Akadoi Ebera (Embera language)/ The Hope of the Embera

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In Partial Fulfillment of the M.F.A. Degree requirements

Indiana State University

Department of Art

May 2013

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BACKGROUND

The leitmotif of the photographs, video and writing I produced for this series is rooted in the reconstruction of people's memories and experiences of the Colombian armed conflict. I have a strong concern for the condition of human rights in my native country. Today, Colombia has the second highest population of internally displaced persons in the world, after South Sudan. Since 1997, 108,262 indigenous people have been victims of forced displacement as is indicated by Colombian government statistics. According to the United Nations High Council for Refugees (UNHCR), the Embera people are among 35 Colombian indigenous groups who are in danger of physical and cultural extinction.

This project, entitled “Akadoi Ebera-The Hope of the Embera” investigates and documents the forced displacement of the Embera indigenous people in Colombia. Due to Colombia’s internal armed conflict, which continues to rage in many rural areas, the Embera are threatened, kidnapped and murdered by leftist guerrilla groups and right wing paramilitaries; and the Colombian army has bombed their native territories.

Fig.1 Embera governor Claudia Wazona (right) attending an event organized by the United Nations Refugee Agency on the Genocide of Indigenous people in Colombia, 2012. C-Print,

Through the “Akadoi Ebera” photo and video documentation, I intend to educate a broad public about this hidden drama of an endangered native people and their struggle for cultural survival (Fig.1). Last year, 4,845 Embera fled the jungles of Chocó and Risaralda, their ancestral
territory in the Pacific region, to the principal cities of Colombia. The indigenous people in Colombia are vulnerable and they are looking for ways to preserve their culture in the face of the armed conflict, I hope the documentation of this tragedy is an important step towards helping them regain their territory and preserve their ancestral ways of life.

When I began this documentation, Juan Carlos Murillo, an Embera-Katio leader, described the situation in the Embera territory in stark terms:

“Our children, women and elders are dying, the doctors do not come to our towns, the hospitals do not take us, and there is no medicine. The armed groups are killing us, we cannot go anywhere freely, we cannot hunt or harvest our crops and when we need medical service we are denied.”

Indeed, in 2011, one hundred Embera children who remained Choco died of malnutrition.

The violence is tied to economic factors. The Embera’s territory in the jungles of northwest Chocó, along the Pacific coast of Colombia, is a strategic location with a wealth of natural resources including gold, timber and water. National and multinational mining companies seeking to impose megaprojects in their lands undermine indigenous governance in their territory. In 2011, in a document titled, ‘Mining: Strategies of Dispossession in Chocó Indigenous Peoples’ the Embera Association of Indigenous Town Councils (OREWA), denounced that:

“157 mining titles were given in Chocó until 2010, to large multinational mining companies, particularly the AngloGold Ashanti, considered one of the companies that most socio-ecological damage have done in the planet”.

From 1992-1998, 8,500 Embera were displaced by paramilitary forces allegedly working for the Muriel Company (later consolidated as Urra Company), to clear the land in order to build the Urra 1 dam, which was opposed by the native inhabitants of the region. The Urra 1 dam flooded 7,417 hectares of Embera territory despite an order by the Constitutional Court forbidding the company to proceed with filling the reservoir. Twenty one million cubic meters of biomass were destroyed, contaminating the water and destroying the fishing areas that constituted the primary source of food for the Embera along the middle and lower Sinú River. The Embera leadership has denounced to the Colombian authorities that the Urra Company has not paid all of the promised
compensation. Today the Embera along the Sinu River live with the threat of the construction of Urra II, a colossal dam projected to be twice the size of Urra I.

Yet the situation outside their territories is hardly better. Displaced native people face unemployment and myriad forms of social marginality in the poorest neighborhoods of Bogotá, Medellín, and other cities. Many displaced Embera subsist by begging to pay for rent in precarious short-term housing; while others have been placed by the Colombian government in facilities run by the Red Cross who provide food, shelter and medical attention. In one severe case, 49 Embera are living in “The Beautiful Patio”, a landfill assigned to them by the Colombian Government in Granada, Meta.

![Embera girls displaced from Uraba playing in the landfill, Meta, Colombia, 2012. C-Print](image)

Many children and elders have become sick from living in this trash dump, where their only sources of drinking water are badly contaminated streams that run through the garbage. There are displaced Embera populations in the departments of Antioquia, Cordoba, Cundinamarca, Cauca, Chocó, Risaralda and Valle del Cauca that have not been documented, where indigenous leaders have been assassinated and where people are living in fear. The State has signed agreements to guarantee their safe return to their territories, which have not gone into effect. Through their organizations, the Embera people are peacefully pressuring the Colombian government to act to protect their lives, culture and properties. They struggle to maintain hope, or Akadoi in Embera language.
DOCUMENTARY TRADITION

"I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me."

Dorothea Lange  Popular Photography, Feb. 1960

For Arthur Freed, one of the authors of the book Documentary Photography by the editors of Time-Life books, 1982 a photograph becomes documentary when the image conveys a message and when it records an event, but the event has to have some more general significance, more than the specific significance of a news photo. It may record character or emotion - but again, is of some general social significance; it is more than personally revelatory, as a portrait is. The photographer tells us something important about the world, and makes us think about the world in a new way. In my opinion a documentary project combines the truth of a reality with the comment of the photographer with the intention to achieve changes in the society.

The term documentary photography was first used during the Depression years but it has its origins in the mid-late 19th century when Jacob Riis, a Danish-born newspaper reporter used a camera for first time to show the brutality of life in New York City's slums. Riis' images were the first ones on documentary photography. At the turn of the twentieth century, Lewis Hine photographed the inhuman conditions of working-class children and immigrant laborers in factories and mines. Riis and Hine used documentary photography as a tool for social change and in study of the human condition. Riis's images contributed to the reduction of crime in the slums in New York City and Hine's photographs of the cruelty of child labor contributed to the establishment of the child labor regulations in the USA.

In the 1930's, when America was facing widespread hunger and 15 million people were unemployed, photography became useful as a tool to win support for federal relief programs. The Farm Security Administration (FSA) acting under the control of the Department of Agriculture hired a dozen photographers during the Depression, in an effort to document American rural
poverty and to get farmers out of desperate conditions by showing their images in magazines, newspapers and books. The FSA looked for programs to improve the lifestyle of sharecroppers, tenants and farmers and to improve the efficiency of farming in more suitable collective farmlands. This program taught farmers modern techniques to make more efficient farming by working together. Although this initiative failed because farmers wanted ownership over the land, a program was established to help poor farmers to buy land which is still in operation today as the Farmers Home Administration.

Photography was used by FSA, as is described by art historian Beaumont Newhall, “not to inform us, but to move us” on the situation of 33 million of Americans living in extreme poverty. Photographs became the conscience of the American society by showing that the poor were neglected and overlooked using the style that today we call documentary photography. For nine years photographers and writers were hired to report and document the plight of the poor farmers to “introduce America to the Americans”.

The FSA was responsible for providing educational materials and press information to the public, many of the images appeared in popular magazines all over the world. FSA made 250,000 images of rural poverty with the idea that these photographs reinforced the concept that poverty could be controlled by "changing land practices" in a social reform. The FSA photography has had major influences on the world since then because of its realistic point of view, and the fact that it works as an educational tool. Among the most famous photographers are Walker Evans with his image of the Alabama family (Fig. 4), Ben Shahn and his images of the African-Americans cotton pickers (Fig. 5), and Dorothea Lange (Fig. 6) whose image of Migrant Mother became a symbol of the depression and whose work of art was partly responsible for getting the government to set up camps for the migrants in 1935.
These same goals and ideals led me to document the Embera displacement. The project Akadoi Ebera has begun to draw the attention of Colombians and Americans to the plight and hope (Akadoi) of this endangered people. I am also working with the Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) and the Embera community to publish a book of reading and writing of the Embera language. I consider this documentation and the exhibition of these images to be a form of humanitarian activism.

INFLUENCES

In 2009-2010, while I was researching the topic of massacres and the theft of land from minority ethnic groups, I worked from a document produced by Human Rights Watch (Fig. 7) about the neo-paramilitaries in Colombia. Based on theses testimonies I photographically re-enacted the deaths of the victims of these massacres and produced a book, entitled Diaries of Death (Fig.8) Through “Paramilitaries Heirs, the New face of Violence in Colombia” I became familiar with the work of documentary photographer Stephen Ferry (Fig.7) in Colombia whose work, books and exhibitions on the armed conflict have influenced my work on the Embera.

I also have been influenced by the documentary photography of Jane Marie Simon on the repression and killings of the Mayan Indians in Guatemala. Her work on Guatemala is the result of eight years of documentation that began in 1980 and ended in 1988 with the publication of the
book *Eternal Spring- Eternal Tyrant* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1987) During many years, Simon prepared reports for international human rights groups and connected visitors with local advocates who were demanding answers from the military regime of General Rios Montt. Today, Montt is accused of 100,000 killings and 40,000 disappearances as a result of thirty years of repression that went largely unreported to the world. Below we see a photo by Jean Marie Simon of the Army from Guatemala directing the annual Indian festival in Quiche, the government wanted to promote the idea of a Guatemala ruled by a democratic system by promoting events like this (Fig. 10)

My interest in producing a personal statement on the situation of forced displacement in Colombia was motivated by many Colombian artists who have worked on the subject of the armed conflict, using diverse media. Among them are the installations of Doris Salcedo entitled “Atribiliarios” about the massacres in Colombia, in particular the one in The Palace of Justice in 1985, which occurred when I lived in Colombia. Recently, I have developed great admiration for the photographic work of Juan Manuel Echevarria and that of Erika Diettes. In 2012, Echevarria documented the abandonment of schools by the residents of Montes de Maria, Sucre, who were displaced by paramilitary forces. The photo-installation by Erika Diettes titled “Shrouds” (Fig. 9) consists of twenty large-scale portraits printed on silk shrouds hung in the nave of the church. The women were photographed when they were retelling their stories as witnesses of violence against their loves ones, a common practice on the ongoing war in Colombia. The women are photographed in black and white, cropped to below their shoulders, eyes closed and naked.
EXHIBITION

This exhibition is an artistic, political and social statement about the forceful displacement experienced by the Embera. This is a photographic essay presented as two ‘film strips’ and one individual photograph. Besides the strips we see one individual portrait of the Embera sacred figure of the spiritual doctor or Jaibana (Fig.11) who in the caption explains that the land exploitation of their territories is causing the displacement of the Embera and the war.

Fig. 11

Each film strip is 25 inches in height and 21 feet wide and includes 7 images (Fig.11). The size and continuity of the images on the film strips focuses the viewer on the subject. The strips narrate clearly the plea of the Embera and their struggle for survival. I adopted the idea of film strip from the installation of public art done by American photographer Stephen Ferry and by Japanese artist ShinPei Takeda.

Fig. 11 Images of the MFA exhibition at Indiana State University, 2013
Each film strip explains to the spectator the displacement of the Embera people in different scenarios: one urban and the one rural. The colors of each strip are completely different, reflecting the different conditions in the two environments. In the urban group the whites of the interior walls of the buildings of Bogota contrast with the reds, green and orange colors of the dresses of the Embera woman. In these images the backgrounds suggest inhospitable city conditions for the Embera. In the strip of Meta, the color of nature dominates the general atmosphere in contrast to the dark faces and sad eyes of the indigenous that are living in the landfill (ironically named Beautiful Patio). In these photographs the close up portraits are predominant as testimonials of their plea.

The film strips and the individual photo of the Spiritual Doctor have been exhibited in Dos Casas Gallery, Colombia and at Indiana State University. In the MFA exhibition the strips are separated by a white space, giving time for the spectator to absorb the information (Fig 11). In Colombia the strips were assembled in the wall as one piece in accordance to the gallery space.

![Images of the film strip exhibited in Dos Casas gallery, Bogota, Colombia 2012](image)

CONCLUSION

This project is not done, there are displaced Embera populations in the departments of Antioquia, Cordoba, Cundinamarca, Cauca, Chocó, Risaralda and Valle del Cauca that have not been documented, where indigenous leaders have been assassinated and where people are living in fear and I intend to document these places in collaboration with the Casa pastoral Indigena, NGO in Colombia and other institutions.
Last year, I made a video entitled *The Beautiful Patio, where the Embera are living in a landfill* (Fig. 14) this eight minute video collects the testimonies of displacement of the people who are living in the landfill. This video was made in September, 2012 in collaboration with the Volunteer Voyagers and Akadoi-Ebera, a group a doctors providing provided medical care to the sick elders, women and children indigenous of the Beautiful Patio. To watch this video please visit: http://alexmenichols.wix.com/wounan_embera#!video

At the moment I am also working in collaboration with the Association of Indigenous Councils of Chocó (Embera Dobida, Katio, Chami) - OREWA and National Indigenous Organization of Colombia, ONIC in the production of two books: One book is an illustrated linguistic manual to promote reading and writing in the endangered Embera language, called *Cartilla de lecto-escritura Embera* (Fig 15), so far I have collected funds to publish 1200 books and we plan to print and distribute them in 2013.

![Fig. 14](image1)

The second book is titled the *Embera Heritage*, a book about their world view and their message. This book will contribute to the preservation of the Embera identity in a context of threads, violence and displacement. The Embera native people of Chocó are skillful artisans, they will design and craft the cover and sew the book spine as is seen the images below.

![Fig. 15](image2)

This book was designed in collaboration with Jim Canary, Chief Curator of Lilly Library. Centipede stitch sawn onto cedar wood
I am committed to continue documenting the Embera displacement as a way to support this endangered community.

FOOTNOTES

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1 In accordance to declarations given by United Nations for Refugees in Colombia, ACNUR, to the mass media in Colombia during their event The Embera Indigenous genocide in Bogota, Colombia". Read article http://m.eltiempo.com/colombia/bogota/estatua-sobre-genocidio-en-colombia/10790084

2 Heyman, Theresea Thau, Philips Sandra, Szarkowski John. Dorothea Lange, American Photographers. (Global Interprinert, Petaluma, Hong Khong, 1994) 120.
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