

## Embera

### Profile

The Embera are Colombia's third largest indigenous group with an estimated population of around 71,000. They are a nomadic people found in different regions of the country although 50% of the population resides on the coastal pacific basin of the department of Choco. Other important groupings are located in the departments of Antioquia, Risaralda, Quindio, Caldas, Valle, Cauca, Putumayo, Caqueta and Narino.

'Embera' translated from the indigenous language means 'people' (or 'gente' in Spanish). These indigenous peoples constitute one of Colombia's most socially complex and diverse ethnic groups which is reflected linguistically, geographically and within Embera mythology. There are thought to be around five different linguistic dialects of the Embera language which are differentiated according to geographical location. The Embera also distinguish themselves as a people based on geographical terrain. These 3 main groups are the people of the mountains (*Eyebida*) who inhabit the western mountain range of the departments of Antioquia, Risaralda, Caldas, and Valle; the people of the river (*Dobida*) found living in the department of Choco; and the people of the sea (*Pusabida*), who can be found in the river tributaries of the Pacific ocean towards the southern port of Buenaventura.

The Embera trace the living concept of 'difference in identity within one tribe' back to their mythological beginnings, which also reveals a history of conflict and competition between earthly and mythical/spiritual beings. Embera and Waunan are of the same linguistic family and agree on a common identity based on cultural heritage and theories on creation. Modern historians and anthropologists are unable to identify the exact historical period in which intra-ethnic demarcations occurred, but according to the mythology recounted by the Waunans, they and the Embera originally lived together on the banks of the San Juan River until the Embera were forced to leave due to their becoming implicated in acts of evil.

While the Waunan have a more homogenous ethnic identity which is maintained across all regions in which they are situated, the Embera in contrast go further in distinguishing themselves as Chamies, Katios, Embera and Epena ([www.etniasdecolombia.org](http://www.etniasdecolombia.org)). These are viewed as regional identities.

### Historical context

#### *Spanish conquest*

The regional dispersal of the Embera community is said to have coincided with the Spanish colonial conquest from the beginning of the 16th century. The Embera put up a fierce resistance to defend their culture and territorial integrity, which culminated in significant losses for the colonists. One of the most significant recorded events during this resistance was the violent expulsion in 1637 of Spanish invaders from Embera territory led by Martin Bueno, which left many of the colonial adventurers dead. Subsequently however, as a result of the colonists violent retaliation, a mass exodus occurred in which

the Embera fled deeper into the tropical jungles and mountain ranges, which became their refuge and later on the source of their cultural survival as a peoples (<http://www.etniasdecolombia.org/>).

Despite the technological military advantage of the Spanish colonists it was over a century after their arrival in 1511 that the Spanish were able to consolidate colonial control. Reasons behind this delay are attributed to the complex social and traditionally autonomous nature of individual Embera settlements, which were coordinated under an effective single leadership of a warrior chief (*sarra*) who was able to unite the communities against the common colonial enemy (*ibid*). In addition heavy rains together with the harshness of the terrain of the unexploited rainforest jungle, as well as infighting between the colonists over territorial control and exploitation of natural resources, are also thought to have been factors in delaying Spanish control (*ibid*).

Colonial domination from outsiders runs as a phased and recurring theme throughout Embera history. The eventual retreat of the Spanish colonists in the 19th century was replaced by extended periods of aggressive evangelization from Christian western missionaries as well as those from the interior. History recounts corporal punishment and the forcible establishment of Embera towns being the policy of such evangelists who aimed to breakdown segregated and autonomous Embera social structures, religion and cultural traditions. Although the colonists were eventually able to establish control by the defeating the traditional warrior chief *sarra* and imposing a new figure answerable to the Spanish crown, as in previous epochs of Spanish colonial invasion the Embera put up a fierce resistance, which as a repeat in history culminated in their mass exodus into territories inaccessible to outsiders.

## **Mega projects**

The colonial presence in the province of Choco was motivated by the desire to gain access to the region's rich and unexploited mineral and natural resources such as gold, silver, and rubber. Later into the 20th century agro-industrial and biological natural resources such as timber, palm oil, tropical plants and animals would serve to attract exploration from the modern biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries.

## **Urra hydroelectric dam**

In 1951 a study carried out by J Tipton projected the viability of the construction of a hydroelectric dam in the department of Bolivar and the narrow straits of Urrá were determined as the site. In 1977 a further study was presented supporting the viability of Urrá projects I and II, but failed to mention the fact that the region was inhabited by the Embera-Katio of the Alto Sinu ([www.etniasdecolombia.org](http://www.etniasdecolombia.org/)).

In 1992 the Colombian government revealed its proposals to implement a multifaceted development project which would include the building of a high powered hydroelectric dam system. Subsequent studies projected that the building of the dam would necessitate extensive flooding of a significant proportion of the Embera-Katio ancestral territories, large scale damage to the natural environment, and threaten the very survival of the indigenous peoples and their traditional ways of life - integral to their cultural heritage and identity. The dam which became famously known as *the Urrá hydroelectric dam project* was funded by multilateral foreign investors including Russian and Swedish multinational corporations. Despite the constitution of 1991 and Colombia's ratification of the ILO convention 169 (1988) establishing in law 21 (1991) the obligation of all third parties to carry out prior consultation with indigenous communities before any natural resources within their territories could be exploited, the plans drawn up in 1992 did not acknowledge the existence of indigenous communities in the region where the roll out of the project was proposed.

Since then and until the present day as a result of the Embera's absolute rejection and refusal to

collaborate in the plans, the indigenous people have been forced to live with the ever looming possibility of forced and mass expulsion from their traditional habitat and the potential extinction of their communities. As they fought legal battles against the government, multilateral investors and other relevant state bodies including INCORA through the constitutional courts, on the ground and within their territories the Embera became increasingly victim to violent attacks and saw the selective assassinations of their spiritual leaders by right wing paramilitary death squads.

Underpinning Embera resistance throughout the whole process was the fact that the government and multinationals had not at any time carried out adequate prior consultation with their communities and as such, any go ahead of the proposals would be deemed illegal and in contravention to both national and international law. In addition the Embera accused the government of seeking to engineer the disappearance and genocide of the Embera as a people by refusing to uphold the principles enshrined in the constitution of 1991 outlining its duty to protect and uphold the human rights of its ethnic minorities, recognised as equal citizens within the pluri-cultural nation of Colombia. As well as participation in legal processes and debates against the implementation of the dam project, the Embera carried out a process of internal consultation with the communities to be affected, which resulted in the production of a list of 105 impacts of which only 4 were positive. In addition they launched widescale demonstrations throughout the country including a protest sit-in at the Swedish embassy in Bogota in 1996 ([www.etniasdecolombia.org](http://www.etniasdecolombia.org)).

In 2004 the United Nations Rapporteur on Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia highlighted the Embera as being one of those indigenous groups most at risk of disappearance due to the violence of the conflict. In the same year the UN Rapporteur on Indigenous Rights highlighted in his report that aggressive corporate activity including the wholesale extraction of natural resources from indigenous territories together with government sponsored development mega-projects such as the Urrá hydroelectric dam, also pose a threat to this ethnic group's survival. The Rapporteur urged the government to adhere to its obligations to uphold and respect the precautionary measures bestowed upon the Embera by the Inter American Court in light of the violent attacks against them due to their objection to the construction of the dam (OHCHR, 2004)

In the same report the Rapporteur also observed and expressed his concern on the reported cases of suicide among Embera girls who had been forced to witness and experience horrific acts of violence and killing associated with the war. Such acts were indicators of the psychological damage and collective depression that women and girls were suffering as a direct outcome of the conflict.

## **Current issues**

Through OREWA Organizacion Embera-Waunan (set up in 1997 with a mandate to safeguard the human rights and development of the Embera community), and often in alliance with the ONIC, the Embera continue to petition the Colombian government to respect, uphold and protect their fundamental collective and individual human right. Such demands include reclamations for their rights to life and dignity, food security, greater access to healthcare, and the right to ethno-education (OREWA communiqué, 23 April 2007).

Land rights also continues to be an issue of the utmost importance and the Embera are calling on the government to grant the outstanding legal titles for 10 more Embera reservations and increase the area coverage of twenty more (ibid).

The Embera make clear their complete opposition to the government's plans to introduce a new legal Statute on Rural Development which runs the risk of undermining or repealing collective and ancestral

territorial rights granted to the communities through the law 70 of 1993. Similarly they make known their rejection of the laws on forests and water and the new mining code which also threaten to deny them access to their lands and the resources found within them, which in turn constitutes a threat to their traditional ways of life and thus existence as a people (ibid).

The Embera are also negatively affected by the government's controversial anti-narcotics strategy funded by Plan Colombia involving the indiscriminate aerial fumigation of ancestral territories. The Embera say this is causing enormous damage to both the life and livelihood of their communities and many people have been forced to move to other areas or become displaced (OREWA communiqué, June 6, 2007).

In addition to all of the above, economic projects involving massive deforestation for the setting up of mega-scale palm oil and banana plantations is another serious problem and form of aggression being waged against them. Mega-projects for industrial scale cattle grazing and the unmitigated felling of trees for the timber industry also pose serious threats to the communities. Such activities are also involving the wholesale destruction of the natural environment in a region of the country known in Colombia as being the '*pulmon del mundo*' (translated into English as "lungs of the world") (OREWA communiqué 23 April 2007).