



The Arson of a Museum: Ethnography of historical experience and plant fiber use in northern Coclé Province, Panama

Nina K. Müller-Schwarze

Research

Abstract

The use of tree cambium to make **cucua** dance outfits attracted the attention of international plant and culture conservationists. Scholarly narratives, media interpretations, and publications for the tourism market about **cucua** often reiterate racialized colonial categories as the origin point for a history construed as Panamanian. Implementation of conservation programs, like the construction of a museum and cultural center, ignored existing social structures among dancers. Arsonists allegedly destroyed the museum. This article presents data collected in anthropological participant observation methodologies and describes why conservation programs were rejected through the ethnography of historical experience that shows how people make sense of the past. Local explanations of plant uses that include power accessed through the ruptures of social structures during liminal times, such as Spanish colonialism, are real and not just symbolic. This article places **cucua** plant use in cultural context with other plant fibers used in northern Coclé for baskets, all called “weaving.”

Introduction

Widespread understandings of ethnobotanical knowledge as corresponding to a particular cultural or ethnic group oversimplify anthropological theory. This has real consequences, as plant preservation happens not only within the context of the available plant species in the surrounding landscape, but also within the perspectives and conversations of humans who agree as to which species ought to be cared for and how. International preservation initiatives are often aimed at people perceived to be a group defined as an ethnicity or a village. Brubaker (2004:16) correctly describes that much is at stake when the categories we use to describe social phenomena, such as labels for ethnicities or groups, are assumed to

be true and essential. “Groups” understood to have clear boundaries are not universally true forms (Müller-Schwarze 2015), but rather appear at specific times in history (Brubaker 2004:45) and become objects under scholarly gazes (Foucault 1972). Brubaker (2004) encourages discussion of social belonging and verbs that relate activities instead of *a priori* assuming that people can be discussed with an ascribed label or category. Who are the people that create discourses about plant use and social belonging? How are discourses about plant use and conservation created and enacted?

Culture has often been the locus of conflict (Mamdani 1996). This article not only records ethnobotanical data, but also describes the specific ways that expectations of plant preservation in discourses about culture resulted in the alleged arson of a museum. The village of San Miguel Centro in northern Coclé, Panama, is known for dancers who wear an outfit made from the inner cambium of the **cucua** tree and decorated with plant dyes. The local term **cucua** refers to various trees, the cloth material made from the cambium, the dance, and the dancers. Historical documentation confirms continuity in plant and fiber utilization (Müller-Schwarze 2015), yet narratives about the

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past differ. International interest in preservation of **cucua** practices resulted in the construction and subsequent end of a museum, as outsiders intent on treating people as an arbitrarily defined group did not respect the existing social structures among dancers and artisans.

This article describes the intersubjective interplay of expectations and stereotypes enacted through the social processes of plant conservation. **Cucua** practices are located within various conversations that interpret and inform identification practices today. History set in linear time seeks an origin point (Foucault 1972), and scholars, journalists, and marketers for the tourism trade who describe Coclé practices seek and interpret ethnogenesis origins in the external forms of objects made from plant fibers which thereby become the center of materialist interpretations about geographical, cultural, and linguistic origins for the Panamanian population. Rural areas are understood as repositories of the past solely in perspectives formed in colonial centers that characterize countryside areas as founts of resources in order to support extractive colonial and neocolonial economies (Müller-Schwarze 2015). Plant conservation strategies in the case of **cucua** portrayed this rural area as a repository of the national Panamanian past and expected local people to be stewards of this perceived origin point. Indigenous people within states are asked to demonstrate what Foucault (1972:21) terms “a special temporal status,” and people associated with plant knowledge are often located in an unchanging time associated with the past.

This article, however, describes the ways local people utilize plants for material objects as adaptation to historical experience and is therefore ethnography of historical experience. Local people are not understood here as solely the occupants of San Miguel Centro village, but rather anyone who participates in discourses about **cucua**. The past is discussed in the present, and this article documents such discourses. Adaptation, creativity, and versatility have ensured the preservation of plant fiber use and knowledge. Artisans and dancers describe **cucua** dances and outfits as means to survive Spanish colonialism in a historical narrative that empowers rural people today.

People in San Miguel Centro not only prepare dance outfits from plant materials for performances; they also use baskets, rope, hats, and other items made from plant fibers in quotidian life in practices found throughout northern Coclé. Artisan and dancer explanations about the meaning of designs on the plant-fiber **cucua** outfit reflect position of self, and therefore understandings of human ontology, within the surrounding ecology and identification with the plant and animal world. Central Panama has many microhabitats, and thus plant preservation and cultural uses of plant species are extremely localized. **Cucua** practices need to be understood within the context of basketry practices found throughout northern Coclé. People that care for, harvest, prepare, and manufacture plant

fibers are called vine artisans (**artesanos de bejucos**). Such specialists have intimate knowledge of their home in the surrounding forest that includes observations about the habitats that specific plants live in. The northern Coclé term **tejidos** translates as plants used for fiber or the cultural materials and products made from the raw materials available in the surrounding ecology. The plant materials for weaving are collectively called vines (**bejucos**). This article presents ethnohistorical evidence that relates local understandings of plant fiber use as empowerment and the means to survive challenging historical circumstances.

Methods

Data were collected in various areas of northern Coclé, Panama (Figure 1), through intermittent participant observation and interviews over the last decade. I arrived in La Martillada as a Peace Corps volunteer (1999–2001) and first visited San Miguel Centro as a guest of fellow Peace Corps volunteer Alon Terry who worked with **cucua** artisans in a small business development program. I was impressed with the talents and skills of **cucua** dancers and artisans I met and realized that there is interesting information here, yet took time in my search for what it means. Most authors on the subject had not spent time living in a northern Coclé community and therefore seemed unfamiliar with the social context wherein plant use happens. I have observed events and experiences related to **cucua** intermittently over the last fifteen years and found that the media and scholarly narratives about northern Coclé plant use that I read followed predictable tropes that reiterated racialized colonial categories. My central question became: how could one describe ethnobotanical data without repeating the narratives that ascribe plant knowledge to a “group” and that present local people as unchanging and outside of time?

Data were mainly collected in the village of La Martillada, with excursions to the village of San Miguel Centro, the village of Lurá, and in a survey of 55 villages in the Indio River watershed conducted in 2005 (Müller-Schwarze 2008). Informed consent was obtained in relation to this research through Tulane University. Specific weavers and artisans, named in the article, demonstrated their techniques to me. Lourdes María Barsallo provided many ethnohistorical materials from the National Lottery Archive in Penonomé. I collected plant voucher specimens together with members of the Alveo Nuñez family, after receiving permission from the Panamanian Environmental Protection Agency (Autoridad del Medio Ambiente [ANAM]). These plants are housed in herbaria at either Tulane University (NO) or the University of Panama (PMA). I document and discuss the linguistic implications of local terms, which are presented here in bold.

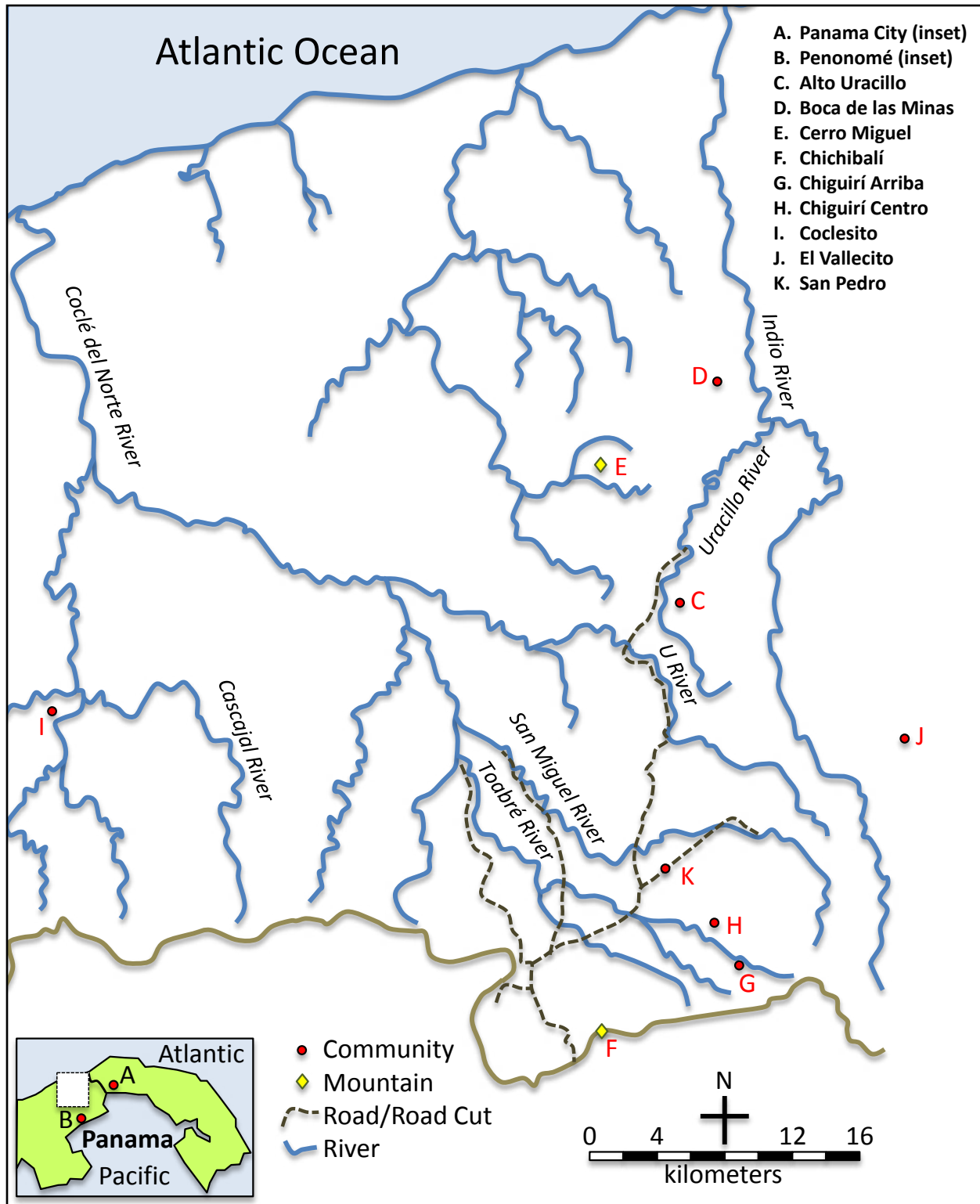


Figure 1. Study area in northern Coclé Province, Panama. Villages are located along rivers; dirt roads now connect some of these villages.



Figure 2. Basketry used in quotidian life in northern Coclé, Panama, includes a strainer, the **churuco** coffee harvesting basket, and the **nasa** fish trap. María Rosario Gil in San Miguel Centro made this strainer.



Figure 3. A man harvests pineapples into a **motete**, a large, open-topped basket. Sabana Larga, Coclé, Panama, June 2000.

This article is written in memory of Asunción “Sencio” Alveo Nuñez, who patiently engaged my requests to learn about basketry and plants. He passed away in 2006.

Results

Description of utilitarian baskets

Baskets are used in quotidian life for carrying, collecting, trapping, cooking, and storing. Weavers in northern Coclé villages (such as La Martillada and Sabana Larga) make **motete** carrying cases worn on the back, **churuco** coffee collecting baskets, **nasa** crustacean traps, **colador** woven strainers, and **canasta** woven all-purpose baskets (Figure 2) from plant fibers.

Agriculturalists use a **motete**, a large woven, open-topped basket. This is worn with two **majagua** fiber or cloth straps over the shoulders to carry harvested plantains or root crops from fields (Figure 3).

Coffee is harvested with a specific basket, the **churuco**. The **churuco** is regularly used and manufactured because coffee is a cash crop sold to larger markets via the road. Extended families enter coffee groves to pick red coffee berries into their **churucos**. The coffee picker passes a rope through the two handles of the **churuco** and ties it around the waist. The rounded basket stays at waist level in front of the picker. The red coffee berries are transported in these baskets to houses, where the berries are sun-dried spread out on sheets of cloth on the ground. Specific villagers who are businessmen buy dried and red

coffee and then sell them in bulk to a coffee roaster via the road or road cut that passes through some villages.

The **nasa** crustacean trap is placed into the edge of a river or stream, where it is tied to a stake and filled with bait. Crustaceans and small fish enter the narrow opening and become trapped; the fisherman returns to untie the narrow opening to harvest the catch.

People cook with a variety of woven strainers (**coladores**). Each size corresponds to a specific kitchen task. A small strainer is widely used to drain the spice **achiote** (*Bixa orellana* L.) flavoring from oil; villagers report the strainer size as convenient. Many households tend to strain coffee with a piece of manufactured cloth on a rounded metal hanger (**coladera**) instead of the woven plant fiber coffee strainers, yet elder weavers remember how to make the medium-size coffee strainers. Fermented corn is processed into an alcoholic drink (**chicha**) which is passed through a larger strainer.

Baskets are made in both round and square shapes with handles. Small baskets were used for carrying items to market, yet villagers observe that baskets are often replaced by plastic bags today. Baskets (**canastas**) often hang from house rafters and are used for storage. In northern Coclé, several words sometimes refer to the same meaning; for example, handles on baskets are called **agarradero** and **hico**, and these linguistic data reveal much in the context of scholarly interpretations of indigenous continuities in the area.



Figure 4. Asunción “Sencio” Alveo Nuñez demonstrates making a small version of a **motete** basket in La Martillada, Coclé, Panama. The weaver needs about 4 m of vine for a **motete**. He removes the bark and pulls along the natural divides (**las venas**). The artisan then presses a knife blade into the cross, which the vine shows when cut in cross section, and pulls the four sides apart while carefully gauging the pressure as too much or too little could cause an uneven division of the vine (**A**). The weaver turns the vine as he pulls it apart (**B**). A knife serves to scratch off (**rajar**) any remaining heartwood (**C**). Weavers prefer pieces with few branches, as they note these interfere with the knife scraping. The resulting pieces of prepared vine (**bejuco rayado**) are the raw material for the **motete**. The artisan creates a crossed warp weave (**D–F**), bends the weave at a right angle to the ground to create the lower corner edge of the **motete** (**G**), and continues to weave vertically (**H–I**). Finally, the weaver doubles back and weaves down, which covers the hexagonal holes about halfway and creates an upper edge for the **motete**. The artisan may make the top rim from a piece of vine with bark intact around which other prepared vine is wrapped.

Manufacturing baskets

Each weaver has specific preferences and styles in weaving, although some general trends can be observed. Asunción “Sencio” Alveo Nuñez made **motetes** with **marica** (*Tanaecium pyramidatum* (Rich.) L.G.Lohmann), a woody vine harvested for thick and straight pieces because he found that knots (**ñoma**) or joints made the vine too twisty and fibrous for weaving.

The weaver needs about 4 m of vine for a **motete**. Asunción “Sencio” Alveo Nuñez removed the bark and pulled along the natural divides (**las venas**). He then pressed a knife blade into the cross, which the vine shows when cut in cross section, and pulled the four sides apart while carefully gauging the pressure as too much or too little could cause an uneven division of the vine (Figure 4). He turned the vine as he pulled it apart. He scratched off with a knife any remaining heartwood. He preferred pieces with few branches, as he reported that they interfere with the knife-scraping process. The resulting pieces of prepared vine (**bejuco rayado**) are the raw material for the **motete**.

Once the vine had been scratched (**rayado**), it took Asunción “Sencio” Alveo Nuñez about one day to make a **motete** or a **churuco**. He explained that the artisan can walk away and return; simply wetting the **bejuco rayado** with water restores its flexibility. The weaver worked on the ground and kept the heart of the vine facing the other heart, so that the fibers did what Asunción “Sencio” Alveo Nuñez described as “sticking together.” Asunción “Sencio” Alveo Nuñez made a row of interlocking shapes (Figure 3), or crossed warp weave, and then bent the weave at a right angle to the ground to create the lower corner edge of the **motete** and continued to weave the same shapes vertically. Finally, the **motete** received an upper edge by doubling back and weaving back down, which covered the hexagonal holes about halfway. Asunción “Sencio” Alveo Nuñez explained to me that the top rim may be made from a piece of vine with bark intact, around which other prepared vine is wrapped. The **motete** is woven in an open hexagonal lattice plait (*sensu* O’Neale 1963[1932]:76, Bernstein 2003:14) or crossed warp (*sensu* Mason 1988[1904]:71), similar to other lightweight carrying baskets manufactured across northern South America (i.e., Nordenskiöld 1924 in O’Neale 1963[1932]:76).

Weavers in Sabana Larga and La Martillada use thick **marica** vines prepared as **bejuco rayado**—with additional knife scratching on the vine strips for a tighter weave—to make the **churuco** coffee harvesting basket. The artisan weaves a single, thin, long prepared vine (**bejuco rayado**) through four other prepared vines laid parallel on the ground. The weaver then presses this weave tight. More **bejucos rayados** are added vertically, as one long prepared vine strip is woven horizontally around the basket. The long vine is doubled back over the top rim and woven back down again. A thicker vine circles the rim bor-

der at the top. Two vines wrapped tightly within other vines make the handles (**agarraderas**, **garraderas**, or **hico**). The **churuco** can be described comparatively as a wicker weave (*sensu* Bernstein 2003:14) with a coil and knot border (*sensu* Mason 1988[1904]:127) at the top rim.

Weavers also use the **marica** vine to manufacture the **nasa** crustacean trap (Figure 1). La Martillada artisans lay the pieces of prepared vine (**bejuco rayado**) flat across their upper thigh and then press a knife along the surface to scratch off (**raspar**) fibrous material before beginning, which Asunción “Sencio” Alveo Nuñez described as “tightening the weave.” The weaver interlaces the plant fibers around a glass bottle to create a long cylindrical shape from four vertical vines that are the warp and one long thin prepared vine that is woven under and over each warp around the form of the vessel continuously. The artisan removes the bottle and doubles the weaving back. The weave is continued in a bulbous shape that creates the bottom of the crustacean trap. An opening remains when the glass bottle is removed; this is where the animals enter the trap. Making a **nasa** may take two days. The **nasa** weave can be compared to a plain twine (*sensu* Mason 1988[1904]:72, 123) or wicker weave (*sensu* Bernstein 2003:14, O’Neale 1963[1932]) and to descriptions of similar “fish traps” in other areas (i.e., Cooper 1949, Nordenskiöld 1927).

Descriptions of weaving need to mention the individual artisan, as each has their own preferences and innovations. In La Martillada, the weaver Simeón Alveo prefers **bejuco mula** (*Heteropsis oblongifolia* Kunth) for making baskets because he perceives the central fiber as soft to weave; he harvests it when it is “thick as a cable” and observes that this species has the longest pieces (**tramos**) without branching. Artisans utilize the freshly harvested green fiber of **bejuco de tortuga** (*Anemopaegma orbiculatum* (Jacq.) DC.; the seeds resemble a turtle or **tortuga**) to make a white-colored basket; the fiber stiffens as the basket dries. The weaver uses an odd number of plant fiber pieces for general-use baskets and begins by making the bottom with seven fibers crossing six fibers. Two **bellota** (*Carludovica palmata* Ruiz & Pav.) or **birutillo** fibers may be woven into this for decoration. These fibers are bent upwards at the edges of the bottom shape, and longer fibers are woven either around its entirety or on four sides. The top rim is made from the entire stem of the vine, including the bark, with other fibers wrapped around it.

Simeón Alveo recognizes two kinds of **birutillo** (*Pleio-stachya pruinosa* (Regel) K.Schum.): a green (**verde**) kind which produces green and white fiber and a red (**col-orao**) variety that produces a dark fiber. Artisans prepare the inner fibers of the plant stalk; the green variety produces white fiber from inside the stalk. The weaver shaves regular sized strips of bark with a machete and then shaves the inner plant fiber. Artisans use the fresh fiber strips while still flexible to weave strainers. This **birutillo**

fiber is woven in a specific **junco** weave (**tejido de junco**) wherein alternating strips of plant fiber face to the outside and to the inside of the strainer. The strainers are plaited with six or seven strands of fiber. Strainers made from **birutillo** have **bejuco verde** (*Paragonia* sp.) in the opening or “mouth” (**boca**). The outer covering of the plant stalk is also prepared for a fiber that becomes brown-colored after drying.

Weaving is an innovative and changing art. Individual weavers have preferences among plant materials for their work. Artisans express creative choices in making rims with the same vine that may not be **rayado** or use **bejuco real** for borders. Some basket weavers make creative objects, such as a flower holder or a **motete** with a space for a water bottle. **Motetes**, **churucos**, **javas**, and the **nasa** can also be made of **bejuco colora(d)jo** (*Martinella obovata* (Kunth) Bureau & K.Schum.), a thick vine with a red bark found in heavily wooded areas, or **marica**. **Motetes** may also be made from **bejuco verde**, which La Martillada villagers report can be found in mountains to the north. **Bejuco verde** does not have a cross in the stem to guide the artisan. **Bejuco real** (*H. oblongifolia*), a round vine, is said to produce a coveted and fine fiber and is used for durability.

Odorous roots that dangle from the La Martillada waterfall cliffs are locally called a “vine,” **bejuco dormilón** (*Anthurium clavigerum* Poepp.). The bark of **bejuco dormilón** removes easily to reveal the inside fibers which are used in weaving. People explain the name **dormilón**, or “sleepy,” in that when the leaves close they “sleep” and one can easily pull the roots down. Villagers say there is a specific gentle pull that releases the roots, but that if one pulls with too much force, the plant doesn’t want to wake up. Villagers make a **bejuco dormilón** collar to cure dogs they have diagnosed with cough.

La Martillada weavers recall other vines that they used in the past, such as the thick parts of two varieties of **granadillo**. La Martillada artisans remember a vine they call **bejuco de estrella**, which had a variety for weaving and another variety for medicine; they describe the weaving plant as a star-shaped cross section and a black bark with a red star-shaped flower. Not all vines are useful for basketry; other artisans told me emphatically that **bejuco de estrella** is not used in their work. The same **bellota** fiber for hats is also woven into baskets. Simeón Alveo uses thick pieces of the **bejuco dormilón**, which he peels while it is still green, for making hats. Individual inclinations in weaving likely influence plant preservation.

Weavers care for utilitarian plants in their house yards or harvest these fibers in microhabitats of the surrounding environment (Müller-Schwarze 2006b); they are aware of the locations of and sometimes walk an hour to collect plant fiber resources. Villagers often refer to the collection of “vines” for basketry and other items as a critique

of state land titling programs that focus on agricultural lands and therefore do not reflect local harvesting practices (Müller-Schwarze 2015). Artisans harvest vines when radios report that ocean tides are high. Vines, as with other plant materials, are not gathered under the new moon because weavers believe the finished handicraft will fall apart in a short time.

Weaving is not gender-specific knowledge, as there are both women and men artisans. In comparison, Levinsohn (1980) describes Kwazulu basket manufacture with gender in mind; women make baskets. Both genders in La Martillada work with plant fibers, and although men tend to weave baskets and women tend to make hats (Müller-Schwarze 2006b), individual specialization in preparing and weaving plant fibers is more important than gender in determining who makes these items.

Hat manufacture

Hat weavers sit for hours and days and braid plant fibers into hats with delicate black designs on a white background; “Panama hats” take weeks to make. The weave and plants used in such a hat determine its monetary value and its symbolic value. The cost of hats varies from US\$5 to over US\$200, depending on the weave delicacy. Expensive, finely-woven **bellota** hats are worn to town or on special occasions. Elder men rarely remove their hats; a well-made hat may be their most expensive possession. On rainy days, men cover hats with handmade rubber (**caucho**) coverings formed in the shape of a hat. Men wear **junco** (*Cyperus* sp.) hats for work in the fields and protection from the sun during quotidian rural life; these are a more affordable alternative to the **bellota** hat. The weaver removes the outer peel (**cascara**) of **junco** stalks and uses a needle to pull apart the fiber. Black **chonta** palm bark fibers are woven into **junco** hats.

Hats in Coclé are manufactured in a similar way to earlier descriptions (i.e., de Leon in Mason 1988[1904]:494). Weavers collect unfurled leaves of **bellota** along streambeds. The artisan, often a woman, separates the soft inner part of the unfolded leaves from the hard, green outer edges with a sewing needle. (The unfolding new **bellota** leaves are boiled for hat fiber, and the stem covering can be woven into baskets just like **birutillo** fiber.) She then ties these inner leaves into oval bundles and boils them with citrus to enhance whitening. A distinction is made between those specialists who know how to sew hats and those who know how to weave hats. Weavers attach fibers to a metal circle from a “Peruvian” saddle (**montura Peruano**) that they hang above their seat. The artisan braids an odd number, such as thirteen or fifteen, **bellota** fibers into a **crinaja** braid (Figure 5). A **crinaja** has 26 individual strands when each of the two sides has thirteen. She then delicately sews together these fibers, from the center top of the hat and moving to the brim. Such wo-

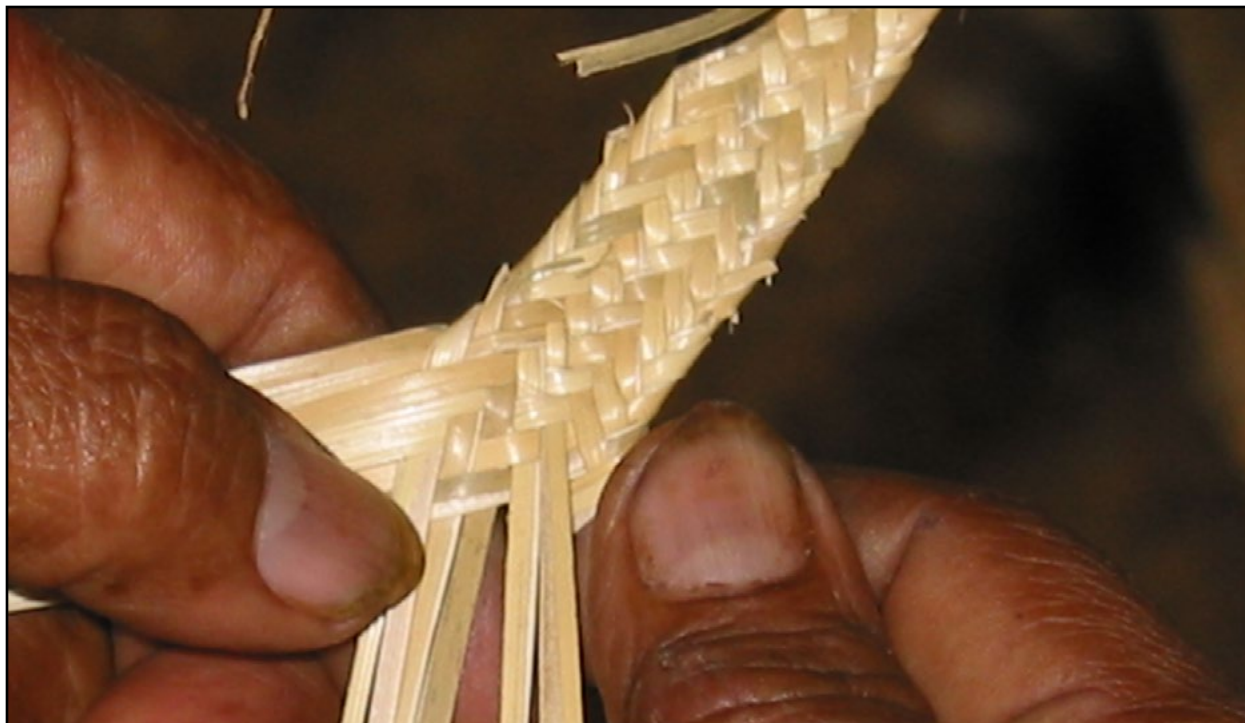


Figure 5. An artisan braids plant fiber into the **crinaja**, which are then sewn together into the distinctive hats from northern Coclé, Panama.

ven strips (**crinaja**) are sewn together with store-bought thread on hats made from **junco** or **bellota**.

Elders know how to use **pita** (*Aechmea magdalenae* (André) André ex Baker) plant fibers to sew the braided or woven strips together into hats. The green outside of the **pita** plant is scraped off with a spoon, washed like clothes in the river—some artisans leave it out in the dew—and eventually it turns white. The fibers are not cooked. Simeón Alveo in La Martillada then rolls the fibers on his upper leg to prepare them for braiding.

Pita fiber is harvested under any moon other than a new moon because that harvested under a new moon is understood to break. It is generally considered better to harvest fibers under a full moon, a practice comparable to Ngäbe people that Lincoln (2004) describes as observing taboos regarding harvesting **pita** under anything other than a full moon.

People throughout northern Coclé consider rope braided from four **crinaja** (**soga de crinaja**) so strong that they use it for fishing line, for the shoulder straps of **motete** baskets, for horse whips, to tie animals, and to tie the skin onto hollow **corotú** (*Enterolobium schomburgkii* (Benth.) Benth.) trunks for musical drums that have been smoothed with **chumico**. Horse whips made from **majagua** are considered strong and durable, yet they are sometimes also

made from **malagueto** fibers. **Motete** shoulder straps are often made from artificial fiber or **crinaja** made of **majagua**.

Coclé hats may include a design woven into the white hat with black-colored fibers. Some white fibers are boiled with lemons to retain the white color, while other **bellota** fibers are boiled with black earth or natural dyes like **chisna** (*Fridericia chica* (Bonpl.) L.G.Lohmann) or **ojo de vena(d)o** (*Mucuna mutisiana* (Kunth.) DC.) vines (Müller-Schwarze 2006a, 2006b) to color them black. The design (**tejido**) in the weave of the hat may have one color, zig-zag lines, or a black color: this is called the **tarco**. Cordero Pérez (No date:74) describes as regional the distinct chemical processes employed in Coclé for hat fiber dying.

Other plant fibers

Quotidian items are manufactured from locally sourced plant materials. Weaving is an important skill. There is much innovation and creativity, and those objects used in daily life change. Change does not imply “loss,” but rather demonstrates creativity and adaptability to fluctuating circumstances and the vicissitudes of life (Müller-Schwarze 2006b, 2015). Plant fiber hammocks and rope are used alongside those made from synthetic fibers. Some villages in northern Coclé are connected through a network of trails that people use for foot and horse travel; howev-

er, new road cuts have changed realities in specific areas. Plant fiber items associated with horse travel, such as baskets used for transporting items on horseback, are used in areas that have fewer road cuts because horses are necessary for travel along trails.

Cortezo (*Apeiba membranacea* Spruce ex Benth. or *Apeiba tibourbou* Aubl.) cambium is soaked in the river during the dry season, then twisted into rope called **majagua**. **Majagua** rope is used often and serves to tie together palm frond house roofs; **bejuco real**, **bejuco estrella**, **bejuco loco**, and **bejuco verde** are also used to tie houses together. Strips of **majagua** are used without twisting to fasten together house beams. Agriculturalists who harvest the staple crop rice grip the stalks in one hand and then tie the bundle with a **majagua** rope piece they had around their wrist; this is a measurement called one hand (**mano**) of rice. Simeón Alveo distinguishes between female **cortezo** trees which he finds produce a lighter fiber and male **cortezo** trees that he reports produce a more durable fiber. **Cortezo** trees grow in abundance in fallows near La Martillada village because agriculturalists have a predilection for leaving them when clearing swiddens.

People now prefer commercial fiber hammocks and claim **majagua** hammocks do not last as long. Cotton is twisted into cords to make rope (**soga**), hammocks (**hamacas**), and bags that men carry. Elders remember that hammocks and rope were often made from **malagueto** (*Xylo-*

pia frutescens Aubl.) in the past. Two **guagará** (*Manicaria saccifera* Gaertn.) palms grow in La Martillada village, and elders recall that the fruit covering (**tutulo**) of the **guagará** palm was used as a shoulder bag. In contemporary times, animal feed sacks or the plant fiber bags that are woven by Ngäbe Native Americans and sold between rural areas are used in northern Coclé as bags. People are skilled at transporting almost anything, including food items like eggs, in shoulder bags made from plant fibers.

A basket similar to the **motete**, but smaller and rounder, is the **java**. Women in the Indio River region today transport children in **java** baskets with a **majagua** or **malagueto** tumpline and hang the baby in the **java** on a tree while they work in the fields. **Javas** are made from **bejuco ajo** (Bignoniaceae). Elders recall that, before the road was cut to enter La Martillada village, they carried produce in **javas** on a horse to the provincial capital Penonomé. Two **javas** tied to a wooden pole on each side of a horse were connected with a rope across the back of the animal. Today, the **java** has been replaced with reused feed sacks (**sackos**) to transport merchandise on cars, buses, and horses. In comparison, in Indio River villages, **javas** are still used in this manner (Figure 6), as horses and canoes are the main means of transport along trails and rivers.

Horse saddles in the mountains contain plant fiber items; padding underneath the saddle is woven from **esterilla** (*Eleocharis elegans* (Kunth) Roem. & Schult.), and the



Figure 6. A villager transports items in **java** baskets attached to a horse saddle. San Cristobal, Coclé, Panama, 2005.

entire saddle may be covered with a handmade rubber sheet to protect it from rain. People remember other uses for these plants in earlier times. People wove **junco** into a surface to sleep on. In La Martillada, people remember a plant, locally named **cuernón**, the leaves of which were used to wrap meat, salt, and other merchandise before plastic bags became widely available. The strings on musical instruments are made from **pita** fiber. Humans live within the surrounding environment in an intimacy that includes many of the objects of daily life in northern Coclé. Baskets and other woven plant items are just some of the many daily objects made from plants.

Artisans weave plant fibers in La Martillada into utilitarian items for quotidian use. In contrast, many people from the mountains to the north transport and sell plant fiber objects in the Penonomé regional capital market. An increase in tourism along the Pacific coast of Coclé province has provided an opportunity for villagers to sell more handmade plant fiber items. Villagers have adapted by producing hats and baskets in small sizes which are easily carried home by tourists. People have learned to make smaller versions of all the woven items for sale at the annual regional Orange Festival in Churuquita and for sale in the provincial capital Penonomé to tourists. Sometimes the name of the province or the provincial capital is woven into the designs and a small hook is attached to facilitate hanging these items.

Distinct plants are available further north in the mountains from La Martillada because of soil and microhabitat variety. An epiphyte with roots hanging from the forest canopy but locally called a “vine,” the **bejuco de acla** (*Bomarea edulis* (Tussac) Herb. or *Bomarea carderi* Mast.) is rarely found near La Martillada. **Acla** is white inside, with a hard brown bark outside. In contrast, the Coquillo store sold **acla** hats in May 2010 that Faustino Sánchez had made and covered in varnish, which demonstrates the abundance of the plant in that area. The weaver Faustino Sánchez in Las Marias recognizes two varieties used for weaving: **acla ronciosa** and **acla lisa**; he prefers the **lisa** variety. **Acla** can be used to make **motetes**. Artisans report that **bejuco real** strengthens the edges of hats made from **acla**. In 2010, the weaver Faustino Sánchez in Las Marias sold a small tourist-sized **nasa** made of **acla** for \$1.50 to a middleman who then took these items to the provincial capital Penonomé. He sold hats and baskets made from **bejuco verde** in a similar manner. The village of Cerro Miguel is rumored to have a lot of **bejuco mimbre** (*Philodendron* sp.) in its vicinity.

Agriculturalists in the northern mountains manufacture wicker furniture from plant materials. Furniture varies with the style of the maker. Such furniture was formerly made for personal use, but now the market for it outside the northern mountains recognizes a specific aesthetic. Long strips of the outer covering of the **bellota** stalk are woven into panels and nailed onto **sangrillo blanco** (*Cro-*

ton draco Schltl. & Cham.) frames tied together with **bejuco chumico** (*Tetracera volubilis* L.) and nails. Chairs are made from slices of **matamba** (*Desmoncus orthacanthos* Mart.) bark and **bejuco cuatro caras**. A chair can be softened with edges of **conga** palm leaves that are cut to make round the corners that will be under the knees of the person that will sit in the chair. People transport such furniture on horseback or on foot to roads. Small buses (**chivas**) that transport people to the provincial capital from northern Coclé are often loaded with such furniture, which people from the mountains sell in the Penonomé market and on the side of the Interamerican highway in Penonomé.

The demand for such furniture has affected plant preservation. Common stewardship of plants includes the practice of harvesting the oldest leaves and leaving the center of a plant (**gogoyo**) to allow it to continue to grow. The competition for sales, however, means that many people have used up their vine resources in the mountains. Gossip reports that people rob vine resources from each other and that plants are so scarce that even **bejuco chumico**, a less desirable plant, is used for furniture making. However, agriculturalists leave **sangrillo blanco** in cleared swiddens, and as the seeds fall, they sprout. Some families transplant these small trees. People live within the surrounding environment in daily life; they value plants and make many quotidian objects from plants.

Cucua

It is in this context that artisans in San Miguel Centro village make **cucua** dance outfits. Artisans live within the social worlds of northern Coclé and utilize plants understood within local understandings and the context of basketry and weaving, yet also travel to attend seminars and have expressed creativity in **cucua** dance outfit manufacture. Adaptability and versatility have ensured preservation.

People throughout northern Coclé understand plants to have either hot or cold properties, and utilization of plant fiber sources depends on their classification as hot or cold plants. Varieties such as white, **cucua blanco** (*Poulsenia armata* (Miq.) Standl.); red, **cucua colorao** or **sandí** (*Brosimum* sp. or *Naucleopsis* sp.) which gives an orange-colored cloth; and **oreja de puerco** (*Ficus maxima* Mill. or *Ficus tonduzii* Standl.) are all referred to as **cucua**. The **cucua** trees and fibers are considered hot plants, and thus they are understood to keep people warm. The temperature of the plant is understood to pass to the person, and there are many customs surrounding how one acts with regard to perceptions of warm and cool. The color of red **cucua** is understood to convey heat. Material objects made from such plants have uses understood to keep people “warm:” people make white or colored hammocks which are then painted; bed mattresses; and a child walker (**chirigua**) made from **cucua colorao** cloth sewn in a circle of vine and hung from house rafters. Florentino Morán (pers.



Figure 7. Juan Mandoleno Morán fells a **cucua** tree with a machete (A), and then Severiano Sánchez, Daniel Morán, and Juan Mandoleno Morán (left to right) remove the outer bark of the tree (B). They then extract the cambium underneath (C). San Miguel Centro, Coclé, Panama, 24 June 2000.

comm., San Miguel Centro, 2005) recalls that **cucua colorao** was used for clothing and **cucua blanco** for bedding. There are various other tree sources that artisans manufacture into fiber suitable for **cucua** purposes, such as **manzanilla** (*Acmella alba* (L'Hér.) R.K.Jansen). The artisan Silvestre Ovalle (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2005) prefers each species depending on the circumstances; he remembers the **higuerón** being useful when he had to make dance outfits for over twenty dancers and he needed a long sleeve in a rush, yet he prefers **cucua blanco** when he makes a dance outfit.

In San Miguel Centro in 2001, the harvest and elaboration into cloth of these plant materials began with men who selected a tree about six years old, as they observed that saplings produce fibers that are too loose and older trees produce fibers that are too tough for elaboration (Florentino Morán, pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010). The artisans used machetes to fell a tree, then pulled off the dark outer bark and separated the fibrous cambium underneath (Figure 7). They noted that **cucua blanco** in particular and all saplings have a sap that irritates the skin, so immediately after harvesting, the cambium is rinsed in the river, carried back to the village, and pounded with a grooved stick (**meseta**) that is made from **naranjilla** wood (Figure 8). They explained that **cucua colorao** expands when pounded. They then washed the cambium again and left it to dry in the sun. The cambium pieces of the dance outfit were then sewn together with **pita** string.



Figure 8. Lucas Sánchez softens the **cucua** cambium with a tool (**mazeta**) that is used for the **cucua blanco** tree variety. A thicker tool without indentations is used when artisans work with the **cucua colorao** cambium. San Miguel Centro, Coclé, Panama, 24 June 2000.



Figure 9. Bacilio Morán, Bacilia Morán, Lucas Sánchez, Anita Riviera, and Miriam Velazquez sit at a table to create artisan items from **cucua** materials. San Miguel Centro, Coclé, Panama, July 2005.

Masks for the dance outfit are made by stretching painted **cucua** material over a basket structure, wild pig jaw, and deer antlers. A structure inside the mask—made from either **bejuco verde**, **tortugillo** (called **bejuco tortuga** in La Martillada), or the more desirable and flexible **birutillo**—supports the bark cambium. The weaving inside the mask is made in **motete** stitch.

This dance outfit is then decorated with designs made from plant dyes. The **cucua** maker Florentino Morán (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) recalls that the outfits used to be striped and credits his own inspiration while watching leatherworkers to make wooden stamps (**marquillas**), which artisans now dip into plant dyes to make lines and designs (Figure 9). Artisans cut the stem of **caña blanca** at an angle to paint outfits (Florentino Morán, pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010). Materials are harvested before but not during a new moon, as any plant material harvested under a new moon is understood to be defective.

Masks and their associated long trains (**pañuelos**) are covered with detailed images of the local flora and fauna. Artisans credit intuition or a sixth sense for the designs they make. Florentino Morán (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) describes his inspiration, “When I worked alone in earlier times, I would be tired and walk far and watch, and when I got home, I’d draw in a notebook and invent the art. My family looks at my notebook for inspiration. And my family has learned to do it; they are continuing it.” The images on the **pañuelo** depict an under-



Figure 10. The artistic style changed as villagers began exploring new dye plants and new colors to decorate the **cucua** dance outfit. Modesto Agraje shows his art, San Miguel Centro, Coclé, Panama, 2010.

standing of self in the world, or cosmology. The **pañuelo** depicts the being (**ser**), the soul in the world of nature. A circular design in the middle and center of the **pañuelo** depicts the Eucharist, or Catholic understanding of embodiment of Jesus Christ. Florentino Morán describes the **pañuelo** as expressing the universe, air, the faith one has and one's belonging in the Catholic Church in the form of the Eucharist, and below this, trees, animals, and fish. Similarly, Modesto Agraje (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) paints with plant dyes three panels of the **pañuelo** to show the sky, person, and the earth or underworld (Figure 10). He explains that these three areas depict animals of the air (such as birds or butterflies); symbols of the church (a cross or the Eucharist); and symbols of the earth (such as animals of the earth). He also explains the images of the sun, moon, and Eucharist, as well as the **pañuelo** itself, as "sacred" and the symbolism as "the tradition is alive and all the animals are here." Florentino Morán (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) recalls learning to dye images of the sun, the moon in its current phase, and the Eucharist (**sacramento**) on the **pañuelo**, but could not comment on any further meaning.

There has been much innovation recently in plant dyes; artisans have learned much new information through attending seminars and conversing with colleagues from other rural areas of Panama. In 2001, artisans decorat-

ed the **cucua** material with three colors and pounded the leaves of **ojo de venao** in a mortar and pestle to make black dye. They applied **guaymí** (*Morinda citrifolia* L.) for red colors (Figures 11, 12) (interestingly, the name of this plant is the same as an earlier name for Ngábe Native Americans). Until recently, only these two dyes were used for red and black and were mixed to make brown or yellow. Interest from outsiders has resulted in invitations for artisans to attend seminars about dye plants. Modesto Morán recalls a seminar with a Peace Corps Volunteer whereat he learned that added lemon juice changes the **jagua** dye color. Modesto Morán created dyes in 2005 from the plants **yuquilla** or **yuquita** (*Curcuma* sp.) for a yellow cadmium; **jagua roja** (*Genipa americana* L.) for a reddish purple; **ojo de venao** for black; and **ojo de gallo** (*Melastomataceae*) for dark green. Florentino Morán listened to explanations about plant dyes at free seminars at the Atlapa Artisans Fair in Panama City and learned that Emberá Native Americans use **jagua negra** to make a black dye; he tried it and also found that **jagua morado** makes a purple dye. Subsequently, people experimented with adding different substances to the dyes, and now a rainbow of colors are produced and used. **Yuquilla** dye is combined with red or black to make a darker yellow. People have, however, always been creative; Asunción "Junito" Alveo in La Martillada recalled in 2005 that people used to dye **majagua** string yellow with **yuquilla** dye,



Figure 11. Paulino Morán carries **guaymí** leaves across the San Miguel River. San Miguel Centro, Coclé, Panama, 24 June 2000.



Figure 12. Herbacio Morán crushes **guaymí** leaves in a large mortar and pestle. San Miguel Centro, Coclé, Panama, 24 June 2000.

black with **chisna**, and blue with a store-bought dye he called **añil** and would weave colored bags from this string.

Several Peace Corps volunteers encouraged knowledge of business techniques and cultivated contacts for dance performances outside the village. A Peace Corps volunteer, Alon Terry, initiated projects such as the making of souvenir dolls and nurtured contacts with companies such as Gran Morrison and tourist markets to sell them. Such opportunities have resulted in more detailed and creative applications of plant dyes. **Cucua** items stained with plant dyes in 2005 included camera cases, cell phone holders, and multi-colored depictions of karate fighters and cartoon characters to adorn houses. At Atlapa, Modesto Agraje (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) compared similar cloth made by Native Americans from the Darien and notes that their cloth still had a lot of resin because of a short boiling time, with results more yellow instead of white. He also saw people from Nicaragua and Honduras with elaborated cloth (**tela**) at Atlapa and notes that their bark (**corteza**) looks the same, but they use artificial paint. Creative ideas are not contained in one geographical location.

Dances in social and historical context

Preservation of **cucua** practices reflects the social location of each artisan. Each dance ensemble in San Miguel Centro contains named positions with specific duties of performance and management that signify the individual's social location within the dance performance and within the village (Florentino Morán, pers. comm.). There are three main devils (the Diablo Mayor, Capitán, and El Dirigente/Teniente) in a dance ensemble. These three not only dance but also speak during performances. The Diablo Mayor has management responsibilities such as initiating and cultivating contacts with people outside northern Coclé. Modesto Agraje (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) explains that the Diablo Mayor keeps the devils in order, trains his followers, and commits to this position for a long time; the Capitán and what he terms the Teniente organize the line of dancers; and he explains that the other devils in the performance ensemble don't have named positions. Villagers recounted in informal discussions that the social positioning of the Diablo Mayor, as director of his dance troupe and teacher, has eroded with the emphasis on plant preservation and reforestation by outsiders such as school teachers, NGOs, and others.

The Capitán and Teniente flank the Diablo Mayor during a show. The number of devils, which may be fifteen or more, depends on the payment for the performance. The Diablo Mayor dances out and around the other devils, one time on each side, and then speaks a contextual poetic verse (**copla**) between each until he has spoken three **coplas**. In comparison, a depiction of Los Santos dance (in *La Prensa* 1985) describes the same two-line formation in

space, and then the basic dance steps: right, left, right, right, with a right raised knee hop. The dancer repeats the same on the other side, and at the completion of each step cycle yells "**ju-a**." Florentino Morán (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) recalls that the devils (**diablicos**) would use a staff (**garotillo**)—made from a strong wood such as **naranjillo** (*Swartzia simplex* (Sw.) Spreng.) or **cacique**—to scare people and to move through a crowd. The musical instruments that accompany **cucua** dancers are also made from plant materials. Artisans hollow **sigua** (*Nectandra globosa* (Aubl.) Mez) tree trunks to make the bodies of the drum and the violin.

The recited verses refer to the power of the different characters and the amazing feats they have done and ask God for protection for the coming year. Most annotations of **cucua** and versions I collected have four verses. Most begin with "I am the Main Devil, and I come from the other side" (**Yo soy el Diablo Mayor, vengo del otro lao**), and subsequent verses contain six to eight syllables per line, four lines in a verse, and every other line rhymes.

Modesto Agraje (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) explains that specific **redondillas** for Corpus Christi refer to religion and that couplets for Carnival are called **redondillas de paranda**. For example, "**Soy el Diablo Mayor, y vengo del otro la'o. Aunque todos no conozco, con todos tengo amistad**" or "**Yo soy el Diablo Mayor, un trago de refina'o**." (Don Pascual refers to the host of the festival.) Silvestre Ovalle (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) notes that to compose a **redondilla** is an art form; he includes the name of the place they are visiting in his verses when he performs. (In comparison, Isleños, descendants of immigrants from the Canary Islands in southern Louisiana, sing **décimas** that relate incidents and characters from St. Bernard Parish. The Canary Islands Descendants Association in southern Louisiana has printed pamphlets titled "The Significance of the **Décima**" that quote the scholar Samuel G. Armistead who identified the Isleño four-verse quatrain as distinct from the ten-verse stanza sung in the Canary Islands.)

Narratives about **cucua** situate the dance in historical experience. People throughout northern Coclé knew how to prepare the dance outfits, yet would gather in San Miguel Centro on Corpus Christi in order to travel to Penonomé and perform (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010). Mass was held in the Penonomé church on the Wednesday before Corpus Christi Thursday (sometimes spelled "Corpu Christi" reflecting the Coclé dialect which often doesn't pronounce /s/). Florentino Morán (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) recalls that, "on Wednesday [the devils] would arrive [from other communities] in the morning and go to the Penonomé church, entered to listen to the mass, and when the mass ended, '**ju-a**' and go out onto the street. Passing the houses, streets; danc-

ing. People who danced along gave us drinks.” Florentino Morán credits three directors for teaching him **redondillas**: Leonardo Gonzalez from San Miguel Centro was the Diabolo Mayor; Pedro Velasquez from San Pedro was the Diabolo Teniente; and Juan Paulino Alabaca from Indio River was the Capitán. Florentino Morán began dancing in 1949 and notes the ensemble was no longer going to Penonomé then. It seems this practice was revitalized.

Modesto Agraje (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) recalls only one ensemble (with dancers from communities such as Alto Uracillo, Vallecito, Chiguirí Arriba, San Pedro, Boca de las Minas, and Chiguirí Centro) existed when he started dancing in 1967 and that they would travel to Penonomé together to perform the **cucua** for the annual festivals of Corpus Christi, village foundation, and Carnival, and he claims there is a photo of this dance ensemble displayed in the Penonomé Municipal Building. Modesto Agraje maintains that the dance ensemble stopped going to Penonomé in 1997 or 1998 because of transportation expenses. He reflects that the dance was preserved in San Miguel Centro as it was the home community of the Diabolo Mayor, Leonardo González, who then passed the position on to Florentino Morán. Modesto Agraje recalls that he became Diabolo Mayor in 1995 when the previous one, Humberto Morán, became ill.

Cucua dancers continue to dance in San Miguel Centro and depict a meeting between an angel and the devil during the annual patron saint festival on September 29, the occurrence of which depends on vicissitudes in the organization of the community. Florentino Morán (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2005) describes the dance: “In earlier times, the **cucua** dance of the devils represented a confrontation between good and evil with the figure of the masks with antlers (**cachico**) and teeth (**gosico**) that represent evil. The devil confronts Saint Michael in the dance.” The person portraying Saint Michael wore blue and red cloth, carried a sword and a helmet, and stood in front of the church (Florentino Morán, pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2005). The **cucua** devil dancers would exit the house where they had gotten dressed and approach the character of Saint Michael, calling out “**ju-a**.” In recollections of the drama in Penonomé (i.e., No author 2003b, Tejeira No date), Saint Michael is depicted by a girl dressed in white and a crown of flowers and is said to represent a pure soul. The actors exchange poetic words (**redondillas**). The angel may strike the devils with the sword in the theatrical presentation. Purity scares the Diabolo Mayor, and the devil dancers scatter. The dance depicts in theatrical form a soul in dispute between the devil and the archangel.

Preservation of cucua and the arson of a museum

Cucua practices express the balance between cosmological forces. Dancers and artisans navigate a social terrain that includes tensions within the village and among

outsiders who are sometimes too enthusiastic about the cultural resources **cucua** practices seem to offer. Attention from outside the village regarding **cucua** is couched in narratives about preservation, yet is perceived locally as desire to possess and contain **cucua**. Individuals and agencies from outside the community have focused on plant preservation and sometimes overlook the social structures within dance ensembles. This heightened tensions in the village to such an extent that it resulted in the alleged arson of a museum. Clifford (1997) describes museums as zones of contact comparable to the trading posts of early colonial days. Items in museums have different meanings for various perspectives. It is interesting to understand and document how dancers and artisans themselves narrate preservation of **cucua** and situate these practices within their own historical experiences and dignity.

In the first decade of the millennium, there were two main artisan and performance ensembles in San Miguel Centro. The Morán family has long been established with their Grupo Folclórico del Cucua. The Diabolo Mayor among the dancers, Florentino Morán asserts that he has performed in this role since 1947. Florentino Morán recalls being asked to dance for a longer period of time at a 1974 performance in Penonomé and claims the dancers then incorporated other “folkloric” dances beyond the Dance of the Devil, such as the **fachenda** which is danced by one devil, the **chogoro**, and the **cumbia** in their performances outside of the village. Dances were altered to accommodate performances in creative ways. He recalls dancing with the ensemble at a 1987 silver anniversary celebration at the Penonomé church, when the dance troupe had eleven couples. The dancers manufactured the outfits and crafts, presented the dances, and continue to do so.

Silvestre Ovalle (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2005) is the Diabolo Mayor of another dance and artisan ensemble in San Miguel Centro and credits the preservation to individuals; he recalls that his father and a teacher from the school, Valentín Uvarto, revitalized interest by teaching the **cucua** and **fachenda** dances in the 1980s, when the practices had almost ceased. In 2005, Silvestre Ovalle became director of a children’s ensemble, the Conjunto Folclórico Escuela Candelario Ovalle, that had previously been tied to a San Miguel Centro school. Villagers have interpreted school teachers’ management of children’s dance ensembles as disregard for the existing social structure. Florentino Morán notes that the community suspected a teacher had been stealing funds and was not perceived to share videos of the performances with the village.

Artisans from San Miguel Centro travel each August to the large Atlapa Artisans’ Fair in Panama City to sell their wares. Florentino Morán remembers attending since the 1990s, and he credits Ilse de Quezada for coming to the community to work on a reforestation project and for inviting the dance ensemble to perform at Atlapa. Silves-

tre Ovalle (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) recalls that his dancers were subsequently invited to Atlapa after his son brought a children's performance ensemble to Río Hato to participate in the 1980s political Macho de Monte rallies orchestrated by the Omar Torrijos presidency. Silvestre Ovalle (pers. comm., 2005) recalls that their first performance at Atlapa in 1999 had no music, and he says he has accompanied the children's performance ensemble as a musician ever since. This is corroborated in Conte Guardia (1963–1964), who interviewed an elder man from Sagrejá who had performed as a **cucua** devil dancer; he remembered not having instruments, but rather the only musical accompaniment to the dance was the “**ju-a**” voice and the beating of sticks on the ground. Florentino Morán (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) claims that the other dance troupe only recently invented hitting the ground with a staff, a comment which may portray the recent rivalry between the ensembles.

Villagers remember “Diana Chiari” as an outsider who helped preserve the **cucua** dance. Florentino Morán relates that Diana walked to San Miguel Centro in 1972 and sought him out after she had seen his name on a dance outfit. He credits her with being the first person from “outside” the community to visit and express interest in **cucua**, and he recalls that she gave the Atlapa Convention Center in Panama City a **cucua** outfit that is prominently displayed inside the urban building. This is corroborated in a newspaper article commemorating Diana Julia Chiari de Gruber, a folklorist and professor of art, for promoting recognition and preservation of Panamanian folk arts (No author 2003a). She learned how to make **cucua**, and four **cucua** tapestries by her decorate the Atlapa convention center (No author 2003a).

Florentino Morán describes the division of the dancers into two performance troupes as a result of villagers and regional outsiders vying for leadership positions among dancers. He recalls as difficult the collaboration with the National Institute of Culture (Instituto Nacional de Cultura, INAC)—which had invited **cucua** dancers to participate in folkloric spectacles in the Panama City national theater—because he felt they wanted to run the dance troupe (**querían mandar**). Silvestre Ovalle recalls waiting months to get paid for a performance at the Panamanian national assembly and how the community did not understand the bureaucratic delay, accused him of corruption, and removed him as Diabolo Mayor because of these perceptions.

Interestingly, Silvestre Ovalle recalls a Radio Veraguas CD recording that enabled a large geographic distribution which incited interest from the Netherlands. The Netherlands Committee of the United Nations for Nature started a reforestation program in San Miguel Centro for an endangered species of **cucua** tree and supported a project in the village through the Panamanian NGO called CECA (Circle of Applied Sciences) (Quezada 2003a, 2003b).

They worked with San Miguel Centro villagers to build a community center, a **cucua** museum, and a reforestation project (Quezada 2003a, 2003b). Silvestre Ovalle credits Renee Changmarín, a Panamanian biologist, for bringing an NGO to the village and initiating a reforestation project, yet notes that the reforestation project focused on **cucua blanco** and not the other species artisans utilize. Florentino Morán (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) questions the practicality of monoculture reforestation, as trees develop many branches which impede the uniformity of the cloth (**tela**) for artisan purposes. The Morán family notes that they take care of other plants, such as **pita**, relevant to the dance. Such narratives reflect the dignity and self-determination in local preservation efforts.

By 2005, a cultural center, touted as a museum outside the community and as a workshop inside, had been built, and San Miguel Centro village as a group was given a generator for the first **cucua** festival. By 2010, Silvestre Ovalle (pers. comm., 2005) had changed the name of his ensemble to Grupo Cultural Ecológico and recalls working closely with the cultural center. The “museum” included a building where artisans were asked to give presentations to outsiders and a monoculture area planted solely with **cucua blanco**. Displays inside informed about artisan techniques and the **cucua blanco** tree and its biology, means of reproduction, and reforestation. However, such generosity from outside the community flamed already existing differences among performers and artisans.

Competition and animosity increased between the dance ensembles and solidified identification as separate “groups.” Artisans guarded with secrecy dye knowledge and painting styles. Villagers remarked in 2005 that competition for plant resources had intensified and sometimes resulted in the elimination of local plant sources by rival dancers. One ensemble accused the other of not planting the tree seedlings funded in reforestation plans. This increased opportunities for people from other villages to sell **cucua** plant materials to San Miguel Centro. Modesto Agraje (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) became Diabolo Mayor of a dance ensemble, La Danza de los Cucua de los Adultos, that had split off from existing performance assemblies by 2010. Each dance ensemble emphasized its claims to authenticity.

Narratives in the village concur that intervention from the outside disrupted the tranquility and cooperation within the community. The **cucua** festival has been indefinitely postponed. Villagers commented in informal discussions that the festival was really for outsiders, as they themselves repeatedly see dancers practicing in open grassy areas. The museum structure burned, and villagers maintain that it was arson in culmination of long standing disputes. The narrative of arson reflects discomfort with outsider intervention. The San Miguel Centro museum is now a memory. Many villagers concur that cooperation has been restored in the village in the years since.

Discussion

Activities related to the preservation of (plant) knowledge happen within intersubjectivity between perspectives. Examination of the various discourses surrounding plant preservation reveals the complexities. Data about plant knowledge is found in discourses beyond the conversations artisans have in northern Coclé and at the Atlapa Convention Center. Scholars emphasize data about plant use as evidence of continuous indigenous occupation, and ethnohistorical research methods show both chronological associations and versatility in the use of particular plant species. Scholarly narratives tend to ascribe Native American identification to area residents, yet a study of local understandings reveals that identification as **cholo** correlates with plant fiber hat use (Müller-Schwarze 2008). Panamanian media narratives stress a historical narrative for the nation-state. However, artisans and area residents are interested in the functions of what they make. People dependent on the surrounding natural environment adapt their knowledge to current needs as historical contexts change. In comparison, Davis (1996) suggests that the colonial encounter forced indigenous Amazonian people to invent more medicinal uses for plants. Political land rights based on “indigenous identity” require people to remain unchanged and exhibit the same cultural traits that were once recognized or rejected (Müller-Schwarze 2015). However, ethnobotanical knowledge, like that deemed traditional in other contexts, remains in use over time precisely because it is flexible and needed for survival (*sensu* Honko 1995). It is in the interactions between these discourses that plant conservation practices are enacted. Moreover, it becomes important to see plant preservation contextualized in human conversations in the ethnography of historical experience.

Scholarly narratives of archaeology and continuity

Scholarly narratives about plant use in archaeological evidence emphasize continuity. In the nearby Sitio Conte archaeological site, “bark,” probably *Ficus* sp., was used for grave covers and cotton for “painted cloth” (Cooke & Ranere 1992:286). Fredrik Johnson (in Lothrop 1937:108–112) interprets impressions on clay and copper in the archaeological site as bark cloth, baskets, and weaving and interprets connection between ancients and modern Ngäbe (Guaymí) people. The early Spanish chronicler Oviedo (in Torres de Araúz 1992:44, No date) describes the type of woven hammock people had as indicating their social rank and describes women who wore floor-length **naguas** of “bark cloth” as higher ranked, with those who wore knee-length ones having lower rank. The Spanish chronicler Adrian de Ufeldre (in Casimir de Brizuela 1971) describes bereaved who dressed a corpse in a funeral dress (**pampanilla**) of tree bark in the western isthmus. De la Rocha (in Villareal 1992:14) mentions, in the seventeenth century, what he calls bark cloth clothing. Encoun-

tered people in the western isthmus recognized a specialist who had the job of painting bodies of others, especially faces, with motifs like human figures, four-legged animals, birds, and trees (Wafer in Casimir de Brizuela 1971).

Discourse about plant knowledge is located in practices that reflect and encourage identification as indigenous. Evidence from archival and ethnohistorical sources supports the understanding that people in northern Coclé today continue to exhibit a heritage from indigenous populations. The direct historical method links historical people with archaeological sites and cultures. Workshops for Coclé artisans have included visits to the Penonomé Museum and the archaeological site of Sitio Conte, wherein participants were encouraged to observe the paintings and designs called “characteristic of central Panama” (Museo de Penonomé 1995:4).

Linguistic evidence related to plant use can also be interpreted within scholarly narratives of indigenous continuity. Romoli (1987:150) writes that the Spanish chronicler Oviedo described a covered basket called **hava** among people he encountered in the isthmus, and when two **havas** were placed one inside the other, they were sealed with **bijao** leaves. The illustration Romoli has cited from Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés (1478–1557) actually shows a round basket carried on a pole. **Bijao** (*Calathea panamensis* Rowlee ex. Standl. or *Calathea marantifolia* Standl.) leaves are used today for similar purposes in northern Coclé (Müller-Schwarze 2006b). The Spanish chronicler Oviedo (in Romoli 1987:73) lists the words **hico** or **hyco** as meaning hammock rope. Miranda de Cabal (1974:112) reports the word **quisí** as the Dorasque word used for the fiber for making **chacarás**; the fiber would today be referred to as **pita**. (Miranda de Cabal (1974) describes Dorasque people that lived in the western isthmian highlands as “extinct” at the Spanish arrival due to fighting with people identified as Mosquitoe.)

A review of scholarly sources indicates that the common name for the plant **acla** also signals antiquity. Romoli (1987) compares similar words from current isthmian indigenous languages and ancient root languages. (Romoli [1987:81] compares what she classifies as the Cuna **kala** or **naimali e kal** [meaning bone or tibia, **canillas de hombre**]; the Cuna word **akla**, which means **repisa**, **masa**, or **desvan**; and in Chocó **akare**, which means “below.”) In a table of comparison between the ancient “Cueva” vocabulary used in various conqueror texts, Romoli (1987:81) lists “**Acla**” as “**canillas de hombre**” as Acra or Acla in Cueva language and as the place of a crucial battle between indigenous; and in Chibcha, “bone” is said as **quine** or **quene** or **muyscquyne**; in Arawak, **arka** means “to fight.” Durán (2003) describes that prehistoric **caciques**, or chiefs, in the central isthmus took the names of plants and animals. Romoli (1987:59) lists Acra and Ataracherubi, with variants of Acre and Acla or Taracherubi, as the cacique of the sector southeast of Cueva. Aguilar

(1963:75) locates Acla in Calidonia Bay as an indigenous ethnicity in the sixteenth century. Romoli (1987:33, 59, 70) describes the word as a toponym and documents Acla as a place located on the isthmian Atlantic coast in 1525. The Spanish conquistador Pedrarias formed a settlement at Aclá or Ákla, which was later abandoned (Howe 1974:11, 17). Castellero Calvo (1967:38) notes that "Acla" was the name of a plantation (**reducción**) formed after the Spanish kingdom in 1551 and 1552 recognized the freedom of the native population. Castellero Calvo (1967:67) documents a colonial gold mine on the Pacific coast called "Acla." The cultural use of plants can be interpreted to understand historical continuity.

Plant knowledge in historical context

Continuities need to be understood in the details of creativity and history; rural people are not located outside of time in an unchanging list of plant uses and basket manufacture. Rather, people remember historical circumstances that influenced and changed plant use. Corroboration of oral history with written sources demonstrates the versatility and creativity evidenced in northern Coclé plant use.

The interaction with the Catholic Church hierarchy encouraged the preservation of plant knowledge for specific crafts. Franciscans, the missionaries who made the earliest contact with people in northern Coclé, encouraged artisan education in hammock, hat, and rope making (Conte Porras 1997:65). Conte Porras (1963, 1997:68, 1998, 1999) sees hat manufacture as something the population of northern Coclé, whom he calls **cholos**, have done for generations. Lincoln (2004) writes that Central and South American indigenous people have been cultivating **pita** plants for centuries, and cites the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss for evidence.

Knowledge about plant use helped people survive the injustices and expectations on Spanish plantations in the colonial era. Castellero Calvo (1967:115, 117) describes Spanish colonial state tribute requirements in the central isthmus on **reducciones** for widows and single women as a half-pound of **pita** string (**pita hilado**). Castellero Calvo (1967:122) describes Indians on **reducciones** who were able to abandon such concepts about production and return to a subsistence way of life because they gained access to European goods by exchanging artisan goods (**artesanía**).

According to Suárez (1997:58), people he terms Indians sold **pita** in Penonomé in the 1700s. Camargo Ríos (2002) interprets the contact that happened during religious festivals in Penonomé as the seed of interdependent trade and identifies three zones of exchange activity in the region, with people nearest to Penonomé trading more frequently. In this time period, Humboldt (in Cordeiro Pérez No date:73) describes dye being extracted from

Fridericia chica. Penonomé townspeople utilized indigenous plant knowledge in production when they participated in international trade, as documented in 1735, and sent hammocks, nets, wooden trays, rope, and palm-leaf brooms per ship to Lima, Perú (Durán 2003, Rodríguez 1998). Trade ties between Panama and South America included the exchange of hats and hammocks (Figuroa Navarro 1982:41). Such travel routes reflected indigenous knowledge of ancient shipping routes (*sensu* Lothrop No date).

Araúz (2002) describes 1800s Panama City as dependent on rural imports and cites an 1817 document that records how people from the countryside regularly traveled to the city market to sell products like rice, corn, beans, plantains, livestock, cotton weavings, **pita**, hammocks, **batea** trays, and brooms. In the 1800s, **pita** was manufactured into goods that were traded to Penonomé and then to Lima, Peru (Camargo Ríos 2002:117). The administration of the Gran Colombian colonel Anselmo Pinedo opened trade schools, such as the hat making school in Penonomé (Figuroa Navarro 1982:226). By the mid-1800s, the Penonomé parochial opened a school to teach hat sewing with a fiber called **jipijapa** (Quiros 1981:72). The teacher Francisco Lara from Ecuador taught hat making and the use of **bellota** in the Central School for Hatmaking in Penonomé (Camargo Ríos 2002:126).

Rosas and Ureña (1988) seek an origin point for the **cu-cua** dance, which they place between 1824 and 1940, when missionaries entered mountainous Coclé. This makes one wonder as to whether it was in this time period that these missionaries created more documentation about the dance and created interest outside the area. Contemporary documents depict plant fiber use in the area. The botanist Henri Pittier (in Heckadon-Moreno 1996) describes the central isthmian uses of the **cuas-cua** or **namagua** tree for cloth, sails for canoes, clothing, and bed mattresses (**petates**) in 1911. Nordenskiöld in 1927 (in Villareal 1992:42) documents Bogotá Indians dressed in cloth bark on the Rio Calovébora. Wafer (1960:99) describes **majagua** fiber use. The travel writer Verrill (1928) describes, "the Coclé [sic] Indians are the most highly civilized of all Panamanian tribes, despite the fact that for years they fought relentlessly against Spain and managed to hold their own at that. Today, they have forgotten their own tongue and live in a far more civilized manner than their Panamanian neighbors ... Once a year they don weird dance costumes of bark cloth with grotesque masks fitted with horns and jaws and the teeth of wild animals, and take part in the 'Kukwa' or devil dance." Biesanz and Biesanz (1955) have photographs that depict area residents wearing large woven baskets on their backs.

Florentino Morán (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro) recalls dance ensembles in both Coclé and Veraguas provinces, but notes that only in Coclé was **cucua** preserved. This is confirmed by Modesto Agraje (pers. comm., San Miguel

Centro, 2010). Today, people in Veraguas province recognized as Ngäbe continue to make similar cloth, yet are not known for an associated dance. It is likely that people in the entire region made cloth from tree cambium. Oral history relates that the elaboration of tree cambium into an outfit can be understood within the framework of precolonial customs of clothes made from tree fibers in the entire mountainous and northern region.

The Coclé folklorist Elijah Fernandez (pers. comm., Chigoré, 2005) recounted how men at the turn of the twentieth century used a **pampanilla** of **cucua**, which he described as a diaper with front and back flaps that hung down; and women wore a **refao** of **cucua**, like a towel they wrapped around their waists. This is corroborated by Florentino Morán (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro), who recalls, “Before, one used **cucua colorao**. Now people don’t use it because they don’t know how to use it. Before, women would wear a **pollera** [skirt] of **cucua colorao**. Men wore a **cobo** tied with a string, and **pantanilla**.” Florentino Moran (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2005) saw in the 1930s in San Miguel Centro people in quotidian life who wore a rectangular **cucua** poncho (**cobo**) that he describes had a round collar with a small triangle in the front. The cloth was folded for storage and was worn with a **pantanilla** (or **pampanilla**) underneath. Everyday clothes were not dyed. He recalls seeing people wearing these and **manta sucia** cloth until the 1930s. Silvestre Ovalle (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro) confirmed that people in the past would make a long sleeveless shirt, which reached above the knees and was tied at the waist, from a thick **cucua colorao** or **cucua blanco** cloth (**lona**). Despite not being recognized as Native American within the Panamanian nation-state today, San Miguel Centro villagers freely admit they were indigenous in earlier times and refer to previous epochs as “the time of being indigenous” (**cuando eramos indígenas**) (Müller-Schwarze 2015).

The power of the nation-state and its policies toward people designated as “indigenous” influenced plant use for clothing. The Victoriano Lorenzo **cholos**, who fought for indigenous land rights and won a Coclé indigenous reservation in the early Panamanian Republic, wore woven plant-fiber hats (Carles 1966:120). Civilization policies in the early Panamanian Republic required by law that indigenous people wear manufactured clothing (Müller-Schwarze 2015). Nonetheless, Villareal (1992:14) cites a 1964 reference that uses the term **cobo** for cloth bark dress. Conte Guardia (1963–1964:80) describes how **cholos** dressed in a **cobo**, a knee-length habit, and women wore **pollerinas**, large skirts of various colors, and an adorned jacket called **vasquiña**, and sees contact through national schools as changing forms of dress. Graciela Joly (1981:37) portrays the removal of festive urban hats that she observed during the northern Coclé utopian movement of the Priestess as a rejection of the outside world. Elder men in La Martillada village, however, recall wearing a suit jacket and tie to dances in an expression of dignity. In the 1980s, the Panamani-

an president Manuel Noriega portrayed rural belonging in the nation when he commanded a battalion wherein each soldier used a **motete**. Ovidio Alveo Nuñez (pers. comm., La Martillada, 2010) recalls that the state asked people in the Azuero to weave their style **motete**, which has a larger opening than Coclé styles.

The expression of belonging and plant fiber hats

Scholarly analyses cite plant use data to interpret social belonging and often ascribe belonging to people as groups. Otto Lutz (in Conte Porras No date) describes the **pita** use for the manufacture of hammocks, bed mattresses, and **motetes** as a marker of ethnicity and calls the people of northern Coclé “Ngäbe” in his book *Los Habitantes Primitivos de Panamá*. Durán (2003) equates Coclé people described in Spanish colonial documents with Ngäbe Native Americans today and notes that the name of the provincial capital, Penonomé, reflects the name of a historic **cacique** or chief. The ethnohistorian Conte Porras (1999, 2003) sees wood species that are harvested as a cultural continuity. Conte Porras (1999) cites the Jesuit Juan Franco as having recorded that local people have much valuable plant knowledge to find useful wood and harvest **amarillo**, **almacigo**, **algarrobo**, **aguacate**, **arbol de balsa**, **cobolo**, **cacique**, **caimitillo**, **caoba**, **carati**, several species of **cedro**, **corotú**, **espino**, **espave**, **guayacán**, **gachapali**, **gallito**, **madroño**, **membrillo**, **mamey**, **nazreno**, **palo blanco**, **quira**, **roble**, **sigua**, and **totuma**. These are the same common names in use in northern Coclé today (i.e., Müller-Schwarze 2006b). Conte Porras (2001, 2003) interprets Coclé artisan works and the specific uses of the plants from which fibers are manufactured as markers of ethnicity and cites evidence that **cholo** people have indigenous plant knowledge.

Scholarly interpretation often reflects the narratives of scholars; it is important to consider self-identification and how people describe their social belonging in their own reflections. Narratives in La Martillada village about identification as **cholo** reflect on clothing and presentation (Müller-Schwarze 2008:176). For example, one respondent recalls that her father told her that in earlier times, both women and men in this area dressed in an underwear made of a bark cambium (**cucua**). She recalls that people dressed in re-used coffee sacks (**manta sucia**) after the War of a Thousand Days in the early twentieth century, and she noted that no one had access to either clothing or shoes like today. Hennequin sacks were refashioned into clothes, and then white cloth flour bags replaced the **manta sucia**. Today, people in the village have access to affordable second-hand North American clothing and imported Asian clothing from stores in Penonomé. This reveals the complexities of self-identification practices. Statistical data collected in La Martillada correlate self-identification and use of plant fiber hats within this context; this reflects the location of self within the surrounding ecology (Müller-Schwarze 2008).

Media narratives about plant fiber use

Media images are especially revealing about the intersubjective images and stereotypes commonly portrayed about the rural and the indigenous. Panamanian media images promote indigeneity to tourist markets, yet northern Coclé residents have limited land rights (Müller-Schwarze 2015). Media interpretations refer to plant fiber items in national historical narrative and essentialize area residents for the tourism market. Media narratives reviewed here do not refer to specific historical data but rather rely on creative interpretation and the journalist role to uphold a historical narrative for the (Panamanian) nation-state.

People in northern Coclé no longer enjoy indigenous land rights (Müller-Schwarze 2015) yet are essentialized in the common narratives about **cucua** and crafts in Panamanian media and expression. Narratives in Panamanian media that refer to **cucua** usually follow these tropes: the “pagan” functions of the dance and conversion of native people (i.e., Rosas & Urefia 1988, Villareal 1992:10); gender; concern for preservation of plants (i.e., Quezada 2002); cultural and ethnic origins; the spoken verses as resistance to Spanish colonialism (i.e., La Prensa 1985, Racero 2005, Villareal 1992:13); and authenticity (i.e., Espino 2003, No author 2003b, Rosas & Urefia 1988).

Media narratives seek origin points for **cucua** practices. Some authors emphasize an indigenous origin for **cucua** practices, whereas others place the origin at the time of conversion to Catholicism by missionaries. Triana (in Conte Porras 2003) writes that people of Chibchan languages use many plant fibers and cotton; the association of language with material culture can be found in other authors (i.e., Lincoln 2004:49, Romoli 1987). Narratives about origins variously emphasize colonial heritage (i.e., Cesar 2003); indigenous roots (i.e., Valdez 2004, Villareal 1992); ideals of creolization and narratives of acculturation (Torres de Araúz 1992); Coclé regionalism (i.e., La Prensa 2003); and Panamanian national identification (i.e., Josez No date, La Prensa 2005). Villareal (1992:11) describes the designs on the dance outfits as “pre-Columbian.” Beytia Muñoz (No date:67) traces the origins of the eight-syllable **copla** spoken by **cucua** dancers to Spanish writers such as Miguel de Cervantes. Plant fiber utilizations are treated as traits comparable with others. Only some authors (i.e., Ariel Rodriguez 2003:8a) seek African roots, in the drums associated with the dance. Rosas and Urefia (1988) describe women participating only in the **gaita** and the **chorro** pieces in folkloric presentations and interpret the simple skirt and blouse of women dancers as a recent addition to the dance.

Newspaper articles regularly narrate the story of **cucua** by crediting specific individuals for their work to preserve the dance (i.e., Quezada 2002, 2003b, 2003c). The teacher Bolívar Ramos claims that the **cucua** dance originated in Veraguas, and a migration of people from Veraguas to Co-

clé brought the dance to the area of San Miguel Centro about six decades ago (Ariel Rodriguez 2003:8a). Pictures of a centennial celebration among the Panamanian diaspora in the United States, held in the Gusman Center in Miami, Florida, refer to the **cucua** dance as The Dance of the Mirrors (Jarava-González 2002).

Narratives of loss (i.e., No author 2003b) may be based in perspectives formed in the provincial capital Penonomé, as the dance is not performed at Corpus Christi in the city anymore. Such narratives, however, are repeated in a pamphlet prepared by well-meaning outsiders and distributed at performances by the Conjunto Folclórico Candelario Ovalle. Narratives of loss obscure other possible explanations such as migrations of Miskito and Cueva, who hid in mountains during the colonial era and survived in an area of refuge (Müller-Schwarze 2015). For example, in the northern Mosquito Coast, people make bark cloth by pounding with a mallet the inner bark of a *Ficus* sp. and a *Castilla* sp. tree, for loin cloths and bed blankets; sorcerers use white “cloth” marked with black and red designs for “incantations” (Conzemius 1932:47). However, understanding of tree cambium cloth as magical is also widespread. Mexican manufacturers of **amate** paper use *Ficus* sp. and exact shamanic rituals for the understood magical properties of the paper.

Tourists are attracted by essentialism. A new tourist hotel on the coast of Coclé displays Panama hats and handmade shirts in a glass case, thereby further removing the folkloric image from the reality of life in the countryside (**campo**), which is a physically challenging life wherein the hat itself protects agriculturalists from long days of labor under the hot sun. Tourist literature recognizes the **cucua** dance as “indigenous” or Indian, and general knowledge recognizes indigenous roots. Indian stereotypes occupy a special place in the tourist imagination of the exotic. This has implications; the Morán family hosted an unexpected visitor from France interested in **cucua** who arrived in San Miguel Centro without local language skills and unprepared for rural conditions.

Rural areas are often depicted as uniform and unchanging across entire regions. Anthropological texts (i.e., Conte Guardia 1963–1964, Conte Porras 1963), Panamanian media, and tourism brochures (i.e., Rivera Rodríguez 2009) ascribe **cucua** as emblematic of the whole region, yet a systematic survey of Indio River watershed (Müller-Schwarze 2008) revealed that none of the respondents reported participation in either **fachenda** or **cucua** dances. The Coclé **cumbia** dance, however, is widespread throughout the region and is danced to music played on a drum, box drum, **churuca** gourd instrument, violin, and sometimes a guitar. Elders lament the changes, such as heavy influence from Los Santos **pindín** styles that they perceive have happened in **cumbia** dances, drumming, and songs.



Figure 13. A Peace Corps volunteer in San Miguel Centro encouraged villagers to present the **cucua** dance to visitors. The musicians Vacilion Morán on violin, Paulino Morán on guitar, Miguel Sánchez on drum, and Herbacio Morán on **caja** drum accompany the dancers Humberto Morán, Maria Elena Sánchez, Severiano Sánchez, and Juana Helis Morales (from left to right). Maracas are also usually played, but that musician was not present that day. San Miguel Centro, Coclé, Panama, 24 June 2000.

Media authors interpret the functions of the **cucua** dance to the culture. Ariel Rodriguez (2003:8a) writes that each day is a fight between good and evil for the residents of San Miguel Centro. At the same time, urban Panamanians look to folklore for national belonging. Anthropological scholars have observed how societal norms reverse during festivals, especially Carnival; this can be seen in the Panamanian Carnival celebrations when wealthy urban Panamanians wear clothes from the countryside. Panama hats and **campesino** handmade shirts are seen at carnival celebrations in the city. It is an interchange of identification, as marginalized country people work to look modern, and wealthy urbanites revel in a romanticized folkloric image of rural life. La Martillada villagers expressed anger in informal discussions and state that such examples show how many urban Panamanians do not know what rural life and work are truly like.

Functions of woven plant items

In contrast, narratives about plant use in weaving and clothing emphasize function in northern Coclé. Plant fiber bags hung from house rafters for storage are used alongside plastic bags. Many technologies are used at the same time, instead of the expectation that material culture be understood as the “progress” of a linear timeline (Müller-Schwarze 2015). Similarly, the objectification of **cucua** as cultural artifact differs from understandings about the function of the dance. The folklorist Elijah Fernandez (pers. comm., 2005) understands that people in northern

Coclé had dressed in “bark cloth” in earlier times, but that the **cucua** dance began in the 1870s. It is possible that he means that the dancers began performing in coastal towns such as Penonomé around this time. The **cucua** dance can be understood within the context of myths of the Guardian of the Animals, a mythological character whom locals in northern Coclé know to live in specific caves where he protects animals and manages game for hunters (Müller-Schwarze 2015). Elijah Fernandez (pers. comm., 2005) remarks: “The Indian dance is in honor of the animals; the wild pig, deer, the masks are in honor of these animals, the devils interpretation came afterwards, the dance was an Indian **refugio** for hunting.”

Romel Rosas (1998) describes a change in **cucua** dance emphasis to performance and cites as evidence the innovation that couples dance. Performers dance a friendly **cumbia**, a northern Coclé circular dance without spoken words around musicians in the center, in presentations for tourists and festivals (Figures 13, 14). The **cucua** dance as performance differs from the community drama that depicts the chasing out of the devil and the banter between the devil and the community; expresses the relation between individual and society; and balances positive and negative. In comparison, basketry from the Darién in Panama is sold in international markets, with a store in Santa Fe, New Mexico, dedicated to it. Wounaan and Emberá basket makers are known for coiling technique of the *Carludovica palmata* fiber (Indigenous Art from Panamá 2010); designs on baskets are understood to have been



Figure 14. The same musicians and dancers as in Figure 12 present the **cucua** dance to a group of Peace Corps volunteers in preparation for a redefinition of the dance for a greater public. San Miguel Centro, Coclé, Panama, 24 June 2000.

derived from body painting or curing ceremonies or designs painted on boats and altars to facilitate communication with spirits (Indigenous Art from Panamá 2010).

Functions of the *fachenda* dance

Dances are preserved despite being recontextualized in new meanings. Performers today present the dance steps of the **fachenda**, but not the ritual. Modesto Agraje (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) experienced the **fachenda** as a ritual conducted when a child had died. Elijah Fernández recalls that it was considered taboo to cry or pray for a child under the age of 7 that had died (pers. comm., 2001), as their soul was understood to instantaneously become an angel in heaven. People made a **nicho**, an arc adorned with flowers and palm fronds inside the house; played songs accompanied with a violin, a guitar, a bell, and a **churuca** gourd instrument; and danced **fachenda** in the night and day (Elijah Fernández, pers. comm., 2001). Silvestre Ovalle (pers. comm., 2005) describes the **fachenda** rituals he experienced as a youth as “a habit and crown for the angel, with a palm cross in hand, the child dressed as an angel. The child lies there as if dead with its hands crossed, surrounded by flowers, and people danced nearby and took a flower each. The godparents of the child were the first to dance; godparents have responsibility like this,

to protect a child from anything bad.” From there, they took the child corpse to a separate cemetery “for the little angels” that each village had (Elijah Fernández, pers. comm., 2001). He recalls that couples danced **fachenda**. Silvestre Ovalle describes the dance as part of the grieving ritual (**velorio**), “It was for the soul of the child to reach heaven—an angel—[we felt] happiness when a child reaches heaven.”

Florentino Morán recalls how the child’s cadaver would be displayed. The entire community would accompany the family of the deceased child, and people would dance **fachenda** the whole night instead of sleeping. People would dance **fachenda** and drink fermented corn again three months later when they observed a ritual wherein a well-dressed doll was strung over an altar and pulled higher to represent the heavenly ascension of the child soul; the three months signify atonement (**pagamento**) (Florentino Morán, pers. comm., San Miguel Centro). Silvestre Ovalle notes that people have since learned that it is “bad” to dance around a corpse. The Luracito community today dances the **fachenda** during the annual festival of the Holy Cross in May (Figure 15). Olegario Villareta (recorded interview with Onel Alveo Nuñez, Luracito, 25 July 2006) confirms the preservation of the **fachenda** dance in Luracito Arriba and that he learned to dance and play the **fachenda** on violin since he was fourteen. The **fachenda** musicians in Luracito include violin, guitar, drum, and **churuca** players, and adults dance **fachenda** and **cumbia** on Catholic holy days such as Holy Cross, St. John, St. Peter, and St. Paul (Olegario Villareta, recorded interview with Onel Alveo Nuñez, Luracito, 25 July 2006). In San Miguel Centro, however, dance ensembles that perform in urban areas have adapted the **fachenda** dance steps to their presentations in performance contexts outside of northern Coclé.

Functions of the *cucua* dance

Oral history narratives describe the power available to dancers through **cucua** practices. The dance made possible the survival of liminal times, such as the disruptions in social structure experienced during Spanish colonialism (Müller-Schwarze 2015). The dance and oral history narratives about **cucua** practices continue to function as embodiment of historical experience. States create categories through which they govern, and these are usually labeled ethnic and socioeconomic (Müller-Schwarze 2015), yet popular discourse about **cucua** within Panama emphasizes the creole reality that is expressed in quotidian life in rural areas.

The animal motifs of the **cucua** dance continued within the colonial context. Blanc (2005) writes that “the dancer is a stage paradigm of what we humans are.” Historical context makes the **cucua** dance necessary as it expresses the embodiment of conversion and colonial-



Figure 15. Villagers decorate a cross with local produce and dance the **fachenda** during the annual festival of the Holy Cross in Luracito, Coclé, Panama, May 2001. A spectator in the foreground wears a handmade hat.

ism. This happened at the Catholic Church building in Penonomé each year during Corpus Christi. Scholars interpret this particular meaning of the dance with respect to their own feelings toward conversion and conquest. Conte Porras (1988) depicts this dance as a response to colonial structures of power. In the colonial festivities of the Immaculate Virgin, Cu Cua or **ñumi** dancers descended from the mountains to participate in the festivities; they arrived in Penonomé, as well as in Santa Fe and San Francisco de Veraguas, and this was recognized as a cultural trait and labeled Ngäbe (Conte Porras 1988:133). Conte Porras (1988:133) interprets these dances as indigenous people who demonstrated “resistance” to the colonial Spanish and Spanish-descended, and notes that only later did the town incorporate the dance into its Corpus Christi festival. Scholarly narratives define colonial experiences in their act of interpretation.

Missionaries in colonial times used church theater to convert encountered people and adapted indigenous festivities to Church purposes. In comparison, indigenous **voldores** dancers perform on Corpus Christi in Mexico. The Spanish festival of Corpus Christi includes the public display of a local church society, the *Cofradía*, that tends to the saints and to Church business throughout the year. A Belgian nun had initiated Corpus Christi festivities in 1246. The Pope had sanctified it as a festival that took place 62 days after Holy Week, and the festival of transubstantiation became widespread custom in the 1200s. Corpus Christi centers on the ritual consumption of the Eucharist, understood among Catholics as the body of Jesus Christ. Carles (1947:35, 37) remarks that this festival historically received more pomp and festivities in Spain than elsewhere, despite the importance of the Eucharist

everywhere in the Catholic world. In the Americas, the festival changed to include encountered people. A document from 1529 (in Asociación Rescate de Danzas Miguel Lequizamo 1996) reports that Corpus Christi was celebrated in the Aztec capital in 1521 and that the procession was led by indigenous dancers that included devils. Ecclesiastical authorities during the Spanish colonial era in Panama organized festivities for Corpus Christi which included parades of troops, dancers, and costumed Indians; dancers portrayed the conquistador Don Pedro Alvarado and the Aztec leader Montezuma (Carles 1947:36). Villareal (1992:11) writes that in 1623, Fray Adrián de Santo Tomás celebrated in Los Remedios with devil dances and that the Spaniard Don Juan de Carrisolio invited **caciques** to participate in Corpus Christi in Santo Domingo de Darién in 1643, with church officials organizing these dances.

In Penonomé, the Corpus Christi spectacle of mountain devils dancing included an ever-changing intersubjective negotiation between cultures and religions; in some years the dancers entered into the church building, and in other years Church authorities forbid their entry and they danced outside. This function of the dance, through which town dwellers and mountain indigenous people incorporated and negotiated through theatrical drama the conversion experience, is comparable to descriptions (i.e., Hill & Monaghan 1987) of the Guatemalan Dance of the Conquest that emphasize the absorption, embodiment, and expression of historical experience (Figure 16). Western church music had in Europe become an event that did not include dance, yet the embodiment of political structures and colonial norms from Europe were reinterpreted by dancers in outfits that expressed both the transubstantiation of earthly experience and the ontology of life with-



Figure 16. In the Guatemala Mayan Native American village of Santo Domingo Xelajob in 2003, dancers portray the characters of Spaniard and African in the Dance of the Conquest. Scholars have described a function of this dance as the articulation of historical experience, and it can therefore be compared with the function of the **cucua** dance in Coclé, Panama.

in the surrounding natural environment. The dancers and spectators not only incorporate experience, but also articulate and reinterpret history anew in each performance. **Cucua** dancers in their interactions with the public improvise in ever-changing comments on social locations. The flexibility of the idiom allows for its survival.

The participation of mountain people in Penonomé church festivals and masses was controversial throughout historical times. Otto Lutz (in Conte Porras 2003) describes Holy Week in Penonomé in 1810 and notes the religious devotion of the **cholos** who participate in all the activities of the church; however, the festivities ended in a drunken brawl wherein men fought each other to the blood. Eyewitness Tejeira (No date) describes that the **diablicos** would march into Penonomé in two lines early in the morning on the first day of Corpus Christi celebrations, attend mass, and then follow the procession from the church and stay behind the procession dancing and beating their sticks. He also describes that the dancers would enter the cemetery looking for souls, which may be a rumor that probably reflects the author's positioning within inherited colonial norms for social relations and attempts to cast **cucua** as an otherworldly and evil force outside of authoritarian control. In a 2 November 1889 document, the Bishop of Panama reprimanded the Penonomé priest for allowing animal masks and "costumes determined to be of a non-Catholic nature" to participate in the Corpus Christi celebrations

(Conte Porras No date). A series of **denuncias** during the period 1870–1880 complain about the "indigenous from the mountains" who were allegedly drunk during religious festivals in Penonomé, and there are many documents that show discussion within the church about how much "pagan" expression is allowable in the church during festivals (Conte Porras 1997:143–144). The association of bad behavior with **cucua** created discussions about proper social conduct in Penonomé town and about the social location of people from the mountains. **Cucua** practices have in the past repeatedly been that locus of conflict that Mamdani (1996) terms culture. Quezada (2003b) writes that the **cucua** devils performed in Penonomé Corpus Christi celebrations between 1930 and 1940.

Oral history narrates that the **cucua** dance was indeed means to live in Spanish colonial times, and how it was revitalized. Florentino Morán recalls, "A tradition of the ancestors, they invited me to dance this. When the Spaniards came here, the dance was a protest. But that was before his time. Although some have died, we have continued this, I want to continue it. We've passed through tough times selling a suit for no more than \$2." Modesto Agraje (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) condenses historical time when he recalls his grandfather's explanation and reflects that, after the War of A Thousand Days, mountain people made **cucua** outfits "just to scare," and that Spaniards feared such outfits and masks, and

only afterwards did it become a dance. This may reflect how **cucua** practices empowered mountain people during colonialism. Similarly, Silvestre Ovalle remarks, "The dance came with the Church, it was a protest against the Spaniards; that they don't invade us. Now we just have the tradition." The dance outfit portrays the conversion experience that brought liberation theology that allowed freedom of the soul despite outer circumstances (Müller-Schwarze 2015). Silvestre Ovalle notes that the Penonomé Church no longer invites San Miguel Centro dancers to participate in Corpus Christi. These narratives show how much power was historically available and continues to be accessed through **cucua**.

The cucua dance in comparison

There are many devil characters that take to the streets in other regions of the Panamanian isthmus. Popular culture distinguishes between "dirty" (**sucio**) and "clean" (**limpio**) devils. **Diablos sucios** generally wear red and black colors sewn onto cloth called **manta sucia** (La Prensa 1985). In earlier times, revelers painted such **manta sucia** cloth red and black with **achiote** plant dye and carbon (La Prensa 1985). Oral history narratives recount that a Penonomé priest once painted a devil dancer with a stripe of **achiote** that ran in the rain, and this outfit was thereafter called "dirty" (Elijah Fernandez, pers. comm., before 2005).

Devil masks across Panama depict animals and often include feathers in their design. Each **diablo sucio** represents an animal and takes on the characteristics of that animal in the dances at Corpus Christi in Chilibre (Tenorio 1996). Jaen Arosemena (2003:109–110) documents an 1808 Montezuma dance with over 60 actors and sees the origins of the Los Santos Montezuma dance in the Coclé **cucua** dance: in the circular Montezuma dance Indians and Spaniards confront each other with clashing swords and speak verses, and Indian characters are veiled and imprisoned. In the Montezuma dance, the Cortez character explains in his spoken verses that he comes from the other side of the ocean (No author 2003b); **cucua** dancers may have inverted this phrase to signify their home in the mountains and as pagan. In Los Santos province, devil dancers metaphorically divide the universe between good and evil, which Coclé **cucua** do not do in their presentations. Modesto Agraje (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) notes that Los Santos devils do not perform dances from Coclé, such as **fachenda**, **cumbia**, or **chogorro**, yet describes as different that they dance to seed noisemakers sewn to their outfits and perform a dance called **zapoteo**. The San Miguel Centro devil may use bells. Florentino Morán (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) describes the dance steps and speech as different, when asked to compare **congo** dances from Colón province. (The similarity in dance steps and rhythms between Haitian **congo** and Panamanian **congo** dances lead one to speculate about the naming of Congo Square in New Or-

leans.) Panamanian devils may wear mirrors, and this is popularly explained in that "Spaniards" confused encountered people with mirrors.

Written accounts repeat widespread understandings that locate creative expressions within geographies as origins and historical narratives associated with place (Müller-Schwarze 2013). A collection of articles written for the Panamanian centennial describe **cucua** dances as national pride. In this article, Jaen Arosemena (2003) repeats Panamanian national historical narrative when he suggests a Mexican origin for Montezuma dances because they depict characters from the encounter between Aztecs and Spaniards, yet he also interprets medieval Spanish traditions in the ties to the church ceremony. European devil dances are seen as having pre-Christian pagan roots in Europe, such as sun rites and fire festivals celebrated in Catalonia (Adolfo Gonzalez, pers. comm.). Morales (2013) interprets the dance of the devils performed in the Mexican states of Guerrero and Oaxaca as ancestral spirits that cleanse evil from villages and that aid shamans in curing. Mayan **voladores** dancers perform on Corpus Christi, yet also celebrate the solstice and call for rain. Such interpretations of artistic expression attempt to categorize and objectify human life and expression which is flowing and not static. (For example, the influence of aesthetics brought by Asian immigrants to Panama on cultural practices such as urban Panama City devil masks has yet to be described.)

Writers also interpret the function of the performances and locate these within representations of geography. Verrill (1928:218–19) compares the Coclé devil dance to counterparts in South America and describes its function to scare away evil spirits in what he calls "to outdevil the devil." The devil character is found in street theater and festivals throughout Latin America as well as the greater Caribbean. The skeleton character in the New Orleans Mardi Gras has a similar function in scaring away one's fears and reminding viewers that life is short. Wheeler (2006) describes dancing as a Bolivian **diablada** in a dance that she describes as representing victory over darkness, enslavement, and oppressive forces during the Gran Poder festival in La Paz: "masked, unrecognizable inside 20 pounds of sequins, silver, satin, plaster, glue, elastic: roaring and laughing hellishly." Devil dancers in a Quechua-speaking town in Peru annually depict evil as humorous personifications of Europeans during the Virgen del Carmen festival (Rommen *et al.* 2012[2001]:279).

Conclusion

This article describes intersubjective discourses about plant use, instead of ascribing a label to people portrayed as a "group" (*sensu* Brubaker 2004). The characters of devil, heathen, and the indigenous overlap in the popular imagination about **cucua** and empower, albeit during car-

nivalesque proceedings. Rommen *et al.* (2012[2001]:281) note that “many stories are being told” within the performances at a festival. Verrill (1928:220) describes the antics of the Coclé dancers in Panama as “frightening” and then notes a holy day as the best day to chase out the devil. The depictions of the surrounding ecology on the **cucua** dance outfit locate dancers and spectators within a cosmology of plants, sky, and earth. Moreover, **cucua** practices can be understood within the context of daily plant use in northern Coclé wherein self-location is within the surrounding ecology. Turner (1969) describes the power recognized during liminal times (when societal rules are also reversed) as symbolic, yet the power received through these creative performances is real. The divisions between Church and devils are a continuum; Florentino Morán (pers. comm., San Miguel Centro, 2010) recently gave the Penonomé bishop a **pañuelo** and a mask. The dances still help mountain people mediate the outside world. Self-understandings in northern Coclé reflect intersubjective spaces among these networks and conversations and show how people manage the lived consequences of national and scholarly discourses.

Plant knowledge and connection to the local environment have repeatedly empowered people who live in the northern Coclé mountains to survive during the Spanish colonial era when some people avoided plantation life and traded artisan products instead, and now people mitigate economic realities by selling baskets made from plant fibers in the regional Penonomé market or to tourists along the Interamerican highway. It is not specific historical circumstances or the interpretation of origins as ethnic that influence whether plant knowledge and plants are preserved. For example, competition in San Miguel Centro after heightened outside interest in **cucua** preservation resulted in the destruction of plant resources and the rumored arson of a museum. Rather, adaptation, creativity, and versatility because of functionality have ensured the preservation of plant fiber use and knowledge in northern Coclé and likely elsewhere. The ethnography of historical experience describes the details of the ebb and flow of life lived within nature.

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Appendix 1. Botanical names and local names for plants used in northern Coclé Province, Panama. Linguistic data contained in the northern Coclé dialect names may reflect indigenous pasts.

Botanical name(s)	Local name(s)
<i>Acmella alba</i> (L'Hér.) R.K.Jansen	manzanilla
<i>Aechmea magdalenae</i> (André) André ex Baker	pita
<i>Anemopaegma orbiculatum</i> (Jacq.) DC.	bejuco de tortuga, tortugillo
<i>Anthurium clavigerum</i> Poepp.	bejuco dormilón
<i>Apeiba membranacea</i> Spruce ex Benth. or <i>Apeiba tibourbou</i> Aubl.	cortezo
Bignoniaceae	bejuco ajo
<i>Bixa orellana</i> L.	achiote
<i>Bomarea edulis</i> (Tussac) Herb. or <i>Bomarea carderi</i> Mast.	bejuco de acla
<i>Brosimum</i> sp. or <i>Naucleopsis</i> sp.	colorao, sandí
<i>Calathea panamensis</i> Rowlee ex. Standl. or <i>Calathea marantifolia</i> Standl.	bijao
<i>Carludovica palmata</i> Ruiz & Pav.	bellota
<i>Croton draco</i> Schltldl.	sangrillo blanco
<i>Curcuma</i> sp.	yuquilla, yuquita
<i>Cyperus</i> sp.	junco
<i>Desmoncus orthacanthos</i> Mart.	matamba
<i>Eleocharis elegans</i> (Kunth) Roem. & Schult.	esterilla
<i>Enterolobium schomburgkii</i> (Benth.) Benth.	corotú
<i>Ficus maxima</i> Mill. or <i>Ficus tonduzii</i> Standl.	oreja de puerco
<i>Fridericia chica</i> (Bonpl.) L.G.Lohmann	chisna
<i>Genipa americana</i> L.	jagua roja
<i>Heteropsis oblongifolia</i> Kunth	bejuco mula, bejuco real
<i>Manicaria saccifera</i> Gaertn.	guagará
<i>Martinella obovata</i> (Kunth) Bureau & K.Schum.	bejuco colora(d)o
Melastomataceae sp.	ojo de gallo
<i>Morinda citrifolia</i> L.	guaymí
<i>Mucuna mutisiana</i> (Kunth.) DC.	ojo de vena(d)o
<i>Nectandra globosa</i> (Aubl.) Mez	sigua
<i>Paragonia</i> sp.	bejuco verde
<i>Philodendron</i> sp.	bejuco mimbre
<i>Pleiotachya pruinosa</i> (Regel) K.Schum.	birutillo, verotillo
<i>Poulsenia armata</i> (Miq.) Standl.	cucua blanco
<i>Swartzia simplex</i> (Sw.) Spreng.	naranjillo
<i>Tanaecium pyramidatum</i> (Rich.) L.G. Lohmann	marica
<i>Tetracera volubilis</i> L.	bejuco chumico
<i>Xylopiya frutescens</i> Aubl.	malagueto