrove swamps on the outskirts of the town. My research focuses on one of these neighbourhoods, La Solución. This neighbourhood is located behind the regional airport and next to a sewage treatment plant and counts well over 500 households (Miviot 2014b). The residents of La Solución are predominantly Ngäbe, although there are several Afro-Panamanian residents and a couple of Latino-Panamanian households. The Ngäbe households live in wooden houses with corrugated metal roofs connected by wooden walkways over the mangrove swamp. The Panamanian State considers these houses to be inadequate and precarious, and the living conditions to be unhealthy (Miviot 2014a). This assessment of housing and living conditions in La Solución has incited a state-planned project to relocate all residents of La Solución to another area on the island. As I outline in chapter seven, this relocation project significantly impacts Ngäbe residents' daily lives and well-being in various ways.

In the following chapters, I outline how the cultural, political, economic and social contexts I have described have shaped and continue to shape urban Ngäbe residents' notions and experiences of well-being and poverty. In chapter three, I demonstrate how urban Ngäbe notions of living well are based on their ideals of sociality as I described in section one of this chapter. I outline how Ngäbe individuals bring rural life and the values that underpin their ideas of how they ought to live into the urban sphere. In chapter four, I discuss urban Ngäbe notions of poverty. I examine how these urban notions and experiences of poverty are, in part, impacted by the ways in which Ngäbe are commonly represented and held in popular imaginary, as I described in section 2.2. In chapter five, I explore the significance that the community holds in urban Ngäbe residents' well-being. I analyse the experienced lack of unity within the community of La Solución and how this relates to the commonly held ideas about Ngäbe lack of organisation discussed throughout this chapter. In chapter six, I analyse the hierarchically structured inter-ethnic relations in Bocas del Toro, which I briefly introduced earlier in this section. I examine how these inter-ethnic relations impact upon urban Ngäbe residents' abilities to live well. Finally, in chapter seven, I discuss the state-planned relocation project mentioned earlier in this section. I demonstrate how this project is a continuation of a long-standing political approach, which I discussed in section 2.3 of this chapter, and how this approach constrains Ngäbe residents' abilities to create good lives for themselves.

CHAPTER THREE

"This is the way we should live":

The importance of the *finca* in rural and urban imaginaries

"Where do you live better, here [in town] or there [in the *finca*/*comarca*]?"[32] [33]

Alberto: I prefer the *comarca* because it's very quiet and calm (*tranquilo*) … in the *comarca* there are the best rivers on the planet. They are not like this mud that you get here in the river. Rivers with a current. It's a paradise… So any time, before you go to the Netherlands, we will take you to visit over there. A special trip, to Río Chiriqui.

Juanita: There on my *finca* where I lived, there are trees, there is fruit, there is everything. There is a beach there, there are fish, there is everything in the sea. Everything is beautiful there. It's all natural… I have a small boat (*lanchita*) here and with that, I collect some dollars. When you want we can go. We can stay there a week, a day, anything like that. Whenever you want I can take you.

Introduction

The direct translation for *finca* is farmland or agricultural land. Ngäbe people more specifically conceive of a *finca* as the land that provides them with their livelihoods and that allows them to practice their cultural customs. More than just labour, Ngäbe consider cultivation practices to be their culture and the *finca* represents the space within which they can practice their culture. Philip Young (1971) has identified the importance of agricultural practices in Ngäbe livelihoods. He explains that swidden agriculture has been

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[32] All quotes are my translations from Spanish to English unless stated otherwise.

[33] A *comarca* is defined by Herrera (1998:13) as a "politico-administrative unit wherein indigenous political structures are granted legal recognition by the state". The term emerged circa 1977 when the Torrijos regime negotiated property of land with various indigenous groups in Panama (Wickstrom 2003). In subsequent use of the term 'the *comarca'*, I refer to the Ngäbe-Buglé comarca, which was established as such in 1997.

the primary productive activity of Ngäbe and forms the basis for much of their social order, including their dispersed settlement pattern, their residential ideals, their emphasis on household autonomy and gift-giving, the practices of reciprocal labour and marriage exchange, their kinship-based distribution system, and the organisation of large ritual events called *balserias*. Later ethnographies similarly underlie the importance of cultivating for Ngäbe, but within the context of concentrated communities (e.g. Karkotis 2012).[34]

This chapter is concerned with ideas about the *finca* and cultivation among urban Ngäbe residents of La Solución. It explores how these ideas shape and underpin their notions of the good life and 'the way one should live'. I analyse the role these ideas play in daily life and in the ability to live well in an urban environment. The chapter starts with a contextualisation of the urban setting, followed by a discussion of the values implicated in the practice of cultivation which shape Ngäbe notions of the good life and the way they believe one should live. Subsequently, I discuss the recent urbanisation trend among Ngäbe households and what this process entails. I outline the ties that urban Ngäbe residents maintain to the *finca* and demonstrate how the *finca* retains great significance for urban Ngäbe residents, both in the possibility of a return in the future and in the physical and emotional ties maintained. I then highlight the ways in which urban Ngäbe residents strive to live the way they believe they should, incorporating the values imbued in their cultivation practices into their daily urban lives. Finally, I consider how nostalgic references to the *finca* and aspirations to return to it serve to maintain and identify with Ngäbe 'culture' and the 'way one should live'. I argue that Ngäbe residents strive to live well by maintaining ties to and aspiring to return to their *fincas*, by nostalgically invoking references to the *finca* way of life, and by integrating the values of cultivation practices into their urban lives.

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[34] Relatedly, Fortis (2012) describes how for the neighbouring island-dwelling Guna, the forest and their cultivated gardens on the mainland are of great significance in their everyday lives. They often consider their cultivated lands to provide them with everything that they need in their daily lives – e.g. food, medicines, and power (ibid.; Visser 2009).

3.1 Urban lived realities in La Solución

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Saturday 6 January 2018, 18:30, at Inelda and Jerome's house:

I was visiting my neighbours Inelda and Jerome in their home in La Solución. While I was talking to Jerome, his wife Inelda went outside to check the water. 'No water' she said as she walked back into the living room. "That is strange", Jerome responded, "it should have gotten here by now. They connected it just before I left work at six o'clock". Jerome, a Ngäbe man in his early fifties, worked as a guard at the IDAAN water reservoir which supplies the town's 'potable' water. "There may be a delay of a few minutes before the water gets to La Solución after they send it through, but it shouldn't take this long" he added. The water is normally 'connected' (*conectado*) or 'sent' (*mandado*) to town four times a day. In the morning for two hours, in the afternoon for an hour, and the evening between 18:00 and 20:00 and again between 22:00 and 00:00.

Jerome asked if there had been water that morning and afternoon. Inelda responded that there had been a little in the morning, but that the tide had been so high that she was not able to fetch any water.[35] After some discussion, Jerome called his colleagues that do maintenance work on the water distribution system. His colleagues informed him that a tube near the airport, which normally channelled the water to the neighbourhood, was broken and they had to shut off the water to the area. The IDAAN employees explained that the water company might send people to fix it the following day. I wondered what the likelihood would be of their actually sending workers to fix it on a Sunday and I assumed that we would remain without water until at least Monday.

When I got home, Manu was sitting on the ledge on the outside of the bathroom in the shade provided by the bathroom roof. He was waiting for the water to start running. The tap was turned open, the bowl underneath it cleaned and empty. Not one drop of water was coming out. I told him the news that Jerome had just heard from his colleagues. Manu sighed and seemed annoyed but not surprised. "No shower again", I said. "Oh no", he responded, "I went to the beach today". When I mentioned to him that I had hoped to wash

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[35] See Figures 7 and 8 for visual images of water provision and fetching in my household. Many other households have similar set ups. If the water pressure was low or someone was fetching water to wash laundry that day – which was often the case – fetching water in the morning could take as long as two hours or more if the water was running for that long.

my hair, but would not be able to because I need more than one bucket of water for that, he confided that he needs two buckets of water to feel clean. Manu explained that he used to shower at the hostel his mother worked at whenever there was no water in the neighbourhood. However, now that the hostel was closed he no longer had that option.

Figure 7: Fetching water

Figure 8: Fetching water

Upon entering the house, I saw Maribel sitting in the living room. She had the day off. I gave her the news about the broken tube and told her how I had really wanted to take a shower. Maribel, however, was more concerned with the large load of laundry she had to wash, which had been piling up while she had been working every day. As I walked out with two empty gallons to fill water in a machine that dispenses filtered water, I came across several other residents with bottles, gallons, and buckets, empty or full of water.[36] Each of them had their own resources for attaining water in such situations. For example, before the hostel had closed, Maribel would routinely bring empty gallons to work in the morning. She would fill them up with filtered tap water and bring them back in the evening. After the hostel closed down, she often called a cousin who lived in another part of the neighbourhood. If her cousin had running water, she sent her son over to fill up buckets and carry them to the house. Many other individuals also had family members or other contacts from whom they could obtain water.

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[36] The machine uses a water filtration system that a North American resident devised and installed in several hostels, restaurants, the hospital, and a few other places around the island that are frequented by foreign residents. Its main users are tourists and foreign residents, as local and Panamanian residents generally drink the island's tap water.

A few residents saw me walking with empty gallons and asked me where I was heading to get water. I answered that I was going to purchase filtered water from a machine. They asked how much it cost and where it was. The machine I used was at a warehouse on the edge of the neighbourhood, across from the airport. Many Ngäbe residents in the neighbourhood were aware of another machine at the hospital, which provided filtered water at the same price as the one I was using ($0.50 per gallon). However, the hospital was a fifteen to twenty-minute walk from the entrance of the neighbourhood and only open at certain times. The machine I was using, although located right outside the neighbourhood, was behind a gate that was usually locked. The North American owner had given me a key to the gate when I moved into the neighbourhood so that I could have access to the water machine, the washers and dryers, and use the WiFi at any time – an option that was not available to anyone else in the neighbourhood.

On my way to the warehouse, I was greeted by a few other individuals. When I asked how they were, they responded: "there is no water Boana". The inconsistent and often lacking water supply was a theme that frequently came up when I asked Ngäbe residents about life in La Solución. Comments regarding this theme were often followed by remarks about the *finca* and the availability of fresh water twenty-four hours a day. The availability of fresh water was an important benefit of the *finca*, but certainly not the only one.

Earlier that day, I had visited Sarina in her house and talked to her and her husband Celino about life in the *finca*. Sarina had invited me on a trip to her home community and this had led to a conversation about the differences between life in the *finca* and life in town. Celino explained that he is fine in La Solución, knowing that he has his parents and his *finca* in his home community. "I am here working and do not think much, but when I go back there [to the *finca*], I am good there and I don't want to come back here [to town]" he explained. "If you did not have a house or somewhere to stay in the *finca*, would you be OK here or not?" I asked. "No", they both said instantly and confidently. Sarina explained: "There it is good, there is fresh air, sea, and a breeze. You are not hot there, but here you are. So this is what we have to endure ('*aguantar*') to have something, to achieve what we want ('*para lograr lo que queremos*')".

Sarina, like many others, also frequently mentioned the availability of fresh root crops (*verdura*), the main staple of Ngäbe households, in the *finca*. Whenever she returned from a visit to the *finca*, she brought with her big sacks full of freshly harvested *verdura* and

invited me for dinner at her house.[37] "Here it is difficult", Sarina once stated in a group discussion.[38] "Everything is expensive. *Buchú* costs money and there [in the *finca*] it doesn't.[39] One doesn't have to pay there. *Verdura* and fish are free (*gratis*)." Alberto, another participant had agreed: "There [in the *finca*] it's better because there you don't spend a lot [of money], because everything that there is to eat we plant, and from that we live. Everything is free. All the *verdura* is free. We take it for free. There's fish and we go fishing and we get the fish for free."[40]

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Later that evening, after chatting and playing with the children in my household for a while, I washed the sunscreen and sweat from the day off my face and brushed my teeth with a small amount of the filtered water that was left. I dropped myself onto the bed. I always left the windows open at night to allow a bit of the breeze in, in the absence of a fan in my room. The breeze brought in waves of urban mangrove smells (sulphur, disintegrating food waste, and sewage mixed with fried fish, cooked rice and burning wood) as well as fragments of conversations, various types of music, and other noises (e.g. babies crying, children shouting, dogs barking, adults singing) coming from the different neighbouring houses.

Figure 9: Mangroves

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[37] Sarina generally brought yam (*ñame*), manioc (*yucca*) and *buchu* (small banana) from the *finca.* Ngäbe individuals generally refer to these food items as *verdura.*
[38] This group discussion took place at Habla Ya language School, Bocas del Toro, 12 May 2016.
[39] *Buchú* is a small banana, the main staple and most pervasive vegetable (as considered and used by Ngäbe) in Ngäbe diet. Even if there is nothing else to eat, one can always eat boiled *buchú*.
[40] When Ngäbe individuals state that *verdura* and fish are 'free' (*gratis*) in the *finca* they mean that there is no cash transaction or other form of 'payment' involved.

Figure 10: Sewage and disintegrating food waste

Figure 11: Burning wood

Figure 12: Fried fish

The next day I woke up at 6:30 and checked the water. Nothing. It no longer bothered me. That afternoon, I would go to another area of the island and stay with my friend in the rainforest for a few days. I would be able to take a fresh shower in the creek, which always had enough water to shower, wash my hair, and wash laundry, 24 hours a day. There was always enough rainwater to drink, cook, and wash dishes. And I would not be required to stay home at certain hours to fill buckets and to ensure there was enough water for myself and the household. In the rainforest, there was always a breeze and fresh air that smelled of trees and rain. The urban sounds of La Solución made way for the sounds of singing birds, monkeys, rain, and leaves moving in the wind. I could forget about the stress of having so many different things to do, errands to run, people to visit, and (field and house) work to complete. For me, the rainforest meant an escape from the intensity, the crowdedness, the dirtiness, the heat, and the noise of La Solución. It offered an opportunity to get some rest, peace, quietness, tranquillity, and fresh healthy (free) food.[41]

I felt that having a second home in this rainforest setting, helped me better relate to the idea of having a *finca*. It allowed me to endure (*aguantar*) and to get through my time in La Solución. And I felt that having this possibility to escape and recharge also helped me better understand the importance that having access to a *finca* plays in the urban lives of my Ngäbe neighbours in La Solución.

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Ngäbe residents of La Solución often nostalgically invoked images of the *finca* as an idyllic place, in contrast to urban living and particularly in response to the annoyances that urban living brings; infrastructural weaknesses and failings, unnatural aesthetics, and crowded spaces. Limited access to water and frequent water shortages in town were contrasted with the abundance of natural water (rivers or creeks) in the *finca*; the dirtiness of the neighbourhood due to the high quantities of raw sewage and rubbish in the mangroves was often juxtaposed with the lack of these things and the natural beauty and cleanliness in the *finca*; the lack of space in La Solución was contrasted with the ability for children to run around and play safely and freely in the *finca*; the heat in town due to lack of a breeze was weighed against the comfortable temperature and fresh air and breeze in the *finca*; the crowdedness and almost constant noise pollution was unfavourably compared to the tranquillity of the *finca*; and the need to work for others, be told what to do, and be limited

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[41] 'Healthy' refers to boiled vegetables and chicken rather than rice with fried protein (chicken, sausage, egg, etc).

to inconvenient working hours was contrasted to the freedom to choose when and how one works in the *finca*.

But perhaps the most oft-mentioned appeal of the *finca* over the town was that the vegetables do not have to be purchased and taste much better than the vegetables one could buy in town. Ngäbe neighbours and friends often commented that in town one has to buy food and that it is expensive, whereas in the *finca* one can eat and live for free (*se come/vive gratis*). It was not solely that the *verdura* was free (*gratis*), organic (*orgánica*, *buena*, or *sin químicas*), and available in abundance in the *finca,* which was of importance to Ngäbe residents in Bocas Town. Ngäbe residents also greatly valued the act of cultivating; planting and harvesting one's own food.[42] Many Ngäbe individuals saw cultivation as more than an activity or a way to obtain food. They considered it to be a way of living, as part of their culture.

Ngäbe residents of La Solución often told me that they have no culture in La Solución. When I asked what they meant by culture, they would state that their culture is growing *verdura*; cultivating. The direct translation of *verdura* is vegetables. However, Ngäbe commonly refer to items that they cultivate and that constitute their staple food sources as *verdura.* These include manioc (*yuca*) and other root crops (*dachín, ñame, ñampí,* and *otoe*), as well as items that are not technically considered vegetables in the English language, such as banana, peach palm fruit (*pifá*), and more recently also plantain. Ngäbe commonly refer to other vegetables, which they do not generally (and traditionally) cultivate, such as pepper, tomato, cucumber, and courgette, as *vegetales*. Hence, *verdura* for Ngäbe represents that which they cultivate in their *fincas*.

Residents frequently lamented that they cannot cultivate in La Solución, because there is no good soil, no solid ground. Samuel, a Ngäbe man in his late 50s who lives in a mangrove community on a nearby island, but who has a house in La Solución where his children lived while they were in high school, like various others, lamented this 'loss of culture':

> "There, in La Solución, nothing can grow, in the salty water, or over the land,
> and it's very sad. So we, for example, near our house we have bananas,
> manioc, *dachín*, all these root vegetables, and *this is the way we should live*,
> and a lot of them [in La Solución] they have left that behind… A lot of our

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[42] We can observe a similarity with Guna people who consider their own cultivated food to be better than food from the city, as it is fresh from the forest, rather than packaged in plastic and they do not need to purchase it in the supermarket (Fortis 2012).

Indigenous People aren't dedicating their time to planting or cultivating in the forest."[43]

Lenardo, a Ngäbe resident of La Solución in his late forties, echoed this idea. When I asked Lenardo about people's motivations for moving to La Solución, he answered somewhat sarcastically: "It's because we want easy money, or to serve other people. Because we *can* cultivate. Those who have land *can* cultivate to survive, to live. But we don't dedicate ourselves to this". Lenardo felt that his Ngäbe neighbours who have *fincas* should dedicate their time to cultivation and was lamenting that many do not. For many Ngäbe of Samuel and Lenardo's generation, cultivation and the way one can live in the *finca* represents their culture, the good life, and the way they believe Ngäbe people 'should' live.

Figure 13: Finca (natural beauty)

Figure 14: La Solución (rubbish)

Figure 15: Finca (space)

Figure 16: La Solución (limited space)

3.2 The good life, the *finca*, and the way the Ngäbe should live

The concepts of well-being and 'the good life' and their meaning in various societies have received growing scholarly attention in the field of Anthropology over the past decade, with several edited volumes on these important topics (see for instance Overing and Passes 2000; Corsín Jimenez 2008; Izquierdo and Mathews 2009; Kavedžija and Walker 2016). Also within the anthropology of Lowland South America, a rising interest in notions of the good life and well-being have led to more extensive and comprehensive accounts and comparisons of these notions among various indigenous groups of this region (Overing and Passes 2000; Santos-Granero 2015a).

Overing (1988:176) observed that for Piaroa people of Venezuela, "the good life is the tranquil one" in which behaviour is moderated and personal autonomy, particularly with respect to labour decisions, is valued greatly. Various other Lowland South American scholars have found more recently that a variety of indigenous groups in greater Amazonia link "the good life to the construction of strong, productive, and moral human beings and the promotion of convivial social relations" (Sarmiento Barletti 2015:143; Micarelli 2015; Santos-Granero 2015a). The creation of these 'real' human beings and kinship is generally "attained through hard work and relations of care" (Santos-Granero 2015a:22). Micarelli (2015:178) explains that "work is the source from which not only the human body, identity and society but also life and the cosmos are continuously recreated".

Ngäbe also perceive hard work and relations of care to be at the basis of "ethical and moral living" (Karkotis 2012:25). They consider promoting a sociality that "respects individual autonomy and admonishes stealing, lying, [and] violence…" to be of great importance (ibid.). Such a sociality is generally pursued through hard work, care, cooperation, autonomy, and generosity (ibid.; Young 1971). Akin to other Lowland Central and South American groups, "disapproval of laziness and praise of work, are constant themes" in Ngäbe moral evaluations (Micarelli 2015:166). Among Ngäbe residents in Bocas del Toro, particularly residents of 30 years old and over, who have experienced living and cultivating in the *finca*, there is a consensus that the youth in town do not know what working hard is. This opinion was repeatedly expressed through comments such as "my daughter doesn't like to plant and harvest. The youth today only think about their study and want everything

provided to them" and "the children that are growing up now they don't know how to carry *chakara*, nothing. When I was my son's age, I carried, I was strong, but him, no".[44] [45]

Figure 17: Carrying chakara   Figure 18: Carrying chakara

Carola, a middle-aged Ngäbe woman, confirmed this perspective with a plea she held to me in 2016 about the importance of hard work and the absence of this ethic among young people nowadays. The following excerpt from that plea underlines how laziness is frowned upon among Ngäbe:[46]

   "It's good to be in the field but much of the youth these days don't know anything about this. It's sad, very sad. They all want to buy. *'Por Kreng'* (because of laziness), is what my dad says, *por pereza* (laziness). They have *pereza* to go to the field, *pereza* to go *chapear* (to weed, with a machete – see Figure 19), *pereza* to go plant, the *pereza* is going to kill us is what he says."

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[44] *Chakaras* are large bags made with fibre from the *pita* plant (*Aechmea magdalenae* – Lincoln and Orr 2011), and more recently also with string from discarded plastic bags (Border 2011), which the women use to carry heavy *verdura* back from the *finca*, with the strap placed around their foreheads (see figures 17 and 18).

[45] The first statement was made by Carola in 2016 and the second statement by Celino in 2018.

[46] This plea emerged out of Carola's narrative about a recent visit to the *finca* during which she planted corn, which she explained is a rarity these days (28 October 2016).

Figure 19: Chapear

The excerpt exemplifies how hard work is often associated with working in the field, or the *finca*, and with cultivating *verdura*. However, cultivation is not only about hard work. It also embodies the values of care, generosity, cooperation and autonomy. Cultivation requires care for one's land and for the production of food. Through this care, an individual also establishes a relationship with the land. Additionally, through cultivation and working hard in the *finca*, one has the ability to provide and care for one's family and be generous with kin by sharing food and saying yes to those who come to beg for food (Young 1971).[47] Providing food when someone comes to beg, in turn, creates the obligation for the beggar to help and cooperate in the future, reinforcing the emphasis on cooperation. As Young (1971:184) states, "a person survives through cooperative effort with his affines as well as his consanguines rather than through individual effort". Indeed, cultivation allows, or even requires, cooperation among nearby households.

Cultivation also allows each household to be autonomous. Households are generally able to provide in their own consumption needs and are able to conduct their daily activities, including cultivating, how and when they decide and will not receive any interference from

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[47] Neighbouring Guna people similarly value caring for loved ones by working in the forest and procuring food for the household and Paolo Fortis (2012) notes how failure to do so may indicate that a person is not a good companion.

other households (Young 1971). Cultivation thus allows individuals to live autonomously, generously, and cooperatively by working hard and maintaining relations of care. Encompassing the most significant Ngäbe values, practising cultivation is thus seen by many Ngäbe individuals as part of their culture, as the good life, and as the way they ought to live.

According to the Ngäbe values I discussed earlier, living well and being a good person can also be described as living *humildemente*; with humility and generosity. When I visited a community in the *comarca*, the president of this community described how he had achieved great things for his family and within the community, even though he was just a "normal" person without a solid education. He contended that these achievements were due to the support of the community, which in turn was thanks to his hard work and generosity. He stressed multiple times the importance of being humble (*humilde*), helping others, and "not keeping everything for oneself". Various other Ngäbe individuals had communicated to me the importance of sharing and the idea that nobody should 'have more or feel better than others'. Denis, an eighteen-year-old Ngäbe secondary school student, once explained to me that "if there is a little bit [of food], there is a little little little bit for all of us. We are like that... In all parts, the Indigenous People [Ngäbe] are like that. Nobody is greater than anybody, and nobody is less than anybody. It is because of this that I say that nobody is perfect in the world and nobody is richer than others." Such remarks reveal that living *humildemente* reflects the proper Ngäbe way to live.

Living *humildemente* by helping others and sharing food rather than selfishly accumulating or 'keeping everything for oneself' is embedded in Ngäbe subsistence agriculture and associated with cultivation practices. According to Ngäbe, it does not make sense to accumulate cultivated foods or keep more than the household needs other than for social purposes (e.g. to share with visitors or those who come to beg) or to prepare for challenging times (e.g. drought). The system of begging helps to ensure that households live *humildemente* and share their abundance in food with others who are in need, as saying no to beggars is frowned upon and risks being denied food on future occasions (Young 1971). However, it is necessary to bear in mind that this idyllic way of living is an idealised version of indigenous life (Young 1971). Rather than a reflection of daily lived realities or rules to adhere to at all times, I suggest that living *humildemente* denotes a set of values and ideas about how to live a good life and how to be a good Ngäbe person.

In the urban space, where cultivating *verdura* is not possible, this practice is often idealised and its impracticability lamented. Such a desire to idealise or reconstruct the past – a past in which cultivation was practised and embodied the 'right' way to live–, Peluso and Alexiades (2005:8) suggest, paradoxically "manifests itself within the context of cultural hybridity".[48] Such idealisation has particular currency through the experiences of, interaction with, and adaptation to new urban settings and ways of life, and the subsequent experiences of loss within these new encounters. For instance, Carola's and Celino's conversations about the younger generations and cultural values generate reminiscences about cultivation and life in the *finca*. Yet, the majority of Ngäbe residents in Bocas del Toro have – temporarily or permanently – yielded their daily cultivation practices by moving away from the *finca* to reside in town. In the next section, I explore the motivations for this trend of moving away from the *finca* and discuss its implications.

3.3 Urbanisation: From cultivating in the finca to living in the urban mangroves of La Solución

As I have demonstrated, the *finca* and the way of living that the *finca* allows are associated with Ngäbe culture, the good life, and the way Ngäbe believe one 'should' live. Yet, paid work has come to be seen by many households as a necessity. An increasing number of Ngäbe individuals and families are (temporarily) leaving their *fincas* to seek paid employment in urban centres. I have found that the two principal reasons for Ngäbe individuals and families to move to town are (1) the felt desire or need for a monetary income to buy daily necessities and construct one's house and (2) the aspirations (for children) to be educated and 'become a professional' (see also McSweeney and Jokisch 2007; Chackiel 2005). This is not surprising as seeking economic opportunities and pursuing (higher) education have been identified as the two principal drivers for indigenous urbanisation in lowland South America since the late 20th century, along with reduced land availability and land conflicts (McSweeney and Jokisch 2007; 2015).[49]

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[48] For a detailed and broad discussion of debates around hybridity and what cultural hybridity means in the lowland South American context see Peluso (2003, 2020 in press).
[49] I follow McSweeney and Jokisch in defining urbanisation as "the process of rural-to-urban migration and … the state of living in an urban area" (2015:14).

Ngäbe househoulds in the *Ngäbe-Buglé comarca* have been experiencing an increasing necessity for money. As several interlocutors disclosed to me, it was possible to live off the *finca* in the past by cultivating *verdura* and raising chickens and pigs, but this has become progressively difficult. They explained that there used to be enough space for everyone, as there were fewer people in the past. However, as the population grew and families multiplied, the land that they occupied and used had to recurrently be split into the number of kin, as each individual wanted their own plot of land. Now, they say, there is not much land left. Philip Young (1971) reported concerns about land shortage among Ngäbe as early as the 1960s. These concerns about land shortage, according to Karkotis (2012), became one of the main reasons that several village communities started forming in and around the *comarca* shortly after the turn of the century.

Particularly in these villages, Ngäbe involvement in the market economy augmented (Karkotis 2012). However, also prior to this process of village formation, Young (1971) observed among Ngäbe individuals a desire for goods that they did not produce and which needed to be purchased. Many of these desired goods became necessities in Ngäbe households, amplifying the need for money (ibid). This increasing dependence on the market economy, Young (1971:230) argues, put cumulative demands on people's time, which challenged swidden agriculture as the primary productive activity. Indeed, many Ngäbe men have been away from their *fincas* for extended periods to perform wage labour since the late 20th century, in attempts to satisfy their households' needs for money (Bourgois 1988; Bort and Young 1985).

Another reason why it became increasingly difficult to live solely off cultivating and fishing (or hunting or domestic livestock farming), is that education became progressively sought after in the *comarca*. Several Ngäbe children began to receive formalized state-provided education in the mid-20th century when the first schools appeared in the then indigenous reservation (Young 1971).[50] In the past two decades, a growing number of Ngäbe parents have wanted "their children to be someone in the future" (Wilberto, pers. comm. 2016), meaning to become 'a professional', which they hoped to achieve through education. On the one hand, being educated allows individuals to find higher-skilled and higher-paid work and thus to provide for their families. However, there is also a more political element to this desire for education. Ngäbe have increasingly felt that knowledge of the mainstream (Latino) society through state-provided education may enhance their collective

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[50] Before it obtained *comarca* status, the Ngäbe territory was a reservation (Herrera 1998).

opportunities and political power (Young and Bort 1999). For Ngäbe residents of the village community of Bisira, for instance, state-provided education meant to "know what the 'others' know"; to obtain insights into the ways and knowledge of the dominant ('Latino') society (Karkotis 2012:41).

Evan Killick observed a similar desire among Ashéninka people in Peru. He found that many Ashéninka individuals assumed that "through knowing how to read and write … they will be better able to defend themselves" (2007:476). Similarly, Gow (1991) found that Piro people in Peru consider individuals that cannot read, write, and speak Spanish very well, to be uncivilised and believe that they do not know how to defend themselves. For various Indigenous Peoples, then, "education is viewed as an important means of counteracting the obvious power of outsiders" (Killick 2007:476). Many indigenous communities consider education to provide valuable skills in negotiating with authorities, obtaining benefits and enhancing respect for the community (Virtanen 2010), while it is also a way for indigenous youth to craft urban lifestyles and networks (Peluso 2015).

Ngäbe have sought socio-political 'progress' through education since the 1970s (Karkotis 2012:41). However, various families in the *comarca* have experienced challenges in educating their children, as the schools were often far away and there have been few ways to earn sufficient money to pay for school and university tuition and necessities. This challenge to attain education in the *comarca* has led many families to move into concentrated communities or to urban areas to pursue education for their children (Karkotis 2012; Chackiel 2005).

The movement towards concentrated communities follows a national trend and forms part of a Panamanian politics of indigeneity. Other Panamanian indigenous groups have held similar desires and ambitions. Emberá households, for instance, have been settling in concentrated communities to provide their children with education as well as to organise themselves politically, while Guna people have been living in concentrated village communities for over a century (Fortis 2019; Herlihy 1986; Kane 1994; Theodossopoulos 2013).[51] Education and increased urban residence have facilitated political participation and success among various Lowland South American indigenous groups (McSweeney and Jokisch 2007). Yet, it has also been a means to integrate indigenous groups into the current

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[51] Fortis (2012; 2019) describes how Guna residents in the San Blas archipelago have come to consider living in densely populated village communities more desirable and suitable than living scattered in small rural settlements.

state logic (Stafford-Walker 2018), which includes state extractivism (Garcia-Bonet 2017). I explore this urbanisation trend and the ways in which rural and urban are linked in the urbanisation process in more detail in the following section.

3.3.1 Rural and urban links

Various scholars have demonstrated that indigenous urbanisation is not as straightforward as it may seem and may not fit the push-and-pull framing of mainstream rural to urban migration that many policy documents suggest (Alexiades and Peluso 2015; McSweeney and Jokisch 2007; 2015; Peluso 2015). These scholars argue that what sets the recent trend of increasing indigenous urbanisation apart from the general rural-to-urban migration of the mid-20th century is the value placed on ties that are maintained with rural homelands and communities.

In an emerging body of literature on indigenous urbanisation, scholars have demonstrated the various ways in which urbanised Indigenous Peoples are linked to their rural home communities, creating an 'urban-rural interface' (Browder 2002; Alexiades and Peluso 2016; 2015; Eloy and Lasmar 2012; Garcia Castro 2000; McSweeney and Jokisch 2015). Examples of such links are remittances sent home, the financing of communal projects in home communities, the hosting of rural visitors by urban resident family or community members, and the transportation of food and other natural products from rural homelands to the urban setting, in order to "make urban living more bearable" (McSweeney and Jokisch 2015:25; Peluso 2015). Many of my Ngäbe friends engaged in one or multiple of such activities. The activities they participated in include contributing to the construction of a communal house and health centre in their rural home communities, sending money to parents or other family members, paying family or community members to maintain their *fincas*, and transporting packaged and commercially produced food and construction items to the home communities, as well as transporting vegetables and wood from their rural communities to town.

The links that are forged between the rural and the urban spheres include the multi-directional flows and movement of goods, resources, ideas, and individuals (Peluso 2015). Scholars have found that Indigenous urbanisation may not necessarily imply a permanent or even full-time absence from rural communities (Alexiades and Peluso 2015, 2016; McSweeney and Jokisch 2007). In fact, indigenous urbanisation may involve the

establishment of multi-sited dwellings and the formation of ethnic neighbourhoods as well as return-migrations and "temporary, cyclical, semipermanent, or permanent residence patterns" (Peluso 2015:62). This kind of movement is consistent with a historic predisposition indigenous communities have to high levels of mobility, dynamism and multiplicity, which was required in the face of many difficulties and dangers experienced over the centuries (Alexiades 2009; Alexiades and Peluso 2016).

The literature indicates that movement of individuals from rural to urban settings does not necessarily imply a move away from an identification with the homeland, but may instead reinforce place-based identities (McSweeney and Jokisch 2007; Peluso 2015). Nor does this migration trend signify a "lack of a future in their home territories", as various scholars have found (McSweeney and Jokisch 2015:21; Alexiades and Peluso 2015). My fieldwork data concurs with these findings. Urban Ngäbe residents often maintain strong ties and connections to their families and *fincas* in their home communities while living in town and many Ngäbe individuals in Bocas del Toro aspire towards a future in or involving their homeland or community. When I asked residents about their preferred residence, the majority responded that they would prefer to live in the *comarca* or their *finca* if there was a way to earn (more) money there and attain better access to education. Additionally, many individuals have indicated to me that they moved to La Solución with intentions of returning to their communities of origin once their goals are met, for instance when their children graduate high school or when they have been able to construct or renovate a house for their families in their communities of origin from their incomes in town. Indeed, several of my Ngäbe friends left Bocas del Toro to return to their *fincas* during my fieldwork period.

Furthermore, data obtained from a household survey I conducted in La Solución in 2017 support these observations of urban temporality and the ties that people maintain to their home communities. The survey indicated that 30 per cent of respondents (40 of the 135 households – identified by the head of the household) was officially resident – i.e. registered to vote or to obtain benefits – in their home communities rather than in Bocas del Toro, where they were physically living at the time of the survey. Although not many individuals provided a motivation for this, a few participants indicated that they preferred to vote in their home community rather than in Bocas del Toro or that they were not planning to remain in Bocas del Toro. The survey responses confirm the intended temporariness of Ngäbe households' urban residence.

Results from the survey also denote a significant share of multi-sited dwellings among Ngäbe households in La Solución. 36 per cent of respondents (49 households) indicated that they had a house of their own in the home community – either the community of the head of household or their spouse – and another 30 per cent (40 households) had a familial house in their home communities or *fincas* where they would stay when visiting and potentially lived prior to their urban-ward move. Furthermore, various urban Ngäbe residents have used the income from their employment in town to construct a house in their *fincas*. Having the resources to build a house in the *finca* is a significant 'benefit' of working in town for many Ngäbe residents of La Solución.[52] This data indicates that, in concurrence with the literature on indigenous urbanisation in Lowland South America (McSweeney and Jokisch 2015; Alexiades and Peluso 2015; Peluso 2015), urban Ngäbe residents generally maintain strong ties to their respective home communities and lands as well as a sense of temporariness with respect to their presence in the urban area of Bocas del Toro.

The extent to which urban Ngäbe residents maintain and visit their *fincas* substantiate the strong ties they retain to their rural homelands and their aspirations to return. Ngäbe residents of La Solución maintained their *fincas* to various degrees in order to have the option to return at some point in the future.[53] 69 percent of household survey respondents (93 of 135 households surveyed) stated that they owned a *finca* elsewhere.[54] Of these *finca* owners, 89 percent (83 individuals) indicated that they visited their *finca* at least once a year and 34 percent (28 individuals) at least once a month. Of these individuals who make yearly or more regular visits to their *fincas*, 88 percent actively maintain – i.e. plant, harvest or clear – their *fincas* upon their visits (48 individuals) or have a family or community member maintain their *fincas* for them (25 individuals).

Urban residents who have a *finca* feel the responsibility of maintaining their *fincas* to retain the option of returning in the future and of preserving the tradition of cultivating, as part of their 'culture'. However, those who do not – or no longer – possess a *finca*, do not enjoy the option of 'returning' nor feel the responsibility to maintain this custom, as seen in the following group discussion:

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[52] For instance, Sarina mentioned that coming to Bocas del Toro "has greatly benefitted me (*me ha dado mucho beneficio*). Because of that I have built my house there [in the finca]."
[53] They might clean the *finca*, plant and harvest themselves on their visits or they might arrange for (and potentially pay) a family member to maintain their *finca* for them.
[54] Of these 93 households, 87 households have a *finca* of their own, and six stated to have familial *fincas* (owned by father or mother).

Me: What do you think is more important, to have the opportunity to be able to plant and eat vegetables of your own that you have planted or being here working?
Arely: Working.
Idelina: Eating my own vegetables.
Arely: That time has gone.
Idelina: It has not gone, for me, it has not gone. We should not lose our custom. We were born planting. We were born planting and harvesting and from this we grew until we got here. I don't …
Arely: You have to get used to another place.
Idelina: I have to plant and harvest and then come here?
Arely: That's why I say that you have to get used to this environment, to working and buying.
Idelina: It's a lot of spending.
Maidenis: I go to my *finca* to plant and harvest and when class starts I come here.
Idelina: Every vacation, do your planting in your place and then come back. Another vacation, the plantings are big and you are able to harvest, you bring it, like that.
Arely: Those that have a *finca* can do that yes.
Juanita: Harvest rice, plantains, banana, yucca, all sorts of vegetables, we have it. Like she said. I also have a *finca*, I go. Right now, I have rice, I have corn, I have yucca, I have otoë, everything. What I buy here is sugar and those things.
Arely: It's just that I don't have a *finca*.
Juanita: For those that do not have, it's difficult. But there are some that have a *finca*. You have to take advantage of doing that work. [55]

This excerpt from a discussion in La Solución indicates that there is a different experience for those who own a *finca* and those who do not. For Arely, who did not own a *finca* and had never had the experience of cultivating in the *finca*, the way of living associated with the *finca* belonged to the past; the collective past of the Ngäbe. As very few Ngäbe individuals or families have sold or permanently abandoned their *fincas* (contrary to popular belief), there is a high likelihood that those who do not possess a *finca*, did not actually grow up with and do not share the memories of life on the *finca*. Yet, the practice of cultivation and way of life associated with it are not 'lost' for the majority of urban residents who do have a *finca* and instead remain an important aspect of their lives, even, or perhaps particularly, in the urban sphere. Urban Ngäbe residents bring the *finca* with them into their urban lives by returning regularly (or as often as they can), upholding the custom of cultivation, and aspiring to return to the *finca* in the future. For these individuals, the *finca* is an important aspect of their urban lives.

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[55] The discussion took place in 17 November 2016 at the communal house in La Solución.

However, many individuals in La Solución lamented that they were not able to visit their *fincas* as often as they would have liked and that they did not have sufficient time to maintain their *fincas*. This raises additional problems, for if a household is seen to 'abandon' the *finca*, others may steal the harvest, encroach on the land, or even claim the land for their own household. While Ngäbe kin groups own land collectively, usufruct rights are inherited individually, both patrilineally and matrilineally (Young 1971). Usufruct rights can only be transferred when the land has been actively farmed and, in the context of population growth and increasing land scarcity, a household may lose their usufruct rights if they cease to exercise these rights by continually farming the land. Ramiro explained this to me as follows: "before, our people left their *fincas* abandoned and it turned into forest, but nobody cared. Nobody touched it. But now, since there are many people in the village, when they see a *finca* not being used, they want to take it. Because of this, one has to be there to take care of the *finca*". Working six to seven days a week and not receiving any (paid) vacation, many residents of La Solución are unable to make the trip more than once a year, depending on the distance to their *fincas*. This limitation not only reduces their ability to cultivate and obtain and share the products of their *fincas*, but also impedes with individuals' plans to return to the *finca* once they retire, or at any other point in the future, which is still an aspiration for many Ngäbe residents of La Solución.

3.4 Living the way one 'should' live in La Solución

As I outlined in previous sections, cultivation and living *humildemente* – living humbly, generously, and autonomously – are key aspects of Ngäbe ideals of living a good life and way they believe they ought to live. This ideal way of living appears incompatible with wealth accumulation and working for a boss. Yet, money and paid employment are two of the principal aspects of living well for Ngäbe residents of La Solución. When I asked my Ngäbe friends what they needed in order to live well, the overwhelming majority immediately responded that they needed money (*plata*) or work (*trabajo*). Silvia explained, for instance, that "if there is no work, there is no money and if there is no money there is no food". This opinion was echoed by many other individuals I talked to.

These seemingly disjointed values and aspects to living a good life, however, need not be in conflict. First, it is necessary to bear in mind that the 'ideal' way of living, as highlighted

previously, is an idealisation of indigenous life. It denotes a set of ideals rather than a representation of the lived reality, even in the *finca*. Second, the incorporation and reinterpretation of money and other aspects of 'modernity' may "show the vitality of indigenous cultures" (Micarelli 2015:163; cf. Bloch and Parry 1989). As Sarmiento Barletti (2015) observed among Ashaninka, money now forms an integral aspect in their abilities to live well. The same is true for Ngäbe people. Money and work support urban Ngäbe residents in their striving to live good and proper lives.

Such a conjoining of indigenous values on living how one ought to live and practicalities of life within the national political economy resembles the situation for various indigenous groups in Latin America. In Ecuador, for instance, where indigenous notions of 'the good life' (*buen vivir*) are incorporated into the constitution, the indigenous perspective of this notion is starkly different from the national state version, which is grounded in ideas of development, progress, and accumulation (Whitten and Whitten 2015). Whitten and Whitten (2015:202) note that "to conjoin the concepts is to be part of a palpable structure of conjuncture of dynamic indigenous desirable life and life in a vortex of modern capitalist transformation". La Solución is an interesting setting to observe the conjuncture of living according to Ngäbe values and ideals and satisfying the needs of everyday life in a capitalist society.

Also in the urban environment of La Solución Ngäbe residents strive to live by the set of ideals on how they think one ought to live; autonomously, generously, cooperatively and with care. They integrate the ideals imbued in cultivation into their urban daily lives. For instance, the importance Ngäbe individuals attach to autonomy is reflected in the emphasis they place on having their own house. This theme kept resurfacing in conversations. Sarina stressed the significance of having a house of her own to me in the following way:

> "For me, coming here [to La Solución] has provided great benefit (*me ha dado mucho beneficio*), a lot of money… because of this, I have constructed my house there [in the *finca*]. Because of this, I can eat. I have my little something in the house because of this. But if I had stayed in Punta Aguda, I could not have… I would not have my own house… So I like living here for what I have. Because I get money, what I want to do, I do it. But if I was there, I would not. [There] I would have free vegetables, free fish, but I would not be able to construct my own house".

When I asked Sarina and her husband Celino if they would be good in La Solución if they did not have a house in Punta Aguda (her home community), nor in Bahia Cangrejo (his home community), they both instantly said "no". I clarified "so it is important to have…", "…my own house" Sarina completed my sentence. Also in various other group discussions, Ngäbe individuals indicated that they were fine in La Solución because they had a house of their own and the things they needed in the house (water, food, and a place to sleep). Not living well, in turn, was associated with "living to pay the bills, the bills of the house and the shop and having nothing to save and fix up your house" (Celino 2018). Clearly, having one's own house, and the household autonomy that it provides is an important aspect of Ngäbe notions of living well, according to the way they believe they 'ought to live'. Renting, in turn, was generally frowned upon and many residents did not think they could live well if they had to rent a home. Paid employment provides urban Ngäbe residents with opportunities to construct their own homes and the autonomy this implies.

The way one ought to live is further embodied by expressing generosity through the sharing of fresh food brought back from the *finca* with kin and closest friends in their urban setting. Sarina often invited me to eat at her house upon returning from the *finca*, when she could cook the fresh *verdura* she had harvested in her *finca*. Moreover, Ngäbe residents of La Solución are expected to care for their environment by keeping their *patios*, the areas around their houses, clean. They are further expected to cooperate with neighbours and share their productive capacities by participating in communal work.

Failing to participate in communal work, in turn, was frequently criticised. An oft-mentioned critique was that community members only wanted to work for money and not for the community. These community members were failing to share their hard work and their productive capabilities and were instead using these capabilities to enhance personal wealth. Carola, a middle-aged Ngäbe woman, called this prioritisation of personal wealth over communal wealth and cooperation the disease of money. "There where you are from, they only think about this [money] and they live with this", she told me. "This is reaching Panama as well, this disease that people only think about money and that with money they are going to live well. The young people are all with their cell phones. The girls as well. They don't have [money] for flour, sugar, or rice, but they have for their phone cards. This is bad. I have observed this… Even if they have their stomachs with a lot of noise, but they have their cell phones charged".

Others of Carola's generation also critically referred to adolescents who spent their money only on their mobile phones, haircuts, and their physical appearance (clothes, perfume), rather than on food and other necessities for the household, indicating that these expenditures do not resemble a humble lifestyle. The consensus among older generations was that the youth want more luxury and comfort and are not willing to work hard and eat real Ngäbe food (*verdura* – particularly *buchú*, *dachín*, and *pifá*).[56] As such, they are seen to not be interested in living *humildemente* or the way their elders believe Ngäbe should live. These adolescents are, instead, accustomed to living in a world in which everything is obtained by money rather than hard work.

"Money is everything, Boana", my Ngäbe friend Antonio would often tell me. Having grown up in the urban mangroves of Bocas Town, Antonio has observed the growing influx of tourists and foreign residents over the past two decades.[57] He has been both intrigued and dismayed by the abilities of these privileged outsiders to purchase 'everything' – from indigenous labour and government concessions which allow them to undertake otherwise illegal construction, to parts of rainforest 'land' inhabited and farmed by his indigenous peers. Antonio and other young urban Ngäbe residents have been unable to deny the importance that money has in their urban daily lives and increasingly in the lives of Indigenous Peoples more generally.

Money and its attractive and seductive power are often seen as a threat to the socio-cosmological order and to the continuation of living the way one should according to Ngäbe values. However, Bloch and Parry (1989) explain that money itself does not have any intrinsic power to transform a social order. Instead, money is often seen as a symbol of the short term cycle of individual transactions, which provide short term benefit to individuals, rather than the long-term cycle of transactions, which serve to reproduce the social order. What may threaten to transform a social order, then, is the favouring of transactions that provide short term benefits to the individual (household) over the transactions that benefit

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[56] Ngäbe people generally consider 'real' Ngäbe food or *verdura* (with fish) to produce strong and hardworking people. The alleged laziness and limited physical strength among younger generations as identified by older individuals is, in part, associated with their dislike of proper 'Ngäbe' food. Various anthropologists have noted how among different Amazonian Indigenous Peoples, eating 'proper' food allows individuals to become 'proper' and strong people (e.g. Conklin 2015; Conklin and Morgan 1996; Fortis 2012; Londoño Sulkin 2000; 2012; Santos-Granero 2015). For instance, Fortis (2012:25-26) writes of the neighbouring Guna that eating food from the forest allows Guna individuals to "grow into strong and intelligent adults" and that they consider food contained in plastic "not real food", which makes people "weak and unable to bear their daily routine".

[57] I describe and analyse this influx of tourists and foreign residents to Bocas del Toro and its impacts on Ngäbe residents' urban lives in detail in chapter six.

the collective and are focused on maintaining the way of life; the socio-cosmological order. The short term cycle thereby threatens to replace the long-term cycle rather than informing and feeding it (ibid.). I suggest that Carola was concerned with the short term transactions replacing long-term transactions in her comments discussed above. Indeed, individuals from the younger generations of Ngäbe in Bocas del Toro can be seen to favour the short term cycle of 'fast money'.

Carola's comments reflect a generational anxiety about future livelihood and social reproduction, which is often expressed with reference to generational differences (Narotzky and Besnier 2014) and how in some cases money might threaten this reproduction. Herzfeld (1997) proposed the term 'structural nostalgia' to refer to such generational anxieties and yearnings for an "idealised irrecoverable age of reciprocal sociality" (Theodossopoulos 2016:1912). Such rhetorical longing for perfect and balanced reciprocity that has been damaged "by the self-interest of modern times", Herzfeld contends, is replicated in each succeeding generation (1997:111; Angé 2015). It represents a fear that "when money enters in", all norms, values, and customs are compromised (Herzfeld 1997:138).

Carola's nostalgic laments indicate anxiety about the future of the Ngäbe way of life; a perceived threat to the "continuity of identity in the context of present fears, discontents and uncertainties" (Angé and Berliner 2015:5; Davis 1979). Davis (1979:31) argues that such nostalgic rhetoric is crucial in shaping, sustaining, and reconstructing (cultural) identities. I suggest that the nostalgia expressed by Carola's generation serves to support the continuity of the Ngäbe socio-cosmological order.

3.5   Conclusion: the importance of the *finca* in urban lives and imaginaries

As the ethnographic description of urban lived realities in La Solución demonstrates, urban Ngäbe residents often idealised the *finca* and the way of life it allowed, particularly in contrast to the discomforts, annoyances, and stress of urban life in La Solución. Such comparisons with and idealisations of rural life are not uncommon among urbanised Indigenous Peoples. For instance, Peluso (2015:66-67) observes that urban Ese Eja in the Peruvian city of Puerto Maldonado see "urban life as often dysfunctional, unpredictable

and unhealthy" in comparison to rural life and that they "verbally express their appreciation for the natural abundance of basic resources available in their home communities".

For urban Ngäbe residents, such idealisations of the *finca* typically take a nostalgic character, especially when provoked by or placed in contrast to urban nuisances. These idealisations regularly invoke nostalgia for certain aspects of the *finca* as a place, as well as for a way of life not available in the urban setting, and hence in the present moment. As such, these reminiscences comprise a longing for something that is missing from their current urban lives, from the present. Although at first instance nostalgia appears to be a "longing for a place", Boym (2008:xv) notes that, in reality, it is a "yearning for a different time".

Yet, this different time is often a 'time-out-of-time'; a representation of a past created by a mourning for something that is missing from the present (Strathern 1995:111); "a suggestive projection of how people wish to imagine the past" (Peluso and Alexiades 2005:8). This is not to imply that individuals' memories of the *finca* are not real or that the things from the *finca* that they miss in their urban lives are not things they truly experienced. Rather it implies that these memories and laments are idealised and essentialised reconstructions of past experiences and practices, "embodying the past in the present" (Strathern 1995:111).

I suggest that, rather than wishing to return to the past, Ngäbe individuals are effectively bringing the *finca* into the urban space with such nostalgic references. These nostalgic laments about and idealisations of the *finca* are ways to symbolically incorporate the *finca* and Ngäbe ideas and ideals about the good life into their current urban daily realities. Recollections of life in the *finca* and references to the ideal or 'correct' way to live may forge a continued identity as Ngäbe, through the identification with the indigenous values and customs associated with the *finca* and cultivation. As Battaglia remarks, nostalgic practice fosters "the attachment of appropriate feelings toward their own histories, products and capabilities" (1995:77). Urban Ngäbe residents continuously invoke that which is important and valued by idealising the *finca* and lamenting what is lost or absent in the urban space and thereby express and reinforce their culture.

I argue that for urban Ngäbe residents, nostalgia serves as a continuity with the proper way to live while stressing discontinuity with the practices associated with this way of life. Atia and Davies (2010:184) assert that nostalgic invocations and practices may "serve as a negotiation between continuity and discontinuity". In the case of urban Ngäbe they indicate

a discontinuity by stressing what is absent from or 'lost' in the urban sphere, while forging a sense of continuity with the 'correct' way of life and the pursuit of the good life, by remembering and attempting to incorporate the values associated with the *finca* and cultivation practices. In section 3.3, I outlined how many urban Ngäbe individuals feel dedicated toward maintaining the custom of cultivation and the ties to their *fincas*, despite the obstacles they may face to doing so in their urban lived realities.

Nostalgia for the past may serve various other present purposes (Angé 2015; Bissel 2005; Davis 1979; Herzfeld 1997) For instance, nostalgic references to life in the *finca*, or 'the way one should live' may serve to justify individuals' own moral living in the urban space, as a good Ngäbe person. Referring to the ideal Ngäbe ways and the absence of these ways and their possibility in the urban space may justify the imperfect adherence to these ideals in urban daily life. Additionally, nostalgia may help recently urbanised Ngäbe defend against negative emotions and experiences (e.g. aggression, anger, helplessness and loneliness) associated with facing a new physical and socio-political environment and different socio-economic conditions (Akhtar 1999; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Lijtmaer 2001).

Not just the retrospective idealisation, but also the aspiration of returning to the *finca* and the associated hope of returning to that idyllic time-space form an integral part of the ability to endure (current) urban frustrations and obstacles (Jackson 2011). This idealisation of a past that people strive to realise in the future (Boym 2008:351), thus gives rise to hope: "the necessary illusion that… everything will work out for the best" (Jackson 2011:147). I suggest that nostalgia, in this sense, is a form of aspiration for the future. Such a sense of aspiration, or hope for the future, has been found by various scholars to be an essential ingredient for well-being and the ability to live a good life (Appadurai 2004; Fisher 2015; Jackson 2011).

I argue that the knowledge of having a *finca* is an important part of urban Ngäbe individuals' social imaginary that also sustains their well-being. Whether Ngäbe return to the *finca* permanently once children grow up or enough money is saved, or temporarily visit every year for a few weeks, the *finca* is very important to most Ngäbe living in town because it allows them to endure (*aguantar*) life in La Solución and thus live well knowing that the *finca* is there. For many individuals, making regular visits to and maintaining their *fincas* help them live a good – mainly urban – life. Additionally, aspiring to return and nostalgically invoking memories of the *finca*, through which they bring the idyllic world of the *finca* and

the values associated with cultivation into their urban daily lives, also aid in their ability to live well in an urban environment.[58]

Nonetheless, urban Ngäbe residents are aware of the risks which residing and working in town bring to the 'survival' of their values. They see that these values are being 'lost' on the younger generations, who are growing up in a world where 'money is everything', as I demonstrated in section 3.4. I suggest that there may be a shift away from living *humildemente* as the younger generations become accustomed to and grow up with money and demand more luxury and comfort. Ngäbe individuals from older generations may aspire to return to the *finca* once they retire or their children graduate high school. However, their children are more likely to stay in town studying at university or seeking paid employment. Although these younger generations do have long-term aspirations for the good life, these aspirations are mainly directed towards education and 'becoming someone in life'. These aspirations may in the first instance serve the purpose of being able to take care of their families and ensure their elders' wellbeing. However, in the process of doing so, they may not reproduce the socio-cosmological order in the way that their parents may wish them to. As children grow up without experiencing daily life in the *finca*, practising cultivation and the values imbued in it, they will likely not have the same kind of nostalgic memories towards the *finca* and the way of life it allows and requires. They may not share their parents' aspirations to return to the *finca* or to embody the ideals imbued in cultivation.

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[58] It is significant, whether or not this urban life is temporary or ends up being longer term.

CHAPTER FOUR

"*Our race is poor*":

Urban Ngäbe notions of poverty

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24 August 2015, at Hostel Padua:

Sarina was standing outside hostel Padua getting ready to leave after another day of cleaning the rooms and the kitchen. I asked her if she was going home and if I could walk with her to look for potential students for my English class. "Now?" she asked, "you want to go with me now?" Yes", I answered, "unless it is not a good time now. Another time is fine too". "No, no," she said, "It's OK, you can come with me".

I had become acquainted with Sarina during my first few days in Bocas Town, while I stayed in Hostel Padua. When I told the Latina Panamanian manager of the hostel that I was planning to conduct research about Ngäbe residents in the neighbourhood of La Solución, the manager had said that the two women that clean the hostel (Sarina and Elina) were both Ngäbe and residents of La Solución.[59] Shortly after becoming acquainted with Sarina and Elina, I had found an opportunity to teach English classes and recruit my students in La Solución. Sarina and Elina were the first individuals I had approached about the English classes, and they had expressed great interest. I had inquired with them if they knew any other interested individuals and Sarina had said that she would ask around. I requested to go with her to 'ask around' among her neighbours, and the individuals who she thought might be interested. "Sure", she had responded. Today, I was following up on this.

"Leonora will kill me if she finds out I invited you to my house", Sarina said as we walked towards La Solución. Leonora, her manager at the hostel, had been wanting to see Sarina's house as well, but Sarina had never invited her. After taking me to a few houses to inform

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[59] The term Latino-Panamanian relates to the *mestizo* population category as used commonly in Latin America. In Panama, this population group or segment is referred to as Latino, rather than *mestizo*. They are considered to have Spanish or mixed Spanish-indigenous heritage (and are generally identified by their lighter skin-colour (than indigenous individuals)) (see also Wickstrom and Young 2014; Guerrón Montero 2006a).

residents about my English classes, Sarina said, "come, let's go to my house, but don't say anything to Leonora". I promised I would not tell.

When we arrived at the house, she invited me to enter. She told me to sit down and offered me some *pifá* (peach palm fruit). I gladly accepted the offer and asked her if I could learn how to cook *pifá*. As Sarina showed me how to prepare the palm fruits, she told me that she is from the *comarca* and she only cooked *verdura* and fish before moving to Bocas del Toro. While living in town, however, she learned how to cook rice and other foods. Sarina confided in me that she did not want to move to Bocas initially. Her husband went first, to look for work and approximately a year later, when her son was a few months old, Sarina joined her husband.

She then wanted to take a photo of her and me together in her house, to show to her parents when visiting them in the *comarca*. However, her phone was not cooperating. I offered to take a photo on my phone and send it to her. Upon seeing the picture I took, she stood up to take down the clothes that were left to dry on the wooden beams supporting the roof. She stated that she did not like the photo because you could see the clothes on the background and asked me to delete it. She explained that when the weather is bad, she hangs the laundry inside to dry. Once she took the clothes down, we took another photo, and I told her I would send it to her.

As we ate the *pifá*, she asked me what I thought of her house. "We live differently than you do, this house is different from your house, right?" she continued before I was able to answer her first question. As I was trying to formulate a response to her question, she stated "our race is poor" (*nuestra raza es pobre)*. I asked what made her say that. She explained that the Ngäbe have to work hard to be able to attend school. She only went to primary school. Her parents could not send her to secondary school because they did not have any money for the travel, uniform and other educational necessities. They had food – her father went to the *finca* every day – but they did not have money, so she could not attend secondary school. Sarina said she was very good at school. However, she was unable to participate in Physical Education because she did not have the appropriate clothes and had often not eaten in the morning. She stated that this was the case because her parents were poor. She further explained that she had only one uniform for the whole year. I asked Sarina if there were only Ngäbe children in her school. "Yes", she responded, "only our race". I further inquired whether other children experienced these same issues or if some children

in her class had more clothes and educational necessities. "Some children had more", she stated.

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Introduction

The above conversation and Sarina's statements made me wonder about her experience of poverty and what motivated or triggered her to say that 'her race is poor'. Sarina expressed two distinct experiences of poverty in this short conversation. The first experience is one of collective poverty; the Ngäbe are poor in comparison to non-Ngäbe or 'other races'. The second experience is one of individual poverty; it concerns the experience within one particular household context in relation to other households.

I suggest that Sarina's comments reflect the relevance and relationality of her own notion of poverty: the Ngäbe are poor *in relation to* others who live differently and who do not have to work as hard as Ngäbe to obtain or achieve the same things. Moreover, Sarina defined her experiences as poverty in comparison to what she assumed to be my conditions and experiences. Whether she defined similar experiences as poverty in other instances may have depended on whom she was speaking to and with whom she was comparing her conditions.

Other Ngäbe individuals spoke about poverty using terms such as *pobre* (poor – Spanish), *bobre* (poor – Ngäbere), *humilde* (humble, poor) or *de bajos recursos* (having fewer resources). When they used these terms, it was most often in reference to Ngäbe people as a collective. However, when I asked Ngäbe residents about poverty in La Solución, the most common response was that there is not any poverty and there are not any poor people in La Solución. These variations in perspectives indicate that the experience of poverty is not only relative, but also highly contextual.

The varied references to poverty also made me wonder how urban Ngäbe individuals define, perceive, and understand poverty and how their understandings relate to dominant notions and definitions of poverty. On a national level, and according to Western definitions of poverty, the Ngäbe are considered to be the poorest ethnic group in Panama (Davis 2010; Jaén 2001). Also in Bocas del Toro, Ngäbe residents of La Solución, are reported to live in poor, unhealthy, and precarious conditions (Miviot 2014a; 2014b; Thampy 2013). When Ngäbe individuals refer to their collective poverty they may be reproducing the dominant

discourse of poverty and development. Furthermore, the indigenous term for poor in Ngäbere, *bobre*, clearly derives from the Spanish *pobre*, indicating that prior to interacting with non-Ngäbe others in Spanish, Ngäbe did not have a term for poverty. This suggests that the concept of poverty for Ngäbe people came to have meaning only in contact with and relation to non-indigenous others. But to what extent do Ngäbe individuals subscribe to dominant Western notions of poverty?

In this chapter, I explore the notions, experiences and ideas of poverty among urban Ngäbe residents. I further examine how Ngäbe residents of La Solución discuss and perceive their own living conditions in relation to their ideas about poverty. I reveal how the discourse of poverty, when externally imposed, may stigmatise Ngäbe individuals and limit them in their abilities to live well. The chapter starts with a discussion of various notions of poverty, including dominant Western definitions and Lowland South American indigenous conceptions. Subsequently, I describe the various ways in which Ngäbe individuals invoked discourses of poverty. I then explore what these discourses reveal about Ngäbe notions and experiences of poverty in an urban context. Finally, I demonstrate how Ngäbe individuals frequently reject the label of poverty when discussing their individual conditions. I argue that the rejection of this discourse by Ngäbe individuals in some instances and their invoking it in other instances are powerful tools that urban Ngäbe residents strategically employ in their striving to live well.

4.1 What is poverty?

Dominant notions of poverty

Dominant Western definitions of poverty have shifted and varied over the past century. Earlier definitions saw poverty framed in economic terms and based solely on income and material possessions (Alkire and Santos 2013; Alkire and Fang 2019). However, the failure of economically oriented development approaches became apparent in the 1970s and 1980s and prompted an evaluation of the social aspects of development. Definitions of poverty then came to include other indicators based on basic human needs (Alkire and

Santos 2013; Escobar 1991; Feiring et al2013).[60] These basic human needs were assumed to be universal.

Amartya Sen's capabilities approach to development influenced a further shift in Western perspectives and definitions of poverty (Alkire and Santos 2013; Foster et al. 2013). The capabilities approach focuses on the "living conditions we can or cannot achieve" (functionings) and the freedom people have to achieve those living conditions and the life they value and wish to lead (capabilities) (Sen 1987:16). Based on this capabilities approach, poverty has come to be defined as the lack of freedom or capabilities to be or do the things that one may value (Foster et al. 2013:1). The currently dominant notion of poverty refers to the inability and lack of capabilities to achieve a life that one values and wishes to lead (Alkire and Santos 2013; Foster et al. 2013; Sen 1987).

However, the majority of poverty measurements and assessments among indigenous populations in Latin America have continued to use indicators of poverty based on income, material possessions, and basic human needs (Alkire and Santos 2013; Feiring et al. 2003).[61] These assessments, in turn, influence development approaches and politics across Latin America. Such approaches and politics have assumed the definitions and notions of poverty that they are founded on to be universal (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1997; L'Estoile 2014; Sarmiento Barletti 2015).

This assumed universality of notions of poverty has led to a common classification of Indigenous Peoples as 'poor' (Feiring et al 2013; Sarmiento Barletti 2015). The case of the Ngäbe is a vivid example. Ngäbe are considered to be the poorest indigenous and ethnic group in Panama, according to mainstream poverty assessments (Davis 2010; Jaén 2001; Quintero 2005). As Sarmiento Barletti asserts, the assumed universalisation of dominant notions of poverty has further classified Indigenous Peoples as "'savages', against which the 'developed', 'modern' and 'civilized' claim their normality," (2015:146). Such a classification of Indigenous Peoples is indeed also present in Panama. Panamanian society commonly considers its Indigenous Peoples to be 'uncivilised' and 'backwards'. State actors further attribute poverty among the Ngäbe population to a lack of education and their resulting 'backwardness' and 'uncivilised' ways.

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[60] These basic human needs included access to services and infrastructure, education and health, decision making power, social and political exclusion, vulnerability, etc (Feiring et al 2003:4)
[61] In Latin America these indicators generally included access to clean water and improved sanitation, type of dwelling, school attendance, level of education, and dependency ratio (Alkire and Santos 2013).

At the same time, indigenous children are taught that they live in poverty through national, state-provided education. The ministry of education provided schools with the theme *familias sin pobreza* (families without poverty), for which students were asked to write essays and make drawings regarding this theme toward the end of 2015. I helped a nine-year-old Ngäbe friend with her English homework at her house the following year. We practised vocabulary associated with furniture and household items using pictures from her English book, most of which she did not have in her home or looked very different. Following our English practice, she said to me: "we live in poverty, and you live in wealth, can you help us?" When I asked her why she said that, she bowed her head and said, "never mind". She clearly knew that she was not supposed to make such a request and if her mother had been there, she would have been told off for doing so.[62] Children generally stated more freely that they live in poverty than adults did, which indicates that formal education in a national curriculum plays a role in this positioning.

The Panamanian government has made efforts to instil in the Ngäbe the idea that they are needy and dependent on state support through education and in various other ways. Álvaro, a Latino-Panamanian resident of La Solución, explained to me that all Indigenous People in Panama were subjugated and made reliant on the government in the time of the Torrijos government (1968 – 1981). According to Álvaro, this resulted in the Ngäbe being dependent and poor now. General Torrijos attempted to incorporate Ngäbe into the nation through increased political participation and the expansion of government-provided social services into indigenous areas. These social services were financed by mining and damming projects which have negatively affected many indigenous communities by causing land losses and displacements (Gjording 1991; Young and Bort 1999; Wickstrom 2003). The nation has experienced massive economic growth and has adopted more neoliberal economic reforms since the time of Torrijos. This economic growth and reforms, alongside the decline in arable land, have generated increased dependencies on the market economy among indigenous populations (Bort and Young 1985; Velásquez Runk 2012; Wickstrom 2003).

Post-development theorists argue that such increased participation in and dependence on the market economy has damaged local systems of subsistence sharing and communal labour and has increased poverty among indigenous populations (Ferguson 1997; Sachs

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[62] On several prior occasions, her mother had told her off for asking for food or clothes in my presence and had apologised for her daughter's behaviour.

2010; Sillitoe 2000). Furthermore, these scholars maintain that Indigenous Peoples' increased interaction with the market economy provokes a gradual shift in their perceptions of their own economic conditions. These perceptions progressively align with the dominant society's ideology and ideas about poverty (Escobar 1991; Ferguson 1997; Sachs 2010). Post-development scholars assert that poverty both as a concept and as a condition derived from the same development efforts that supposedly aimed to alleviate it (Escobar 1991; Ferguson 1997; Sachs 2010). Following post-development theory, the conditions of poverty among Ngäbe would be the result of national economic development approaches and increased participation in the market economy. However, to what extent is this condition that is produced by development and economic participation experienced by Ngäbe individuals as poverty?

As I have outlined in this section, the idea that Ngäbe are poor is generated through dominant neoliberal ideologies that exist within a Western economic frame of reference (de L'Estoile 2014). This idea is reproduced and further circulated through education alongside political and economic integration. To what extent, then, is this idea accepted and internalised by Ngäbe individuals? What notions of poverty do Ngäbe individuals maintain? And how do they perceive and experience their own supposedly 'impoverished' conditions? The remainder of this chapter strives to answer these questions.

Indigenous notions of poverty

Lowland South American Indigenous Peoples' conceptions of poverty generally do not revolve around material possessions, unlike the dominant Western notions described above (Santos-Granero 2015a). For many Lowland South American indigenous groups, poverty has a significant social dimension. For instance, it may involve a lack of social support, stinginess, or the absence of generosity, dishonesty, or laziness (Conklin 2015; Santos-Granero 2015a; Sarmiento Barletti 2015). The state of poverty is most commonly associated with orphanhood and being deprived of social support or a social network on which to rely for sustenance (See for instance Santos-Granero 2015a; Micarelli 2015; Conklin 2015). For some of these groups, the real poor people are those who are lazy (Micarelli 2015) or those who accumulate material possessions and fail to share, are not hard-working, or are dishonest (Sarmiento Barletti 2015).

While Ngäbe people generally disapprove of these types of anti-social behaviour, they do not consider such attitudes to make a person 'poor'. Nor do they generally refer to social deprivation or loss as poverty. When I asked Ngäbe individuals whether they ever equated being alone in the house as poverty, they disaffirmed this idea. Ngäbe individuals instead defined poverty as lacking the basic necessities to survive (e.g. food or a place to live and sleep) or to live a good life and be a good Ngäbe person (for instance by offering *brindis* - food or drink – to a visitor), as I demonstrate in the following section.

4.2 Urban Ngäbe discourses of Poverty

In this section, I seek to explore and understand Ngäbe discourses and notions of poverty and their perceptions and experiences of their own living conditions in relation to these notions. As I suggested in chapter one, such an exercise requires a detachment from taken-for-granted and naturalised assumptions about what is good, worthy and desirable (Fischer 2014) and moving beyond a (Western) economic "framework for perceiving the world and acting on it" (de L'Estoile 2014:62). In this endeavour, I refrain from employing pre-established economic categories such as relative and absolute poverty, subjective or objective poverty, multi-dimensional poverty, basic needs, functionings, and capabilities (Alkire 2002). Instead, I categorise the various ways in which Ngäbe fieldwork participants invoked discourses, ideas, and images of poverty in terms of patterns that emerged from my field notes, observations, and interview transcripts. I discern three ways in which Ngäbe individuals refer to poverty in reference to their own (collective or individual) condition(s) or those of other Ngäbe. The first refers to a collective condition of Ngäbe people; the second refers to individual (or household) conditions in the past or the present; and the third involves the term *humilde*, which relates to ways of being and living. I explore these three ways not *as* notions of poverty, but as a contextual basis for discerning and understanding urban Ngäbe notions of poverty and well-being.

4.2.1 Collective poverty: 'the poor life of the Indigenous People

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I regularly visited Denis in his house to work with him on his English homework for secondary school. One day when I arrived at his house, he and his family members were eating lunch: boiled green banana with salt. We chatted about how things were going for them and for me for a little while and then Denis said: "Boana, the life of the Indigenous People is a poor life" (*que pobre la vida de los indigena)*. "How so?" I asked. "Simple", he responded, "when there is nothing, we don't eat, just plain banana". His older sister, one of my English students, clarified: "He is saying that among our race if there is food, we eat, and if there is nothing, we don't eat. If there is white rice, we eat white rice. If there's not, there's not. If there is meat, we eat meat. If there are vegetables, like last year I think we gave you banana with beans; we eat like that. If not, we eat banana with salt. That's what he is saying. "the life of the Indigenous People is difficult". I wanted to know more. "Why is the life of Indigenous People more difficult than that of *Latinos* or black people?" I asked. "Because we don't have money like they do" she explained. "If they need something, they go to the bank, they take out money, and with that, they buy what they need. But for us, where are we going to take out money? If we don't work, we don't have money. Only when we work, we have money".

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Denis' statement and his sisters' explanation echoed Sarina's statement that 'her race is poor'. Sarina's explanation was that Ngäbe households need to work hard to obtain an education, implying that people from other ethnic groups do not have this burden. Other Ngäbe individuals in La Solución made similar comments, indicating that the life of Indigenous People is a life of struggle ("*es una vida de lucha dura"*). The common thread throughout these statements was that Ngäbe individuals have to work hard for something that is a given for others, such as going to school and having sufficient food and other resources (e.g. money, a communal house, access to water, and electricity). In this sense, the comment that Ngäbe are poor implies that they do not have the same ease of access to resources as other groups do. Many Ngäbe individuals stated that they, as Ngäbe, have few and limited resources (*de bajos recursos*).

The statement that Ngäbe people as a collective are poor is an acknowledgement of their place at the bottom of an ethnic hierarchy in Bocas del Toro. They have limited access to resources in comparison to non-Ngäbe others who have greater access to resources. Ngäbe residents in Bocas del Toro were well aware of the hierarchical characteristics of the wider society and political economy in which they participated, as I demonstrate in chapter six.

This hierarchy categorises individuals in terms of their ethnicity and material wealth. By stating that their race is poor, Ngäbe individuals confirmed this hierarchical system while also expressing their senses of unfairness regarding this system.

At the same time, Ngäbe individuals made strategic use of their collective lower hierarchical position vis-à-vis other ethnic groups to gain a potential collective advantage. I witnessed one such strategic use of their presumed collective poverty in February of 2016. A class of North American University students from a field school based on the island visited La Solución and the professor had asked me to arrange for a resident to talk to the students about the neighbourhood. I had requested Marina, with whom I had been working on a communal project, to talk about her experiences of living in La Solución. She told the visiting students that living in La Solución is quite difficult (*duro*), because they are poor (*somos pobres*), but that they were working on some projects to make the neighbourhood better, like constructing a communal house. She was aware that the majority of Panamanians and foreigners view La Solución as a poor neighbourhood. Marina likely figured that the field school and many of its North American students would be able to provide financial support. She voiced her experience of living in the neighbourhood in such a way as to satisfy the preconceived assumptions of the students while providing an opportunity for offers of support. I later asked Alinda, an active female resident in her late thirties, to speak about the need for the communal house for a fundraising video. She stated, "we are poor (*somos pobres, humilde)*, but we are fighting for our children to make it better". Alinda and Marina both used the language of needs and poverty strategically and to their potential advantage.

Various anthropologists have witnessed similar approaches among other Lowland South American groups. Peluso (2003), for instance, discusses how Ese Eja in Lowland Peru and Bolivia regularly position or disguise their poverty to their advantage. Moreover, García Castro (2000) provides an example of how indigenous Warao in urban centres of Venezuela strategically use their image as poor and marginalised Indigenous People to obtain economic benefits through begging. Rather than passively participating in the dominant economic system or depending on the state for support, urban Warao carry out "deliberate and conscious actions" of 'gathering' donations to obtain immediate economic benefits through minimal engagement with the dominant society (ibid.:83). These strategic uses of their assumed poverty allow them to return to and resolve the economic difficulties in their places of origin.

Similar to these indigenous groups, Ngäbe individuals used discourses of poverty and marginalisation as tools in their quests for support. Ngäbe residents' lived experiences in Bocas del Toro have proven that the international local resident community may offer resources that the state is unwilling to provide and which the Ngäbe have few other avenues from which to obtain them, as I discuss in chapter six. Ngäbe individuals may thus strategically position themselves as poor or marginalised to satisfy certain aspirations and needs. However, such strategic positioning does not necessarily signify that Ngäbe individuals subscribe to ideas and discourses about their poverty, as I demonstrate in section 4.3.

4.2.2 Individual (household-based) poverty

"Ti da bobre"

During my first month in Bocas del Toro, I was staying with a host family in a Ngäbe community on one of the archipelago's islands. As my host mother was teaching me words and phrases in Ngäbere, I asked her what the translation for 'poor' (*pobre*) was in Ngäbere. "*Ti da bobre*" (I am poor), she responded. I later received the same answer from my Ngäbe friends when I asked them this question. When I asked Wilberto, a male Ngäbe resident in his sixties, about the meaning and uses of "*ti da bobre*", he told me it means "I do not have anything at this moment. Maybe I had something yesterday and I can have something tomorrow, but today I do not have anything". Various other friends gave me similar answers. Ngäbe individuals seldom used this phrase in my presence and when they did it was in instances where they stated that they were unable to do or participate in something because they did not have money.

The phrase *ti da bobre* is generally used when someone has a particular need and is requesting something from another person or when someone is not able to offer something while they are expected to. For instance, when one does not have food or a drink – *brindis* - to offer to a house guest, they may state "*ti da bobre*". It refers to the inability to be generous towards others, which is an essential aspect of being a 'good' Ngäbe person, as I discussed in chapter three. I suggest that *ti da bobre* is used as an explanation or justification for not embodying generosity when others expect such behaviour.

A different usage and notion of poor surfaced when I held conversations (in Spanish) with fieldwork participants specifically about the topic of poverty during my last fieldwork phase. During one of those conversations, Sarina asked me: "Boana, have you never been in a shortage (*tu nunca pasaste en páramo*)?" "In what?" I asked. "In food shortage (*Páramo de comida*)?" she added. "Have you never been poor? (*tu no quedaste pobre, nunca?*)". I thought about what to answer for a moment. I indeed never had experienced a 'food shortage'. However, I remembered how I felt when I went to primary school in the 'posh' part of a neighbouring town where the majority of my classmates lived in beautiful large free-standing houses or even villas. I remembered how I, living in an ugly old rental flat, felt poor compared to my classmates. Where poverty is a relational, conditional, and experiential phenomenon, as I argue here, *feeling* poor is a significant aspect of *being* poor. But does feeling poor *equate* to being poor? Would my sense of being poor because I did not have as nice a house as my classmates mean that I experienced poverty?

Sarina seemed to equate poverty to not having any food to eat when she posed her question about *páramo de comida*. I thus concluded that I indeed had never been poor according to Sarina's definition of poverty, even if I may have felt poor in the past. I answered her question stating that even though I believed I was poor when I was young because all the other children in my school were living in nice big houses and I was living in an ugly old rental flat, I had indeed never been without food. Sarina continued by sharing her childhood experience of food shortages in the *comarca*:

> "Sometimes, I went to school without food. In the morning, I got up without breakfast. If I came home at midday and there were not any vegetables, I stayed like that in the afternoon until the evening. So I did live in poverty. My father struggled for food, with the ground there in which nothing would grow. My sister had a lot of children, and we lived all together in the house. Only with us, three children, my dad may have been able to, but we lived with my sister and all her ten children in the house together. And my father was unable with that many grandchildren. That's why we suffered hunger. My father has a lot of poles (slender and tall trees), but he didn't cut wood. We lived in a house made of *jira* (*socratea exorrhiza*), it's like a round tree that we planted, like a palm. It is because of me that my mom now has a house made of wood and zinc."

Sarina did not tell this story to request anything from me nor to justify not doing or offering something. There was not any strategic element involved in her sharing her childhood experiences. Sarina's account indicates that, in the *comarca*, poverty is marked by not having access to sufficient food and not having a good house to live in. Other friends' accounts confirmed this meaning of poverty in the *comarca*.

Unlike in the *comarca*, where food can be cultivated and does not need to be purchased, in Bocas del Toro cultivation is not possible and everything costs money, including food, water, and construction materials. In this urban space, people may be poor when there is not any money to purchase food and maintain the household. When I asked Ngäbe residents of La Solución what poverty means to them, the majority told me that it refers to not having any work or income and being unable to purchase food. Others explained that poverty signifies "when there is nothing in the house" to sustain oneself and one's family. Finally, a few individuals responded that poverty means not having a good house or place to sleep nor any money to fix the house. These responses indicate that for urban Ngäbe residents poverty refers to not having the necessary resources to live a proper life.

Yet, the majority of residents stated that they did not believe there was any poverty in La Solución, when I asked them about poverty in their neighbourhood. Various individuals indicated that they believed there were not any poor nor rich people in La Solución. Others explained that residents were not poor because they had a house and food. Alinda, for example, stated:

> "I am not poor; at least I take my cream. There are no poor people here. If I were poor, I would not have this house, this parrot, or this barbeque. I have my house here. I have my house up there [in the *finca*]. I am rich, Boana".

Many comments made by residents demonstrate that the perceived absence of poverty in La Solución is related to the availability of work. Residents associated poverty with not having work or not making use of the ability to work. According to these residents, there was plenty of work in town and on the island. Therefore, the majority of Ngäbe residents believed that there should not be any poverty in Bocas del Toro. I suggest that this idea that there is not or should not be any poverty among Ngäbe residents of La Solución is related to the value Ngäbe people place on individual responsibility. As I outline in section 4.4, Ngäbe individuals commonly consider each person to be responsible for their own well-being and for living a good life. Individuals should, therefore, avoid poverty by working hard and taking good care of the household.

4.2.3 "*Mi casa humilde*"

In the opening ethnographic vignette, Sarina was noticeably hesitant when I asked her whether I could join her to visit her neighbourhood. I initially took her hesitation to mean that she might have had something else planned. However, I later understood her hesitation to stem from her belief that her house was not prepared for my visit. When she saw the photo we took together in her house, she noticed the clothes hanging from the beams and took them down instantly. She appeared to be ashamed of the non-orderly state in which I saw her house.

My Ngäbe friends often believed that their houses were not prepared for my visit. For instance, when I visited Antonio, a young Ngäbe man in his twenties, at his house in an area outside of town, he later explained that his mother and sister were ashamed of having me visit without being informed beforehand. They had told him the house was not well-arranged and clean.

Many of my Ngäbe friends apologised for the state of their "*humilde* houses" when I went to visit them in their respective homes for the first time. *Humilde*, in Spanish, is a polysemic term and can mean both 'humble' and 'poor', and when Ngäbe individuals referred to their houses as *humilde*, they likely implied both these meanings. My Ngäbe friends often stated that their houses were not neatly arranged, that there was not a good place for me to sit, or that their houses were not in good conditions. For instance, when Camilo took me to his house so that I knew where to find him, he presented his house as 'humble' (*casa humilde*). "It needs repairing, new metal on the roof, but there is no money for that," he added.

I also noticed, however, that Ngäbe neighbours visited each other's houses at any time, without any previous notice or warning. Having a *casa humilde* did not appear to be anything to feel ashamed of in daily life among Ngäbe neighbours. Elina made this clear when she was complaining about the rubbish laying around, stating that "having a *casa humilde* is normal, not everyone has [the resources], but the rubbish we can do something about".

Ramiro, one of my English students and a middle-aged Ngäbe resident of La Solución, confirmed the normalcy of having a *humilde* house. When I visited him in his home one day, he explained that his house was not in a good state yet. For him, this meant that he was

not able to close his house off and did not have a separate bedroom yet. "Right now, we don't have mattresses", he explained, "but I am not preoccupied with mattresses… Our custom of the Indigenous People is not to sleep in a bed. We sleep on the floor of the bedroom, a special room. We Indigenous People fix a separate bedroom and a separate kitchen. We sleep in *jira* (*socratea exorrhiza*).[63] Previously, we lived there on the coast, and we slept in *jira*. We don't have the custom of sleeping in a bed or on a mattress. We didn't know that before." Ramiro's home was *humilde*, but he did not mind. He was not concerned with having all the comforts that those in town might be accustomed to. Ramiro was concerned with living in the way he was used to in the *comarca* and the way he believed the Ngäbe 'should' live; in a house with a separate bedroom and a separate kitchen.

It appeared that a *humilde* house became something to be ashamed of in relation to non-Ngäbe others like myself. Nora, one of my English students, provided deeper understanding when I stumbled upon her house on one of my walks in a mangrove neighbourhood adjacent to La Solución and she promptly and proudly invited me to a tour of her newly constructed house. Her house was not any different from other houses in the neighbourhood. "Many of my people are ashamed of their houses" she explained, "but I have been dealing with your race for so long, that I know how to deal with your people". "My house is *humilde*, but it is something," she said. Nora's explanation helped me understand that Sarina may have felt ashamed about her *humilde* house. Sarina's statement that Ngäbe are poor in the opening ethnographic vignette followed her expression that her house was different from my house. I took her expressions about her house to mean that she believed that her house was likely not as 'nice' as mine. Sarina may have assumed that I would perceive her to be poor by the looks of her 'humble' house, because of her previous experiences with non-Ngäbe others. As I discuss in section 4.4, Sarina's statement that her race is poor may have been a way to explain her individual housing conditions and protect herself from my potential judgements of her home and its conditions as a non-Ngäbe outsider.

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[63] *Jira* refers to a fibrous slat from a slender palm (*jira socratea)*. The trunk of the palm is 'opened' by splitting it in half. Ngäbe use the soft inner part of the palm to sleep on. Emberá similarly use Jira extensively to sleep on, but also construct the floors of their houses (see Reverte 2000, Theodossopoulos 2016).

4.3 Urban Ngäbe poverty?

When I talked to Jerome, a middle-aged male resident of La Solución, about poverty (*pobreza*), he stated that there are people who indeed have a difficult life, those that do not have any land. "There are real *humilde* people (*gente humilde de verdad*)" he explained, "for example those who do not have a school nearby and whose children are not in school". He was referring to people in the *comarca*. When I asked him what *humilde* meant, he continued telling me about *gente humilde.*

> "*Gente humilde* are when they are there [in the *comarca*] and they don't have anything. They don't have clothes; they don't have the resources to buy their soap, their sugar, their salt, their things. They don't have any clothes. So they come here and they find a job and they can buy their food and their things. And they feel very good with this because over there, they don't have anything. It doesn't matter to them if they have their house in a bad state (*si tienen la casa mal*), if they live poorly (*viven mal*), because for them, they are better than over there".

"There are many *gente humilde* here," he continued. "They are here. They feel good. But me personally, I don't. I don't like it." According to Jerome, *gente humilde* are too easily satisfied with their poor living conditions and are not interested in improving their conditions or environment. He indicated that this lack of interest among Ngäbe residents stemmed from their being accustomed to living in poorer conditions than they were in La Solución. Resultantly, they were easily satisfied with the small improvements they may have realised by moving to Bocas del Toro. For Jerome, such satisfaction with their urban living conditions had a negative connotation. He identified many problems in La Solución that he believed the residents could collectively resolve. However, he also asserted that there was not sufficient interest among residents because many of them accepted living poorly or badly (*viven mal*) and were satisfied with their poor conditions.

Jerome was not referring to poverty as a (temporary) state, but rather to a poor person as a type of person: a person who accepts and is satisfied with living poorly and consequently does not feel the urge to aspire to something better. Jerome's comments reminded me of a recurring comment about Ngäbe in Bocas del Toro and Indigenous People in Panama generally. Non-indigenous individuals in Bocas del Toro often stated that Ngäbe people do not want to improve their lives and their lot, that they do not work or fight for their

progress, or that they simply want to 'live poorly' (*humildemente*). The media, state, and non-indigenous society commonly make it seem as though living poorly and accepting to live poorly is intrinsic to Ngäbe culture; implying that they live in a 'culture of poverty'.[64] It seemed as though Jerome was invoking the national discourse on progress, which states that Indigenous People in the mountains are backwards and need to become 'civilised'.

Jairo, a Ngäbe friend in his mid-twenties, had made similar remarks to me when he told me about his ideas and plans to improve his family's situation. He stated that some of his family members were not interested in improving anything. His sister, for instance, "just wants to live poorly (*humilde)*". I later came to understand that Jairo's comments were not simply an internalisation of the dominant ideology which sees Ngäbe or *gente humilde* as 'backwards' and 'not wanting progress'. His and Jerome's comments reflect a disappointment in Ngäbe neighbours or family members who accept their place in the ethnic hierarchy or their assumed 'inferior' status to that of non-indigenous others. It reveals a desire to enhance among their Ngäbe peers their 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2013).[65] Yet, at the same time, Jairo and Jerome employed dominant discourses to express these ideas and thereby reinforced dominant stereotypes about Ngäbe people.

Poverty and relationality

The various ways in which Ngäbe individuals use the terms *bobre*, *pobre*, *humilde*, and *de bajos recursos*, as I described in the previous section, reflect a Western and capitalist perspective on wealth and poverty. Ngäbe discourses of poverty mainly refer to lacking the basic necessities to survive and to live a good life according to Ngäbe values. These basic necessities include food and a place to live, cook, and sleep. They also include the ability to be generous, for instance by offering *brindis* (food or drink) to a visitor, as the phrase *ti da bobre* indicates. Ngäbe discourses on poverty appear to concur with the dominant notion of poverty based on the capabilities approach: a lack of capabilities to achieve a good and worthy life, a life that one values and wishes to lead (Alkire and Santos 2013; Foster et al. 2013; Sen 1987).

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[64] See Dahl and Jensen (2003) for an account of Indigenous Peoples in urban areas (worldwide) and the depiction of their 'culture of poverty' in media and mainstream (political) discourse.
[65] Appadurai (2013) sees the capacity to aspire as a cultural navigational capacity to express and explore horizons in choices, options, desires and wishes that fit within culturally embedded ideas of a good life.

Bobre, in Ngäbere, derives from the Spanish term for poor (*pobre*). This indicates that the concept of poverty obtained its meaning in correspondence with non-Ngäbe others. Also the term *humilde* likely attained its negative connotation in relation to non-Ngäbe others. In chapter three, I demonstrated that living *humildemente* resembled the way Ngäbe believe they should ideally live. Also having a *casa humilde* was nothing to be ashamed of among Ngäbe neighbours, as I outlined in the previous section. My presence as a non-indigenous individual taking up another place in the ethnic hierarchy made my Ngäbe friends aware and potentially ashamed of the condition of their *humilde* houses and living conditions. I suggest that this negative connotation is partially due to the proliferation of the image of residents of La Solución living in *humilde* (unhealthy, unworthy, precarious and poor) conditions.[66]

Ngäbe individuals' self-consciousness about their own houses and living conditions may vary based on who the non-Ngäbe others are that they are presenting themselves to. For instance, Sarina had not invited her Latina-Panamanian manager, Leonora, to her house, despite Leonora's repeated requests. I suggest that these varied approaches are due to the differences in Leonora's and my ethnic backgrounds and the types of interactions Ngäbe enjoy with these respective ethnic groups in Bocas del Toro. Ngäbe generally experience more overt and widespread discrimination from Latino-Panamanians than they do from foreign tourists and residents.[67] Based on these lived experiences, Sarina might expect a white foreigner to pity her living conditions and evaluate these conditions as 'poor'. In contrast, a Latina Panamanian individual may be more likely to discriminate against Sarina, based on her 'impoverishment' and the 'inadequate' (*indigno*) state of her house. Such observations indicate that the meaning of poverty is relational. The concept of poverty came to have meaning for Ngäbe in relation and comparison to non-indigenous others. This meaning appears to constantly shift based on these relations, comparisons, and dominant notions. The urbanisation process, which intensifies inter-ethnic relations and interactions with dominant notions, may significantly affect the meaning of poverty for Ngäbe individuals.

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[66] The neighbourhood of La Solución has received negative attention in the news over the past several years (see Dia a Dia 2014; Lorenzo 2014; Machuca 2014; Redacción La Estrella de Panama 2014). See chapter seven for more detailed information.

[67] For instance, foreigners are more likely to express pity or sympathy for the Ngäbe and offer some kind of support than Latino-Panamans are (See chapter six).

I suggest that urban Ngäbe notions of poverty are based on inter-ethnic experiences and comparisons. Sarina may not have related her experience of food shortage (*páramo de comida*) in the *finca* to poverty if she had not had the inter-ethnic urban experiences she did. She defined her food shortage as poverty in conversation with me and after having had extensive contact with non-Ngäbe individuals in Bocas del Toro. Yet, in the *finca*, a momentary "food shortage" (*páramo de comida*), as Sarina called it, may be experienced as part of 'normal life'. De L'Estoile (2014:66) explains that this kind of uncertainty is a part of 'peasant life', where one is dependent on seasonal and other external factors related to harvests and hunts. As Denis and his sister explained to me (see section 4.2.1), this is the "life of the Indigenous People": "if there is food, we eat, and if there is nothing, we don't eat". Such food shortage may not be experienced as poverty or as a problem, as long as it does not concern structural hunger or experiences of deprivation or suffering.[68]

Temporary food shortages within Ngäbe households have historically been resolved through intra-household cooperation and generosity (e.g. sharing or begging) (Young 1971). Additionally, many research participants mentioned that "there is always food in the *finca*", even if this may at times only be banana, like Denis and his sister discussed, or if there is only one meal a day like Sarina described. However, such food shortages may become more critical problems when the daily routines of life organised around cultivation are restructured to fit into another social, political or economic structure. For instance, Sarina encountered obstacles when she went to school. She did not have the clothes nor the energy to participate in physical education or to concentrate on her study if she had not eaten all day.

Particularly when moving to Bocas del Toro, Ngäbe individuals see that such food 'insecurity' is not a normal part of life for everyone. They perceive that other ethnic groups may not experience the same struggles. Such a comparison may lead some individuals to the conclusion that the life of Ngäbe is a life full of struggle. Such comparative observations

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[68] Of course food shortage may be experienced as a significant problem when it involves structural or consistent food shortage, which could have been Sarina's case in section 4.2.2. It may also be the case of others in the *comarca* who do not have access to sufficient land to cultivate the necessary food crops for their daily consumption needs (see Young and Bort 1999, for instance). However, this is not what I am referring to here. Such structural food shortage is a wider political economic problem due to a combination of population growth, the refusal of the government to include parts of Ngäbe territory in the *comarca*, encroaching on Ngäbe lands by non-indigenous neighbours, destruction of communities and *fincas* through state-approved resource extraction (such as mining and hydroelectric damming), and diminishing of fertile lands through over-cultivation (see chapter two).

conjugate with the label of 'poor' that the dominant society has placed upon Ngäbe. These combined factors may cause Ngäbe individuals to state that 'their race is poor'. This notion of collective poverty is inherently comparative and based on increased interaction with the dominant society in the urban sphere.

Urban Ngäbe residents find that their experiences of struggle are exacerbated by the precariousness of employment in Bocas del Toro. For Ngäbe individuals in particular, paid employment is a rather precarious resource. As I discuss in chapter six, the majority of Ngäbe employees work in insecure conditions without a formal contract or agreement and are highly susceptible to exploitation and redundancy. Additionally, much available work is dependent on tourism and construction plans and hence fluctuates. As such, work and money, as markers for the market economy, are highly unreliable, as is the economy itself (de L'Estoile 2014).

Money and employment constitute vital components to living well in the urban sphere, more so than in the *finca*, as outlined in chapter three. Not having employment and consequently not having money are predominantly urban challenges for Ngäbe individuals. Experiences and notions of poverty in Bocas del Toro are conditioned by this urban economic reality of precarious employment alongside inter-ethnic relations and comparisons. These urban experiences may impact Ngäbe notions of poverty and their assessments of their own conditions. However, this does not necessarily mean that urban Ngäbe residents have adopted or internalised dominant notions or ideas about their poverty. As I demonstrated earlier, urban Ngäbe residents often use the discourse of poverty strategically (although not always intentionally so) in various ways. Ngäbe individuals may use discourses of or appeals to poverty to gain a certain advantage, as I outlined in section 4.2. They may thereby apply 'culture of poverty' arguments to describe the disadvantages of the Ngäbe as a collective, suggesting that their limited access to resources and opportunities and their *humilde* conditions are associated with their indigeneity and their indigenous culture (Dahl and Jensen 2003; Frerer and Vu 2007; Small et al. 2010).

Furthermore, urban Ngäbe residents may state that their 'race' is poor as a way of explaining their individual conditions. They may thereby strive to protect themselves from potential judgements of their individual 'poor' living conditions by non-Ngäbe others. Additionally, as I discuss below, explaining their individual conditions through statements

on their collective poverty can be a way in which Ngäbe individuals assume personal responsibility for their well-being.

4.4 Rejection of poverty

Although Ngäbe residents of La Solución invoke discourses of poverty in various instances, they do not generally dwell on their poverty and often disaffirm it. Following the conversation with Sarina in the opening vignette, the topic of poverty remained dormant for a while. Ngäbe residents of La Solución *did not* speak about poverty more than they *did* speak about poverty and Ngäbe individuals primarily discussed the theme of poverty with me in response to my probing. Ngäbe residents generally focused on what they did have – a (humble but good enough) house, food, and possibly a *finca* – rather than what they lacked.[69] I observed very few Ngäbe individuals state that they were poor in the present tense and the majority of Ngäbe residents refuted the idea that they lived in poverty. The few individuals who indicated that they were poor were women who were unable to work and who ran a household of which the male 'head of the house' had left or was not taking care of the family. Even these individuals generally stated that they were 'in need' (*necesitada)*, 'without money', or 'without food', rather than asserting that they were 'poor'. It is more common for individuals to state that they had 'lived in poverty' in the past, like Sarina had when referring to her childhood conditions of food shortage or hunger, than to state that they live in poverty in the present.

I suggest that the rejection of poverty as a current condition is linked to the importance Ngäbe place on observing personal autonomy and responsibility. Ngäbe individuals greatly valued their sense of autonomy and personal responsibility, as I outlined in chapter three and discuss in more detail in chapter five. According to Ngäbe values, each individual is personally responsible for being a good Ngäbe person by working hard, securing their household autonomy, and caring for their family and their house (or *finca*). As such, it becomes an individual's own personal responsibility to prevent themselves from living a poor life by working hard, constructing one's own house, spending one's money wisely, and taking good care of the household.

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[69] This is similar to observations regarding other Lowland South American indigenous groups, who emphasise what they have rather than what they lack – see for instance Micarelli 2015; Zoomers 2006.

Several residents stated that if there is poverty in La Solución, it means that the individual in question is "looking for poverty". Wilberto, a male resident in his sixties, explained that "in part, there is poverty here, but it is temporary poverty because there is work. There is poverty because one lets himself be poor. There is money, there is work, but if you don't look for it…" Celino, Wilberto's cousin, provided examples for such instances of temporary poverty:

> "There are poor people in La Solución as well: when they don't have their own house and have to pay rent, they have a debt in the shop, they have to pay for their kids' school, so when they get their paycheck, they stay without money. The pot stays empty in the house. There are people who drink and then leave the household without anything. Sometimes the woman suffers for not having food (*sufra por comida*)".

These statements indicate that living in poverty signifies that an individual did not live up to his or her responsibilities of being a good Ngäbe person. As such, Ngäbe individuals may prefer to reject the label of poverty, at least as a current condition. Indeed, Ngäbe residents generally referred to individual poverty as a state, situation, or condition that concerned other individuals but not themselves or that was situated in the past. The individual condition of poverty may resemble a motive for action, as individuals strive to avoid it. If someone experienced poverty, they would have been motivated to change their conditions. For instance, Sarina may have retrospectively stated her motivation to move to Bocas del Toro when she described her difficult experiences in the past as 'living in poverty'.

Describing the collective conditions of Ngäbe as poor is one way to avoid the label of individual poverty. In such arguments, poverty is a condition of the Ngäbe collectivity or 'race', resulting from structural unfairness (Zipin et al. 2015) and maintained by the hierarchical political-economic context within which they live. The responsibility for creating and altering this collective condition lies with the politically and economically powerful. Ngäbe individuals do not possess the power to alter the hierarchal structure or change their collective condition. Resultantly, they are not responsible for their supposed 'poverty'. For instance, Sarina's statement that her race is poor appears to be a justification for the *humilde* state of her house. She may have assumed that I would judge her home and her living conditions as poor. Such a judgement would indicate that there is a lack of personal responsibility on her part to live well. However, if Sarina's living conditions resembled the collective conditions of the Ngäbe, sustained by the ethnic hierarchy, she

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could not be personally responsible. In this sense, Sarina's statement that her race is poor reflects an awareness as well as an opposition to the idea that she has not assumed her responsibilities as a hardworking person to live well.

Sarina, like many other Ngäbe individuals, stated that she did not live in poverty, when I asked her about her current conditions. She and others commonly reject the label of poverty and thereby delegitimise the dominant definition and discourse of poverty. The refusal to accept the definitions or discourse of development (of poverty and needs) delegitimises this discourse (Micarelli 2015). This discourse focuses on people's inabilities and limitations and it implies that people have needs that they are unable to satisfy. Furthermore, such a discourse of poverty and needs may invoke a sense of dependency and victimhood. Izquierdo (2009:83) argues that "being constantly reminded of their need for 'development' and the benefits of 'progress' may provoke feelings of imposed inferiority" among Indigenous Peoples.

This discourse of poverty, which focuses on 'negative minimalisms' (Thin 2008), reproduces significant differences. These differences, or inequalities, serve to maintain the "worth and wealth" of those in power (Narotzky and Besnier 2014:6). The identification of poverty, then, upholds and safeguards the identities, status, and power of the wealthy (Narotzky and Besnier 2014). Those in less powerful positions, in turn, "permit the existing and corrupt standing of local and national elites to be further bolstered and reproduced" when they acknowledge the worth and wealth of the powerful (Appadurai 2013:186). Appadurai (2013:189) calls this phenomenon "adverse terms of recognition". He defines terms of recognition as "the conditions and constraints under which the poor negotiate with the very norms that frame their social lives". People in power-marginalised positions are generally urged to subscribe to these norms (Zipin et al. 2015). The social effect of such norms is to "further diminish their dignity [and] exacerbate their inequality" (Appadurai 2013:186).

However, the terms of recognition of the poor are altered when there is no consensus between 'the poor' and 'the wealthy' regarding the norms that frame their social lives (Appadurai 2013). Ngäbe alter their terms of recognition when they disagree with or reject the label of poverty. I argue that when Ngäbe individuals reject the idea that they are poor, this is a powerful act, in which they take responsibility and agency for their own lives and their well-being.

4.5 Conclusion: on poverty and living well

A question that remains is whether it is useful to continue to define Indigenous Peoples' living conditions as poor if these peoples themselves reject such a notion. I argue that labelling Ngäbe as poor may limit their capabilities by placing them in a hierarchical system that constrains them in various ways. This hierarchical structure constrains their 'capacities to aspire' and their opportunities to change or otherwise affect their own 'terms of recognition' (Appadurai 2013).

Furthermore, the label of poverty emphasises individuals' inabilities and focuses on 'negative minimalisms (Thin 2008). Corsín Jimenez asserts that such negative minimalisms function as political limits (2008). He explains that "our conceptual point of departure for describing human experiences is fundamentally determinative of how we allow people to represent to themselves their own capacities for action" (ibid.:24). Focusing on the inabilities rather than the abilities individuals have may constrain their perceived opportunities and possibilities. Individuals' actual opportunities are, in turn, "bound by the realm of what is seen as possible" (Fischer 2014:6). In this way, also their conditions for life and abilities to live or pursue a 'good life' may be constrained by the limiting discourse of poverty.[70] I argue that labelling Ngäbe as poor limits the ways in which Ngäbe strive to live well and are able to construct a good life for themselves.

The discourse of poverty further assumes that Ngäbe themselves are not capable of finding a solution for their supposed 'problem' or their impoverished living conditions. Their own capabilities of finding solutions, alternatives, or ways to make their circumstances work for them are not acknowledged within this discourse. The label of poverty obscures the fact that even though Ngäbe individuals' "decision-making capacities are restricted by their limited assets, be it in terms of wealth or power, [they] are nevertheless capable of developing … individual or collective strategies to enhance their own well-being and the well-being of future generations" (Narotzky and Besnier 2014:4). In other words, Ngäbe individuals may find ways to live well even if they have limited economic and political resources.

The majority of Ngäbe in La Solución individually reject the label of poverty. They do not consider their individual conditions or those of their households to be poor. This does not

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[70] Such 'conditions for life' for a group of people are defined by a set of possibilities and constraints, both material and symbolic (de L'Estoile 2014:64).

mean that urban Ngäbe residents do not face any challenges that correspond with dominant definitions of poverty. Various Ngäbe individuals may have indeed experienced hunger, marginalisation, deprivation, or being 'in need' at different points in their lives. They may define such past experiences as poverty. However, urban Ngäbe residents generally avoid the label of poverty in describing their current individual conditions. While various Ngäbe individuals occasionally use discourses of poverty to gain a particular collective or personal advantage, such strategic uses of the language of poverty and needs generally refer to their collective condition as Ngäbe; to their lower socioeconomic status and hierarchical position. I argue that using language or images of poverty in some instances and rejecting them in others are ways in which urban Ngäbe residents of La Solución strive to live well.

The case of Ngäbe in La Solución demonstrates that applying the concept and projecting the condition of poverty onto Indigenous Peoples may have a stigmatising effect, by focusing on their inabilities and their victimhood. Following Quispe (2003), I suggest it is more useful to identify the ways in which people do strive to live well within the limits in which they find themselves. Focusing on such endeavours and the ways in which individuals and communities are hindered, limited, opposed, or even sabotaged in their striving to live well allows the individuals in question to become powerful actors whose attempts are thwarted, challenged, or obstructed.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Here it's like the people don't know each other":

Conviviality and living (well) in an urban community

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Friday 28 August 2015, 17:15, La Solución:

The community meeting was to take place at the widest point of the gravel road leading into La Solución, beside the rubbish collection point, next to the *muelle principal*.[71] The people that were gathered, and those who were still joining, all stood to the sides of and in the middle of the gravel road that started at the airport and led into the neighbourhood. Some attendees were sitting on televisions, ovens, and refrigerators that had been dumped along the side of the road to be picked up.[72] A few individuals were talking quietly with their neighbours, while others waited silently for the meeting to begin. None of the residents appeared to indicate a concern or impatience regarding the meeting not having started. A few times, the vice president of the *directiva* – the neighbourhood leadership committee – urged the president, Basilio, to open the meeting, stating that it was getting late.[73] However, Basilio did not believe that sufficient people were present and wanted to wait for a bigger turnout. Shortly after 18:00, an hour after the scheduled time for the meeting, Basilio began to speak to an audience of approximately 30 individuals. He opened the meeting with a comment on the low attendance, stating that many people failed to attend this meeting. Nonetheless, he explained that the meeting had to start as it was getting dark.

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[71] Muelle generally means dock or pier, but in this case refers to boardwalk or wooden walkway: See Figure 20.

[72] See Figure 21. This photo was not taken the meeting described above, but at a subsequent one. It was taken to be able to demonstrate the need (as expressed by the residents) for a communal house to hold meetings in.

[73] The members of the *directiva* are neighbourhood residents who voluntarily take on these roles. They are not employees of the state and do not get paid for their invested time and efforts.

Figure 20: Muelle principal

Figure 21: Community meeting

I was invited to participate in this communal meeting, because I had discussed with Basilio, the president of the *directiva*, a Ngäbe man in his sixties, my intention to help with, participate in, or undertake a communal project in the neighbourhood. Basilio suggested various needs and potential projects, including the construction of a sewage system, repairing the *muelle principal*, arranging electricity for all residents living along the *muelle principal*, and the construction of a communal house, but he indicated that it was at a community meeting that decisions about such matters were made.

Basilio initially suggested at this meeting that a decision could not be reached because of insufficient quorum. Ample representation at communal discussions is one of the key components involved in Ngäbe decision-making processes (Young 1971:76; Karkotis 2012; 2013). He suggested to postpone the decision to a later meeting and prompted attendees to encourage their families and neighbours to attend the following meeting. However, several individuals remarked that a decision had to be reached at this meeting, for the attendees were the same individuals that were always present at meetings and that if others truly 'cared' about these communal matters they would have attended this meeting. When the attendees decided that the most urgent project was the construction of a communal house, this decision appeared to have been enacted on the vocalised frustration that a decision would not have taken place otherwise, as the ideal conditions – a majority representation at a community meeting – were unrealistic.

I later came to understand that ample representation and participation at communal meetings was indeed an unrealistic ideal. Members of the *directiva* and other residents frequently lamented the low participation in meetings and communal work at large, as well as the lack of collaboration or cooperation with their neighbours in various settings and the lack of care about communal matters more generally. They often commented that those who showed up for communal work, meetings, and events were always the same individuals and that the majority of residents did not have an interest in partaking in communal affairs or in improving the neighbourhood. This was an ongoing voiced concern.

Introduction

Throughout the project I undertook with residents to construct a communal house in the neighbourhood, the members of the *directiva* and other community members that were actively involved often lamented that "nobody" or not sufficient people "collaborated" with

the project. It was clearly an expectation by active community members and the *directiva* that individuals or households should collaborate with the neighbourhood projects and activities that the *directiva* organised. This expectation was most often expressed in the form of a complaint that the majority of people did not meet the expectation.

Such complaints regarding collaboration or participation in communal work or meetings did not apply solely to this (ambiguously chosen) project. Residents frequently lamented the lack of support and cooperation among their neighbours in various settings and the lack of care about communal matters more generally. When the grandson of a middle-aged male *directiva* member, Gerardo, died, another *directiva* member, Carlos, lamented that nobody from the community visited Gerardo and his family to show and provide their support. "Nobody came to support Gerardo. Nobody went there and I find it sad!" he stated. When I asked him why he thought nobody went to visit Gerardo, he answered "the people are like that, Boana. Well, here… In another place when something like that happens, I have seen a lot of support, but not here. *Here, it's like the people don't know each other*."

Carlos' comment that people do not seem to know each other touches on popular themes in both residents' laments as well as in scholarship on community, particularly the themes of unity, community cohesion, solidarity, and belonging. This comment, as well as people's laments on the lack of unity, cooperation, care, and support, appear to indicate low levels of unity, community cohesion, solidarity and belonging. Yet, these laments and indications did not always correspond with my observations, for I did observe ample cooperation, care, and neighbourly support.[74] Clearly, the participation, cooperation, and support that I observed did not reach the levels that *directiva* members and other active community members thought it should and, as such, it did not live up to their expectations. The laments about lack of participation and cooperation demonstrate the kinds of expectations that residents who actively engage in community matters have of their neighbours and fellow community members.

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[74] For instance, several individuals gave up many of their Sundays, often their only day off, to help with the construction of the communal house. Additionally, when I helped Alinda, a Ngäbe middle-aged female resident who was heavily involved in the fundraising effort for the communal house, and her family to collect money from other households in the neighbourhood for the funeral of Alinda's brother who had passed away, many (adjacent as well as far) neighbours contributed a few dollars. I also observed a neighbourly support system when a fire broke out in the adjacent neighbourhood of Agua Negra. Several of La Solución's residents helped prevent the fire from spreading by filling buckets with water from the sewage treatment, passing them down the line and emptying them onto the burning houses.

In this chapter, I examine the links between the expectations regarding cooperation and participation and the meaning of community to Ngäbe residents of La Solución. I highlight how the communal expectation to cooperate forms the normative basis for the community. Following Barth (1969) and Cohen (1985), I suggest that the social identity of the community is shaped by culturally-specific values and that these values delineate the boundaries of the community. I outline how this sense of common social identity in La Solución has been challenged in various ways and the boundaries encapsulating it have become increasingly blurry over the past few decades. I argue that this precarious social identity is in due to dwindling levels of cooperation and participation alongside ambiguous membership and identification of who is and is not meeting the communal expectations. Declining cooperation and participation, in turn, are interconnected with residents' varying senses of belonging and intentions regarding their residences in La Solución.

5.1 Unity and communal living among Ngäbe People

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18 January 2018, La Solución:

I was visiting my neighbour Inelda at her house when her husband Jerome came in. Looking at the paperwork in my hands, Jerome asked me what I was distributing. I explained that I was collecting residents' opinions on living in La Solución and whether one lives well there. Without waiting for me to ask any questions, he immediately made his standpoint clear. "It is not good. Many have come here for work and to educate our children" he told me. But according to Jerome, there were several problems in La Solución. These included the lack of a sewage system, not being able to have a good bathroom, the difficulty of attaining one's own electricity, and the poor state of the wooden boardwalk. "You see the walkway (*Usted esta viendo el camino*)? Before it was worse. But we need to fix a permanent walkway (*un camino permanente*).[75] It is costly and *we don't have unity*, there is no force (*no tiene union, no hay fuerza*). You can see that when there is a meeting, nobody goes". I asked him why he thought there was no unity. "It has been like that. The people are not interested," he answered.

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[75] See figure 22.

Figure 22: Muelle - boardwalk (in disrepair)

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Jerome's comment that there is no unity in La Solución was one that I heard often. Many other residents had mentioned that 'their people' were not united; that there was no unity or cooperation in La Solución. When I asked them why they thought there was no unity or cooperation among neighbours, they commonly responded that it was because of a lack of interest to improve the neighbourhood or a lack of care about one's neighbours and about their social and physical surroundings. "Nobody cares", "nobody is concerned" or "people are not interested" my Ngäbe friends often lamented.

The comments by Ngäbe individuals about the lack of unity among the residents of La Solución echo dominant (national) notions and discourses on organisation and unity. Before embarking on fieldwork in La Solución, as well as throughout my field research, many individuals who had a connection with the neighbourhood or its residents, but did not themselves reside there, consistently told me that the residents of La Solución were not united as a community.

Such comments on the lack of unity among residents of La Solución correspond with popular ideas of what a community is supposed to be like. Community is generally understood to be an "entity to which one belongs, greater than kinship but more immediately than the abstraction we call 'society'" (Cohen 1985:15; Barrett 2015). Community has historically been thought of as an entity with "geographic boundaries and a shared fate" or identity (Norris et al 2008:128). More recent conceptions of community

consider it to be "shaped by dynamic, politically and epistemically charged relationships" and often marked by great internal diversity, instead of it being static or geographically bounded (Barrios 2014:330; Titz et al 2018). However, general use of the term community continued to implicate an entity and 'commonality' "of values, interests and identities" (Solesbury 2014:140; Gupta and Ferguson 1992). This conception of community assumes that there is something that its members have in common, "a collective commitment to exist" (Delanty 2018:4).

The comments on lack of unity also correspond with the notion that "Indigenous Peoples in urban areas are often not organized", a viewpoint which various Latin American scholars maintain (Dahl and Jensen 2003:6). It further reflects an image of and long-standing national discourse on a collective lack of social and political organisation and unity among the Ngäbe in Panama.

Several anthropologists have attributed such 'social fragmentation' or 'failure' to demonstrate resilience and organisation among Ngäbe to their relationships with outside actors in the wider socio-political context. For instance, comparisons to the assertive acts of resistance and "strong political organization of the Kuna" may provoke notions of Ngäbe as lacking unity and organisation (Thampy 2013:29; see also Bourgois 1988; Castillo Guerra 2009; Jordan-Ramos 2010). Ngäbe are often said to not have organised themselves sufficiently to be able to oppose the government, before receiving outside support. Gjording (1991) maintains, for instance, that their relatively recent, fairly successful organisation was (only) a response to an imminent threat and in part due to support from outside. Such analyses generally identify a 'lack' of Ngäbe political organisation, which may be considered a 'cultural characteristic' or a result of wider systemic factors.

Such ideas of 'lack', Overing and Passes (2000:10) argue, accompany Europe's (and North America's) historical "creation of its imaginary worlds of Amazonia", and the expectations that were brought along. As Rosengren (1987:3) appropriately notes, "the attention we pay to the absence of characteristics [like organisation and unity] is often the outcome of our expecting to find them". Adhering to ideas of lack, the scholars I discussed earlier (e.g. Castillo Guerra; Gjording 1991; Thampy 2013) fail to acknowledge in their analyses of Ngäbe political organisation efforts a Ngäbe preference to remain egalitarian and refrain from selecting individuals to represent and make decisions on behalf of the collective (Karkotis 2012). Such a preference resonates with a wider Amazonian concern to prevent leaders from becoming powerful actors within a given group (Clastres 1989; Killick 2007).

Placing these preferences within a wider context of the values and socialities of Lowland South American peoples, it becomes clear that there is certainly intention in the apparent disorganisation. The dispersed settlement pattern that Ngäbe by and large adhere to is, in fact, a deliberate form of organisation. Overing and Passes (2000:23) explain, for instance, that "settlement dispersion, and the relative distancing it provides, is a strategy common to many Amazonian peoples for maintaining their deeply valued harmonious quality of life" (see also Santos-Granero 2000). In order to examine Ngäbe ideas on and experiences of unity, or lack thereof, in the urban community of La Solución, I will first briefly explore the different ways in which Ngäbe people have created and (trans)formed social and communal life in various settings.

Ngäbe communal life

Living in concentrated communities like La Solución is a relatively new phenomenon for Ngäbe people (Karkotis 2012). According to Young (1971:105), Ngäbe did not "occupy large settlements even temporarily for ceremonial or economic purposes" at the time of his fieldwork in the late 1960s, nor did they do so "traditionally". The majority of Ngäbe households in the present-day *Ngäbe-Buglé Comarca* lived dispersed over large territories in hamlets that consisted of two to six households all of which were related by family ties (ibid.).[76]

Within these settings, various households participated in reciprocal labour through *juntas*, organised by one household who required assistance with a particular task, such as a large harvest (Young 1971; Karkotis 2012). But apart from these *juntas*, Ngäbe in these areas of the *comarca* had few collective interests beyond the immediate kin group or hamlet (ibid.). Households were largely independent, autonomous, and responsible for themselves. Young (1971:126) states, for instance, that "the ultimate goal of every man is to establish a household of his own" which fulfils its own daily production and consumption requirements.

This observation corresponds with other Lowland South American groups' social organisation, which generally revolves around residential families, rather than the 'community' as a whole (Alexiades and Peluso 2002; Peluso 2003, 2020 in press; Santos-Granero 2000). For instance, the Ese Eja 'community', "as a political and social unit",

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[76] Ngäbe-Buglé Comarca is hereafter referred to as the *comarca*.

Alexiades (1999:140) remarks, "is one which responds more to the centripetal forces resulting from external political, social and economic institutions, than to those of internal political and social configurations". In this context, 'community', as a unit larger than the kin group or residential family is something that mainly exists in response to and interaction with outside influences.

Wage labour and concentrated communities

Many Ngäbe men started performing wage labour on banana plantations in the Bocas del Toro province, for which they would leave their respective communities for months at a time, during the second half of the 20th century. Often times they would bring their families with them to live on the plantations (Bourgois 1988; Karkotis 2012). Karkotis (2012) found that through wage labour on banana plantations, many male labourers and their families became accustomed to living in settlements with others outside of their kin group. Upon returning from the plantations several of these households decided to establish residence in a concentrated community setting (ibid.). Karkotis (2012) further explains that community living was also a way to reduce the pressure of the diminishing availability of fertile ground to cultivate.

Although many Ngäbe men had worked together on the banana plantations, this had been in a different context, under a non-indigenous boss. When settling in village communities, Ngäbe individuals were not used to working in a group with multiple families in this kind of setting (Karkotis 2012). Instead, the demands of the individual household were still of primary concern and importance and all major decisions were taken by these individual households (ibid.). Ngäbe residents of the village of Bisira explained that, through a communal project to eradicate malaria in the area, they 'learned' to work together. This project was, according to Karkotis (2012:112), "the only common practice that all households performed together" and this urgent common problem "forced the Bisireños to act communally".

Killick (2007:476) describes such a joining of forces to fight for a common cause as "willingly giving up degrees of their own autonomy in order to gain some advantage that they deem important", such as eliminating an outside threat or fighting a repressive regime. As I highlighted in chapter three, Ngäbe, like many lowland South American groups, generally observe and respect personal responsibility and autonomy, which expresses their aversion to authority and hierarchy (Clastres 1989; Karkotis 2012; Killick 2007; Overing and Passes

2000; Rosengren 2000). As Killick (2007:465) explains, such an "emphasis on personal autonomy is linked to individuals' avoidance of imposing themselves on others or following the dictates of others".

I observed such refraining of imposing one's will on others and respect for personal responsibility in communal work or communication regarding communal projects. When male residents worked on the construction of the communal house, for instance, there was generally no active coordination or direct supervision, allowing each individual to take responsibility for their own work. Additionally, in the fundraising phase of the project, the women involved in fundraising refrained from confronting individuals who owed money or other types of support to the collaborative project, assuming instead that each individual knew what he or she owed and what their responsibilities were.

Such avoidance of authority or imposing oneself is, in turn, "linked to a wider belief that living and acting independently is the only way to achieve a peaceful society and thus to ensure physical and social reproduction" (Killick 2007:469). Respecting each other's personal responsibility and individual autonomy is a way to maintain convivial relations among households by avoiding direct confrontation and conflicts (Santos-Granero 2000). As Overing and Passes and various other contributors to their edited volume (2000) have highlighted, avoiding conflicts and assuring conviviality is essential in (the proper functioning of) Greater Amazonian social life.

Conviviality is in part maintained through the careful observation of the boundary that marks respect for each other's personal autonomy. As Rosengren (2000:224) states regarding a Matsigenka perspective, "it is the person who tries to dominate and impose uniformity who is breaking up the collectivity". Unity or communal cohesion in indigenous Lowland South America, in turn, involves maintaining convivial relations among households by observing household autonomy, independence, and personal responsibility alongside cooperation and care.

Urban conviviality

Close and frequent collaboration between households may increase the chance of conflict. The boundary that marks respect for each other's personal autonomy is easily overstepped in close collaboration between households who may each have their own way of working and ideas of how something should be done. Such collaboration between different families

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in a community, or even between different households within the same family, may give rise to conflict through overstepping these boundaries or through overt disagreement and confrontation.

Crowded urban living particularly increases the possibility of conflict. Like many other Lowland South American groups, Ngäbe people do not, among themselves, count with a formal mechanism to resolve conflicts. Such conflicts are instead avoided through self-restraint, avoidance of confrontation, respecting others' personal autonomy, and dispersed settlement (Santos-Granero 2000; Rosengren 2000; Young 1971). It has been noted for various indigenous groups in the region that the intensity of convivial relations has been easier to regulate when the households were more dispersed (Overing and Passes 2000; Santos-Granero 2000). Ngäbe residents of La Solución often complained that there are too many houses in the neighbourhood and that they are too close together (*pegadas*), while there are still new houses being erected in between existing houses.[77]

Santos-Granero (2000) notes that once indigenous settlements or communities grow larger, the chance of fissioning, or splitting into two or more parts, becomes greater. For instance, Fortis (2015:212) discusses how Guna people have had to expend greater effort to "maintain a safe and peaceful everyday life", as the populations of their island villages have grown considerably over the past century. While fissioning would have been a solution to the increasing population density and tensions within communities in the past, creating new villages has become increasingly more impractical for Guna people due to lack of habitable space in the San Blas archipelago (Fortis 2015; 2019). Similarly, fissioning is nearly impossible for an urban community like La Solución, because land is not available in the vicinity of the urban centre where households can move to. One strategy to "lessen the burden" that living in nucleated settlements places on conviviality, is having two houses; one in the village and one on the outskirts near their gardens (Santos-Granero 2000:272). While many Ngäbe residents of La Solución have a house in their *finca,* as I outlined in chapter three, the majority of them do not have their *finca* near enough to provide them with the option to divide their time between the two residences, in order to lessen the burden of urban (crowded) living on conviviality.

I have outlined how conviviality involves both respecting personal autonomy and cooperation. As Rosengren (2000:223) notes, the "strong ethos of personal freedom to act

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[77] This contrasts with Guna people who, according to Fortis (2012:204), "value their life in densely populated villages, where houses are built in close spatial proximity".

according to one's own wishes" and respect each other's personal autonomy that is widespread among Lowland South American Indigenous Peoples makes retaining social harmony a "precarious balancing act" (see also Overing and Passes 2000). Particularly in a crowded urban setting like La Solución this delicate balancing act of living convivially through cooperation, sharing, and caring while enacting one's personal freedom and autonomy becomes even more precarious.

5.2 The meaning of community and cooperation

The obligation to cooperate

As illustrated at the beginning of this chapter, Ngäbe residents of La Solución frequently lamented the low levels of participation and cooperation among their neighbours. These laments demonstrate that the residents who actively participate in community projects expected their neighbours and fellow community members to participate in communal work and activities that serve to improve or benefit the neighbourhood and its residents. They expected, for instance, that male residents share their physical labour in the construction of the communal house, while female residents were expected to prepare food for the construction workers and to help with fundraising efforts through the preparation and sale of food and other items. Both male and female residents were expected to attend communal meetings and collaborate with communal projects and fundraisers.

It was thus an expectation that neighbours share their time, effort, and resources with the community – in some cases as an individual and in other cases as a household. It was expected for instance that community members should perform communal labour without receiving payment for it. When in one of the meetings about this project, I suggested paying participants a small amount for their time and their work, this suggestion was promptly rejected. A few of the older men explained that people should volunteer for their community, indicating that it is an expectation that community members undertake communal work voluntarily without anticipating a personal benefit (e.g. payment). In this context, the anticipation that people volunteer their labour for communal benefit signals the idea that a community is one in which such participation and cooperation is not only expected, but defines the very meaning of community.

This meaning of community relates well with Roberto Esposito's (2010) understanding of community as a shared obligation or burden. Esposito found that the originary meaning of *communitas*, derived from a conjoining of *commun* and *munus*, regards the sharing of a burden, a debt; "an obligation that is contracted with respect to the other and that invites a suitable release from the obligation" (2010:5). According to Esposito, a never-ending obligation is what the members of a community have in common, which unites them.

I suggest that cooperating and participating in communal affairs is considered an obligation for community members. Various long-term residents of La Solución told me that when they first established their residence in La Solución, they 'had' to help with the construction of the *muelle* (boardwalk) or other communal tasks. This indicated that in order to 'join' the community, indeed to form part of the collective and help 'shape' the community, they were obliged to perform certain duties. This obligation to cooperate would continue to exist as long as one remained a member of the community. The expectation to cooperate thus expresses the eternal debt and obligation that accompanies (being part of) the community.

Cooperation and communal identity

Ngäbe do not see cooperation and participation solely as an obligation, but also as a virtue. Alinda and Marina, the two women most closely involved in the fundraising for the communal house project, would often say about a certain individual that they have the 'right' to cooperate ("*tiene derecho de cooperar*") when indicating that they wanted and expected this person to participate. Initially, I assumed that they simply confused the terms 'right' and 'obligation'. However, I later came to understand that cooperation is a virtue that is greatly valued.

In chapter three, I outlined how cooperation and generosity are significant aspects of being a good Ngäbe person and of living the way they believe one should live. In a concentrated community, cooperation with neighbours and participation in communal projects involves being generous with one's neighbours by sharing one's productive capacities – labour – or the products of one's labour – monetary contributions or food.

I suggest that the expectation or obligation to cooperate expresses a desire among urban Ngäbe residents and their intention for a continuation of their social order; to maintain Ngäbe cultural identity. In this way, through the expectation or obligation to cooperate, which forms the basis of 'community', community is made into "a resource and repository

of meaning, and a referent of identity" (Cohen 1985:118). The numerous laments about the lack of cooperation and participation reveal a fear of or hesitancy about the potential loss of this collective social identity or their "way of life" (ibid:109).

Cooperation and autonomy

When individuals – or households – did not cooperate with or participate in communal projects, it was often assumed that it was their choice not to and that they did not care about improving the neighbourhood and the community. However, I observed that these individuals were often confronted with conflicting interests and priorities. For instance, communal workdays were generally scheduled on Sundays, since for many individuals – mainly for men, but also for various women – this was their only day off. It was often also the only day they could spend with their families, go fishing, fix their own houses, or visit their *fincas* – if their *fincas* were nearby. Furthermore, when there was a town hall meeting or protest at which residents could collectively stand up and fight for their needs, rights, and futures, the majority of the residents could not attend because they had to present themselves at their places of employment or stay at home to attend children. In several of these circumstances, individuals may have wished to attend communal workdays, meetings, or protests, but their other commitments often took precedence.

These conflicting interests and priorities were the daily urban challenges Ngäbe residents in Bocas del Toro faced. Urban Ngäbe residents had to choose between working for pay – or for the household – and working for the community in various instances. Paid employment is one of the principal motivations for Ngäbe individuals' migration to and residence in Bocas del Toro, alongside education. As I outlined in chapter three, such employment is also a way for individuals to assert and maintain household autonomy. When individuals prioritised their paid employment over voluntary cooperation with communal projects, they were concentrating on their household autonomy, as well as their households' immediate daily concerns.

Personal or household autonomy and communal cooperation are both necessary components of living convivially. The delicate interplay between cooperation or generosity and personal autonomy can also be observed in urban Ngäbe residents' notions of being a 'good neighbour'. When I asked local residents what it means to be a good neighbour, half of the respondents (13 out of 26) answered that a good neighbour is someone who helps, cooperates, shares with one another, and informs one another. The other half of

respondents answered that a good neighbour is someone who does not cause or seek problems, who does not disturb the peace, and who does not criticise others. Jeraldo, a middle-aged, male, long-term resident, for instance, stated that a good neighbour is someone who avoids problems. When I asked him whether he had good neighbours, he answered that it is fine, because everyone does their own thing (*"cada uno hace lo suyo"*). These answers indicate the importance attached to individuals and households minding their own business and not interfering with the autonomy of other households.

While supporting, sharing, and cooperating with one's neighbours is clearly important and expected, the more urgent and realistic norm to observe was to respect one another's autonomy. Several respondents who indicated that a good neighbour shares, cooperates, and supports, answered that their neighbours were fine because they did not cause any problems. This response denotes that there is a difference between prescriptive normative ideals and the manifestation of conformity to the norms (Barrett 2015). The prescriptive normative ideal may be ample cooperation and generosity among neighbours, in addition to respecting household autonomy.

However, conformity to the normative ideal is lower than some expect and wish for it to be. Several of the respondents answered that they did not have good neighbours in La Solución. Together with the frequent laments about the lack of cooperation, this demonstrates that La Solución does not live up to their expectations of communal living or conviviality. The fact that the ideal of cooperation is rarely met also means that people have set themselves up for a perpetual cycle of falling short of what a community is allegedly meant to be.

5.3 Community membership and belonging

From conversations and group discussions with long-term residents, it became evident that they experienced more cooperation among Ngäbe residents during La Solución's initial stages as a neighbourhood or community, in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Several of these long-term community members indicated to me that there was friction between more established and newer residents, as the following discussion demonstrates:

Me: What was La Solución like when you first arrived?

Arelia: La Solución was only mud (*charco*) at that time [2003]. We walked on top of poles. We walked one day and we got to here* in the mud (*points to her legs). We had to get water from outside (*aca afuera*) to wash our feet, to put our shoes on. And with time, we laid down wood, little by little, and now we put down concrete (*la tosca*), and now it's a big community with all sorts of people (*toda clase de gente*); Latinos, rural people, black people, Indians. There's a mix of all *(Latinos, paisanos, negro, indio. De todo hay mesclado)*…[78]

Patricia: The first day that we came there, we made *chicha*, we made food, we got there, the women made food, the men worked, my husband went to the *finca*, to Sharkhole, and they carried wood [to construct the *muelle*], they worked a lot. The people that are coming now are soft.[79]

Fernanda: Those that got there first suffered there.

Arelia and Patricia: they suffered, worked hard.

Erika: We suffered there, but those that came last they have it easy. And this is who cares least about what happens with the *muelle*. Who is concerned about it? Nobody![80]

Figure 23: Concrete walkway

[78] "Concrete" (*la tosca*) refers to the concrete walkway. Figure 23 provides a graphic example.
[79] *Chicha* is a fermented drink made form maize or peach palm fruit (*pifá*).
[80] This discussion took place in 2016 at my apartment near La Solución.

The comments made by these women illustrate that the individuals who came to La Solución 'first', or a while ago, 'created the community' through (the sharing of) their hard work and cooperation. Residents who had been there in the neighbourhood between ten and twenty years all indicated that when the first few Ngäbe residents came and settled, in the late 1990s, there was no neighbourhood – there were just mangroves (*puro manglar*). By constructing their houses and – initially improvised – walkways to their houses, they physically created and established the community. Yet, the women in the group discussion referred not only to the physical creation of the community, but also the social formation of it. The initial residents shaped the identity of the community through their physical labour as well as the enactment and unifying of their social identities through cooperating, caring, and sharing (e.g. labour, natural resources, and food). In this way, the expectation – or obligation – to cooperate serves to reinforce these values and the creation of a common social identity and a common purpose; the construction or development of the community/neighbourhood.

Blurring community boundaries and dissolving identity

The discussion above indicates not only that there was more cooperation among residents initially, but also that the community identity was stronger. I suggest that this community identity has been dissolving through the blurring of the community boundaries. Building on the work of Barth (1969), Anthony Cohen (1985) argues that the community boundaries encapsulate the identity of the community by distinguishing the commonality within the boundaries from the difference across the boundaries. This commonality, he asserts, regards a "common body of symbols" (norms or values) or "forms (ways of behaving)", whose meanings and interpretations may vary for different members (ibid.:12).

According to Cohen (1985:15), maintaining unity "is practised by identifying an outsider who does not live up to [the shared] values". The boundaries that protect the communal identity thus define membership of the community. When the neighbourhood was initially formed by the first few residents and households, the commonality and membership were relatively easily identified, through their shared commitment, hard work, and cooperation. Anyone who resided or wished to reside in the neighbourhood cooperated and shared their labour. Anyone who did not was an outsider.

Although membership normally fluctuates, as the identity and boundaries of the community are contextual and subject to perception, an increasing blurring of boundaries

can threaten the community's identity (Cohen 1985). I suggest that such a blurring of boundaries has been ongoing in La Solución. Due to various factors, the identity of the community became increasingly ambiguous. Some of the factors affecting the identity and boundaries of the community are its rapid increase in size and diversity, the various ties new residents maintained to their prior communities, and the temporariness of their intended residence in La Solución. This temporariness was further exacerbated through the state-planned relocation project which intends to displace all the residents to another location on the island. I discuss these factors in more detail below.

One factor that generated ambiguity surrounding community identity was the growing resident population and diversity of the neighbourhood. As outlined in section 5.2, when a residential space becomes more crowded and households live closer together, it proves more difficult to avoid conflict. As more households have constructed their houses in La Solución, the space has become more densely occupied and tensions between people have increased. Contact gradually became less personal, participation less common, and the obligation to cooperate was observed less closely.

Furthermore, as the neighbourhood has grown in population size, it has also become more diverse in terms of residents' ethnicities. Whereas the first residents were all Ngäbe, as Arelia mentioned in the group discussion, the neighbourhood later came to accommodate "all sorts of people". Various Ngäbe research participants mentioned the differences in ways of living and being that they observed in non-Ngäbe – mainly Afro-Panamanian – residents, in some instances in reference to the perceived lack of unity or cooperation between residents. This increase in (ethnic) diversity evidently challenged the sensed common cultural identity. It has thus become increasingly difficult for residents to identify who belongs to the community, indeed who lives up to its original values.

Another factor that contributed to the blurring of community boundaries and identity was that newer Ngäbe residents felt a greater sense of belonging to their communities of origin than to La Solución. Many Ngäbe individuals and families moved to La Solución with intentions of returning to their communities of origin once their goals are met, for instance when their children graduate high school or when they have been able to construct or renovate a house for their families in their communities of origin from their incomes in town, as I outlined in chapter three. I also highlighted that many residents of La Solución were, in fact, officially still residents of their prior or home communities. Various local residents identify with – and trace their belonging to – different communities on the

mainland or on other islands, indicating that these residents do not consider themselves residents of La Solución, but rather of other communities.

This sense of temporariness and the strong ties that they hold to their home communities, which I discussed in chapter three, indicate that many Ngäbe individuals living in La Solución, may not see La Solución as 'their' community. Indeed, in various conversations, fieldwork participants would refer to their communities of origin as 'my community' (*mi comunidad)*. Rather than belonging to the community of La Solución, several residents may instead feel that they belong to their community of origin. In this way, the integrity of the community is questioned through the senses of belonging to other communities (Cohen 1985).

An additional factor impacting communal identity in La Solución is the state-planned relocation project and coinciding changes in leadership. For the past decade, residents of La Solución have been receiving intensifying notifications – ranging from rumours to threats – of a relocation project that would see them displaced from their current location to another, more inland, area of the island. As I discuss in chapter seven, this proposed relocation has added a sense of temporariness to their residence in La Solución and prevented residents from true place-making and settling. Any 'lack' of care that residents may exhibit towards their surroundings – towards the improvement of the neighbourhood or toward building community – needs to be understood within the context of this relocation. Many residents are unsure if any investment in their neighbourhood and community will be worth it, as they may lose these investments if the proposed relocation becomes reality.

Alongside and intertwined with the intensifying pressure of the projected relocation, the community has experienced significant changes in its leadership. Towards the end of 2015, the president of the neighbourhood *directiva*, Basilio, moved to a town on the mainland, where he had been offered employment with the municipal government. He had been one of the first residents and was considered to have been the person who established the neighbourhood.[81] According to various research participants, Basilio had been a strong figure in uniting the community and fighting for community matters and residents' rights. Consequently, several interlocutors have attributed this offer of employment to the

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[81] Opinions varied on whether he was actually the first to reside in La Solución.

intention of the government to weaken the opposition by the neighbourhood *directiva* and residents to the planned relocation project.

With Basilio's absence, the motivation and enthusiasm of the *directiva* members seemed to have decreased and the *directiva* slowly dissolved until only a couple of members remained actively involved. The *directiva* was expected and tasked to resolve disputes in a non-conflictive manner, as well as exemplify the convivial values of cooperation, hard work, and care. As a dissolving political unit, the *directiva* was not able to live up to these expectations, and many residents, along with the *directiva* members themselves, became disillusioned and participation in communal affairs deteriorated further. During this process, community boundaries became ever more blurred and obscured and it became increasingly difficult to determine who was meeting the initial expectations.

Cooperation, membership, and belonging

I suggest that the experienced decrease in participation and cooperation is intertwined with the level of personal and convivial contact between households and the felt sense of commonality and belonging: On the one hand, the obligation to cooperate increased residents' involvement and investment in the community and forged a shared sense of commitment. As the more established residents laid the foundation stones – or planks – of the community, this generated their shared sense of investment, involvement, and commitment. As the community grew and the *directiva* weakened, it became increasingly difficult to regulate and ensure this obligation to cooperate. For instance, a member of the *directiva* used to visit each household personally in order to inform the residents of a meeting and would take note of which households participated in meetings and communal work. However, with the growing size of the neighbourhood, this was no longer possible.

On the other hand, individuals' intentions regarding involvement and strives for a sense of belonging informs their levels of cooperation and investment. As the majority of Ngäbe individuals and households move to Bocas del Toro to seek paid employment and the employment they encounter is generally not permanent, the length of their stay, their commitment, and their senses of belonging to the 'community' are uncertain and precarious. Many new residents may therefore opt to rent initially, or focus entirely on their paid employment rather than on living convivially. This precarious sense of belonging is exacerbated by the planned relocation project as well as residents' attachment to their

former communities. Many, particularly newer, Ngäbe residents do not see La Solución as 'their' community.

In La Solución, a neighbourhood built through cooperation and communal participation, cooperation defines not only the meaning of but also membership to the community. During the communal meeting described in the opening vignette, several attendees argued that if fellow residents who failed to attend had cared about the community, they would have attended that meeting. This suggests that only those who demonstrate their care for and cooperation with the community by participating should have the opportunity to be involved in the decisions affecting the community. This suggestion symbolically places those who do not embody the values of caring and cooperating, by participating in meetings, outside the community.

Yet, there is no formal system of tracking who is and who is not cooperating and participating sufficiently. Residents often stated that 'nobody cares' and 'nobody cooperates'. The individuals making these remarks were symbolically placing 'everybody' outside the community, indicating that 'community' does not exist, because there is no cooperation and no care. However, these statements did not literally mean that nobody cares or cooperates. 'Nobody', in this context, may be used to anonymise such statements, as stating that certain individuals do not care, cooperate, or participate sufficiently would be considered criticising and disrespecting another's personal autonomy. Such personal criticism is actively avoided. Lamenting that nobody cares or cooperates, then, is a way of stating one's discontentment with (the behaviour of) certain individuals while avoiding confronting these individuals and thereby imposing oneself on another. I argue that the identification of who is and is not meeting their obligation and hence considered a fully-fledged respected member of the community remains strategically and deliberately ambiguous through avoiding direct identification of those who do not participate and cooperate sufficiently.

5.4 Conclusion: urban conviviality and communal wealth

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that cooperation with neighbours, participation in communal affairs, and care for one's social and physical environment are important elements of Ngäbe convivial life. The significance of these values is expressed by residents of La Solución through their lamenting about the failure of fellow residents to live up to the

values. For Ngäbe residents of La Solución, their laments about the low levels of cooperation and care among their neighbours may indicate a frustrated desire to 'belong' to a greater whole; to belong to a community in which cooperation and care are generously expressed and symbolised. Their laments express the importance attached to living convivially and their felt disappointment in convivial or communal living in La Solución.

According to Santos-Granero (2015a), it is precisely the values of cooperation, generosity, and care that form the basis for convivial wealth, an element of public wealth, among Lowland South American indigenous groups. Such public wealth manifests itself in the forms of resources or human capital – for instance as healthy, hard-working, moral people (Conklin 2015; Santos-Granero 2015a; Sarmiento Barletti 2015). It is defined as "the totality of valued things – whether material or not – over which a collectivity claims to have rights of usufruct" (Santos-Granero 2015b:90). As such, pubic wealth is meant to be shared with all members of the community or collectivity.

There is great potential for such public wealth in La Solución, as there are many healthy and hard-working residents with productive capacities. A number of these residents do share their labour in the form of communal work, cooperation, and participation for the benefit of the community. Their shared labour becomes communal wealth. However, the frequent laments by these residents indicate that they feel others are not generating sufficient public wealth. Particularly the well-established and more involved residents express a disappointment in the low level of public wealth – or lack of cooperation, care, and sharing. The limited public wealth may significantly affect their capacities to live well in La Solución.

These more established and active residents of La Solución strive to live well by seeking solidarity and belonging in La Solución and by emphasising the values of sharing, cooperating with, and caring about one's neighbours. Other individuals and households, mainly more recent and more temporary residents, may not seek solidarity and belonging in La Solución, for they may find their fulfilment in other places – i.e. other communities. These individuals may instead strive to live well in La Solución by focusing on their paid employment and education and by emphasising household autonomy and independence.

These varying intentions and senses of belonging among residents make community identity ambiguous and convivial living more challenging. The extent to which residents consider La Solución 'their' community varies greatly. Some may only stay in La Solución temporarily and feel more connected to their 'home' communities where they may participate and cooperate more extensively. Furthermore, the paid employment for which

the majority of residents came to La Solución, and the great number of educational and household commitments they encounter in urban life, constrain individuals' abilities to participate in and cooperate with 'the community'. The looming threat of a potential relocation further inhibits residents from investing in the neighbourhood and the community. These various urban challenges in La Solución put an additional strain on Ngäbe convivial living, which is already a delicate balancing act of avoiding conflicts, asserting personal autonomy, and cooperating with one another.

CHAPTER SIX

"The most difficult life is the life of the Indigenous People": Ethno-Racial Hierarchy and Structural Violence

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2 October 2016, at Hostel Padua:

I was invited to eat lunch at Hostel Padua. Leonora, the Latina-Panamanian manager, and Sarina, a Ngäbe woman from La Solución had cooked lentil soup with rice. I had brought a salad to share. The manager and other staff often ate lunch together and regular visitors often joined. Three other regular visitors had presented themselves to join the meal. One of these visitors was an Afro-Panamanian woman whom I had not met before but was well-known to the others.

When the meal was ready, Leonora and the regular guests filled their plates and went to sit at a big table near the reception. Sarina took out food last and sat at the kitchen table by herself. Leonora asked her why she was sitting there alone and without waiting for a response told her to join the group at the big table. Sarina brought her plate over to join the group and ate quietly. Elina, another Ngäbe employee from La Solución, walked in to start work halfway through the meal and Leonora told her to take some soup as well. She filled a plate and ate standing at the kitchen table until Leonora also told her to join the group at the big table. Sarina and Elina ate quietly, while the others had lively conversations, during which the Afro-Panamanian woman, Mrs Green, asked various questions and voiced her opinions on the different topics. For instance, when Carmela, a Spanish woman working for an international non-profit, talked about her recent work trip to a Ngäbe community on the coast, Mrs Green commented that the Ngäbe people are more 'pure' there.

Sarina was the first to get up and clean her plate when she finished eating. Elina joined her shortly after and they both resumed their cleaning duties, Sarina in the laundry room and Elina in the kitchen. The others also got up one by one, washed their plates and went on with their activities for the day. As I washed my plate, Mrs Green asked me what I was doing in Bocas del Toro and I answered that I was conducting anthropology research. She inquired further about the topic of my research. When I told her that I was doing research in La Solución, her eyes instantly opened wide, her nose crinkled and she made a face in which I

identified a sense of revulsion. I explained that I was interested in the story of the neighbourhood and its residents and in the relocation project. As soon as I had finished my sentence, she erupted into a tirade about the problems of La Solucion. The main issue with the neighbourhood, she remarked loathingly, was that all of the people living in La Solución were indigenous:

> "Twenty years ago, there was nothing there, but then they all started coming from the *comarca*. Yet, there is plenty of food in the *comarca*. There are *fincas*, but people don't want to go there. There are universities in the places that these people come from, but they don't want to go to university… All the girls get pregnant while they are in high school! They have a lot of babies and there is a lot of domestic violence! The problem is that if children grow up with that they are going to think that it's normal… They shouldn't have moved to La Solución, because it's titled land and they are not allowed to build there. But they just come here to get money! They have never paid social security because they did not believe in that and now they are retired and are all getting money (*cobrando*)! They get *150 para los 60* [a state-provided old age pension for those who do not have a retirement fund] and they get *Red de Oportunidades*, which is for indigenous women who have children in school. They get money for every child they get and the Indians have a lot of children. They get a lot and have never paid any social security for it."[82]

I attempted to insert myself a few times, stating for example that the benefits are not just for Indigenous People and that the people in La Solución work hard for their money. She discarded or ignored my statements. Elina had been in the kitchen throughout this racist outburst and even interrupted the conversation a couple of times, once by asking if a container she washed was mine and once by reminding me to take my umbrella with me. Yet, Mrs Green did not acknowledge her presence or interruptions and kept talking. As soon as I found an opportunity, I excused myself and left.

Feeling terrible and embarrassed about the fact that Elina was present throughout Mrs. Green's outpouring of racist preconceptions and stereotypes about Indigenous People in

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[82] This is a consolidated version of Mrs. Green's speech highlighting the main points she made, reconstructed from my field notes, which I wrote up immediately following the conversation. The original lasted approximately 20 minutes.

La Solución, a group which Elina 'belonged to', I decided to return to the hostel later that afternoon to talk to her. I found Elina in the laundry room of the hostel, talking vividly to Sarina. I told her that I felt bad about what Mrs Green had said earlier. However, Elina did not appear upset. She said she had not been listening to the conversation, for Mrs Green talks endlessly and Elina had ceased to pay attention to what she says.

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Mrs Green's tirade was my first encounter with overt racism in Bocas del Toro. It was the most straightforward and blunt account of stereotyping that I personally witnessed during my fieldwork period. However, Mrs Green is not the only person I have heard utter negative and racist ideas about Ngäbe people and about La Solución. Particularly in many different government offices and public spaces, I have heard reiterations of racially and ethnically demeaning stereotypes, including that the Ngäbe in La Solución simply stay at home 'watching television and producing babies all day' and that they do not do anything to improve their lives.[83]

Like Mrs Green, employees of public offices would voice their condescending and stereotypical opinions whether or not there were individuals present who might belong to the group they were referring to and who may have been able to hear them. Although I cautiously attempted to avoid any conversations with Mrs Green after the incident above, I did come across her again at the hostel and observed her friendly attitude towards Elina and Sarina, as though they were excluded from the collective about which she held such strong depreciating beliefs. This helped me understand that Mrs Green and the various local government employees were reproducing a normalised discourse, which sees Indigenous Peoples as inferior and underdeveloped and which considers urbanised Indigenous Peoples, in particular, to be corrupt compared to more 'pure' 'Indians' in the *comarca*.

When I talked to Elina about Mrs Green's outburst, Elina did not appear disturbed like I had expected her to be. I wondered whether Elina's apparent (outward) indifference was in any way related to the normalisation of such discourses. I subsequently set out to explore how these discourses and their normalisation around town affect the people they concerned and their lived experiences.

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[83] The offices and public spaces at which I heard such statements included the migration office, hospital, and police station. Such statements were often a response to my topic of research or my statement that I worked in La Solución or with Ngäbe.

Introduction

Alongside an overt account of racial stereotyping, the vignette provides an example of the hierarchical structures in place in many work settings in Bocas del Toro within which such discourses take place. Although the manager of the hostel had invited and even encouraged Sarina and Elina to join the group eating lunch together, it was obvious that Sarina and Elina were inclined to withdraw from the group, initially eating separately, and returning to their duties as soon as they finished eating. When I spoke to Sarina about her work at the hostel after Leonora, as a particularly outgoing and inclusive manager, had left, Sarina stated that they no longer ate lunch together and she missed the shared lunches. I am not aware of any other workplaces in Bocas del Toro at which Ngäbe employees eat their lunches together with non-indigenous colleagues or supervisors. Work relationships, as well as non-work-related interactions between Ngäbe and non-Ngäbe, often appear of a subservient-dominant character.

Thirty years ago, Philippe Bourgois (1988) published a stimulating article about the hierarchical relationships between different ethnic groups employed on a banana plantation in Bocas del Toro and the types of oppression Ngäbe workers experienced on a day-to-day basis. Bourgois noted that at this plantation, Ngäbe workers occupied the bottom position in both occupational and ethnic hierarchies. He further observed that the occupational hierarchy was embedded within "the context of an ethnic hierarchy which both defines and is defined by it" (1988:330). He specifically compared the conditions and positions of Ngäbe employees with those of indigenous Guna workers, who held superior status in various respects, which Bourgois (1988:336) assigns to the "extraordinary" political and adaptive capacity of the Guna.

Bourgois argued that Ngäbe employees experienced different forms of oppression that amalgamated in what he termed 'conjugated oppression'. Within the ethnic hierarchy, they experienced ethnic discrimination, ideological domination, and assaults on their dignity, based on their perceived 'Indianness', which limited their ability to defend themselves economically and politically. This limited economic and political power, in turn, affected their alleged powerlessness and inability to affect their status within the occupational hierarchy in which they faced poor working conditions and various forms of economic exploitation.

Although Bourgois discussed the different ways in which Ngäbe workers were exploited and oppressed, he did not present actual lived experiences as voiced by Ngäbe employees. He argued that the Ngäbe workers "perceive[d] ethnic domination to be their most immediate daily problem" (1988:342), but he did not provide Ngäbe narrative accounts of their perceptions of such ethnic domination. While Bourgois made available a valuable account of Ngäbe oppression, his discussion could have been enhanced by including the voices of Ngäbe employees themselves and their lived experiences and perceptions of such oppression.

Building on Bourgois' theoretical and ethnographic insights, I explore in this chapter the ways in which inter-ethnic encounters are experienced by Ngäbe residents of La Solución based on Ngäbe accounts of their lived experiences and realities. I suggest that the experiences of inter-ethnic encounters are shaped by the hierarchical socio-political settings in Bocas del Toro and contribute toward ideas about and conditions of poverty. I argue that the ethno-racial hierarchy that structures Ngäbe residents' daily lived experiences deepens levels of inequality and marginalisation and constrains their 'capacities to aspire' (Appadurai 2013) and abilities to live well. The impacts of the structural violence exerted within this hierarchy can be observed in various Ngäbe individuals' rejection of their indigeneity.

The chapter starts with a description of this hierarchical structure and its various layers, it's ethno-racial and post-colonial character and its historical development. In the following section, I highlight the various ways in which the structural unfairness and violence generated by or associated with the ethno-racial hierarchy in Bocas del Toro are experienced by and impact the daily lives of Ngäbe residents of La Solución. Subsequently, I examine the ways in which the ideology and discourses associated with the ethno-racial hierarchy may be internalised by Ngäbe residents and how they affect their senses of indigeneity. Finally, I consider how this hierarchy and associated ideas regarding indigeneity and ineptness may shape, limit, or otherwise impact urban Ngäbe individuals' aspirations for a good life and their *capacities to aspire* (Appadurai 2013). The chapter ends with a reflection on the ways in which Ngäbe residents of Bocas del Toro strive to pursue a good life and find ways to live well within the limits posed by this hierarchical setting.

6.1 Ethnic and racial hierarchy

Panama has witnessed an "increasingly dynamic ethno-racial climate" over the past century (Sigler et al 2015:230). In recent decades the state has progressively promoted an image of a multicultural and racial democracy. Yet, as in many other Latin American countries, this is an inaccurate representation and such claims of ethnic and racial equality mask a prevalence of marginalisation, unequal access to power and privilege, and discrimination (Guerrón Montero 2006a; Horton 2006; Sigler et al 2015; Velazquez Runk 2012; Virtanen 2010).

Scholars of Latin America have tended to differentiate between race and ethnicity as analytical categories (Ng'weno 2007; O'Driscoll 2014; Wade 2010). Ng'weno (2007) argues that these two terms are in a "co-dependent relationship that has solidified legally in new ways with the worldwide turn towards multiculturalism" (2007:417). As Wade highlights, ethnicity is generally considered to be culturally evident, while race is associated with physical appearance and perceived phenotypical differences (Wade 2010; O'Driscoll 2014).

The social hierarchy in Bocas del Toro is made visible in "race-color terms", through discourse on the specific facial and physical features of black, indigenous, or Latino ancestry that may categorise a person as a particular (mixed) race (Guerrón Montero 2006a:219; see also Sheriff 2003).[84] Ngäbe individuals also primarily identify non-Ngäbe others according to racial terms, such as White (*blanco/blanca)*, Black (*Moreno/morena* or *Cheng* in Ngäbere)*, Chinese (*Chino/china*), or Latino/Latina, although sometimes they refer to the same people in ethnic terms, such as 'foreigner' (*extranjero/extranjera* or *mergini* in Ngäbere). Ngäbe residents referred to themselves and other Indigenous People as 'Ngäbe', indigenous (*indigena)* or Indian (*Indio* in Spanish or *chuang* in Ngäbere) interchangeably and in many contexts, my interlocutors did not differentiate between being Ngäbe and being indigenous (cf. O'Driscoll 2014).

Although the categories used by Ngäbe and others in Bocas del Toro are mainly racial ones, narratives of discrimination or difference appear to be based rather on differences in 'culture', as Mrs Green's account exemplifies. Such ethnic or cultural discrimination alongside racial categorisation is common in a Latin American context and demonstrates a "slippery overlap between racial, ethnic, and cultural identity categories" (Alcoff 2007:175; Arredondo 2014). The hierarchical structure in Panama has both ethnic and racial

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[84] Racial categories include *negro, culisa, chombo, chombo blanco, pania,* etc (Guerron Montero 2006a)

characteristics that are often difficult to separate (Sigler et al 2015). This hierarchical ethno-racial climate is more pronounced in Bocas del Toro than in the country on the whole due to the region's particular historical development.

Historical accounts, although limited, suggest that Indigenous Peoples populated the archipelago prior to the arrival of Europeans to the Isthmus (Guerrón Montero 2002; Thampy 2013). However, when English settlers arrived in the late 1700s, there were no longer any indigenous inhabitants on the islands (Stephens 2008). Afro-Antilleans came to inhabit the archipelago in various waves, starting in the early 19th century as enslaved plantation workers for various British families brought from the nearby Anglo-Caribbean islands.[85] After Panama abolished slavery, other Afro-Antilleans came to the area to work on banana plantations after being brought to Panama for construction on the Panamanian Railroad in the 1850s and the Panama Canal in the early 20th century (Guerrón Montero 2011).

These Afro-Antillean individuals often enjoyed special privilege due to their English language dominance and largely became a rural middle class (Guerrón Montero 2006b). Although the Afro-Antillean population has historically been marginalised and discriminated against, they have generally enjoyed higher socio-economic status and greater access to resources and education than Ngäbe. Guerrón Montero suggests that Afro-Antilleans in Bocas del Toro now feel "superior to Latino Panamanians and even more so to indigenous groups" because of their more recent middle-class position, their language, and British upbringing (Guerrón Montero 2006a:214). Additionally, they consider themselves the original inhabitants of the archipelago, having settled there two centuries ago when there were no longer (or hardly) any indigenous families in the region.

When Ngäbe individuals and families increasingly started moving to Bocas del Toro in the late 20th century, they entered the social and economic scene at a disadvantaged position vis-à-vis the resident Afro-Antillean population (Guerrón Montero 2006b; Thampy 2013). The difference in socioeconomic status between Ngäbe and Afro-Antilleans is distinctly noticeable in present-day Bocas del Toro. Ngäbe as a 'race' and as individuals within this

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[85] I use the term Afro-Antilleans here to differentiate this group from Afro-colonial people, who were brought to the isthmus as slaves during the colonial period (Sigler et al 2015). This prior group differentiates itself amongst other characteristics through their English speaking Caribbean background. I refer to both these groups together and more generally under the 'umbrella' term Afro-Panamanian. Guerron Montero (2006a; 2011) outlines the various differences between the various sub-groups that are often overlooked when referring to them as Afro-Panamanian. However, discussion and specific recognition of these various differences are beyond the scope of this thesis.

assumed racial category are seen by non-indigenous others as culturally and socially inferior, less intelligent, and 'backwards' (Guerrón Montero 2006a). Since Bocas del Toro's tourism boom in the early 2000s, a growing number of foreign residents settling in the archipelago have complicated the social scene (Spalding 2013). These foreign migrants enter the local social and economic setting at an elevated and privileged position and their presence has exacerbated social and economic polarisation between ethnic groups, as I outline in section 6.1.2.

Ngäbe, Afro-Panamanians, and (North-American and European) foreigners, are the three ethnic groups with the greatest populations in the Bocas del Toro archipelago. These three groups are also the most significant in shaping the local ethno-racial hierarchical structure. In addition to these groups, the local population includes Latino-Panamanians and Chinese-Panamanians. However, their numbers are too small to significantly alter or otherwise influence the overall hierarchical structure.[86] Furthermore, the island has a limited number of indigenous Guna and Buglé residents, the latter of which are officially considered a separate indigenous group but are generally subsumed under the Ngäbe population in daily speech.[87]

Ethnic and racial relations follow a hierarchical pattern in the Bocas del Toro archipelago. This hierarchical structure is most clearly evident in the workplace and labour market and particularly in the types of employment the various groups within the hierarchy assume. There is generally a clear division between the types of jobs that Ngäbe individuals are expected to perform and that which non-indigenous 'others' are willing to perform in Bocas del Toro. Jessica, a North-American woman who worked for a local non-profit organisation, once told me that she had hired several Afro-Panamanian workers, but that none of them were willing to do the work that she delegated to them –carrying sand for the construction of a new building–, stating that it was "work for the Indians" (*trabajo de Indios*).

Ngäbe men most often hold jobs in construction. Alternatively, they refill stock in supermarkets and department stores, deliver goods for hardware stores, or work as boat drivers or as cooks. Ngäbe women most often perform cleaning work for hotels and hostels

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[86] See Sigler *et al* (2015) for a discussion on Chinese-Panamanians nationally.

[87] Although the Ngäbe and Buglé speak different languages, they consider each other to 'come from the same culture' and live in mixed neighbourhoods or even households in Bocas del Toro (cf. Karkotis 2012). During my fieldwork, I have never heard anyone refer to Buglé people, apart from Ngäbe individuals referring to specific Buglé individuals and regarding their different language or origin (i.e. region of the *comarca*).

or other tourism businesses or work as nannies for foreign, Afro-Panamanian, or other Ngäbe families. In some cases, Ngäbe adolescents may work as a sales assistant in smaller shops or – if they speak English – as bartenders or servers.

Afro-Panamanian and Latino-Panamanian individuals generally hold 'higher level' and more generously paid positions. Some work as supervisors or contractors in construction or as kitchens supervisors, managers, or chefs in restaurants. Others work as receptionists or managers in hotels and hostels, as taxi drivers, as sales assistants in larger tourism businesses, or as government employees for the municipal government or regional hospital. Foreign residents in Bocas town, if they are not owners of a restaurant, store, or tourist accommodation business, generally work for foreign non-profit organisations, research institutes, or international schools in more 'professional' positions and with the highest salaries.[88] Finally, Chinese and Chinese-Panamanian families own the majority of the archipelago's supermarkets and department stores.

Manuelito, a Ngäbe resident of La Solución, provided his perspective on this hierarchical employment structure as follows: "The most difficult life is the life of the indigenous…" he told me. "They have to work hard; carry wood, mix cement, work construction. When you look at the people who work in construction, all of them are indigenous".[89] Indeed, the physically intensive construction work on the Island is almost exclusively performed by indigenous (Ngäbe) men. This hierarchical division of labour corresponds with Bourgois' (1988) account of Ngäbe plantation workers being located at the bottom of what he identified as the occupational hierarchy, performing the most burdensome and strenuous jobs.

6.1.1 Ideas about racial and ethnic equality: *Mestizaje* and Indigeneity

The majority of Panamanians perceive their country as a racial democracy because of the absence of formal exclusionary and discriminatory practices and approaches and the legal prohibition of racism (Barrow 2001; Guerrón Montero 2009). However, Guerrón Montero (2009: 222) argues that such racial equality is "a myth that ignores the disparate subordinate positions Afro-Antilleans, colonial blacks, Latinos, indigenous groups, and other minorities" assume (see also Sigler et al 2015). This perception of Panama as a racial

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[88] I refer to professional positions as those for which a university degree would be required.
[89] This conversation took place on 30th March 2016, at Manuelito's house.

democracy is taken from the privileged positions of those who do not experience the negative consequences of discrimination, exclusion, and differential treatment based on racial and ethnic features.

This idea of racial democracy is also intertwined with Panama's politics of national identity, *panameñidad,* and with *mestizaje* (Sigler et al 2015; Horton 2006).[90] *Mestizaje*, common in 20th century Latin America, can be defined as racial and cultural mixing which was eventually believed to result in a superior mestizo identity (De la Cadena 2008; Wickstrom and Young 2014). Although this political endeavour may appear to promote ethnic and racial equality, dissolving all differences, it is generally an assimilative project rejecting and disposing any form of otherness in order to promote national unity (Legoas P. and Arenas Barchi 2014; De la Cadena 2008).

Guerrón Montero (2009) reveals that Panamanians rarely admit to holding any racial bias or partiality. Yet, the majority of non-indigenous Panamanians identify Ngäbe and other Indigenous People based on their physical appearance, language, and association of their indigenousness with perceived and essentialised 'cultural' traits. Their prejudices become evident in everyday speech and social relations, as the opening vignette demonstrates. Such prejudices consider Indigenous Peoples and their ways of life, to be 'underdeveloped' and their "cultural difference is interpreted as an attribute of poverty" (Zipin et al 2015:114;). They take indigenousness as an essential quality which "propose[s] some set of criteria, or conditions, that enables identification of the 'indigenous'" (Virtanen 2010:166). Such a 'criterial' classification of indigeneity is externally imposed and reduces indigenous identity to assumed and essentialising 'racial' and 'cultural' characteristics (Gomes 2013; Merlan 2009).

In an ethnic hierarchy, the level of 'modernisation' or inversely one's perceived indigeneity determines an individual's assumed relative superiority or inferiority and consequently the place they occupy in the hierarchy. For instance, Holmes (2011) demonstrates how ethnic hierarchies on labour farms in the United States involve a sliding scale of perceived indigeneity versus 'civilisation'. This scale of perceived indigeneity is, in turn, associated with a continuum of structural vulnerability (ibid.). Bourgois (1988) observed how perceived differences in levels of 'Indianness' between Ngäbe and Guna workers translated into different degrees of oppression and discrimination on a Bocas del Toro banana

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[90] Panameñidad, in the words of Sigler et al (2015:232) is "a monolithic construction of cultural identity".

plantation. This observation led him to conclude that Ngäbe workers experienced the greatest vulnerability and oppression and were situated at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Ngäbe daily lived realities evidently defy the notion of a racial democracy. As Guerrón Montero (2006a:224) argues, the existence of the myth of racial democracy has actually "slowed the process of marginalized groups for the achievement of [actual ethnic and] racial equality" in Panama. It serves to conceal any structural or systematic violence that is exerted and it attempts to erase the historical memory that enables such violence (Farmer 2004).

6.1.2 Another hierarchical layer: (white) privilege and post-coloniality

An increasing presence of foreign residents and tourists – mainly North American and European – in the Bocas del Toro archipelago since the 1990s has further complicated the hierarchical social scene and underlined its post-colonial character. Tourism has spiked in recent decades through national development strategies which prioritise economic growth via incentives for tourism development and other forms of foreign investment (Guerrón Montero 2011; Spalding 2013).[91] Additionally, Bocas del Toro has become a major destination for lifestyle migration, the movement of economically affluent and privileged individuals to places that may offer a new way of life or the potential of a better quality of life (Spalding 2013; Benson and O'Reilly 2009).

These lifestyle migrants enter the local social and ethnic hierarchical structure at an elevated and privileged position, by virtue of their country of origin and "embodied whiteness", in addition to their relative economic advantage (Benson 2015:20; Croucher 2018; Guerrón Montero 2006a). They may bring with them a rucksack full of various forms of capital including social and cultural capital, 'network capital' (Benson 2013; Elliot and Urry 2010), and 'white capital' (Amit 2007; Benson 2015).[92] Spalding (2013:79) found that the privileged positions of these lifestyle migrants, alongside their values of personal freedom and upward mobility and their senses of entitlement to a 'better life', "produced a patronizing attitude [in which] locals were perceived as being, at times, needy, ignorant,

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[91] As Guerron Montero (2006b:69) notes, in the 1990s Tourism was proclaimed "a national priority that would contribute to the country's economic development".

[92] "Those high in network capital are often highly geographically mobile and have the ability to live 'connected lives'. In other words, they draw on the relationships with 'others-at-a-distance', not necessarily 'known' others in the production of new experiences" (Benson 2013:325-6)

or lazy". Locals, on the other hand, generally value these foreigners because of their light skin, their wealth and the privileges they enjoy (e.g. access to places that locals do not have access to) (Guerrón Montero 2006a).

The unequal relationship between Panamanian locals and lifestyle migrants from Europe and North America, and the United States in particular, can be characterised as postcolonial (Benson 2013:317).[93] Benson (2013:217) asserts, for instance, that North American "migrants' imaginings of the destination and the local population resonate with colonial understandings, and are further embedded through their practices and actions". Awareness of cultural difference on part of these foreign residents tends to be paternalistic, placing local Panamanian people and their ways of being and doing in the categories of less 'civilised', 'modern', or educated, a mind-set that is inherited from and a remnant of colonial times (Arredondo 2014; Benson 2014; Croucher 2009).

Many North-American and other migrants to Bocas del Toro perceive themselves to be providing significant benefit to the 'underdeveloped' local community, be it through the provision of employment opportunities or the organisation of charitable activities (Prado 2012). Such assumptions of positive contributions and impact demonstrate a sense of confidence regarding their relative position vis-à-vis the local population as providers of resources and services which are 'needed' by the local community (see also Benson 2013). In this manner, "the cultural dominance inherent to the postcolonial relationship is enacted through the migrants' positive assessments of the changes they have brought about" (Benson 2013:323). The employment positioning of the local population vis-à-vis foreign migrants also has clear colonial overtones (Benson 2013; Croucher 2009). Locals, and Ngäbe individuals in particular, generally hold temporary and insecure employment positions that are primarily geared towards servicing the incoming foreign population – e.g. in construction or domestic work.

The growth of (residential) tourism and the international community in Bocas del Toro has resulted in an improved provision of services and infrastructure and generation of jobs. Yet, it has also induced further marginalisation of certain ethnic groups, dependence of local

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[93] North Americans are the most numerous group of foreign-born residents in Bocas del Toro specifically and Panama more generally. Although present-day Panama was never a colony of the United States, the particular historical relationships between the two countries can be considered (post)colonial (Benson 2013). Postcolonialism, according to Hall (1996:248; 244), marks a transitory stage which is "characterised by the persistence of man of the effects of colonisation", and in which "*both* the crisis of the uncompleted struggle for 'decolonisation' *and* the crisis of the 'post-independence' state are deeply inscribed".

households on foreigners for employment, and land dispossession and displacement of local families in land conflicts (Spalding 2013; Mayhem and Jordan 2010; Prado 2012). Moreover, the influx of foreign tourists and residents has reinforced existing hierarchical social and ethnic relations through a "privileging of Afro-Antilleans over indigenous groups in various aspects of daily life" (Spalding 2013:80). For instance, whereas Afro-Antilleans have been able to capitalise on tourism to a certain extent (Guerrón Montero 2006b), Ngäbe residents have not had this opportunity.[94] The benefits of tourism for Ngäbe individuals have generally stayed within an increase in temporary low-skilled and low-paid employment opportunities.

Furthermore, the recent increase in international tourism in Bocas del Toro and the influx of foreign residents to the islands, fuelled by recently instituted laws that support foreign investment and tourism development (Guerrón Montero 2011), has added a new layer of unequal privileges and opportunities widely enjoyed by the growing foreign population and further marginalising the local (Ngäbe) population. The current ethno-racial hierarchy sees European and North-American migrants and tourists at the top, situated above the Afro-Antillean segment of the local population, who find themselves in a superior position to the indigenous Ngäbe.

6.2 Daily lived experiences within the ethno-racial hierarchy: structural unfairness

6.2.1 Exclusion from and differential treatment in public life and economic activities

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Friday 8 February 2016, Main Street, Bocas del Toro:

It was a Friday evening in February and the main day of carnival in Bocas del Toro. Carnival took place during the tourist high season and the streets were crowded with both tourists and locals. As I squeezed my way through the crowds, consisting mainly of foreigners, some

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[94] Afro-Antilleans have capitalised on tourism by constructing a self-image of Caribbean peoples, using stereotypes about their 'Caribbeanness' and exploiting their complex histories (Guerron Montero 2006b).

Afro-Panamanian families and a few Ngäbe individuals, I was able to catch a few glimpses of the performance on the stage. The last contestant of the Carnival Queen contest had just finished her performance and the three contestants, between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one, came back onto the stage. One contestant appeared to be Latina-Panamanian and the other two Afro-Panamanian. After one of the young Afro-Panamanian women was selected as Carnival Queen, a dance performance started by three Afro-Panamanian women in extravagant and colourful outfits.

Alongside the central park, the main street was lined with stands selling drinks and fried food (chicken and plantain or chips). The individuals manning the stands were all Afro-Panamanian and their customers consisted of the tourists and foreign and local residents that crowded the main street. As I walked past this row of stands and into the park, a few familiar faces from La Solución started appearing. The park was crowded with Ngäbe individuals and families. On the other side of the park was another row of stands, mostly selling beer or soup.[95] All of these stands were being run by Ngäbe individuals and their customers were all indigenous. At one of the stands, I saw Cecilia, one of my English students. She had rented a stand and operated her small business (*negocio*) selling beer and sodas. She explained that the rent for all the stands was the same, but the ones on the main street get more business. I asked how one requests or gets assigned a location and she answered that the municipality assigns everyone a location without offering any choice to the individual renting the stand.

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Cecilia's answer to my question implied that the municipality delegated the marginal spaces to Ngäbe. This scenario exemplifies how Ngäbe are generally excluded from the more dominant and lucrative economic activities as well as from the public face of the cultural life of the town. Primarily Afro-Panamanians and secondarily Latino-Panamanians represent the public faces of the local population at any cultural events.[96] Although the celebration of carnival is considered to be an Afro-Antillean tradition, due to its origins and introduction to the region, it is only one such cultural event during which the exclusion of Ngäbe from the mainstay of these spheres is noticeable. The yearly celebration of Bocas del

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[95] Often this was a vegetable soup with pig's feet, pork meat, and/or bones, mostly just referred to as soup.

[96] As illustrated in section 6.1.1, Afro-Antillean locals consider themselves to be the original inhabitants of the Archipelago and claim Caribbean autochthony, which shapes their assumed superiority and visibility in cultural spaces.

Toro's Foundation has a very similar set up in terms of economic activity. Additionally, during Feria del Mar, a week-long festival held on the main road near the island's most central beach, the Ngäbe stands are located at the very end of the strip, an area that hardly any tourists and very few non-indigenous residents frequent.

Ngäbe are also subjected to differential treatment in many spheres of public life.[97] The regional hospital is one such setting in which this differential treatment is particularly noticeable and strongly felt. When Alicia, a Ngäbe woman from La Solución, and I both needed to go through the process of obtaining a *carnet de manipulación de alimentos*, we received very different responses and support from the hospital staff.[98] Both Alicia and I were in a rush and both of us received an initial laboratory appointment for a date after the event for which the *Carnet* was needed. When I returned to the secretary to request an earlier appointment, the secretary changed the date of my appointment to an earlier one without any further questioning or commentary. When Alicia did the same, I accompanied her because she was convinced they would not help her if she went alone. On this occasion, the secretary told Alicia that she should have started the process earlier, that they were very busy at the laboratory, and that we had to wait until everyone had been seen that morning to talk to the nurse. This was not consistent with how I had been treated by the same person in the same circumstances.

The comment that an individual should have come earlier is a familiar one for Ngäbe individuals when visiting the local hospital. Many of my Ngäbe friends have relayed experiences of being reprimanded by a doctor or nurse for not going to the hospital sooner. Additionally, I have heard many accounts from Ngäbe individuals who went to the hospital with serious symptoms but were sent home without any actual remedy or treatment. Resultantly, many Ngäbe do not like to go to the hospital and whenever possible they use traditional medicine or visit a Ngäbe *curandero* on the mainland.[99] Although there are various reasons provided for this, an oft-mentioned reason is that they, as Ngäbe people, are not treated well by the doctors and other hospital staff. These individuals generally

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[97] Public life here refers to daily activities and contact with others that take place outside of the household and the neighbourhood.

[98] A *carnet de manipulación de alimentos* is a document that is required when working with the preparation and sale of food. It has to be obtained from the regional hospital and requires various tests, exams, and check-ups and a minimum of four visits to the hospital.

[99] However, the travel costs made this significantly more expensive and often not feasible.

perceive that such unpleasant or even harsh treatment is exclusively due to their indigeneity.

6.2.2 Discrimination and exploitation

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16 January 2016, at Diego's patio on the main street in La Solución:

Diego had organised an intercommunal domino game, in which domino players from Bastimentos were invited to play against the players of La Solución. The men were all concentrating on their game and drinking beer and the majority had not noticed Gerardo walking past with a young boy in his arms. A sudden silence fell over the otherwise rowdy scene when news later reached the community that Gerardo's grandson had passed away. When Gerardo returned an hour later, he explained that the boy had died in his arms on the way to the hospital. He said he was unable to reach the hospital in time. Diego asked him if he walked to the hospital and Gerardo answered that he tried to get a taxi at the airport. There were several taxis at the airport, but the drivers were waiting for the tourists that were coming off the plane at that time and refused to take Gerardo with his sick grandson in his arms to the hospital. Gerardo was left with no choice but to walk to the hospital and the boy passed away just before they arrived.

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This was not the only time I had heard of taxi drivers refusing Ngäbe people a ride in order to remain available for tourists, particularly near the airport. Their motivation for this is obvious. They can charge tourists more money for the ride and they are never sure whether the Ngäbe individual will have enough cash to pay the required fare at the end of the ride. However, to the Ngäbe individual in question, it sends a clear message that the potential tourist is more valuable and more important than them. This particular case allows for an interpretation that the potential tourist's money is more valuable than a little Ngäbe boy's life.

The story of Gerardo's grandson provides a clear account of structural violence (Farmer 2004; Galtung 1969). According to Farmer (2004:307), structural violence is "violence exerted systematically – that is, indirectly – by everyone who belongs to a certain social order". This may include attacks on self-respect, dignity, personhood and sense of worth or

value. It may present itself in the form of poverty, hunger, social exclusion, abusive working conditions and other forms of physical and emotional distress (Bourgois 2001; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004).

The discrimination by the taxi driver who refused to take Gerardo and his grandson to the hospital was not the only factor involved in the little Ngäbe boy's death. Gerardo's family argued that when the boy had been at the hospital earlier that week, the medical staff had discharged the boy too early. They asserted that they had discharged him while he was still in need of medical care. Being prematurely discharged by the hospital is a common experience for Ngäbe, as outlined in section 6.2.1. Such institutionalised racism restricts Ngäbe individuals' access to medical care and prevents them from receiving the care that they require, with potentially lethal outcomes, as this incident illustrates.

This incident also reveals how both the hospital and the taxi driver diverted resources toward those higher up in the hierarchy and away from those at the bottom, thereby further constraining the already limited access Ngäbe residents have to such resources. In this way, the ethno-racial hierarchy further marginalises those situated at the very bottom: Ngäbe residents. This spiral of marginalisation impedes Ngäbe individuals in their abilities to affect their own well-being and creates conditions of poverty.

Exploitative employment

Denying Ngäbe individuals a taxi ride is not the only form of discrimination and structural violence that Ngäbe experience in their daily lives in Bocas del Toro. Particularly in the labour market and workspace, Ngäbe individuals experience various forms of discrimination and exploitation. Although the labour market has expanded over the past decade in Bocas del Toro, the number of Ngäbe individuals in search of work has far exceeded the number of available (low-skilled) jobs on the island. This growth in potential Ngäbe labour force has led to Ngäbe employees being easily replaced and discarded.

Ngäbe workers' alleged reputation as irresponsible and unreliable employees exacerbates their replaceability, despite the hard work they carry out on a daily basis. Similar to Bourgois' (1988) account of Ngäbe plantation workers, the reputation of Ngäbe employees as being unreliable is based on ideas about how they do not notify their managers or employers when they miss workdays and how they drink alcohol during work hours. Various Ngäbe residents of La Solución lost their jobs during my fieldwork because they stayed

home sick a few days in a row, because they were spotted drinking beer during work, or because they missed a day of work without notifying their boss – often because they did not have a phone or sufficient phone credit. When Jairo, a young Ngäbe man in his early twenties, had to miss his first day of work at a new job, he indeed lost the job. According to him, his new employer assumed he was "just another Ngäbe guy that cannot take care of his stuff and gets drunk and is unreliable". On various other occasions, Jairo mentioned to me that Ngäbe were seen as the lowest level people in Bocas del Toro and that others generally consider them to be untrustworthy.

Such racist views and assumptions of Ngäbe employees by their employers become evident in the various ways in which Ngäbe workers are underpaid, overworked, and otherwise exploited. One example is Maximo's story. On Sunday 3ʳᵈ of April 2016, Maximo told me that he would not have a job anymore after the weekend, because his employer discharged him. "They liquidated me, but there is no liquidation money," he said and continued to tell me his story:

> "I have been working with them for one year and six months… 20 September 2015 I completed one year. And when I completed one year I asked him [the contractor] what he was going to do, if he was going to give me a vacation, or if he was going to liquidate me and let me enter the job again. Because I am there, but we didn't sign any papers. The guy likes to work like that. He doesn't want any papers. So I entered the job without papers. So when I started, I worked for 6 months. Then I worked for 4 months and then I worked for 3 months. He wanted it like that. He only gives me the money for the day's work. I never put in a claim with him. I was working with him and when it came to be one year and so many months I said, 'Boss, I have this much time working with you… I need to know whether you will give me liquidation [payment] or not; if you will give me vacation [payment] or not. Tell me'. He told me no; that the doctors are poor, that they don't have money, that they don't have a way to pay liquidation… And that these doctors are doing work for the Indigenous People, to attend the Indigenous People. Because of that, we have to work for free, he told me."

Maximo was doing construction work for a non-profit organisation providing medical services in different indigenous communities. He did not work directly with this organisation, but via an Afro-Panamanian contractor, who he referred to as his boss. Maximo entered the job without a contract and without any formal written agreement on

liquidation and vacation payments. This informal agreement left him with little space for negotiating and demanding such payments a year into the job, something that would have been rightfully his and he would have been able to demand legally had he had a contract.

Maximo told me he was simply asking for his right and not asking to take anyone's salary away. Even though he did not have a contract, Maximo could have taken the contractor to the ministry of work to demand the payments (*hacer una demanda*) and he may have won the battle. However, he said he did not want to. "I want you to talk to me. I don't want to be fighting with you" he told the contractor. "The man got mad at me", he continued telling me. "He gave me 16 days to be at home to then enter the work again, according to him, but I don't believe it. I don't know if I will continue to work, but this whole week and the next I will be at home... I don't know if he will give me [the liquidation money] or not".

Stories such as Maximo's demonstrate that he and others do not feel that they are treated with the respect and dignity with which they treat others and hope and expect to be treated by others. Many Ngäbe individuals entered into precarious employment with informal job agreements out of necessity, for they need paid work, and in many cases, they take what they can get. They often start working without any agreement – written or oral – about payment other than the pay per hour and they often have the hopeful expectation that the employer will 'do the right thing' and pay them what would in legal employment be rightfully theirs. Without a contract, these employees are highly vulnerable to exploitation, as seen in Maximo's case. Other Ngäbe employees working under informal agreements earned less than the legal minimum wage or were asked to do additional tasks that they did not get paid for.[100] Additionally, since many Ngäbe individuals work without formal contracts they could lose their job at any moment.

The exploitation that Ngäbe employees in Bocas Town experience is similar to that described by Bourgois regarding Ngäbe plantation workers, who were frequently taken advantage of on account of their assumed 'ignorance' and 'lower physiological needs' (1988; 1989).[101] Their precarious employment reveals the structural vulnerability that

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[100] This payment under legal minimum wage particularly occurred when performing cleaning or babysitting work for other individuals, but I have also heard accounts of employees at a tourist lodge getting paid less than the minimum wage.

[101] Bourgois (1989:121) states that the Ngäbe were "exploitable not only because of their background as impoverished subsistence agriculturalists but also because of their lack of familiarity with the capitalist economy, inexperience with ethnic interaction, and lack of political or corporate institutions to mediate incorporation into the nonsubsistence economy. They were vulnerable to abuse because they were

Ngäbe individuals experience through the ethno-racial hierarchy and the exploitation that this perceived hierarchy permits and underpins. Such unequal employment practices further result in enhanced stress levels for Ngäbe as well as increased difficulty to make ends meet and pay the high Bocas prices, which continue to increase due to tourism and lifestyle migration to the region. In this way, the ethno-racial hierarchy works to deepen levels of inequality and marginalisation.

Poor treatment by police

Ngäbe receive further poor treatment from the police of Bocas del Toro in a variety of encounters with them. Jairo recounted to me one such scenario which transpired in December 2017. He explained that he had visited a friend in another majority indigenous neighbourhood one evening and was walking past the gas station on his return when two police officers stopped him and asked him what he was doing. He told them he was walking home. They asked him many questions to find out whether he was doing something illegal, but he had not done anything. According to Jairo, because they could not find anything to accuse him of, one police officer took out his Taser and tased him. Jairo thought the police officer did this to get Jairo's adrenaline rushing so that he would become angry and start arguing with the police officer and they would have a reason to take him in. Once he did start arguing with them, they sprayed pepper spray in his eyes, handcuffed him, and took him to the police office to spend the night in jail.

Although the encounter with the Taser was specific to this particular occasion, the interrogation, accusations without evidence, and the pepper spray were common experiences for Jairo and other young Ngäbe men. It is not solely Ngäbe men who experience poor treatment. One night when Alicia, a Ngäbe woman in her early forties, her husband and I were going to a *conjunto* at a local bar with a few other people, she confided that she did not like to go out in a group.[102] She explained that she can never know whether all the individuals in the group can be trusted. For if one person likes to fight, the whole group can have problems with the police. She told me that the last time she went out with a group, the police thought she and her sister were fighting and took them both to the

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unaware of their legal rights, and often they did not recognize when they were being taken advantage of". In other words, Ngäbe workers were easy targets for exploitation.

[102] A *conjunto* is an event at which people can dance *baile tipico*, a form of partner dancing popular among Ngäbe men and women alike.

police station. According to her, the police had already found and detained the person who had been causing problems, but they nonetheless decided to detain her for the night. On another occasion in 2016, Alicia was detained and had to pay a $100 bailout. According to her account, she was arguing with a neighbour and the police had assumed they were fighting and came over to argue with her and her neighbour. One police officer's phone fell and broke and he accused Alicia of breaking his phone and stated that she would have to pay for the repair. He initially said it would be $40 and later changed it to $100.

These experiences demonstrate the often strained relationships that Ngäbe have with police in Bocas del Toro. They further illustrate that the police's treatment of Ngäbe is highly racialised. Ngäbe residents of Bocas del Toro feel that they are treated unfavourably by the police compared to how other ethnic groups are treated and they are aware that this is due to their indigeneity and associated lower status in the hierarchy. The majority of Ngäbe individuals see police as a source of fear rather than a source of security and protection. In those cases in which Ngäbe individuals did contact the police to resolve a problem, the police often did not turn up.[103] These included instances of domestic violence, fights between neighbours, catching someone stealing something from one's house. The instances in which police did not appear entailed two or more Ngäbe individuals in their domestic spheres, contained within the majority indigenous neighbourhood, in contrast with the incidents described above which took place in public spaces or spaces shared with non-Ngäbe others.

It is obvious to Ngäbe individuals that the function of the police is to keep Ngäbe 'in check' and under control so that businesses in town run smoothly and to maintain a sense of safety for tourists, foreign residents, and other 'higher status' residents. Where any law, policy or rule is easily and readily bent to favour foreign residents, investors, tourists, or tourism developers, Ngäbe residents experience the opposite: a disfavouring in law enforcement, as well as the negative impacts of such bending of the law in either direction. These experiences of Ngäbe in their interactions with police reinforce a sense that Ngäbe are of lower importance and value vis-à-vis other groups. In this way, the hierarchical system perpetually reproduces itself through the structural violence exerted within it (Farmer et al. 2004).

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[103] For instance, a friend recounted to me a scenario in which the boyfriend of one of her daughters showed up to her house drunk and threatened and hit her daughter. When she phoned the police they did not come.

6.3 Impacts of the hierarchy: symbolic violence and rejection of indigeneity

As I have outlined in the previous sections, urban Ngäbe residents generally have a sense of inferiority vis-à-vis non-Ngäbe reinforced in multiple ways. They see their lower status in the hierarchy reflected in their exclusion from the main economic activities and public life in town, public health care, and the labour market. This is further mirrored in their interactions with police and government officials, and in how the government prioritises tourism development over the development of Ngäbe residential areas. The prioritisation of tourism is displayed most visibly in the state-planned relocation of Ngäbe residents, which is discussed in chapter seven. Ngäbe individuals consistently made it clear that they viewed infrastructural improvements such as the construction of the main road in town and the installation of electricity on the island as being solely due to catering toward tourism and foreign investment to the region; certainly not for the well-being of Ngäbe residents.

Ngäbe residents are aware of their lower position in the ethno-racial hierarchy, the ways in which they are treated as inferior, and the structural violence that they face because of this, even if they did not refer to such violence directly. They are also aware that the unfair and discriminatory treatment that they receive is due to their indigeneity. The comments they made regarding their difficult lives in comparison to those of other ethnic groups evidence their awareness of the hierarchy and their position within it.

The ethno-racial hierarchy and the structural violence exerted within it negatively impact urban Ngäbe residents in multiple ways. The hierarchy places Ngäbe residents in a spiral of marginalisation, limits their economic and political power, and constrains their abilities to live autonomously and to create the conditions of their well-being. The structural violence associated with the hierarchy further generates various forms of symbolic violence, including denunciations made by Ngäbe individuals of their own (collective) behaviour and cultural customs and rejections of their indigeneity.

Bourgois (2001:13), following Bourdieu (1997), defines symbolic violence as the ways in which victims of structural violence may "focus their recriminations on their fellow victims' as well as their own character flaws". It concerns "internalized humiliations and legitimations of inequality and hierarchy" (Bourgois 2001:8) and is "exercised through cognition and misrecognition, knowledge and sentiment, with the unwitting consent of the

dominated" (Bourdieu 2001:340). In this sense, the "inert violence of economic structures and social mechanisms" (Bourdieu 1997:223) becomes a sort of "pressure cooker generating everyday violence" in families, workplaces, public spaces, police stations, hospitals, and schools (Bourgois 2001:28). In the case of Ngäbe, symbolic violence is apparent when Ngäbe individuals consistently steal from their neighbours, exert domestic violence, accept or internalise their lower position vis-à-vis non-indigenous others, or condemn their own behaviour or aspects of their indigenous customs.

One example of everyday symbolic violence is the way that Ngäbe individuals interact with others when intoxicated. For instance, Jairo, who, as I described in section 6.2.2, has experienced numerous denigrating and discriminatory experiences with police and has been abused and neglected as a child, has been unable to suppress his anger when intoxicated. This inability to suppress his anger has resulted not only in verbal and physical resistance to the disciplining and oppressing tactics that police officers employed towards him – which has further sustained his strained relationship with the police – but also in physical hostility against other Ngäbe individuals on a few occasions in which he felt insulted, denigrated, or otherwise emotionally abused by them. Intoxicated fighting between Ngäbe individuals is a fairly common occurrence in Bocas del Toro.

Bourgois also observed such intoxicated fighting among Ngäbe plantation workers during his fieldwork on a Banana plantation in the 1980s. He describes such fighting as "public displays of humiliating and/or self-destructive behavior" (1988:342). Bourgois considers drunken brawling to be an effect of systematic marginalisation and oppression, along with internalisation of the dominant ideology. However, Ngäbe intoxicated fighting has a long-standing history and was once an accepted form of expressing aggression, which has come to be seen as unacceptable over time (cf. Peluso 2008; 2020).[104]

Fighting among Ngäbe people has its historical roots in the traditional *balseria* or *krun* game, which was widely celebrated until approximately the 1960s before it was prohibited by the religious nativistic Mama Tata movement (Young 1976). At such *Balseria* events, two extended families (or communities) would come together to oppose each other in a stick throwing game. The events included extended drinking of *chicha* – a fermented peach palm fruit or maize juice. Intoxicated fighting was common, particularly on the night before the

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[104] Peluso (2008; 2020:305) similarly explains about Ese Eja people in Peru and Bolivia that drunkenness is now one of few contexts in which physical expression of hostility and aggression – emotions which are generally repressed – is socially acceptable.

stick game, when the drinking started during the day and continued throughout the night. This fighting usually took a ritualistic and controlled form and tended to be aimed at settling previous disputes (Reverte 1963; Young 1976). Phillip Young (1976:49) describes this ritual gathering as a "manifestation of aggression under carefully controlled conditions in a ritually structured context".

Missionaries condemned and prohibited the ritual fighting and intoxication at various times in history, as they considered the practices to be 'uncivilised'. The indigenous Mama Tata religious movement, which has strong Christian influences, also prohibited the consumption of alcoholic and fermented beverages and the *balseria* ritual in the 1960s which resulted in the termination of the ritual in most parts of the *comarca* (Young 1976). With this cessation, the means to express and release aggression in a controlled and ritualistic manner was no longer available to Ngäbe individuals. However, various Ngäbe individuals in Bocas del Toro still release such aggression – which is generally repressed in daily life – upon drinking alcohol, although not necessarily in a controlled manner.

Intoxicated fighting is now a semi-acceptable expression of conflict or aggression among Ngäbe people in Bocas del Toro. Various Ngäbe individuals practice, condone, or celebrate fighting, while others condemn or reject it, including individuals who may have practised it in the past or continue to do so. Non-indigenous others in Bocas Toro commonly consider fighting between Ngäbe individuals to be an unacceptable form of violence, as the incidents described above with the police demonstrate. Police officers conceive of Ngäbe fighting as a concern and a justification for the intervention or even detainment of the individuals involved. For Ngäbe individuals fighting is generally something to refrain from, as Alicia's earlier comment about the risk of going out in groups demonstrates. The main reason to refrain from fighting is that physical fighting and its perception as violence results in conflicts with the police.

Various Ngäbe fieldwork participants have also mentioned that physical fighting is something 'bad'; 'undesirable behaviour' of 'their people'; or an inability to control themselves when they drink alcohol. Such discourses reveal internalisations of historic and enduring religious and other outside evaluations of Ngäbe customs, including intoxicated fighting, as uncivilised, backwards, or immoral. I argue that urban Ngäbe residents' internalisation of the idea that intoxicated fighting is bad is a form of symbolic violence, more so than the fighting itself. It denotes a denunciation of their own cultural customs.

The long-standing denunciation of Ngäbe cultural practices has accompanied judgements and treatment of Ngäbe people as inferior and backwards. Various Ngäbe individuals have internalised such ideas about their inferiority as a collective or as individuals. This internalisation is evidenced by people's discourses about 'not being good enough' for non-indigenous others. Various Ngäbe individuals confided that they needed to become a better person in order to go to church or to establish a relationship with a foreign person. While these ideas are undoubtedly shaped by historic and enduring religious influences, they are also informed by more recent interactions with foreign individuals in Bocas del Toro. Several Ngäbe residents indicated that Ngäbe people as well as their ways of life, such as the food they eat, their *humilde* houses, or their drinking habits, are 'not good enough' for foreigners. Ngäbe individuals working with tourists or other foreigners know that these foreign individuals do not want to drink the water that Ngäbe people drink (rainwater or water from the creek) and take this to mean that the water they drink is not good enough for foreigners. Additionally, many Ngäbe individuals feel ashamed to serve tourists and foreign residents root vegetables, the most important food staple for the Ngäbe, as such food may not be good enough for foreigners.[105] These inhibitions and discourses demonstrate that some Ngäbe individuals feel inferior to other ethnic groups, particularly foreigners.

Downplaying indigeneity

Many Ngäbe individuals in Bocas del Toro may experience feelings of shame, encumbrance or depreciation regarding their indigenous heritage, which is expressed in rejection of (parts) of their indigeneity. Several Ngäbe friends have confided in me that they think many Ngäbe individuals living in Bocas del Toro do not want to see themselves as Ngäbe and do not want to accept their indigeneity. Various urban Ngäbe residents downplay their indigeneity, for instance by speaking solely Spanish in public, adopting 'Latino' hairstyles and dress, or by listening to mainstream music.

Downplaying indigeneity or characteristics that may be associated with being indigenous or that risk being perceived as 'culturally backward' is common among Indigenous Peoples in inter-ethnic contexts, although individuals and communities can sometimes be expected to display their indigenous heritage (Fischer 2014; Peluso 2015; Virtanen 2010). In urban

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[105] The hesitancy to serve others root vegetables solely relates to non-indigenous others. In chapter three, I describe the significance of root vegetables, or *verdura*, for Ngäbe people in Bocas del Toro.

Brazil, for instance, indigenous individuals refuse to use their ethnic group name as a surname, to speak their indigenous language to their children, or to wear traditional clothes when walking about in a multi-ethnic environment (Virtanen 2010).

Ngäbe identity is often associated with their language and many younger Ngäbe individuals refuse to speak Ngäbere. Carlos, a middle-aged Ngäbe resident of La Solución, once told me that "here, nobody wants to accept that they are Indian. Nobody wants to speak Indian. They only want to speak English". He continued:

> I do feel Ngäbe. I always tell the people, I am the only Indian that is still here. Because I always buy vegetables. I make my *masamora*, *michila*, I use coconut, I use vegetables. I always buy fish… But there are others who say 'no, we better buy chicken, eat rice'. They want to leave… they don't feel Indian anymore. Here I speak Ngäbere with everyone. I speak my language with the people.

Several others confirmed that speaking Ngäbere is considered inferior by many Ngäbe residents in Bocas del Toro. The following conversation showcases this:

> Celina: my parents didn't talk to me in their language because they wanted me to study and be someone in life, not like them.[106]
>
> Boana: So speaking Ngäbere is not a pride…
>
> Maximo: no, no
>
> Alberto: No, on the contrary, many of our Ngäbe people Like Maximo aren't going to be [here] anymore. Other Indigenous People are going to feel superior to us because we are talking a language that they do not speak.
>
> Boana: They feel superior?
>
> Alberto: Yes, yes I have noticed that.
>
> Boana: Because they don't speak Ngäbere?

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[106] Celina used the term *dialecto* to refer to Ngäbere. Although the literal translation of *dialecto* in English is dialect, this is not how the term is used and understood by Ngäbe. It is used in everyday conversation to refer to an ethnic language. This is likely a remnant of colonialism where the pejorative use of the term *dialecto* began as it viewed all Amerindian languages as sub-par. However, in present-day speech this pejorative meaning is not readily apparent. The majority of Ngäbe refer to Ngäbere as *dialecto*. When they do, I have translated it as 'language' or Ngäbere, which is how they consciously conceive of its meaning.

Alberto: No they don't speak it. They speak Spanish perfectly and so that is what makes them proud. We make them proud that they speak Spanish perfectly, while Maximo and I don't. I know various Guna friends (*compañeros*) who are professionals, who are highly educated, these guys when they go abroad they never forget their language. And all of them when they are together they speak Guna. This makes me feel lowered (*rebajado*). Because my people, as soon as they educate themselves, they forget everything. But the Guna don't. No matter where they are, they speak their language.[107]

Octaviano, a Ngäbe NGO representative who assists Ngäbe families in their land rights struggles, asserted that such refusal to speak their language represents an internalisation of the idea that Ngäbe people who speak Ngäbere are inapt, backwards, and inferior to others. He explained that the state "has made Indigenous People think... that speaking their language is to be an inept person, a person that is nothing and is never going to be anything of value. It's the way that the mentality has been formed.... They make them think that the best wealth that they [Ngäbe] can have is to be a civilised people". The 'mentality' that Octaviano refers to is the conception that, by virtue of their indigeneity, Ngäbe are worth less than others and are unable to become worthy or to achieve anything in life.

Young Ngäbe individuals are exposed to ideas about the supposed inferiority, underdevelopment and the poverty of their people, culture, and language through the state-provided education they receive. Notions and stereotypes regarding their cultural and economic 'backwardness' and inferiority are further reinforced through the normalised racial discourse in Bocas del Toro. Various Ngäbe residents may have internalised such notions and discourses. Self-deprecating discourses among Ngäbe individuals in Bocas del Toro, alongside Octaviano's commentary, suggest such internalisation. I have heard several Ngäbe residents adopt a degrading discourse about the Ngäbe as a collective, often using terms such as "our race" (*la raza de nosotros*), "us Indians" (*nosotros, los Indios*) or "my people" (*mi gente*). Such degrading discourse could penetrate any topic, varying from a 'lack of participation' within the community, having too many children, being lazy, only wanting to work for money or receive benefits and not working in their *fincas*, or not being

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[107] The Guna have historically been considered more successful at retaining their "traditional customs and institutions" as well as in organising themselves socially and politically, which has resulted in their supposed "ethnically superior" status (Helms 1976:14; Bourgois 1988). Even among indigenous groups in Panama Ngäbe occupy the lowest position within the ethnic hierarchy.

able to save money and rather spending it immediately on unnecessary things to not taking any action to improve their lives.

However, such degrading narratives do not necessarily or always imply their internalisation by Ngäbe individuals. Self-deprecating discourse by Ngäbe individuals may also be a form of 'politics' or a way to create a basis for constructive interactions and cooperation, by "adjusting one's discourse to others' language and goals" (Conklin and Graham 1995:706). Such discourse may thus, in large part, serve to communicate with non-indigenous others in the dominant (cultural) language.

Many of the remarks by Ngäbe individuals presented in this chapter demonstrate a rejection of derogatory discourse, disrespectful behaviour, and the general unfairness of the ethno-racial hierarchy. Such remarks demonstrate that many individuals have not internalised ideas and discourse about their supposed inferiority due to their indigeneity. Comments about the difficult life of the Ngäbe indicate a sense of unfairness among urban Ngäbe residents regarding the ethno-racial hierarchy and their place and treatment within it (Major and Dover 2016). Such senses of unfairness toward the hierarchy imply that many Ngäbe individuals have not internalised ideas about their inherent ineptitude associated with their indigeneity. Those who consider the hierarchical structure to be fair may ascribe any inequalities, inabilities, or discrimination to an attribute that is exogenous to the hierarchy, for instance to their indigeneity (Loury 2003). They may perceive any disparity to be caused by deficiencies of their 'race' (ibid.). A sense of unfairness regarding the hierarchy, on the other hand, points to a belief that such inequalities are not inherent in their indigeneity.

However, the senses of structural unfairness and injustice associated with the described daily experiences of discrimination, exploitation, and other unfair treatment may negatively affect the well-being of Ngäbe residents of La Solución. Studies on discrimination have found that unfairness experienced through discrimination or prejudice results in reduced well-being, life-satisfaction, and happiness, regardless of the shape that the discrimination takes – e.g. from blatant to more subtle forms (Schaafsma 2013).

While many Ngäbe individuals express experiences of unfairness and lament the structural inequality they face, the majority of residents do not dwell on their victimhood within such structures. They may use narratives of their victimhood as a strategy to obtain a certain benefit, as I suggested in chapter four. Additionally, they may use such narratives to criticise

the hierarchy and the political reproduction of their marginalisation. Several individuals may at different times feel that they are victims of ethnic domination. However, in contrast to what Bourgois argued for Ngäbe plantation workers, the majority of Ngäbe residents in the town of Bocas del Toro do not, according to my observations, "perceive ethnic domination to be their most immediate daily problem" (1988:342). Their most immediate daily problem is the maintenance of the household and ensuring that the household's immediate and symbolic needs are met. The ethno-racial hierarchy and the way that it works to divert resources away from the Ngäbe challenge such maintenance.

6.4 Aspirations within and beyond the hierarchy

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As a young Ngäbe boy, Antonio had always wanted to become a pilot. He knew he had to do well in school to realise his dream and, for a long time, he did. He enjoyed his classes and obtained good grades. However, Antonio did not feel supported at school and had limited emotional, and financial support from his family and immediate social network. By the time he reached fourth grade (*quarto grado*), his marks and attendance were suffering. He repeated fourth grade and with the necessary determination, struggle and hard work he reached fifth grade. However, towards the end of fifth grade, he was expelled. He gave up on his dream of becoming a pilot, although he still wonders what could have been, had he had more (financial, social, emotional, and symbolic) resources and support.

Since being expelled from school, Antonio has moved to live with his mother and siblings on another part of the island, at cycling distance from town, close to the beach and in the forest. Until approximately ten years ago, this part of the island was only inhabited by his immediate and extended family. However, over the past ten years, Antonio has seen a growing number of North American and European lifestyle migrants settle in the area, the majority of whom have started businesses catering to international tourists. Having observed the relative ease with which these foreign residents start such tourism businesses, Antonio, now in his twenties, has developed a new aspiration. For the past four years, Antonio has often talked to me about his dream to build a sustainable hostel in the rainforest – his family's *finca* – for tourists to visit and stay; to have his own business rather than working for others; to make a change and to ensure that his family has a better place

to live. When he has mentioned this idea to friends, however, his friends laughed and said he will never be able to achieve (*lograr*) it.

<p style="text-align:center">*****   *****   *****</p>

Antonio's childhood dream to become a pilot represents the kinds of aspirations many Ngäbe children maintain for the future. In class discussions and individual conversations with Ngäbe children between the ages of eight and twelve about their aspirations for the future, many of the children stated that they wanted to practice professions such as lawyer, doctor, pilot, veterinarian or teacher. This corresponds with many Ngäbe parents who wish for their children to become 'a professional' and see in formal education the possibility to realise this wish. However, many young Ngäbe adults experience various obstacles and difficulties in obtaining the necessary structures, support, and means to complete or even start the tertiary education required to become a 'professional'.

As suggested by Carling and Schewel (2018), a common result of an inability to realise aspirations is adapting or (subconsciously) subduing them to the perceived possibilities within a socio-economic context. For Ngäbe, this may result in many adults being constrained to *habituated* aspirations (Zipin et al 2015). Habituated aspirations are based on "tacit senses of what is and is not possible" (Zipin et al. 2015:234), informed by what Ray calls the "aspirations window" (2006:410). This aspirations window includes examples from one's reference communities and the resulting (perceived) possibilities associated with one's place in the ethno-racial hierarchy. Ngäbe individuals' *habituated* aspirations include secure employment – potentially with a formal contract and benefits – or a small enterprise catering mainly to neighbours or other Ngäbe individuals.

A few Ngäbe residents in Bocas del Toro have their own small businesses (like a neighbourhood shop), catering primarily to Ngäbe customers, and many others have told me about their wishes or aspirations to set up such a small enterprise. However, their aspirations for such enterprises to be sufficiently lucrative to sustain a household are rarely realised. Additionally, these businesses and economic activities typically cater to other Ngäbe people and they are not considered to be of the same level and profitability as other enterprises in town, which are primarily owned by foreigners and in lower numbers by Afro-Panamanian individuals or families. Many of these aspiring Ngäbe individuals have experienced the limitations that their place at the low end of the ethnic hierarchy and the relative deprivation of resources, privilege, and various forms of capital pose to their ability to pursue their aspirations.

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Aspirations like Antonio's to set up a tourism business are even more difficult to realise. When Antonio's friends laughed at him for wanting to set up his own hostel ("like a *gringo*") and said he would not be able to succeed, they were not referring to Antonio as an incapable individual but rather to the limitations – or even more generally to an assumed inability – of Ngäbe people to achieve entrepreneurial success. Ngäbe individuals, within their community and ethnic group, do not have any examples of this kind of 'success' within their aspirations window. Antonio's friends' reactions represent "latently felt sense[s] of their likely impossibility 'given [their] position" (Zipin et al 2015:234), associated with the widespread idea among Ngäbe individuals that they are not able to achieve what non-indigenous others are able to, by virtue of their being Ngäbe. This idea can be understood through Bourdieu's (1990:53) notion of habitus: "a system of dispositions", which are "embedded in the material and cultural conditions of given social-structural positions", referred to as "habituated dispositions" by Zipin et al (2015:234). The *habituated* dispositions Ngäbe experience through the ethno-racial hierarchy and associated discrimination, make it difficult for individuals to successfully pursue their aspirations.

Since Antonio first told me about his dream in 2015, he has made various attempts to make this dream reality. Without support and involvement from someone higher up in the ethnic hierarchy, however, he has struggled to get his hostel off the ground. Antonio has come to realise that in order to achieve his aspiration in this inter-ethnic context, he will require money and other resources. And yet he is aware of his limitations as an indigenous person, at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy, to acquire the kind of money and resources required so that he can stand a chance of pursuing his aspiration. Other Ngäbe individuals have expressed similar aspirations of setting up small tourism businesses in their *fincas* but they have not attempted to start such projects, because they do not know where to begin or how to attract customers.

Only a few friends have voiced these aspirations, as they saw an opportunity in me. These individuals voiced such aspirations along with their hopes that I would be able to support, help them, or participate in their endeavours. As Antonio explained, a 'foreign face' like mine involved in the project would add trustworthiness to it. Such trustworthiness is a privilege I entertain as a White foreigner at the top of the ethnic hierarchy, along with having experienced being a tourist and thus having a greater understanding of tourists' needs, as well as having access to the international community in Bocas del Toro and relative ease in establishing a network of 'powerful' people and assuring (financial) support

and local political power. Additionally, the skills I obtained through my education and life experiences (e.g. English language skills, ICT skills, promotion, and marketing) and the resources I have (e.g. a computer with the necessary software, access to the internet, and a network of 'affluent' people who could be potential tourists or provide other kinds of support) are ones that Ngäbe aspiring entrepreneurs mostly lack. Access to such skills, resources, and privileges, through support from an individual who takes up a higher place in the hierarchy, then, would make Ngäbe businesses more likely to succeed and their aspirations more realistic.

There may be other Ngäbe individuals with silent aspirations. At the same time, they are all aware that realising such aspirations is not a possibility without the support of a foreign person like myself, to provide the (network-, white-, and financial) capital, the 'trustworthy' image, and the promotional support. Thus, aspirations that stretch beyond Ngäbe people's place in the hierarchy are mostly linked to networking with foreign individuals or organisations.

The interactions between Ngäbe and foreign residents in Bocas del Toro can be seen as a 'middle ground', or a "construction of a mutually comprehensible world characterized by new systems of meanings and exchange" (White 1991:ix). Such a middle ground is necessarily based on (generally false) assumptions about 'the other' and the ways in which this 'other' could contribute or support (Conklin and Graham 1995). In the middle ground between Ngäbe and foreign residents, the foreigners assume that Ngäbe need to be saved, whereas Ngäbe individuals see such White foreigners as (potential) saviours.

Such relationships in which foreign individuals idealise, exoticise, and essentialise Indigenous Peoples as endearing, helpless, and in need of saving have a long-standing history in Panama (Theodossopoulos 2016). Various scholars (Howe 1998; Taussig 1993; Theodossopoulos 2016) have criticised the racism that is inherent in unequal relationships that foreign – particularly north-American – individuals have established with Panamanian Indigenous Peoples since the early twentieth century. Inherent in these relationships is a Western arrogance about their own superior way of life and a moral judgement or rejection of the way of life of those helped or saved, which is representative of development more generally (Ravenscroft 2016). Such assumptions automatically place the ones being 'saved' –Ngäbe people in this case – in a morally inferior position, failing to recognise that they have anything of worth to 'give' in return (Illich 1992, see Ravenscroft 2016:162).

However, in order for Ngäbe to feel morally inferior, they have to accept such assumptions. various Lowland South American scholars have argued that, for Indigenous Peoples of this region, such apparent 'submissiveness' or 'subordination' may be interpreted as a way of familiarising others and entering into a relationship in which the dominant party is compelled to assume a position of 'care-taker', supplying the supposed 'inferior' party with support (Bonilla 2009; Costa 2009; Fausto 2007; Walker 2012). When Ngäbe establish friendly relationships with foreign individuals in which they may receive some form of support or privilege – such as certain work relationships or friendships with tourists or international residents–, they are not necessarily accepting their subordinate position, but may be exercising their agency.[108]

Aspirations regarding tourism entrepreneurship in collaboration with foreign residents may be one way in which Ngäbe individuals are expressing such agency. I consider such aspirations to be 'emergent' in the sense that "new practices… and kinds of relationships are continually being created" (Zipin et al 2015:238), and 'reimaginative' in the sense that they are "imaginings, voicings and agentic impulses toward *alternative* futures" (Williams 1977:123). Tourism enterprises owned by individual Ngäbe households are virtually non-existent, as are such collaborations with foreign residents in which the Ngäbe individual or household remains the main entrepreneur. These 'emergent' aspirations may be indirectly drawn from the skills of adaptation to continuously changing socio-political circumstances that numerous Indigenous Peoples in Latin America have developed over many generations (Conklin and Graham 1995; Fortis 2016).[109] Such adaptive skills are used to continuously search for new opportunities and alternatives outside of their (kin or ethnic) groups.

However, these aspirations are only attainable if the international community members truly connect with Ngäbe individuals and open up their networks and privileges to these connections. These kinds of aspirations may thus reinforce a form of dependency upon those with resources – foreigners – for support. Such aspirations may thereby solidify the relative positions within the ethnic hierarchy, while simultaneously attempting to move beyond these positions by 'taking the skills and resources acquired from outsiders and turning them to indigenous purposes" as a way to "preserve a degree of autonomy"

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[108] Various scholars have attributed such agency to Guna people establishing relationships with foreigners in their quest to gain autonomy from the Panamanian government (Howe 1998; Taussig 1993). However, such agency has rarely been ascribed to Ngäbe.

[109] As Fortis (2016:435) highlights, various scholars working with Lowland South and Central American indigenous groups have emphasised "the resilience of indigenous lived worlds and the way external colonial powers have been resisted, scrutinized and in many cases digested within local ontologies".

(Conklin and Graham 1995:706). At the same time, forging connections with foreigners, as powerful 'others' and embodiments of a 'higher level' in the hierarchy, may in itself constitute a form of power and agency as well as a space – a common ground – for the potential formation of new 'emergent' aspirations; the widening of their (perceived) limits or the expansion of their *habitus*.

6.5 Conclusion: Living well within the ethno-racial hierarchy

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that the socially and politically constructed ethno-racial hierarchy constrains Ngäbe residents' fields of opportunities, by largely confining Ngäbe individuals to seek and accept employment in which they serve others, are subject to exploitation and unfair treatment, and in which they have little autonomy regarding decisions about how and when to work.[110] These fields of opportunities, in turn, are the spaces in which aspirations may emerge, develop or be constrained, as the *capacity to aspire* is bound by individual and collective senses of viable possibilities for the future as well as the availability of resources and strategies to pursue such possibilities (Appadurai 2013; Fischer 2014; Zipin et al 2014). The resources and strategies Ngäbe individuals have to pursue such possibilities, for instance in the form of privilege, network capital, and symbolic capital, are extremely limited in relation and comparison to non-Ngäbe others. In this way, Ngäbe residents' capacities to aspire are also restrained by what they perceive as reasonable or viable expectations for future possibilities 'given their position' in the ethnic hierarchy.

I argue that the ethno-racial hierarchy places Ngäbe residents of Bocas del Toro in a marginal position vis-à-vis non-indigenous others. Their positioning at the bottom of the hierarchy restricts Ngäbe residents' abilities to obtain the resources needed to live well and makes it difficult for Ngäbe households to meet their immediate and symbolic needs. It limits residents' power to change their collective and individual conditions for life or to pursue the autonomy that they value and desire. This restriction to Ngäbe individuals' power to create the conditions of their well-being generates a spiral of marginalisation and

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[110] Fields of opportunities are shaped by the conditions and resources outside of one's control and structured by ideas about the good (life) and about what is and is not possible (de l'Estoile 2014; Fischer 2014 - see also chapter one).

influences ideas and experiences of poverty. Comparing their limited economic and political capacities with non-indigenous others in the hierarchical socio-economic context leads some individuals to conclude that they, as Ngäbe, are poor. The statement that "the most difficult life is the life of the Indigenous People" expresses the structural marginalisation urban Ngäbe residents experience through this hierarchy as well as their rejections of their positioning within the hierarchy and their assumed inferiority associated with it.

Despite these challenges, Ngäbe residents in Bocas del Toro find ways to live well within the hierarchical socio-political environment. Even though they have the lowest-paying and most strenuous jobs, the majority of Ngäbe households have an income, which allows them, for the most part, to obtain what they consider necessary to live well – their own house and food for their families. These jobs, even though they limit their individual autonomy in significant ways, do provide them with substantial household autonomy – to be independent, and in some cases, to be generous with kin and others.

Although various Ngäbe residents may lament the unfairness of the hierarchy, the majority of Ngäbe individuals do not dwell on the unfairness they experience in their lives nor on their victimhood. Various scholars have indicated that the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as victims of discrimination and injustice may determine the degree of negative effect it may have on their well-being (Dover et al 2015; Schaafsma 2013). I suggest that generally refusing to attach much importance to discriminatory discourses, as Elina did in the case of Mrs. Green's racist outburst, is one way in which urban Ngäbe residents deal with the structural violence they face. Other endeavours to live well within this inter-ethnic context include lamenting the unfairness of the hierarchy in some instances while invoking self-deprecating speech in other instances.

Furthermore, aspirations for the future, such as their children's education, setting up one's own business, or saving enough money to be able to build their own house and return to the *finca* (see chapter three), allow urban Ngäbe residents to 'endure their lot' (Jackson 2011:156). Although both education and tourism, the two main motivations for Ngäbe households to move to Bocas del Toro, have reinforced the ethnic hierarchy and discourse associated with it, they both also provide opportunities for potential emergent aspirations beyond the ethno-racial hierarchy. Although so far there have not been any actual opportunities to challenge or alter their place in the hierarchy, these alternative aspirations may open up ways in which to move more freely within or beyond the hierarchical socio-political context. However, as these aspirations are still emerging, it is not known what they

might offer, contribute, or affect regarding Ngäbe individuals' abilities to live well and their notions of the good life.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"*We are fine here*": The relocation project, bureaucratic

indifference, and indigenous resistance

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3 August 2015, Basilio's house, La Solución:

I was meeting with Basilio, the president of the *directiva*, La Solución's leadership committee, to discuss my research and intention to help with a communal project in the neighbourhood.[111] Shortly into our conversation, Basilio began to tell me about a state-planned relocation project, which would displace all the residents of La Solución to another area of the island. I had taken notice of this relocation project several weeks prior to starting my fieldwork through a number of online news articles published by the Ministry of Housing (Miviot 2014a; 2014b). In these articles, the Ministry indicated that the residents of this neighbourhood were living in unhealthy and precarious conditions. The articles further stated that the Ministry had conducted various censuses to determine the size of the resident population to be relocated to what they referred to as a more "secure location" (*terreno seguro*).[112] This was the first time I heard about the relocation project from a resident of La Solución. Basilio further explained that one of the principal reasons residents consider the project to be problematic is that they will have to pay for the new houses:

> "The problem is that many people don't have jobs and so they don't have money.
> The government wants to build new houses, but with what money are we going
> to pay those houses? There are a few government [cash benefit] programs to help
> – *100 para los 60* and *red de oportunidades* - but this is little money and life in
> Bocas is very expensive. It is not even enough for food, let alone to pay for the
> houses. The houses are maybe around $30.000. How do they expect us to pay

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[111] Basilio is a Ngäbe man in his sixties and was one of the first residents of La Solución. He has been the first and only president of the directiva and has been in this role for over ten years.

[112] These newsarticles have been taken off the website in the meantime. However, various articles by online newspapers which referred to the Ministry's reports are still accessible and provide the same information using a similar discourse (e.g. Dia a Dia 2014; Lorenzo 2014; Machuca 2014; Redacción La Estrella de Panama 2014). Additionally, a Youtube video posted by the Ministry of Housing in 2014 reports on the same topic: Vivienda Panama 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eta8cR8QAUQ> accessed on 17/04/2020.

that? If they give us the construction material and the land, we can construct the houses; we can work. But they don't want to do that... It has divided the community. Some people believe it will be better and want to relocate. Others want to stay here. They don't want to go. We have our houses here. If we relocate, we will lose our house here, and we cannot pay for the house there so we will lose that too."

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Introduction

Basilio's comments clearly summarise residents' principal concerns about the proposed relocation. I came to learn much more about the relocation project since that initial conversation. In some instances, I asked residents about their opinions but more often they did not need any prompting. The relocation emerged as a theme in many of our conversations about various topics and Ngäbe residents were not hesitant to express their feelings about and stances toward it. For over ten years residents have heard about government plans to move their neighbourhood to another area on the island, a project initially referred to as an eviction and later rebranded as a relocation. Yet, throughout this period, they have never received clear information about what the project would entail or how it would impact them, nor have they been consulted or asked about their needs and desires.

Although state authorities claim that the relocation will benefit La Solución's residents by providing them with more dignified, healthy, and appropriate living conditions, the residents themselves have argued that the relocation will negatively affect them in various ways. They say that it will affect them economically, as they will lose the investments they have made in their current houses. They also stress that they will have to pay taxi or bus fares to go to work or school. Such costs put a financial strain on families who have limited economic resources. Some residents add that —given that the relocation area is inland— they will lose the ability to dock their boats, a consideration very important for several families.

There are many additional problems. Considering that the relocation site is out of town, many residents are worried about isolating themselves socially, which will increase their current peripheralisation. They all emphasised that new houses will require new financial investments of all sorts, such as a monthly or bi-weekly fee. This produces additional stress

and anxiety for many Ngäbe households, as they fear they will be unable to pay these fees from their current wages and may lose the house. Furthermore, Ngäbe often have a strong aversion to paying bills, particularly for resources that are generally available in their home communities and do not require payment (e.g. water, electricity, and housing). They consider paying bills as a form of threat to their household autonomy.

As I demonstrated in chapter three, having a house of one's own is associated with household autonomy and constitutes a significant aspect of 'living well'. The majority of Ngäbe households in La Solución constructed their own houses and feel the security and autonomy associated with 'having one's own house'. The new state-provided houses would not be considered to be entirely 'theirs', because for Ngäbe households, having to pay a monthly or bi-weekly fee for these houses equates to paying rent. If they are not able to pay the monthly or fortnightly amount, they might lose their home. Thus, by relocating, they lose the security and autonomy of 'having one's own house'. The relocation project thereby demonstrates the disregard of state authorities toward the indigenous significance of household autonomy. These are several of the challenges residents face in relation to the relocation project.

The responses by Ngäbe residents indicate that they feel mislead, disregarded, and misinformed by state authorities about this project. The residents of La Solución have challenged the state-planned relocation, stating that they are 'fine' in La Solución and do not wish to move. Yet their voices have not been heard. Residents have little political power and perceived legitimacy to resist and challenge the relocation project, in large part because their status as residents is ambiguous. The state and media have presented residents as *precaristas* (squatters) and *invasores* (invaders).[113] *Precarismo* (squatting) and *invasiones* (invading lands) are commonly thought of as unlawful practices. However, while various law proposals have sought to penalise the occupation of privately owned land (see section 7.2.3), peaceful usurpation is not currently illegal (Ministerio Público de Panamá 2015; Thampy 2013).

Furthermore, although the majority of residents settled in the area informally, this settlement process is not squatting. Squatting signifies the occupation of privately owned land. The mangrove area of La Solución was an unused space, which made residents assume

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[113] One example of a news article by Panama America in which the residents of La Solución are identified as *precaristas* is the following by Machuca (2014):
 <http://www.panamaamerica.com.pa/provincias/insalubridad-asi-viven-familias-en-isla-colon>.

it was a public space. The law does not permit mangroves to be titled and privately owned. Yet, over the past two decades, various plots of mangroves in La Solución have been titled and sold to non-residents. Ngäbe residents have had to ward off outsiders who claim to have ownership titles of the mangroves they built their houses on. Any state-issued communication or media accounts have failed to mention these ownership titles or any ambiguities surrounding ownership of mangrove areas.

In this chapter, I draw on Herzfeld's (1992) theory of bureaucratic indifference, to analyse state approaches concerning this project and their implications for residents. Bureaucratic indifference refers to "the rejection of common humanity" through bureaucratic approaches and representations (Herzfeld 1992:1). I suggest that the misinformation and lack of clear information concerning the relocation project are part of a deliberate political strategy which leads to local expressions of bureaucratic indifference and have placed residents of La Solución in a state of liminality and conditions of precarity. Following Butler (2009; 2012), I use the notion of precarity to refer to disproportionate levels of uncertainty, structural vulnerability, and exposure to violence and destruction (See also Han 2018; Hinkson 2017). I argue that the relocation project has constrained residents' capabilities to create their own well-being by generating precarity and excluding Ngäbe residents in various ways.

Ngäbe residents of La Solución have resisted their relocation and the dominant ideology imbued in it to different degrees. Theodossopoulos (2014) demonstrates the relevance of analysing such resistance. He calls for a de-pathologisation of resistance: the reversal of "systematic dismissal of resistance as illogical" or immoral (ibid.:422). This can be achieved by being attentive to "the cultural embeddedness and situated meaningfulness of resistance" (ibid.:416). I strive to take such a de-pathologising approach in my analysis of Ngäbe resistance to the projected relocation. I suggest that Ngäbe residents have resisted external authority and ideological domination primarily through political disengagement. I further argue that such political disengagement, alongside other forms of resistance, represent their endeavours to create good lives for themselves amidst the prevailing uncertainty.

7.1 The story of the planned relocation

As I gained greater familiarity with residents' perspectives on the topic and the various accounts of the planned relocation, I learned that the case was much more complex than what Basilio had revealed during my initial conversation with him in the opening vignette. Not all residents held such clear and firm stances toward the project as Basilio did. Many residents were undecided about whether to support or oppose the project. Others agreed with certain aspects of the relocation, while they contested other elements.

I argue that the ambiguous and divergent stances among Ngäbe residents toward the project were mostly due to the limited, inconsistent, confusing, and inaccurate information provided by the state about the relocation. For instance, state representatives have inconsistently informed residents about the costs of the houses. While residents were initially told that they would obtain the residences free of charge, they later learned that they would have to pay for the houses. The residents' support or opposition to the project depended in part on whether and how much they would have to pay for their new house. Uncertainty about details of the relocation project, like the costs of the houses, affected residents' position toward the project.

In this section, I provide an overview of the various underlying issues and events that have shaped the complex socio-political scene surrounding the relocation project. I relay the development of the relocation project as it has been communicated to me by various stakeholders, including Ngäbe and non-Ngäbe residents, local and national state representatives, legal experts, researchers, and other parties involved.

I encountered various challenges in striving to obtain clear and consistent information about the relocation, its specific parameters, and its current state of affairs, and about past communication related to the project. Furthermore, in instances in which I was able to speak with state representatives, they often provided me with conflicting information, which changed over time. The challenges I encountered in attempting to uncover the story of the relocation denote the ambiguity surrounding the relocation project. The various challenges also convey the incoherence of the Panamanian State as a social and political 'entity' (Gupta 2012). The project was designed at the national level and is reshaped completely with each successive government. When a new president assumes office, this president assigns new government officers to replace previous ones. Thereby, the approach to any state-planned projects shifts, as these new officers have different ideas and stances

from previous ones. Often the projects that these new officers initiate are announced before they are properly analysed and developed and may change or not be completed. Local state authorities are left with the task to explain the details of or justify such projects, while they only have access to limited, outdated, or incomplete information.

Threats to future residence in La Solución

Over the past couple of decades, residents of La Solución have experienced various threats toward their continued residence in the neighbourhood. The first time that residents of La Solución heard of a project that would evict or relocate them from their current neighbourhood was in the mid-2000s. Various residents, local politicians, and NGO representatives working on land rights issues explained to me that a tourism developer had been intent on purchasing the mangrove area of La Solución to construct a large marina. The government responded by attempting to move the residents out of La Solución. In turn, the residents responded by protesting against their alleged eviction. They "fought against this for a long time," one Ngäbe NGO representative stated. He explained that the eviction threats (*'amenazas de desalojo'*) eventually subsided and that the interested party withdrew.[114] The topic then remained dormant for several years, only to resurface in the early 2010s.

State officials made various visits to La Solución to speak about a projected relocation of the neighbourhood during the Martinelli government in 2012. Additionally, representatives of the Ministry of Housing came to conduct a census of the neighbourhood to determine the size of the population to relocate. Residents held various protests against the project in which they stood or marched around the municipal building during this time.

The relocation did not materialise during Martinelli's presidency, which ended in 2014 and ceded its power to Varela's government. As a presidential candidate, Varela had visited La Solución and discussed the residents' needs with them. During these visits, he had allegedly promised to provide the neighbourhood with electricity and improvements to the walkways.

However, as soon Varela assumed his presidency, in 2014, any dialogue about improving or developing the neighbourhood subsided and the relocation discourse reappeared. The new government initiated the *Techos de Esperanza* programme, managed by the Ministry of

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[114] This conversation took place on the 9th of December 2015.

Housing, in this same year. This programme aimed to improve the housing conditions of communities in certain risk areas by constructing and repairing houses.[115] State activity concerning the project has increased markedly since 2014, although the relocation has been on the horizon since the 2000s. Since the beginning of Varela's government in 2014-2015, residents have experienced more serious threats. Several Ngäbe friends relayed instances to me in which they were told that all residents would be required to vacate the area and that the government was going to "take them out" (*sacarles*). They were also told that any residents who were not cooperative and attempted to stay in the neighbourhood would be evicted ("*el gobierno va lanzar a los que quedan allí*").

Information and response pending…

Throughout the relocation project's development, La Solución's residents received conflicting information. For instance, residents were initially informed that they would receive houses free of charge and that the new neighbourhood would contain a school and all the necessary resources and infrastructure. When residents participated in the census, they were under the impression that there would not be any costs involved for them. Various residents were told that they would receive a 'free' house (*casa gratis*) if they participated in the census. According to Gerardo, a middle-aged Ngäbe resident, many individuals "wanted to have the 'free' houses and stood in line to get the census taken so that they would obtain their 'free house'".

Residents came to learn later that the houses would not be free of charge. They were told that they would likely be required to purchase the houses through a mortgage with the bank, or they would have to pay a monthly or fortnightly fee. Furthermore, representatives of the Ministry of Housing articulated to me that participation in the census did not assure families a house in the *Techos de Esperanza* project. The state never communicated the actual criteria for obtaining a state-provided residence to residents, nor have they confirmed how much residents would have to pay for the houses and what the arrangements for this payment would be. Additionally, several residents confided that they signed a paper without being aware of what they were signing and later realised that they had affirmed their agreement to the project.

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[115] The slogan of the Techos de Esperanza project was "decent houses for a better quality of life" (Miviot 2018).

These occurrences demonstrate that when residents allegedly consented to the relocation, they did so without being accurately informed or even without being aware of the consent process. Therefore they have not knowingly consented. It is therefore not surprising that the conflicting information provided about the relocation to residents has negatively affected residents' abilities to provide any kind of input. Additionally, residents have experienced a violation of their trust.

The neighbourhood *directiva* has attempted to hold a dialogue with the state about the relocation throughout these developments. *Directiva* members have demanded clear and up-to-date information about the project's parameters and state of affairs in various meetings with state officials. In such meetings, several residents and *directiva* members have requested the government to make improvements to La Solución rather than to relocate all the residents to another neighbourhood. For instance, the *directiva* drew up a list with requested improvements to their neighbourhood. This list included sanitary services and electricity for all households, a primary school, and potable water. However, the *directiva* has not received any responses to their demands for information or their requests for neighbourhood improvements. The *directiva*'s attempts at a dialogue with the state about the relocation have been met with silence and indifference.

Whose mangroves?

One factor that has caused confusion and uncertainty concerning the relocation project is that the ownership of the 'land' on which residents of La Solución constructed their houses is ambiguous and contested. This ambiguity surrounding land ownership in La Solución is, in large part, due to the ambiguous land tenure laws in Panama.[116] The legal categorisation of the mangrove area as 'land of the nation' (*tierra de la nacion*) or as 'municipal land' (*ejido municipal*) has proved to be particularly obscure and confusing. The municipality has considered the area of La Solución to be 'municipal land'. However, the law states that mangroves are non-transferrable areas and, as such, fall under the legal category of 'land of the nation'.[117]

Whether or not La Solución is Municipal land or 'land of the nation' has various implications for the legality of both construction and ownership. For instance, whereas the law permits

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[116] This information was obtained from ARAP (Autoridad de los Recursos Aquáticos de Panamá). See also Thampy 2013.

[117] This is alleged legal information obtained from a local legal expert (See also Thampy 2013).

construction on land belonging to the nation without having a property title, in the case of municipal land it is only legal to construct on if the municipality has granted permission.[118] Furthermore, the municipality exclusively possesses the legal ability to sell *municipal* land and not 'land of the nation' (Thampy 2013). The municipality can further grant the right to occupy *municipal* land to an individual. Once it has granted this right, this land can no longer be sold (ibid.).

Mangroves or any land located within 200 metres distance to the sea are considered to be non-transferrable areas (*áreas inadjudicables*), which cannot legally be titled nor privately owned.[119] Therefore, the titling and selling of mangrove areas are not considered to be lawful in Panama. Nonetheless, the municipality sold various titles to plots of 'land' located in the mangrove area of La Solución in the early 2000s. Local legal experts assert that these ownership titles were sold illegally. Given that the municipality considers the area to be municipal land, it remains a legal grey area. Furthermore, the legality of Ngäbe households' use of and construction in the mangrove area of La Solución remains ambiguous in part due to the confusion about whether this mangrove area is considered to be national or municipal land.

Another factor for the ambiguity of ownership and occupancy rights is the divergence between the 'traditional' land tenure systems employed by Indigenous Peoples and the legal land tenure system adhered to by the nation-state (Thampy 2013). A local Ngäbe lawyer explained that "traditionally," Indigenous Peoples shared the land and it was not necessary to title this land to determine who owned it. "People knew what land was theirs because they would have planted mango or coconut trees," he stated. "Indigenous Peoples want to preserve their land; their culture, because it is their 'home' (*su lugar*). The civil code (*el código civil*) has guaranteed such social use of land. Nonetheless, the state has removed Indigenous People from their land. Now it is all done through the law and titling, and more legal processes are necessary to legalise the land". As this Ngäbe lawyer asserted, the conflict between the traditional and the legal land tenure systems has—in general and in the long term—disadvantaged Indigenous Peoples in their access to and security over their land (See also Prado 2012; Thampy 2013).

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[118] This is alleged legal information obtained from a local legal expert (See also Thampy 2013).
[119] This is alleged legal information obtained from a local legal expert (See also Asamblea Nacional 1967; 2009).

When national land is not being used, it is generally considered to be 'free space'. When Ngäbe individuals and families moved to the unused mangrove space in Bocas del Toro, they treated this space as unoccupied and unused land belonging to the nation. Many residents stated that when they first moved to La Solución "there was nothing there", that "there were just mangroves" ('*puro manglar')* and that it was thus a "free space" ('*campo libre*' and '*de balde*') to use and occupy. They knew it was a free space and not owned by anyone because, as Ramiro explained to me once, "when it's someone's lot, that person marks it or cleans it. Then you know that no one is going to take it. But that was not the case; it was all mangroves, like a free space (*campo libre*). So each one took their piece".

Nonetheless, the state and various non-residents claim that Ngäbe households 'invaded' and illegally settled in the mangrove space. These claims solely had a legal basis if the land was categorised as municipal land and if it was titled and privately owned. Various state actors have asserted that the mangrove space had been titled prior to any Ngäbe residents settling in the area. Yet they have not supported these claims with any evidence. On the contrary, a map showing all the titled and sold lots (see figure 24) was allegedly drawn up between 1999 and 2004, after many Ngäbe residents had settled in the area.[120]

As a local legal expert asserted, if the Ngäbe residents illegally settled in La Solución, the state, municipality, or any private property owner could have initiated an eviction procedure (*proceso the lanzamiento*). Such a procedure did not occur at the time of initial settlement. Rather, eviction threats initiated in the 2000s and concurred with the rise in tourist activity in the area. The timings of these projected evictions appear to be based on economic rather than legal motives.

Moreover, there has not been any mention of private ownership of certain parts of La Solución in any of the claims made concerning the illegitimacy of Ngäbe residents' occupation of the area. The fact that plots of mangroves in La Solución have titles and are privately owned has been entirely concealed in any state-issued communication or media coverage of the relocation project. Additionally, the municipality has stopped selling land

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[120] This information was provided to me by the Representative of Bocas del Toro (Honorable Representante), Wilbur Martinez Dixon during a conversation taking place on 10th December 2015. When I attempted to verify this information at the local register of land titles, I was informed that these local records got lost in a fire. Subsequently at the provincial registry office, I was informed that they were unable to provide me with a list of purchased titles. They were only able to tell me if a particular lot was titled (or the title sold and to whom) if I could present them with an area section and lot number and location.

titles for this area since around the time the relocation project reappeared.[121] This concealment of municipal-issued property titles indicates the ambiguous legitimacy of the titling process of the mangrove spaces of La Solución.

There have been various attempts by outsiders to claim lands pertaining to La Solución over the years. Many Ngäbe residents of La Solución have experienced conflicts with foreign individuals who came to the neighbourhood to claim ownership of areas of mangroves on which Ngäbe residents had constructed their houses. In several of these cases, different foreign individuals have even claimed the same properties. This recurrence might indicate that the claimants sold their title upon encountering conflict and resistance from the Ngäbe residents or that they did not have any legal rights to begin with. The respective Ngäbe residents have resisted and refuted these claims of ownership by foreign individuals, sometimes with legal assistance. The majority of alleged property owners withdrew following a period of conflict. However, none of the respective Ngäbe residents have officially won land rights cases, nor can they prove the legality of their residence with any formal document.

These various legal issues surrounding land ownership, titling and use have affected Ngäbe residents in several ways. First, because the municipality has ceased to sell titles to the area, any Ngäbe residents who wish to increase their chances to stay in the area by going through the legal titling process have been unable to do so. Second, while the relocation has not taken place, residents have experienced uncertainty about whether or when they may be confronted with property ownership claims to the area in which they reside. They have thus been in constant anticipation of a potential threat to their continued residence in the area. Third, the local government has refused to make any material improvements to the neighbourhood or provide support for such infrastructural development since the relocation project was set in motion. In the following section, I argue that these and other impacts of the relocation have placed the Ngäbe residents of La Solución in conditions of precarity and in a perpetual state of liminality.

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[121] In 2009, the National Assembly passed law 23, which "sought to regulate land tenure through rights of possession" (Thampy 2013:84). However, this law did not regulate mangrove areas. This law was rescinded the same year "following protests from indigenous groups" (ibid.:85). Law 80 was then passed, which regulates rights of possession and titling in different zones (ibid.; Asamblea Nacional 2009).

Figure 24: Map of titled lots and projected streets in La Solución

Figure 25: Satelite photo of current houses and streets in La Solución (Esri Community Maps Contributors). Obtained from:
<https://www.arcgis.com/home/webmap/viewer.html?useExisting=1&layers=10df2279f9684e4a9f6a7f08febac2a9 > on 29 June 2020
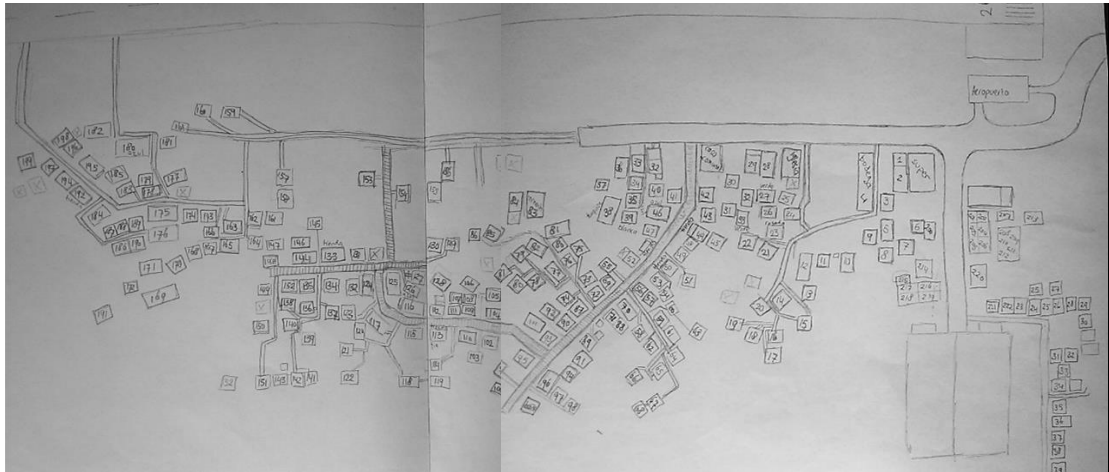
Figure 26: Hand-drawn map of houses and walkways in La Solución (2018)

7.2 Bureaucratic indifference, precarity, and liminality

16 February 2018

I went to the municipal building early in the morning to obtain information about a visit from a delegation of the Ministry of Housing in Panama City to the island, which was supposed to take place that day. I had heard about this potential visit from a *directiva* member a few days before and had attempted to verify and obtain information about it. However, in that endeavour, I had been sent from the mayor's office to the Vice Governor's office, followed by the local ministry of housing's office. No one had been able to confirm or provide any information about the visit, including my contact at the Ministry of Housing in Panama City.

Three residents of La Solución were particularly concerned about this visit. The first was Álvaro, a Latino-Panamanian resident and member of the *directiva*. He had originally heard about this visit from a contact at the municipality, but had not been able to verify the possible visit or to obtain additional information. The second was Ramiro, a middle-aged Ngäbe *directiva* member who had had various responsibilities within the *directiva* and always showed his concern about the neighbourhood as well as residents' personal matters. The third resident was Benicio, a Ngäbe man in his early sixties who was actively involved in neighbourhood matters. Benicio was not officially a member of the *directiva* at

this time, but had taken over Ramiro's task of going from door to door to collect the monthly rubbish fees from each household in the neighbourhood.

As I left La Solución for the municipal building on the morning of the 16th, I saw Benicio. He was walking towards the communal house in La Solución and informed me he would be waiting there with Ramiro. Once I arrived at the municipal building, I came across Álvaro, who was waiting for the same visiting delegation. He had just been informed that the Minister of Housing would be received at the Vice Governor's office a little later. When I inquired at the Vice Governor's office about the programme of the Minister's visit, an assistant informed me she was not aware of any set programme and that the Vice Governor had not come in yet.

On my way out, I met an Afro-Panamanian municipal employee, who informed me she was going to pick up the Minister from the airport. She explained that his flight was scheduled to arrive at 11:40 at the airport. She further told me that from the airport the delegation would walk directly to La Solución, after which they would visit the plot of land where the residents of La Solución will be relocated to ('*el terreno*'). She suggested that I come to the airport at 11:40 and indicated that I would be able to join them at that time.

However, when I arrived at the airport at 11:40, the minister and his delegation had already left the airport. They had not gone directly to La Solución like the municipal employee had stated they would, nor had they stopped by the municipal building. When I reached the municipal building, Álvaro was still waiting there and had learned that the delegation had travelled to the nearby island to visit the other housing project first. Álvaro soon found out that the delegation would return by boat to the dock at the police station. Álvaro and I walked to the Police Station to join the minister and his delegation there.

When the group finally arrived, after approximately an hour, Álvaro and I were able to ask the minister what his plans were. The Minister assured us that his next stop was La Solución. After this brief exchange, the delegation quickly stepped into various black cars and immediately drove off. Álvaro and I got into another car which drove us to La Solución. When we arrived there, however, none of the other vehicles, nor the Minister of Housing and his delegation were there. They had gone to the relocation site instead.

Álvaro and I decided to wait at the entrance to the airport, which the Minister would have to pass to enter the neighbourhood and to catch his flight back. When the first black car arrived, I asked the assistant whether the Minister was going to visit La Solución to speak

with the residents. The young man answered that he would ensure that the minister visit the neighbourhood before departing and that the residents would have a chance to speak with the minister.

Several minutes later, the minister's car drove past the airport and past the entrance to the central part of the neighbourhood of La Solución, straight to the sewage treatment plant. I spotted the minister getting out of the car, taking a quick look, and walking back to the airport, past the entrance to La Solución.[122] As he swiftly made his way to the airport, Álvaro and I caught up with him and managed to catch his attention for just enough time for him to explain to us how unhealthy the living conditions in the area were and to stress the urgency of the relocation project. He managed not to answer any questions, hear any comments, or offer any information about (the status of) the relocation project.

It was late afternoon when I finally returned to La Solución. Benicio and Ramiro were still at the communal house, where they had been waiting all day in vain. Ramiro and Benicio had been pessimistic about the likelihood that the Minister would visit the neighbourhood, speak with the people, and offer the residents a chance to voice their concerns. Nonetheless, they were visibly disappointed and upset when their predictions became a reality and when they understood that the Minister was not going to attend to them.

Figure 27: Location of La Solución

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[122] See figure 27.

7.2.1 Evasive politics and bureaucratic indifference

The Minister's avoidance of confrontation with residents and the failure to provide clear and accurate information about his visit represent a deliberate strategy to avoid confrontation with residents about the relocation. The Minister evaded answering any questions and took the brief moment he spent with Álvaro and myself to reinforce the state's official agenda and discourse (Harris 1991). Such evasive politics is representative of the state's overall approach regarding the relocation project. La Solución's residents have been waiting for accurate information about the relocation for several years. As Schwartz states, "to be kept waiting an unusually long time is to be the subject of an assertion that one's own time (and therefore, one's social worth) is less valuable than the time and worth of the one who imposes the wait" (1974:856). By keeping Ngäbe residents of La Solución waiting for clear and accurate information, the state has asserted its superiority and authority over the residents, making them into 'patients of the state' (Auyero 2011).

Local government employees have also provided inaccurate or conflicting information about various aspects of the planned relocation, as I outlined in section 7.1. The bureaucrats' failure to provide clear, consistent, accurate and timely information about the relocation to Ngäbe residents is likely a consequence of a deliberate political strategy at a higher level, rather than local intentional evasive politics. It represents the inconsistencies and outdated or incomplete information they have to work with in attempting to explain or justify projects or decisions made at a higher level. Nonetheless, in providing inaccurate, inconsistent, or incomplete information and being generally unsupportive, these local bureaucrats demonstrate a disregard for the inconveniences that they impose upon residents. Such behaviours are forms of bureaucratic indifference and structural violence that Ngäbe residents of La Solución have had to confront during the unravelling of the relocation-debate (Herzfeld 1992).

7.2.2 The political creation of precarity

The state has portrayed a particular image of La Solución and residents' living conditions in its promotion of the relocation project. This publicity about the project has represented La Solución as an unhealthy, poor, and unfit place to reside. It has further portrayed the Ngäbe

homes in the neighbourhood as precarious, improvised, and inadequate. This representation has served to justify the construction of improved residences in another area. However, the state representation of the neighbourhood and housing conditions did not correspond with residents' own perspectives and lived experiences. The majority of Ngäbe residents did not consider their homes to be precarious nor inadequate, as I demonstrated in chapter four. These homes have met Ngäbe residents' immediate and symbolic needs. As physical structures, they represent the physical, financial, and emotional investment residents made when they settled in the area, and throughout several years of inhabiting this land. Ngäbe residents feel that they fully 'own' their homes in La Solución, which they constructed with their own labour, despite the fact that they do not legally possess the 'land' on which the houses are built. These homes thereby provide them with household autonomy. The state-provided houses they would occupy in the new neighbourhood, in contrast, may never be completely 'theirs', as the majority of residents do not have the financial means to purchase them or take out a mortgage. They may face continual risk of losing the house if they are unable to pay the monthly fees (see section 7.1).

I suggest that describing Ngäbe residents' houses as precarious or inadequate dismisses the emotional and physical efforts residents have invested in creating their homes. Such a representation further disregards their emotional attachment to 'having one's own house', which I demonstrated in chapter three is an important aspect of living well. Rather than relieving Ngäbe residents from their supposed precarious living conditions, the relocation project has infused Ngäbe residents' lives with structural precariousness, or 'precarity' (Butler 2009; Han 2018; Hinkson 2017). The Panamanian State has placed Ngäbe residents of La Solución in conditions of heightened uncertainty and vulnerability through its deliberate political avoidance strategies and subsequent tactics of bureaucratic indifference.

I propose that the discourse on precariousness has been employed to legitimise the necessity to relocate these residents to a neighbourhood and residences that correspond with dominant ideas of dignified, adequate, and well-constructed housing. The political strategies and bureaucratic indifference implicated in the relocation project have inflicted uncertainty and vulnerability upon residents. It has also inhibited unified resistance among Ngäbe residents, as I outline in section 7.3. I propose that the uncertainty surrounding the relocation project—and the potential displacement that it is bound to generate—has been

a form of precaritization, defined by Lorey (2015) as a biopolitical approach to render citizens subservient and governable through insecurity and uncertainty (see Bower 2018).

7.2.3 Liminal citizens in a liminal space

Bureaucratic indifference, Herzfeld explains, "draw[s] on 'long-established forms of social, cultural, and racial exclusion in everyday life" and is enacted through the construction of the social boundaries of common humanity (1992:13). It entails a classificatory power of who is included and who is excluded from common humanity and who is or is not worthy of support (Herzfeld 1992; Engle Merry 1995). The forms of bureaucratic indifference implicated in the relocation project have been built on long-standing discriminatory practices. These practices have served to morally exclude Ngäbe from the deserving and worthy citizenry. In this sense, Ngäbe have experienced a denial of their common humanity through socio-economic, cultural, and racial exclusion in everyday life (Herzfeld 1992). This shared experience is represented in the story of the planned relocation.

I will now explore the various forms of exclusion that Ngäbe residents have been subjected to through the relocation project and the historical antecedents that have underpinned these forms of exclusion. I suggest that the relocation project has been a continuation of colonial ideologies and post-colonial practices in which Ngäbe have been treated as liminal citizens. Furthermore, I argue that the planned relocation has placed residents of La Solución in a liminal space in which true place-making has been continually suspended.

Symbolic exclusion through discourse and representation

I suggest that Ngäbe residents have been dehumanised through the discourse of *precarismo* (squatting). State issued communiqués and popular media accounts about the relocation project have presented the residents of La Solución, primarily Ngäbe families and individuals, as *precaristas* (squatters) and *invasores* (invaders). Both the terms *precaristas* and *invasores* have negative connotations in Panama. *Precarismo* (squatting) and *invasiones* (invading lands) are commonly assumed to be unlawful practices and have been presented as growing and escalating problems by popular media.[123] The discourse of *precarismo* has thus represented La Solución as an 'illegal settlement'.

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[123] see for instance news articles by Garcés Évila 2009 and Redacción TVN 2015.

Yet, the law does not currently specify squatting as an illegal activity and actually recognises people's right to squat on state-owned lands (Thampy 2013:74). Law 44 of 2013 introduced an addition to the criminal code (Código Penal – Título VI, Capítulo V, Artículo 229-A), which was adopted on the 19th of June 2013. This article penalised the occupation of privately-owned buildings and land with one to three years in prison (Ministerio Público de Panamá 2015). However, this law was declared unconstitutional in 2014 by the Panamanian Supreme Court of Justice (ibid.; Polanco 2015). Representative Hernán Delgado presented a blueprint for the re-introduction of this law to the criminal code in 2019, which has not been approved nor rejected at the time of writing this thesis (Rivera 2019). The two articles in the criminal code that currently address usurpation penalise the removal or alteration of markings that determine the boundaries of real estate that belongs to others (article 228, Chapter V, Title VI) and the dispossession of a property through violence, threat, deception, or violation of trust (article 229, Chapter V, Title VI), but not the peaceful occupation of a property (Ministerio Público de Panamá 2015).

Additionally, residents of La Solución do not consider themselves to be *precaristas.* While many initial residents requested permission from the municipality before constructing their houses, the majority of residents settled in the area without any official process or paperwork. However, as a local legal expert explained, the residents of La Solución are not *precaristas*. "P*recarismo,"* he clarified, "has a very particular definition. *Precarismo* is when I go invade someone's private property while they are using it." It refers to appropriating privately-owned land. The area in which Ngäbe residents settled could not have been privately owned, as it comprised mangroves, which cannot legally be titled, as I outlined in section 7.1. Resultantly, Ngäbe residents did not 'invade' this land as 'squatters'. The discourse of *precarismo*, then, misleadingly posited the residents as illegal or unethical actors. It has served to delegitimise any sense of worthiness or deservedness they may have felt as residents.

I suggest that these discourses have been aimed at undermining the informality of the Ngäbe urban settlement and Ngäbe ways more generally. Informality, when understood in opposition to the formal market economy and the legal bureaucratic position of the state, challenges state control and order (Alsayyad 2004). The informal ways in which Ngäbe residents settled in La Solución opposed state control of the urban sphere (although this

may not have been their intention).[124] Positing such informality as *precarismo* has served to condemn and discredit these forms of informality.

State-issued communication has further presented La Solución as a precarious settlement and an unhealthy place of residence, as I outlined earlier. Rosa and Cirelli (2018:1417) observe how supposed "precarious settlements" may "become the expression of a 'landscape of poverty'". Such representations of precariousness furthermore "confuse precarious living conditions and dirt" (ibid.). The supposed 'informal' Ngäbe settlement of La Solución has been treated like dirt; like 'matter out of place' (Douglas 2003) through the discourses of precariousness and *precarismo*. The state, by treating the Ngäbe residents of La Solución as 'out of place', has exercised its "power to exclude individuals as outsiders" (Herzfeld 1992:167). State actors have thereby denied Ngäbe residents access to the bureaucratic insider space and to common humanity (ibid.). The message exuded through this discourse is that the 'precarious' neighbourhood of La Solución and its majority Ngäbe residents do not belong.

Economic exclusion through the prioritisation of economic growth

Ngäbe residents have also been deemed unworthy of support based on their supposed economic inferiority. State actors have enacted such a stance through their prioritisation of economic growth and tourism development over the well-being of Ngäbe residents. The relocation project exemplifies this prioritisation, as I demonstrate below.

The planned relocation has been publicly promoted as a project that primarily aims to benefit the neighbourhood's residents and improve their living conditions. However, residents have doubted this to be the principal motive for the relocation. Residents believe instead that once they are relocated, the area will be developed for tourism. The primary reason for residents to believe this is that the initial objective of their eviction was purportedly to construct a marina in the area, as I outlined in section 7.2. Residents are also aware that the same area of land – or mangroves – could provide the state with a much higher tax revenue if, for instance, it was used for tourism purposes. As Denis, an eighteen-

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[124] Other forms of informality among Ngäbe are their partial participation in urban politics and the formal economy and their involvement in informal employment and income-generating activities. Ngäbe residents of La Solución participate in urban politics only partially because many of them remain registered as voters in their communities of origin or prior places of residence. They participate in the formal economy partially, because many obtain food from their *fincas* and construct their own house as opposed to renting.

year-old Ngäbe secondary school student explained: "in Panama, we have a lot of conflict about the land. The government can solve that. They have the responsibility, but instead, here they want to move all of the people out because they want to build a marina." Although this planned relocation has been presented as a project for the benefit of the families in La Solución, residents have instead perceived it as their 'eviction' for the benefit of the state and the economic elite.

Many Ngäbe residents have concluded that the state does not care about them and their neighbourhood. Denis told me that he believed a president should be responsible and strive to make things better for his people but according to him this is not the case in Panama. "Here the government is not like that," he stated. "They do not care about their people. They do not show their responsibility. This creates a problem for the people and creates poverty". According to Denis and various other Ngäbe residents, the state and politicians only help "their own people". Residents generally believe this lack of government care and support to be due in large part to their low socio-economic status (*"de bajos recursos"*), their failure to pay taxes, and their limited participation in the national economy, alongside their assumed economic and cultural 'backwardness'.[125] Ngäbe residents of La Solución have experienced being excluded as economic (tax-paying) actors, or as fully-fledged citizens because of their 'low economic worth'.

This economic exclusion contributes to residents' conditions of poverty, as Denis explained in his comments above. Denis was alluding to a politics of poverty; the idea that "a society's dominant ideology and who wields political power shape the incidence and response to poverty" (Raphael 2013:9). A politics of poverty considers politics to structure, shape, and reinforce potential economic inequalities through state policies and institutions which govern the distribution of economic resources (Brady 2003; 2009; Brady et al. 2016). Denis was referring to such an unequal distribution of economic resources and political power. He was further alluding to the capacity that the nation's president and other political actors have to reverse this unequal distribution and their unwillingness to use such capacity.

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[125] They pay fewer taxes because they generally 'have fewer economic resources' (*de bajos recursos*) and because they live in an 'informal settlement' where they are not paying resident taxes nor rent or mortgage payments. However, what is often overlooked is that Ngäbe residents provide great benefits to the local economy through their essential labour contribution in the (residential) tourism sector, often performing strenuous physical tasks that other (non-indigenous) individuals are unwilling to perform. This contribution enables the tourism industry to grow, which, in turn, brings in more taxes.

For Denis and other residents, the relocation project exemplifies the state's unwillingness to reverse any economic inequalities. The state has not heeded to residents' requests to make infrastructural improvements to the neighbourhood of La Solución or other requests for support. In the experiences of residents, the state has been unwilling to improve the neighbourhood for Ngäbe residents. Yet they believe the state will make improvements to the area for the development of tourism once the residents are displaced. Residents further fear that they will face increased economic exclusion through their displacement to a geographically remote location.

Physical exclusion through land commodification and dispossession

The planned relocation would physically exclude Ngäbe residents from the urban space, by displacing them from their current central locality to a distant location. This exclusion from the urban space is not a new experience for Ngäbe residents. In fact, they were never fully included in the urban space in Bocas del Toro. The first Ngäbe individuals that moved to Bocas del Toro settled in the urban periphery of the unused and undesirable mangrove space. However, the increase in tourism and other economic activity, along with the expansion of the town, led to a growing interest in the commodification and urbanisation of the formerly undesirable mangrove space. Resultantly, Ngäbe residents do not belong there any longer and are being pushed further to the suburban periphery, to another undesirable plot of land.

As Quicke and Green remark, such exclusion of Indigenous Peoples from urban spaces, is "the product of historical processes of colonial dispossession and displacement, a neoliberal political economy, and racial discrimination" (2017:175). Forced movement of individuals and communities "wherever they stand in the way of development", Hinkson notes, "is devastatingly familiar to Indigenous People" (Hinkson 2017:57). Indigenous Peoples, including Ngäbe, have been treated as 'moveable' subjects that are hindering national economic progress (Hinkson 2017).

Ngäbe have historically clashed with the national ideology of neoliberalism and economic progress because of their perceived 'cultural differences'. The state and dominant society have considered Ngäbe to be too culturally 'backwards' and incapable or unwilling to adapt to economic progress. Ngäbe people were seen as inferior and were not considered to constitute part of the national identity. In this sense, they were 'liminal citizens' – not (yet)

fully-fledged political and economic citizens according to the national neoliberal 'multiculturalist' ideology that prevails in Panama (Horton 2006; Velásquez Runk 2012).

The relocation project demonstrates that Ngäbe residents continue to be seen as too 'backwards' to adapt to economic progress in Bocas del Toro. One state official asserted, for instance, that Ngäbe residents "have to learn that nothing is for free" when I asked him about the costs of houses in the planned relocation project. "Everything costs money, and they cannot think that they can just get things for free," he added.[126] This remark reveals the underlying idea that Ngäbe individuals are unintelligent because they do not know how to deal with money and with the capitalist system. This idea represents a broader colonial and paternalistic attitude that the Panamanian State has historically assumed in relation to Ngäbe. Ngäbe were defined as an undesirably category of "others as incapable of adapting to the national environment" because of their supposed cultural 'backwardness' and their assumed unwillingness to adjust to the dominant economic ideology (Herzfeld 1992:168; see also Bourgois 1988).

Ngäbe residents of La Solución have continued to be treated as such unwanted 'others incapable of adapting' to the socio-economic environment (Herzfeld 1992). They have been treated as 'liminal citizens' of the urban environment. Local residents have expressed this sense of liminality through the various narratives about the state's prioritisation of tourism and lack of care about Ngäbe livelihoods and well-being. My interlocutors regularly referred to the government's unwillingness to properly assist Ngäbe individuals in various contexts, ranging from health consultations at the public hospital to claims they attempted to make regarding domestic abuse, employment exploitation, or land rights. Additionally, various interlocutors indicated that Ngäbe individuals are not seen to live in the centre of town, to own businesses in town, or to be in professional positions.

The liminal space between La Solución and the relocation

I have demonstrated how the relocation project has continued the historical experience of indigenous land dispossession driven by neoliberal economic ideologies. Additionally, the project has prevented Ngäbe residents from place-making in La Solución. I argue that the planned relocation has placed Ngäbe residents in a liminal residential space as a result of this constriction.

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[126] This conversation took place on 21 September 2015 at the municipality in Bocas del Toro.

The potential displacement involved in the project has added a sense of temporariness to Ngäbe households' residence in La Solución. Residents have been uncertain about whether and how long they can remain in La Solución. As a result, they have been unsure if any physical or economic investment in their houses and in improving the neighbourhood and its infrastructure would be worth it. Furthermore, municipal actors have refused to provide any support to communal development projects or make infrastructural improvements to the neighbourhood since the relocation project has been on the radar. With these antecedents in mind, I suggest that the projected relocation has prevented Ngäbe residents from relating to their natural and physical surroundings and from place-making in La Solución (Hinkson 2017). It has thereby placed them in a continual state of liminality.

Liminality, as theorised by Turner, generally regards a temporary 'in-between state'. Swerts has argued that for undocumented individuals "their state of in-betweenness becomes part of the everyday" through the continual suspension of passage into a 'new' state (2017:381). Similarly, Ngäbe residents of La Solución have remained in continual suspension about whether, when, and how their 'in-between state' would pass into a new state.

7.3 Everyday resistance

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Four days prior to the Minister's visit, I found Benicio in the door opening of Ramiro's house, discussing the alleged visit with him. Benicio wanted to write a letter to the Minister, signed by the *directiva*, demanding more information about the relocation and a response to their earlier requests. However, Ramiro did not see any sense in it:

> Benicio: "Without a fight, there is no victory (*sin lucha no hay victoria*), we have to remember that."

> Ramiro: "You say to the people, although they have to go to work, 'hey the ministry is going to be here on Friday'. Even though they [the minister and his delegation] are not going to come [to La Solución] and attend to us (*atendernos*), we are going to be there, waiting. If they do come, we are going to give them the letter. But there's not any sense in that if it's only the lone two of us there, while everyone else is working and getting paid… and us?" ….

"We don't know which day they are coming, but let's say it's the 16th. If we tell people 'hey let's put on a demonstration, the minister is coming', likely they will respond 'no man, I have to work'. And like that even when there is a fight there is no victory (*una lucha no hay victoria*). Last time we had a demonstration, how many people went? A few women and children only, and the majority? Everyone has other commitments (*todos tienen compromiso*). We can't get the people moving. I don't want to demotivate you (*desanimarte*), but we have to be realistic (*hay que ver la logica*)."

Ramiro ended the conversation by switching to another topic. I walked with Benicio to the communal house and we sat down on the steps in front of the entrance. He felt despondent ("*esas cosas desaniman*"). "This has always been the case," he stated. "That a minister of some sort or president comes and everyone remains quiet (*todos se quedan quieto*). But what can I do? I planned to gather the people as well. But if there is not any support, I cannot do anything".

The *directiva* did not write a letter to the Minister, nor did they inform the community of the alleged visit. Had they undertaken either of these actions, it would have been in vain, as the minister indeed did not 'attend to them', as Ramiro predicted. Inaction appeared to have been the right course, given that Ramiro's realistic outlook became a reality. While Benicio still had hopes of organising a more overt act of resistance, Ramiro's attitude appeared to resemble one of fatalism. However, I suggest that Ramiro's stance, rather than a fatalistic acceptance, embodies an expressed resentment of the inevitable, based on prior experiences.

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Two themes emerge from this conversation, which influenced Ramiro's refusal to organise an act of resistance and Benicio's conveyed disappointment. The first theme is an expressed discontent with the lack of unified support from the community to challenge the relocation project. The second theme is a recognition of the bureaucratic indifference inflicted on the residents of La Solución and of the state's refusal to heed to the residents' voiced needs, requests, and demands. The limited unified resistance has, in part, been affected and shaped by this bureaucratic indifference, as I demonstrate below.

7.3.1 Lack of unified resistance

A significant portion of residents united and demonstrated against the relocation when they initially experienced eviction threats, as well as when they learned that they had been misinformed about the costs of houses. These demonstrations occurred when Basilio, the president of the *directiva*, was still residing in the neighbourhood and was actively involved in communal affairs.

Basilio had acted as a mediator between residents and outsiders, including the state. He was not an authoritative figure, but instead spoke to the community – uniting them through his speech – and represented their interests to the outside world, like a proper Ngäbe leader (Young 1971; cf. Clastres 1989; Killick 2007). Community members, in turn, generally trusted his judgement and accurate representation of their interests. As a result, Basilio had been able to garner sufficient support for demonstrations and other acts of resistance against the relocation project.

Basilio was offered state employment and a house in another city on the mainland several months after my first acquaintance with him in 2016. Basilio's move out of the neighbourhood left a vacuum and consequently, unified resistance against the relocation project faded. Various interlocutors, including local politicians, related this offer of employment to Basilio's opposition to the relocation project. These individuals indicated that his state employment may have been a governmental tactic to constrict resistance to the relocation project.

Political strategies and subsequent bureaucratic indifference – as described earlier – further constrained unified resistance by Ngäbe residents. The representation of La Solución as an informal, precarious, and illegal settlement in state and media communication has served to silence the voices of Ngäbe residents (Alsayyad 2004) and to delegitimise their expressed needs and demands. Consequently, any posed opposition to the project has been refuted and cast as residents', or 'squatters'', 'unwillingness to cooperate'.[127] This de-rationalisation of residents' opposition, by casting it as uncooperativeness toward a project that is supposedly for their benefit, is a form of pathologisation which "aims at de-legitimizing" or 'pathologising' resistance (Theodossopoulos 2014:419). State and media representations of La Solución thereby cast residents' opposition as "matter out of place"

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[127]For instance, news articles by González (2014) and Peña (2015) about other informal ('squatter') settlements present Ngäbe residents as squatters that are unwilling to cooperate.

(ibid.:426), a position often internalised by the residents themselves, as I outlined in section 7.2.2.

Additionally, many residents have felt ambiguous and doubtful about their stances toward the relocation as a result of the lack of clear and accurate information provided. Others have failed to feel the imminence of the threat because of the limited communication about the project. This ambiguity and limited sense of imminence have constrained residents' capabilities to present a united front toward the state. In these ways, the indifferent approach by the state has served to limit overt or material resistance to the relocation among Ngäbe residents of La Solución.

Historical tactics to render the Ngäbe governable and limit unified resistance

Such political diffusion of potential indigenous resistance by the state is not a new experience for Ngäbe. The state has a history of interfering with Ngäbe political affairs, attempting to incorporate them into the national political arena and render them more 'governable' (Karkotis 2013; Bort and Young 1985). Ngäbe have historically decentralised socio-political power, maintaining authority at the level of the household. Ngäbe households were able to retain high levels of individual autonomy due to their historical settlement pattern, dispersed over a vast terrain (Young 1971). This dispersity and individual autonomy made it difficult for external political actors to influence significant segments of the Ngäbe population (Bort and Young 1985). The decentralised socio-political structures further led the national government to assume that the Ngäbe did not have any operable political system (ibid.).

The Panamanian government has sought economic and political integration of the Ngäbe population through 'development' projects and by introducing various types of political institutions in Ngäbe areas throughout the twentieth century. The government instituted a network of externally appointed *Corregidores* to manage internal affairs. An additional system of Representatives was introduced in 1972 to represent the Ngäbe population to the state. The government also extended official political recognition to Ngäbe *Caciques* in 1968 (Bort and Young 1985). The power of these political figures was recognised by the government as such but did not represent their actual authority within Ngäbe society. For instance, the Ngäbe *caciques* had usually gained a following within their communities through the display of specific personal qualities as 'leaders'. However, they would not have normally been extended any political power by their Ngäbe 'followers' (ibid.). Such external

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imposition of political power onto Ngäbe individuals has served to divide the Ngäbe politically. It has minimised their capabilities to collectively challenge and contest external encroachment and exploitation of their land or other undesirable external influences (Bort and Young 1985). Similarly, the recent bureaucratic tactics described in this chapter have served to destabilise the Ngäbe collectivity in La Solución and to constrain their capabilities to resist collectively.

7.3.2 Indirect resistance

So far I have demonstrated how overt opposition to the relocation project has been restrained yet I would also like to highlight how Ngäbe residents have symbolically resisted the state-planned project and the dominant ideology and discourse in various ways (Scott 1985). These forms of resistance are less visible to the average observer, who may attribute to Ngäbe residents a sense of disunity and passive compliance. As Walker (2012:29) suggests, following Mahmood (2006), "what may appear to be mere passivity or docility to an outside observer may actually be a form of agency, yet one that is comprehensible only from within the particular discourses and structures of subordination that create the possibility of its existence".[128] I argue that the apparent passivity and disjointedness among Ngäbe residents toward the relocation project and state authority are themselves a form of resistance.

Scott (1985) argues that everyday symbolic resistance can be expressed in the forms of false compliance, feigned ignorance, sabotage, slander, or dissimulation. I suggest that these 'quiet' or indirect forms of resistance (Alsayyad 2004) are more closely aligned with Ngäbe ways of interacting and relating. Ngäbe avoid overt confrontation when they do not deem this a necessary course of action, akin to other Lowland South American groups (Young 1971). Furthermore, Ngäbe individuals tend to refrain from exposing their true beliefs and thoughts about certain matters to non-Ngäbe others, as several of my friends have confided.[129]

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[128] Walker demonstrates, for instance, how the Amazonian Urarina, by willfully indebting themselves to outsiders, enact their agency within a power structure pervaded with inequalities and alongside, or even through, acts of submissiveness and self-deprecation (2012).

[129] Several anthropologists have attributed to the Ngäbe a certain reservedness about their 'traditional' customs and knowledge (see for instance Bourgois 1988; Karkotis 2012; Young 1971).

Ngäbe responses to the relocation project reflect this avoidance of overt confrontation and reservedness regarding their true beliefs. The majority of Ngäbe residents would not openly confront politicians or bureaucrats about the process of the relocation. However, many individuals indirectly denunciated the ways in which the state has dealt with this project. The compliance residents seemingly offer was, in many cases, a matter of appearances. Arguing from the relative security of their socially intimate context in La Solución, the residents reaffirmed, on a daily basis, their unwillingness to be relocated, entrenching themselves in their homes—the ultimate locus of Ngäbe authority. In Ngäbe society, the decentralisation of power and authority to the level of the household helps prevent any authoritative figure from assuming power and domination over others. As Clastres (1989:213) asserts, the observance of individual autonomy and rejection of external authority represents "a means of preventing the emergence of a state, which is a unifier by nature".

Ngäbe residents of La Solución have avoided the imposition of such external authority by shunning political engagement, although this may not have been a deliberate strategy. When Ngäbe residents prioritised their daily household matters and other necessities and commitments over political engagement, they were keeping such politics out of their daily lives and their public concerns. They simultaneously avoided any external actor to exercise authority over their lives. Residents who prioritised paid employment over a meeting with a state actor, whom they knew from prior experience would not satisfactorily engage with them, were indirectly circumventing submission to the authority of the state actor in question. Residents' apparent 'lack of care' about the future of the neighbourhood, although not necessarily a calculated strategy, indirectly served to reject bureaucratic authority and the political ideology involved in the project.

The vignette about the Minister's visit offers a good example. Ramiro and Benicio waited for the Minister to meet them on their ground. When it had become clear that the Minister would not visit La Solución before his departure, I called Benicio to inform him of this. I suggested that he and Ramiro come to the airport so we could all speak with the minister together. However, Benicio and Ramiro refused to come to the airport to meet with the minister. "We now have a communal house precisely for these kinds of meetings; this is the best place for him to meet with us. If he is at the airport and does not bother to come to the communal house, it is clear he does not have any interest in speaking with us", Benicio stated.

Ramiro and Benicio indirectly challenged the Minister's political authority by declining my suggestion for them to join me at the airport. They patiently waited for the minister to attend to them rather than showing their vulnerability and concern to the minister and submitting themselves to his authority (as Álvaro and I had done by continuously following the Minister and his delegation). Ramiro and Benicio 'quietly' challenged and subverted the state's authority by refusing to subject to the bureaucratic machinery.

Ngäbe residents further rejected the dominant ideology implicated in the relocation project by stating that they were happy living in La Solución. Residents often stated that "we are fine here", most commonly in response to questions involving the relocation. Their statements indirectly denied the rationale of the relocation. It also attracted attention to the urban lives that households created for themselves when they came to the neighbourhood and which they have been building ever since. In this sense, continuously repeating the phrase "we are fine here" was a form of indirect resistance, a weapon of the weak (Scott 1985). Residents were not necessarily claiming that La Solución was a healthy residential environment. They were striving to exercise and protect their autonomy over their own conditions for life. Residents were simultaneously rejecting the dominant neoliberal ideology which prioritises economic growth through foreign investment and tourism over Ngäbe residents' well-being. Additionally, stating that they are fine in the neighbourhood and limiting direct resistance has allowed residents of La Solución to maintain a low profile. The longer that residents are able to remain in La Solución, the more legal legitimacy they may have to defend their rights to continue to live there. The Panamanian civil code (Código Civil - Artículo 1696) recognises the right to apply for legal ownership of a property if an individual has been residing publicly, peacefully, and uninterruptedly on this property for fifteen years or more (Thampy 2013).[130]

The particular type of indirect resistance—encapsulated by the statement "we are fine here"—reveals that the majority of Ngäbe residents have not completely 'internalised' the dominant ideology. Nor have they accepted the bureaucratic indifference implicated in the relocation project. On the contrary; residents did not believe that this relocation project and the way the state has handled it was 'just'. They have resisted 'symbolic incorporation' into the ideology, which has driven the planned relocation (Scott 1985).

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[130] Civil Code: Libro Cuarto Título XVIII De la Prescripción, Capítulo II de la prescripción del dominio y demás derechos reales. Obtained from: https://docs.panama.justia.com/federales/codigos/codigo-civil.pdf, accessed on 18 April 2020.

I do not mean to suggest that such resistance to symbolic incorporation into the dominant ideology or the avoidance of externally imposed authority were necessarily deliberate and calculated resistance tactics. These attitudes may demonstrate "a certain degree of awareness of the order of domination" (Theodossopoulos 2014:423). However, to state that they were all premeditated and carefully measured acts of resistance would be to essentialise La Solución's residents and misrepresent them as overly rational subalterns (ibid.; Rabinowitz 2014). Several residents, such as Benicio and Ramiro, may have carefully considered their varying approaches of interaction and refusal to interact with certain bureaucratic actors. Others may not have reflected upon the implications of their political disengagement and prioritisation of daily commitments, as Benicio and Ramiro's laments about their neighbours' lack of support reveal.

Ngäbe residents have responded to the relocation project and the various forms of bureaucratic indifference involved in ways that align with their own ideologies, rather than by actively and directly confronting state authorities. These responses demonstrate awareness of and opposition to the bureaucratic indifference involved in the relocation project, but have not significantly altered any unequal power structures or reduced the structural violence implicated in these structures. Residents remain awaiting further information or progress to determine the most appropriate responses. They have been enduring the state of liminality in which the planned relocation has placed them… until further notice.

7.4 Conclusion: being 'fine' amidst precarity

"We are the only beings that change and adapt easily, but this change will be abrupt and difficult" -

~ Yaniro

In this chapter, I have argued that the relocation project, which aimed to relieve Ngäbe residents of their supposed precarious living conditions, has actually generated conditions of precarity in residents' current lives. Many residents have experienced the planned relocation as a continuous threat; an external force that could unsettle their current lives. As Yaniro explained to me, "there are so many things that maintain the relationship of people to a place. It's not that easy to move people overnight. There are situations that

people do not understand. It affects the way people live together, transportation and mobility, but it also affects the psychological part. The people are always on alert. There is a lot of psychological tension. Some it affects and others not. It's part social, economic, and part psychological".[131] Households have continuously been anticipating their potential displacement, while their residential statuses in La Solución have remained 'on hold'. Residents have been forced to 'wait' for new information or evidence. In the meantime, they had to constantly readjust their life plans in response to rumours or vague information. This perpetual state of liminality has constricted residents' capabilities to create their own well-being.

I argue that the evasive politics and bureaucratic indifference described in this chapter are forms of structural violence that have thwarted Ngäbe residents' efforts to live well in La Solución. The state's failure to provide accurate and reliable information about the relocation project has significantly constrained residents in their abilities to take a firm stance, unite their forces, and make demands. Resultantly, it has limited the capabilities of Ngäbe residents to create their own 'terms of engagement' (Appadurai 2004) and shape their conditions for life (de L'Estoile 2014).

When residents challenged the relocation project and suggested alternatives, their voices remained unheard (Valdivia 2018). Ngäbe residents have attempted to express themselves using the discourses and concepts of the normalising neoliberal society in a way in which the dominant society can understand them (Crehan 2016; Spivak 1988). However, state actors have blatantly ignored residents' concerns. They have continued to emphasise the need for this project and its taken-for-granted benefits for residents, focusing on ideas such as sanitation, and pathologising the living conditions in La Solución as unhealthy. Resultantly, the negative impacts this project has already had on residents' daily lives have remained invisible to the public. In this way, the bureaucratic indifference resulting from the state's discriminatory political approach has become "naturalised and habitual" (Herzfeld 1992:184).

Nonetheless, Ngäbe residents have contested this indifference and the dominant ideology it reflects, albeit in indirect, symbolic ways. Residents have refuted the dominant discourses which cast them as squatters living in an unhealthy and precarious environment by stating that they are 'fine' in La Solución. Moreover, they have avoided the imposition of external

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[131] This conversation took place on the main road in La Solución just before the start of a communal meeting on 6th March 2016.

authority by disengaging politically and by prioritising their paid employment or other commitments over meetings with state actors. Residents have challenged the 'justness' of the project and the bureaucratic indifference involved in various ways.

Additionally, residents have strived to minimise the experienced psychological pressure of the relocation. They have endured the permanent uncertainty regarding their futures by continuing to focus on their daily necessities, on the importance of personal autonomy, and on 'having one's own house'. As Hoggart (1957:92) states, "when people feel that they cannot do much about the main elements of their situation, feel it not necessarily with despair or disappointment or resentment, but simply as a fact of life, they adopt attitudes toward that situation which allow them to have a liveable life under its shadow, a life without a constant and pressing sense of the larger situation".

Ngäbe residents, on their part, have resisted the constant and pressing sense of the relocation threat by going about their daily lives, by engaging as little as possible with the political contours of the prospected relocation, and by stating that they are 'fine' in La Solución—a statement, which, as I explained, can be seen as a form of indirect resistance. Disconnected from the bureaucratic administration of their lives, they focus on their households, which from the Ngäbe point of view, epitomise autonomy and independence. Anthropological work has elaborated the cultural significance of such indigenous perspectives (See Karkotis 2012; Young 1971; and more generally, Overing and Passes 2000; Rosengren 2000) It is disappointing to see that the state authorities remain oblivious to the significance of indigenous meaning.

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined how urban Ngäbe residents in the town of Bocas del Toro perceive and experience their urban living conditions and relate these conditions to their notions of poverty and living well. I have further explored how Ngäbe households strive to live well in an urban environment and how the urban challenges they face impact their abilities to live well. In this respect, my research has engaged with timely issues pertaining to indigenous urbanisation by demonstrating the significance of rural lands and cultivation practices in Ngäbe residents' urban lives, aspirations, and visions of the good life. It has also provided fresh information to many claims made within that literature regarding multi-sited dwellings, multi-directionality, and the drivers behind such indigenous urbanisation. The ethnography presented in the preceding chapters makes available local, previously undocumented perspectives, which contribute to an emerging body of anthropological literature on Lowland South American indigenous perspectives of well-being and poverty.

Having followed the daily lives of Ngäbe households in the neighbourhood of La Solución for 16 months, I found that Ngäbe notions of living well are based on a cultural matrix of ideas that substantiate what it means to be a good Ngäbe person and live properly according to a set of values. These values, which include household autonomy, generosity, hard work, cooperation, and care, are most prominently exemplified by the act of cultivating food. However, living well also increasingly requires money and education, which drives a growing number of Ngäbe households to reside in urban areas. In these urban areas, Ngäbe residents are faced with a number of challenges to their well-being, among which are the inability to cultivate food, intensified social relations in a crowded neighbourhood, ethnic discrimination, exploitative employment, and discriminatory political approaches. This thesis has demonstrated that the structural violence produced by a hierarchical political economy of ethnic and race relations and political tactics involved in a state-planned relocation project most severely constrain Ngäbe residents in their abilities to live well. I have argued that the ethno-racial hierarchy, as well as the discriminatory political approaches which Ngäbe are subjected to, are based on a long-standing dominant ideology which sees Indigenous Peoples and their lifeways as inferior and backwards.

The findings of my study have demonstrated that dominant notions of poverty have limited applicability on Indigenous Peoples. While poverty assessments and reports using dominant definitions and economic indicators consistently identify Ngäbe households as poor, this

thesis has demonstrated that urban Ngäbe residents more commonly reject the idea that they live in poverty. I also argue that uncritically imposing a label of poverty on Ngäbe peoples disregards the unequal social and political relations that generate adverse conditions among urban Ngäbe households, as well as the ways in which residents strive to live well in the face of many challenges. In these conclusions, I will further summarise the principal findings and arguments of this thesis in greater detail below.

Overall, my research has found that urban Ngäbe households have moved from their previous, mostly rural communities to the urban neighbourhood of La Solución as part of their striving to live good lives. Money and state-provided education now form integral aspects in Ngäbe individuals' abilities to live well, an increasingly common experience among indigenous Lowland South Americans (Micarelli 2015; Sarmiento Barletti 2015; Whitten and Whitten 2015). As paid employment or other opportunities to obtain cash are limited and education is still relatively challenging to attain in the Ngäbe-Buglé comarca and other rural places of Ngäbe residence, progressively more Ngäbe households decide to move to Bocas del Toro and other urban areas.

This urbanisation trend and the increased emphasis on cash and education among Ngäbe do not signify a shift away from the significance of their indigenous lands, values, and perspectives. Contrarily, I have argued throughout this thesis that the *finca* – a household's cultivated land – and the way of life it allows epitomises Ngäbe ideals of living the way they believe one 'should' live, which forms the basis of their notions of living well. Similar to other Lowland South American groups (see Overing and Passes 2000; Santos-Granero 2015a and others), Ngäbe live well by working hard, cooperating, expressing generosity through sharing and caring, and observing personal and household autonomy. These notions reflect a set of ideals and guidelines to strive toward and practice continuously. I have demonstrated how Ngäbe ideals on how to live well are embodied most prominently by the act of cultivation. Urban Ngäbe residents often lamented that they are unable to cultivate in La Solución and bemoaned this 'lack of culture' in the urban environment, where cultivating *verdura* is indicative of Ngäbe culture. They frequently invoked nostalgic references to life in the *finca* and the autonomy, space, and abundant resources it provides (e.g. food, water, fresh air, and shade). I argue that this kind of nostalgia, alongside the perpetual laments about urban life, serve as a reference to and continued identification with Ngäbe culture and the 'proper' way to live.

Throughout this thesis, I have highlighted the importance of the *finca* in Ngäbe residents' urban lives and in their abilities to live well. Many urbanised Ngäbe make regular visits to their *fincas* and they maintain their *fincas* to various degrees. The ties urban Ngäbe residents maintain to their agricultural lands and communities of origin allow them to retain options for and aspirations about returning. Like other urbanising Lowland South American Indigenous Peoples (see Alexiades and Peluso 2015; 2016; McSweeney and Jokisch 2007; 2015; Peluso 2015; Peluso and Alexiades 2005), many Ngäbe households in La Solución intended for their urban residence to be temporary or cyclical, even if it may have become permanent in some cases. I argue that such intended temporary residence and aspirations to return to their *fincas* have allowed various families to endure the urban inconveniences they faced. The initial temporariness of urban residence allows Ngäbe individuals to focus on their immediate household concerns and limit the impacts of external authority, discrimination, ideological domination, and structural violence on their daily lives.

Nonetheless, Ngäbe residents face various challenges to living well in the urban environment. As I have demonstrated in this thesis, the ethno-racial hierarchy that structures economic, political, and social life in Bocas del Toro places Ngäbe in a marginal position vis-à-vis non-indigenous others. Their positioning at the bottom of the hierarchy restricts individual Ngäbe 'fields of opportunities' to obtain the resources needed to live well (de L'Estoile 2014) and makes it difficult for Ngäbe to meet their immediate and symbolic needs. Ngäbe residents have limited power and possibilities to act towards their desired future (Appadurai 2013) within the urban context. This hierarchical context thereby generates and imposes upon Ngäbe conditions of precarity, vulnerability, and poverty. Ngäbe individuals find it exceedingly difficult to turn these conditions around because they are structurally upheld by the ethnic hierarchy, as well as by political approaches and ongoing bureaucratic indifference.

Another significant challenge to urban Ngäbe residents' well-being is a state-planned project to relocate the residents of La Solución to another, more distant, location. This relocation project officially aims to alleviate residents from their purportedly precarious and poor living conditions. However, I have demonstrated how this project places residents in conditions of precarity, constrains them in their abilities to create good lives for themselves, and imposes dominant ideas of adequate, dignified, and well-constructed housing upon Ngäbe residents. The project thereby dismisses not only the emotional and physical efforts residents have invested in creating their homes in La Solución, but also

indigenous notions of living well – prioritising, instead, a non-indigenous vision of progress and well-being (Feiring et al. 2003; Mathews and Izquierdo 2009). I argue that this disregard for indigenous values is a continuation of a historical and colonial tendency to dismiss indigenous perspectives as worthless and is representative of a long-standing political approach. The Panamanian State has historically attempted to incorporate Ngäbe and other Indigenous Peoples into the national economy and political arena through education, cash benefit programmes, and economic development projects (Wickstrom 2014; Bort and Young 1985). Such political approaches have exacerbated indigenous marginalisation in Panama (Velazques Runk 2012; Wickstrom 2003).

My research has found that the more Ngäbe engage with non-indigenous others and with the national political economy, the greater significance economic and political power have in their lives. Urban Ngäbe residents are well aware that their access to those forms of power is severely constrained in the inter-ethnic context, by virtue of their indigeneity. I have demonstrated how awareness of their limited economic and political power impacts Ngäbe perceptions and experiences of poverty. Comparisons with non-indigenous others in the inter-ethnic context leads many Ngäbe residents to conclude that they, as Ngäbe, are poor, exemplified by the statement "our race is poor". Yet, as I have argued in this thesis, the idea that Ngäbe are poor is a comparative notion, produced by the ethno-racial hierarchy that structures their economic lives. Urban Ngäbe residents commonly reject the label of poverty when speaking of their individual or household conditions. Ngäbe individuals may refer to their collective lower socio-economic position and their limited access to resources. They may even strategically invoke discourses of poverty. But they do not generally consider themselves to be poor or to live in poverty.

The label of poverty is one that is externally imposed upon Ngäbe. I argue that imposing such a label obscures the social relations and political approaches that structure and condition their urban lives. An external identification of Ngäbe as poor takes for granted the facticity and objectivity of the ethno-racial hierarchy (Green 2006). It disregards the ways in which this hierarchy and its associated structural violence produce the conditions identified as poverty. It further imposes dominant ideas upon Ngäbe individuals about what they ought to value and that they do not have enough (Feiring et al. 2003). Such labelling of Ngäbe poverty neglects any indigenous meaning-making and disregards the capacities Ngäbe have and the actions they undertake to live good and meaningful lives. I argue that such a classification of indigenous poverty is based on an enduring dominant ideology that

considers indigenous lifeways to be inherently inferior and impoverished (Legoas and Arenas Barchi 2014; Zipin et al. 2015).

My research has found that increasing exposure to this dominant ideology and discriminatory ideas and practices has led various Ngäbe individuals to internalise ideas about their inferiority. Many Ngäbe individuals in Bocas del Toro may experience feelings of shame, encumbrance or depreciation regarding their indigenous heritage, which is expressed in rejection of (parts of) their indigeneity. Nonetheless, urban Ngäbe residents of La Solución have resisted ideological domination in various ways. They have resisted the bureaucratic administration of their lives by focusing on the household as the locus of autonomy and independence. They have also challenged the dominant ideology, which sees their lifeways as inferior by rejecting the label of poverty and continuing to strive to live well according to their indigenous values. The oft-made statement "we are fine here" represents this ideological and political resistance that I describe.

As I have demonstrated in this thesis, Ngäbe conditions of marginalisation, precarity, and inequality are politically and socially generated problems with economic repercussions. These conditions did not originate from a lack of education or human capital, as the national neoliberal ideology presumes. Conditions of poverty among Ngäbe are therefore not resolved through education and instructing Ngäbe on dominant values and supposedly 'adequate' ways to live, nor by incorporating them into the dominant economy and ideology. True interest in improving the lives of Ngäbe would entail taking their ideas seriously about what a good life looks like and how they strive to practise living well. Making actual improvements to Ngäbe well-being involves identifying the structural obstacles that generate conditions of poverty and prevent them from creating good lives for themselves, points which I have strived to convey in this thesis. It requires understanding how indigenous ideas on and aspirations for 'the good life' help them combat and overcome structurally imposed conditions of poverty. Such an understanding would allow observers to admire and respect Ngäbe individuals' resilience and their ability to endure urban inconveniences and challenges. This thesis has been dedicated to drawing attention to these alternative, local views, challenges, and inconveniences.

Future research

Ngäbe interactions with the state deserve and require further investigation. The relocation project, in particular, provides an excellent entry point for such research. State authorities

have allegedly started the construction of the new residences in the relocation site at the time of writing this thesis. Ngäbe residents remain uninformed about the details of the relocation and the implications for residents. This relocation, if it comes to pass, will have tremendous consequences for urban Ngäbe livelihoods and severely impact their well-being and potentially their senses of indigeneity. Ngäbe residents' urban experience is undeniably shaped by the escalating commodification of urban land driven by neoliberal political and economic ideologies (Quicke and Green 2017). This relocation most prominently exemplifies such commodification and further research on indigenous urban experiences of such commodification is urgently needed. As indigenous urbanisation is intensifying, it becomes increasingly important to understand how Indigenous Peoples and state authorities negotiate indigenous presence in urban spaces and the 'right-to-the-city' (Levebre 2003; Harvey 2008; Quicke and Green 2017). Further research on the relocation project of Ngäbe residents as it unfolds could provide significant insights into how such rights are negotiated and the ways in which indigenous voices are offered or denied a platform (Spivak 1988; Valdivia 2018).

Another critical future research interest entails individual Ngäbe aspirations to develop household-based tourism initiatives. Such emergent aspirations, which were consistently communicated to me, sharply contrast with the overwhelming control of the local tourism industry by foreign or non-indigenous social actors. Although there have been a small number of indigenous Ngäbe tourism projects, supported by development organisations, these have all been community-based projects and have had limited success. The desires among urban Ngäbe residents to establish household-based tourism enterprises are closely aligned with their emphasis on household autonomy, which, as I have demonstrated in this thesis, constitutes an essential component of Ngäbe ideas of how to live well. If such aspirations come to be realised, the tourism projects that emerge may significantly impact Ngäbe individuals' notions of living well, particularly pertaining to household and community conviviality and cooperation. The projects may further affect Ngäbe individuals' understanding of their relationships with non-indigenous others, as well as their experiences of, positioning in, and (perceived) possibilities within the ethno-racial hierarchy of Bocas del Toro. Further research on household-based indigenous tourism initiatives as alternatives to community-based projects (Bunten and Graburn 2018; Theodossopoulos 2018), may provide significant insights into their effects on households, community, and inter-ethnic relations and enhance our understanding of the meaning of such entrepreneurship in notions of well-being.

The current work has strived to take the first necessary step in making visible—what Sahlins (1976) would call—the cultural reason that informs Ngäbe views regarding their relationship with non-indigenous others in the inter-ethnic (urban) context. Understanding what it means to live well for Ngäbe is a prerequisite in engaging with the emerging political and representational issues of the present and the future. I am looking forward to engaging with the latter in future research. The lessons I learnt in this journey, through the systematic application of the anthropological toolkit, have equipped me with a local perspective that may continue to guide my steps in the future, hopefully towards a direction that will greater represent and voice Ngäbe concerns.

Appendix 1

Household Survey questions

1. Cantidad de personas en la casa (adultos y niños)
2.
   a. De donde son?
   b. Donde vivieron antes?
3. Cuando vinieron a Bocas / la Solución?
4. Por medio de quien llegaron a Bocas / La Solución?
5.
   a. Donde vivieron primero al llegar a Bocas?
   b. Y en La Solución?
   c. Que había alrededor cuando vinieron (cuales casas)?
   d. Donde mas han vivido?
6.
   a. Están alquilando o propia casa?
   b. Pagaron para el lote?
7.
   a. Tienen contrato de agua?
   b. Si no, de donde / como sacan agua?
8.
   a. Tienen luz?
   b. Contrato propio?
   c. De dónde sacan?
9.
   a. Tienen contrato de colección de basura?
   b. Qué tipo de contrato? (con municipio, privado? Con quién?)
   c. Si no, que hacen con la basura?
10.
    a. Donde están registrados para votar?
    b. Si no están registrados en Bocas, porque no?
11. Están a favor de la reubicación?
12. Cuáles son los problemas más urgentes en La Solución?
13.
    a. Tienen finca?
    b. Cuantas veces al ano van a la comarca / finca?
    c. Tienen casa propia allí o se quedan con familia?
    d. Para que van (visitar familia, ir a la finca)?
    e. Cuando van, trabajan la finca? Mantiene la finca?
    f. Quien lo mantiene?
    g. Que traen de allí cuando van?
    h. Que llevan de aquí para allá (para uso personal o para familia?)
14.
    a. Reciben red de oportunidades?
    b. Donde están registrados para la red?

Map of surveyed households in La Solución

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