The Embera Category of Jai: A Territorial-Cognitive Analysis

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Abstract

The Embera category of jai constitutes a vital ontological principle that interweaves agency, knowledge, and vitality across human and non-human domains. This paper examines how jai is both a cognitive category and a territorial phenomenon, deeply embedded in Embera cosmology and knowledge transmission. Drawing from cognitive anthropology and territorial studies, we argue that jai persists due to its alignment with cognitive constraints on cultural transmission while simultaneously being vulnerable to territorial dispossession and geotrauma. Through an interdisciplinary framework, this study explores the effects of forced displacement, extractivism, and state-imposed resettlement on the transmission and embodiment of jai. While cognitive models suggest that certain cultural concepts endure, we reveal that territorial loss fractures the conditions in which jai is enacted and learned. The paper also examines adaptive strategies of the Embera to resist epistemic erasure. By analyzing jai at the intersection of cognition, ontology, and territoriality, this study contributes to broader discussions on indigenous epistemologies, cognitive constraints, and the resistance of cultural knowledge under colonial and environmental pressures.

Keywords: *Embera, Jai, Geotrauma, Cognition, Territoriality.*

Introduction

Jai is a category used by the Embera people of Colombia's western lowlands to refer to "the vital principle of all beings" (Ulloa, Rubio-Togler & Campos-Rozo, 2004, 14). In a seminal and pioneering work based on observations made during long-term fieldwork, Colombian ethnographer Luis Guillermo Vasco argues that *jai* is an essential part of all things, energetic and vital:

The Embera Indians say that everything has *jai*, plants and animals, natural phenomena and even manufactured objects. And when something loses its *jai*, it also loses its basic characteristics, the ones that make it what it is. (Vasco, 1985, 88).

Since the Emberas understand this essence as energy, it is therefore "something real and material that can take on different forms, i.e. it can be transformed" (Vasco, 1985, 89). This essay examines the manner in which territorial displacement among the Embera disrupts the transmission and embodiment of *jai*, a vital ontological principle. It draws from the disciplines of cognitive anthropology and territorial studies, and argues that while *jai* conforms to cognitive constraints on cultural transmission (Boyer, 2002), its meaning and function are increasingly shaped by geotrauma (Pain, 2021) and territorial suffering.

This study is based on ethnographic analysis and comparative textual research, drawing on primary sources from Embera oral traditions, historical accounts, and anthropological literature. The fieldwork activities were conducted between February 2023 and November 2024 making staggered visits to the indigenous reserve of *Gito Dokabu* to stay there for several days at a time. The reserve is located in the biogeographic region of Chocó in Colombia. Data was collected through participant observation, dialogical interviews with Embera community members, and textual analysis of historical and ethnographic sources. The essay then poses the question of how territorial dispossession affects the cognitive and ontological transmission of *jai* among the Embera.

The category of *jai* is considered part of a wider body of indigenous knowledge, which is collectively referred to as *jaibanism* (Pardo, 2020; Jaramillo, 2006). This knowledge is practically embodied by some members of society, who are designated as *jaibanás* by others. They (the *jaibanás*) develop a visionary ability

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that allows them to tame, maintain contact with and control the *jais* over time and space (Marulanda garcía, 2022). It has become clear that "The process of learning *Jaibanism* thus involves the process of acquiring [*jais*]" (Ávila, 2014, 93).

As the *jais* are perceived by Embera people as the primary source of illness, the *jaibanás* are able to utilize their abilities (and *jai* allies) for healing. However, they can also be used to willingly send and direct diseases, most often to other jaibanás (Jiménez Marzo, 2019). In light of the aforementioned inherent tension, as the ethnographer David Marulanda García recently argued, the phenomenon of *jaibanism* is much more complex than a mere set of healing practices: "*Jaibanism* pervades the lives of the Embera people, and thus, neither the economy, politics, social relations, nor Embera subjectivity can be fully comprehended without an understanding of this phenomenon." (Marulanda García, 2022, 89). *Jai* is thus a nodal category in the constellation of Embera *Weltanschauung*.

Highlighting this centrality, in the rest of this essay we have chosen to approach the category from a territorial and cognitive perspective. In the first part, some contextual lines are offered around the general dynamics of territorial configuration. In the second part of this essay, we extend this discussion by applying Pascal Boyer's (2015; 1994) cognitive framework to analyze the category of *jai*, but this time within a model of cognitive constraints on the acquisition of cultural content. In the final part, we propose that *Jai* can be understood as an intuitive ontology, culturally specific yet representative of the general cognitive constraints inherent in human thought (Boyer, 2002), and at the same time dependent on particular territorial dynamics.

Section 1: Territorial Suffering and Geotrauma

Jai As A Territorial Phenomenon

The Embera people have suffered a series of political atrocities, not only related to direct violence, throughout their recent history. This is reflected in territorial suffering (Hernández, Chamorro & Pastas, 2024). The notion of territorial suffering refers to the cumulative negative effects resulting from the displacement, loss, fragmentation or degradation of one's home territory. This suffering is multidimensional and manifests itself in material existence (loss of land, resources and traditional livelihoods); psychosocial well-being (trauma, alienation and existential dislocation); and epistemic structures (disruption of knowledge transmission, ritual practice and cosmological continuity).

By linking territorial disintegration to these intersecting dimensions, the framework advances our understanding of how environmental and cultural ruptures disproportionately increase the harm to marginalised communities, extending effects beyond material dispossession to psychosocial and epistemic dimensions, encompassing emotional distress, cultural disorientation, and even diminished physical health (Billé, 2014).

The displacement of the Embera has been driven by colonial and postcolonial forces, including land expropriation, extractive industries, and state-led resettlement programs. These processes have not only severed indigenous spatial autonomy but also altered the conditions under which *jai* is learned and enacted. The territorial loss or disruption affects economic and subsistence practices but also epistemological structures, fundamentally altering the way knowledge is acquired, transmitted, and embodied.

The Embera people's historical and ongoing struggle with displacement, state-imposed sedentary living, and extractive encroachments exemplifies how territorial suffering disrupts long-standing ecological relationships and ontological stability. For the Embera, territory is by no means physical space but a dimension constitutive of collective being. Land, spiritual entities, and human existence are deeply intertwined, forming a relational ontology in which identity, mobility, and epistemic security depend on a balanced territorial landscape (García, Morales & Gallego, 2024). Territorial dispossession, therefore, disrupts economic and subsistence practices also undermining ontological security (Billé, 2014)— in the Embera case, the capacity to maintain stable relationships with *jai* and the broader cosmos.

As Llanos-Hernández (2010) notes, such displacement leads to a rupture in the individual's and community's sense of identity, as access to sacred spaces, traditional medicinal resources, and ancestral landmarks is either restricted or severed. This breakage produces social alienation and economic precarity; it also engenders profound ontological grief, wherein individuals experience a loss of self because their existence is inextricably linked to a specific landscape (Łukianow & Wells, 2024).

Furthermore, the absence of a current territory or its fracture results in psychological distress, spiritual dislocation and epistemic erosion. Territorial suffering highlights how territorial dispossession and fragmentation create existential crises—a feeling of profound estrangement from the natural world and from the past, as well as a loss of meaning in the absence of a land-based relational framework. Without a stable territory, the Embera experience an increasing difficulty in maintaining uplifting personal and collective relationships, as the landscape that once structured their cosmological and social order becomes either inaccessible or permanently altered.

If territorial suffering disrupts the ontological security of a people, what happens to the cognitive structures that emerge from and rely upon that territory? Given that *jai* is a fundamental concept in Embera ontology, we argue that the displacement and territorial suffering of the Embera directly impact the transmission, conceptualization, and embodiment of *jai*. By positioning *jai* within Boyer's cognitive constraints model, we will explore how the Embera's natural ontology—historically situated within a lived, vitalistic relationship to their environment—is simultaneously resilient and vulnerable to the pressures of territorial loss.

This approach allows us to consider how intuitive ontologies, such as the belief in a vital, transferable essence like *jai*, are shaped by universal cognitive structures but in close relation to contingent, material conditions—in this case, the loss of the very territory where *jai* is enacted, learned, and experienced. Through this lens, we seek to demonstrate that while cognitive constraints facilitate the persistence of certain cultural concepts, the survival of those concepts is also deeply entangled with the territorial conditions of the people who hold them.

Geotrauma and the Colonial Reshaping of Embera Territoriality

The area identified as Embera ancestral territory encompasses a significant tropical rainforest ecosystem situated in the internal border region triangulating the Farallones del Citará, Caramanta hill and the confluence of the San Juan and Cauca rivers. The region in question is situated within the current provinces of Chocó and Antioquia in Colombia's jungle mountains. A fledgling spatial delimitation of this territory can be traced back to colonizers' chronicles (more than five centuries ago), in which the establishment of limits was contingent upon the language spoken by the inhabitants (Botero Páez, 2004).

This idea is meticulously examined by Botero Páez, who cites the Spanish conqueror Jorge Robledo as evidence for a path-based framework for measuring land in correlation with the reach or scope of spoken languages: "The language of the provinces of Ebixico is more than forty leagues in length and as many leagues in width." (Botero Páez, 2004, 19). Figure 1 depicts the polygon, which represents the approximate area of Embera ancestral territory, based on this particular ethnohistorical data linking them to Ebixico:

Figure 1. Approximate Polygon of Ancestral Embera Territory. Based on Botero, 2004.

Figure prepared by the author, using Google Maps and based on ethnohistorical data provided by Botero, 2004.

It goes without saying that the area in question is situated within a biogeographic region that is one of the most biodiverse on the planet (González-Orozco, 2021). For centuries, it has been the *loci* of various forms of racial and colonial oppression, precisely because of its abundance of natural resources. These forms of oppression have included practices such as gold mining, slavery, evangelisation missions, kidnapping, illegal recruitment and political violence perpetrated by armed groups, including the Colombian state (Nemogá, Domicó, & Molina, 2018; McNichols-Torroledo, 2013).

In the course of bitter disputes over control of gold resources in this region, the ancestral territory of Embera Indians has been progressively usurped and taken away in a complex panorama of power struggles. The Embera's struggle is not just about land but about autonomy and resisting destructive systems of excess, like sustained extractivism. Historical reports show, for instance, that in the 1970s Colombian landowners and wealthy civilians from Medellín, the capital of Antioquia province, applied to the state for mining concessions in the region of Farallones del Citará. The state replied, through some of its officials, that in order to formalize the concessions,

The land in question had to be wasteland, which led to an intensified campaign against the Embera to make their territory appear uninhabited. As a result, the remaining indigenous *tambos* on the banks of the Azul and Colorado rivers were evicted and then destroyed (Hoyos, 1994, 53).

Another strategic slander has been to discredit, divide and misrepresent the claims of indigenous and other subaltern populations on a permanent basis:

Regarding indigenous peoples, former president Turbay Ayala [...] stated in Europe that there were no political prisoners in Colombia, because in the Alto Sinú no indigenous people existed and that at most there was a small redoubt of four to six families of untamed nomads lost in the thick of the jungle. As a political act rather than as a demonstration of their existence, the Embera people made this assertion without challenge when, in 1994, 650 of their members in 140 planks sailed for the last time to Santa Cruz de Lorica. (López, 2005, 28).

Situations like the aforementioned, with the ruthless imposition of new boundaries, limits and thresholds, has deconfigured the Embera ancestral geo-socio-historical ensemble. Such dynamics has resulted in the

Embera people being forced to address the consequences of a particular and undesirable trauma series linked to places for many generations. This necropolitical economy (Mbembe, 2003) thrives on the commodification of life: gold becomes blood money, rivers are poisoned with mercury, and biodiversity is reduced to a resource frontier (Tsing, 2005). State-sanctioned megaprojects (e.g., Hidroituango Dam) and evangelization campaigns further fracture Embera autonomy, reframing their territory as a site of "development" or "a moralized region of salvation." Yet, these processes also catalyze embodied resistance—as land recuperations and transnational advocacy networks (e.g., ONIC)- assert indigeneity as a counter-sovereignty.

The term "trauma" is polysemic when it is approached in a general way. In the field of social sciences, trauma has been primarily conceptualized and investigated as a spatio-temporal dislocation (Ehrkamp, Loyd, & Secor, 2022). Consequently, it is challenging to identify fixed spatialities for trauma, which are often characterized by adversarial processes such as displacement, deterritorialization, dispossession and expulsion. In instances such as those analyzed in this essay, trauma has a territorial dimension and is associated as well with coloniality, which may be comprehended as a long-term structural umbrella shape of various forms of violence.

In order to grasp the territorial situation of the current Embera people in the context of the dynamics of spatialized conflict succinctly depicted before, it is useful to introduce the concept of *geotrauma*. This is defined as the ongoing intertwining of collective traumas and place(s). This implies "the notion that trauma is located not only within people's minds and bodies, but in the social, environmental and structural contexts around us" (Pain, 2021, 974). Since the emergence of the Colombian nation, at least two centuries ago, the Embera have been forced to adapt their territorial existence in response to numerous and violent external pressures, creating the conditions for the possibility of an ethnic geotrauma.

In a recent ethnography, it has been noted that for Afro-descendant and indigenous communities in the region, including the Emberas, the repeated experiences of war are not restricted to the damage caused to people but that war's consequences are also engraved on their territories and the myriad beings that cocreate them, in a way that the wounded lives of humans and other-than-human beings cannot be understood solely in terms of human rights' (Ruíz-Serna, 2019, 20).

For the purposes of this essay, it is important to specify that these other-than-human beings include the *jais*:

Indigenous leaders of the Emberá-Katío communities from the Alto Andágueda in Chocó report the risk to their food sovereignty caused by air strikes launched by the Colombian Air Force: the bombs dropped during these attacks allegedly infuriated the jaïs, spirits that protect certain game animals, to the point that these spirits decided to keep agoutis (Cuniculus paca) inaccessible to people (Quiroga, 2015. In: Ruíz-Serna, 2019, 20).

From traditional practices of group mobility over large areas of amphibious ecosystems (of forests and rivers) in search of fishing and hunting resources, the Embera people have been compelled to adapt to the social and spatial fragmentation represented by the closed areas defined by Colombian law as "resguardos". This concept of the "resguardo" is inherently paradoxical. The establishment of these reserves effectively provides shelter for the indigenous population, yet simultaneously restricts their movement. It is of the utmost importance -for several decades now- to evaluate the effects of this territorial designation on the reliance of indigenous populations within the state and other detrimental impacts on certain aspects of their autonomy (Roelens & Bolaños, 1997).

The figure of the *resguardo* (indigenous reservation) in Colombia has historically functioned as a double-edged mechanism for indigenous peoples, including the Embera group. On the one hand, it provides a legally recognised territorial unit, ostensibly aimed at protecting indigenous lands from external encroachment. On the other, it imposes a colonial framework of governance and spatial confinement that

undermines traditional Embera mobility, self-determination and territorial sovereignty. (Lopera-Mesa, 2010). Some cases -like the Embera-Chamí in *Karmata Rua*- highlights that the *resguardo* is not a space of Indigenous autonomy but a site of contested colonial governance (Jiménez Marzo, 2019). Rather than protecting Indigenous sovereignty, it imposes state-centric forms of administration that undermine traditional governance structures; limits spatial mobility, disrupting the Embera's historical nomadism and ecological adaptability; turns land ownership into a source of intra-community conflict, exacerbated by economic dependencies and external pressures.

Ultimately, the territorial contention faced by the Embera is not just about land but about the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being (Quijano, 2015). The *resguardo* remains an ambiguous institution: a protection mechanism that, in practice, constraints Indigenous existence within state-sanctioned borders, while failing to prevent external exploitation or ensure genuine self-determination.

Andadera: Knowing By Wandering

A culture-reflected impact could be traced in the learning process of the *jaibanás,* which is also relevant to general members of the ethnic group, given the ethnographically based understanding of *jaibanism* as an ethnic cohesive force. In order to ascertain the category of *jai* as constitutive to the Embera worldview, it is necessary to consider the geotrauma with which it is probably related, in the following terms.

There are several alternatives to becoming a *jaibaná*. Perhaps the most traditional is the ritual spatial separation/isolation from the group to seek teachings, apprenticeships and knowledge on an itinerary (Losonczy, 2006). In this itinerary, "in the Jaibana tradition, the one who knows gives a power, a spirit or a gift, and it remains in the body of the shamanic apprentice, accompanying him" (Hoyos, 2007, 162). Another is the oneiric path: "The Jaibana apprentice must learn to live in the dream as in another form of reality, to master it, and to act in it as in everyday life." (Vasco, 1985, 31). Another, more contemporary if you like, is to buy a seat (*purkao*) and be taught by other jaibanás (Vasco, 1985).

And yet there is another way to obtain an apprenticeship, one that is of great interest to us because it is close to our territorial perspective: the *andadera* (Marulanda García, 2020). In their specific cultural setting, the social bond with *jais* relies heavily upon territorial linkages, explored through the *andadera,* simultaneously a way of being, doing and knowing. The fundamental *jaibanism* feature of acquiring *jais* through the *andadera*, has been significantly influenced by territorial dynamics resulting in geotrauma.

The Spanish verb *andar* means "to go from one place to another" and is used for animate beings (Real Academia Española, 2023). *Andadera* is a verbal expression that refers to the repetitive experience of *andar,* a close expression to the dynamic designated by the english expression *wandering.* Specifically in the Embera ethnographic context, the *andadera* is "a propensity to move, a mode of relating, and therefore a knowing in going and returning" (Marulanda García, 2020, 94). When talking about child rearing practices, the Embera Indians express that parenting is somehow equivalent to *rising* people. In order to grow up (to *rise*) and become a man, an Embera must experience the *andadera*, concretized in going out and looking outside. That's why it could be said -as *jaibanás* insist- that Embera people *raise themselves by wandering*.

Andar as a way of parenting and longlife technique of learning and knowing is, therefore, key for any understanding of the Embera subjectivation process. It is of particular significance to highlight that the *andadera* represents a pivotal aspect of the process by which a *jaibaná* can obtain his *jais*, thereby becoming a *jaibaná* stricto sensu. In this particular framework, learning how to wander (*andar*) is directly proportional to learning how to control *jais* (Marulanda García, 2020). But if there is territorial suffering and a rampant geotrauma, *andar* becomes lack of surface and the associated symbolic support, adding another analytical instance to the current situation of the Embera people. The *andadera* allows us to show exactly the point at which the *jaibanism* and geotrauma converge.

Section 2: Cognitive Constraints on Jai

Jais And Cognitive Restrictions To Cultural Contents.

One of the fundamental tenets of anthropology is the notion that culture is not inherited but rather acquired (Schudson, 1989; Boggs, 2004; Craith, 2012). Despite its inclusion in introductory courses and seminars across the full academic spectrum, there remains a dearth of comprehensive frameworks that elucidate the processes by which culture is effectively acquired and retained. An inspiring compilation of seminal essays approaches this complex topic with the general idea that the human mind processes information through an evolutionary design of domain specificity (Hirschfeld & Gelman, 1994). One particular assumption included in this general framework is that, given the general properties of the human mind, this evolutionary design imposes constraints on the acquisition of cultural content (Boyer, 1994; Boyer, 2002).

Modes of processing such as the acquisition or memorisation of information impose various constraints on content and cultural content organization: "the belief that human mental abilities make culture possible and yet do not in any way determine its content and organization" is, at best, *näive* (Sperber, 2002, 57). To move beyond this naivety, it is useful to explore the notion of cognitive constraints, which assumes that cultural transmission is an inherently selective process. This is not the same as seeking or postulating cultural universals (Boyer, 2002). But it does allow researchers to think that there are some features of cultural representations that are similar across many cultural environments, and that this phenomenon might best be approached from the perspective given by the operation of cognitive constraints on the selection of cultural phenomena (Boyer, 1994).

The domain of spiritual and/or religious phenomena provides a particularly illustrative example. In spiritual representations, certain features recur across cultural settings, despite the variability of those settings. The category of *jai* can be seen as a reference of this phenomenon, manifesting recurrence and a distinct articulation of the religious domain, as we shall see. The evidence lies in the similarities with many other spiritual representations. Closely following Boyer's work, the ideas set out below around *jais* appear peculiar due to their apparent violation of the fundamental principles of everyday cognition: "They garner considerable attention due to their inherent counter-intuitive nature" (Boyer, 2002, 197).

While *jai* is deeply embedded in Embera cosmology and territoriality, it also functions as a cognitively intuitive category. Cognitive anthropology suggests that certain cultural beliefs persist cross-culturally because they align with fundamental cognitive biases (Boyer, 1994, 2002). From this cognitive perspective, a general set of recurrent features in spiritual cultural representations -and the Embera counterpart for each one- can be summarized as in the following table:

Table 1. Features in Spiritual Cultural Representations and the Embera Counterparts, Based on the Tipology Of Boyer (1994; 2002).

Concept	Description	Associated embera Terms/Beings	Key References	Additional Notes
Non-Physical Survival	A non-physical component persists after death.	Jaure-jai	Vasco (1985); Montes Bolívar (2023)	Rooted in ethnographic accounts.
Communication with Entities	Certain individuals (Jaibanás) have a stable ability to interact with the dead.	Jaibanás; "The True Men"	Jaure-jai (ethnographic context)	Ability is a unique feature that distinguishes practitioners.

Symptoms of Causal Connection	Illness/misfortune indicates interactions between beings and the living.	Maleficio (harm); Loquera (madness)	Ethnographic reports	Viewed as diagnostic of supernatural influence.
Ritual Efficacy	Rituals alter physical reality (e.g., healing, harm).	Kariburu; Benek'úa	Indigenous prescriptions	Rituals mediate between spiritual and material.

In his work, Boyer emphasizes that humans intuitively categorize living and nonliving things by assuming they have internal, unobservable essences (Boyer, 2002). This cognitive bias, often linked to biological essentialism, enables people across cultures to believe that living beings contain an underlying, vital force that defines their identity. The Embera concept of *jai* fits directly into this cognitive default, aligning with Boyer's argument that religious and supernatural ideas often emerge from a natural propensity to infer that objects and beings possess essential but invisible properties.

Moreover, *jai* is not merely a spiritual or abstract force, but a material and real energy that can take different forms (Vasco, 1985, 89). This observation supports Boyer's claim that supernatural beliefs tend to amplify and extend natural cognitive expectations rather than contradict them. In this case, the *jais* extends essentialist intuitions by providing a culturally specific explanation for vitality and transformation.

Another one of Boyer's central arguments is that humans have a strong tendency to detect agency, even in inanimate objects and natural phenomena (2002). This hyperactive agency detection is an evolutionary adaptation, helping humans quickly identify potential threats and meaningful interactions. The Embera jaibanás (*shamans*), who specialize in controlling and interacting with *jai*, exemplify this principle. This suggests that *jai* is not just an impersonal force—it possesses some degree of autonomous agency.

This coheres with Boyer's annotation that intuitive ontologies often support the idea of "minimally counterintuitive" supernatural entities—that is, concepts that slightly violate, but do not completely contradict, common-sense expectations. The notion of *jai* as an energy that moves between dimensions and beings, maintains balance, and is controlled by specialists fits within this cognitive template. *Jai* is both an extension of biological intuition (a vital force) and an agent-like entity (capable of action and interaction).

A central component of Boyer's theory is the idea that religious and supernatural beliefs involve the transmission of properties between entities—for example, the belief that sickness, luck, or vitality can be transferred through physical contact or spiritual intervention. The Embera category of *jai* aligns with this model of intuitive transferability. *Jai* is not static; it can be passed from one being to another. Additionally, illnesses, environmental imbalances, and even social discord are often explained in terms of *jai* being weakened, sent, removed, or manipulated.

This mirrors Boyer's discussion of contagion-based intuitions in religious thought, where certain properties (e.g., purity, power, illness) can be transmitted through contact, intention, or ritual intervention. In this way, *jai* functions as a cognitively natural category, explaining how health, power, and vitality move through the world in culturally framed ways that human cognition already expects.

Boyer (1994) argues that successful religious ideas tend to violate natural ontologies in limited, predictable ways. Completely incoherent supernatural ideas do not spread, whereas those that slightly subvert but largely conform to cognitive expectations tend to persist. The category of j*ai* represents such a "minimally counterintuitive" element:

- It aligns with biological essentialism (all things have an internal energy).

- It follows agency-based cognition (jai is an active force that jaibanás can control).

- It conforms to transferability intuitions (jai moves between entities and can be manipulated).

- But it slightly violates expectations by extending these properties to all things, including inanimate objects.

Thus, *jai* maintains enough cognitive familiarity to be easily understood, while introducing a unique variation that makes it compelling within Embera cosmology.

Section 3: Conclusion About Endurances and Transformations of Jai in A Fractured Territoriality

As mentioned above, the Embera category of *jai* embodies a core ontological principle that integrates vitality, wisdom and agency, extending across both human and non-human realms. Throughout this essay, we have analyzed *jai* through a dual framework: territoriality and cognition. The former emphasizes how the historical processes of displacement, fragmentation, and ecological dispossession have reconfigured Embera life practices. The latter inquiries how *jai*, as an intuitive ontology, both conforms to and challenges cognitive constraints on cultural transmission. This concluding section consolidates these perspectives, arguing that *jai* persists as an adaptive structure, resisting in the face of *geotrauma*, yet vulnerable to the ongoing colonial configurations that threaten the very landscape in which it is represented, enacted, embodied, and understood.

The analysis of embera territorial suffering reveals the deepening ways in which displacement, suffering and dispossession disrupts knowledge embodied systems as the *andadera*. Territory, in Embera thought, constitutes the collective being, interwoven with ancient epistemic and cosmological frameworks. The disarticulation of ancestral lands, driven by extractive capitalism, state and political violence, and forced sedentism, has induced forms of ontological grief that reverberate through multiple domains—social, economic, and spiritual. The geotrauma experienced by the Embera has resulted in material dispossession and has actively reshaped the way *jais* are perceived and practiced. Where once the *jaibanás* engaged in extensive *andaderas*, learning through direct engagement with the landscape and its non-human agents, contemporary constraints limit the very mobility upon which such knowledge production relies. This territorial rupture progressively destabilizes *jaibanismo*, altering its pedagogical transmission, ritual efficacy, and communal significance.

In this light, *jai* is much more than a static cultural category: is an epistemic structure that interacts dynamically with changing material conditions. As territorial aggravation intensifies, the capacity of *jai* to serve as a cohesive force within embera cosmology is increasingly tested. The *jaibanás*, once itinerant knowledge holders engaging in fluid exchanges with the *jais*, now operate within restricted, often government-imposed boundaries, where the imposition of the *resguardo* figure of system order, serves as both a protective and limiting mechanism (Roelens & Bolaños, 1997). This paradox represents the broader colonial logic that shapes contemporary indigenous experiences: while legal frameworks may offer nominal protection, they simultaneously constrain indigenous autonomy, redefining land in ways that are incongruent with its preexisting cultural meanings.

From a cognitive perspective, the category of *jai* exemplifies a structure that conforms to universal principles of cultural transmission while maintaining its particularity within Embera ontology. As explored through Boyer's cognitive constraints model, *jai* aligns with innate human intuitions about agency, vitality, and essence. The belief that all beings—human, animal, plant, and even inorganic matter or man made artifacts—possess *jai* resonates with a broader cross-cultural tendency to ascribe hidden properties to entities, a cognitive process deeply embedded in human evolutionary psychology (Ojalehto, Medin & García, 2015).

However, what distinguishes *jai* is the manner in which it transcends these cognitive defaults, embedding itself in a sophisticated relational framework that extends way beyond simple animism. Within what we would call embera epistemology, *jai* is not merely a life force; it is a dynamic, interactive collection of agents that can be tamed, submitted, transferred, strengthened, or diminished through ritual engagement. This

nuanced conceptualization of *jai* challenges reductive interpretations of indigenous thought that seek to classify such beliefs under generic or generalistic animistic schemas (Bartolomé, 2015; Reynoso, 2015). Instead, it reveals an intricate system of knowledge that emerges from, and is sustained by, the interaction between cognition and territory.

Yet, if *jai* is a category that persists due to its cognitive resonance, it is simultaneously a category under threat due to the shifting territorial conditions in which it is unfailingly embedded. The severance of territorial ties, whether through war, deforestation, pollution, or forced migration alters the materiality of Embera life and impacts the mechanisms through which *jai* is learned and enacted. The pedagogical transmission of *jai*, traditionally dependent on embodied experience and prolonged interaction with specific landscapes, is rendered precarious in conditions of territorial instability and *geotrauma*. As displacement disrupts long-standing ecological relationships, the embera people must navigate new modalities of knowledge preservation, often within constraints imposed by external forces. The tension between the cognitive durability of *jai* and the fragility of its territorial enactment constitutes a critical site of analysis, revealing both the resilience and vulnerability of indigenous epistemologies under conditions of persistent coloniality.

In this context, the adaptability of *jai* becomes a paramount factor in its survival. While displacement and territorial disruption pose significant challenges, the Embera have demonstrated an ability to rearticulate their cosmological and social practices in response to external pressures. The persistence of *jaibanismo* in urban and semi-urban contexts, where displaced Embera communities continue to engage in ritual practices despite geographical dislocation, attests to this adaptive capacity (Gómez-Ruíz, 2024).

However, such adaptations are not without consequence; the reconfiguration of *jaibanismo* outside its ancestral territorial matrix inevitably alters the experiential and ontological dimensions of *jai*, leading to progressive shifts in its meaning and function. The emergence of new forms of *jai*-related practice, shaped by the exigencies of displacement and modernity, raises critical questions about the future trajectory of Embera knowledge systems. Will *jai* retain its foundational role within embera ontology, or will its meaning gradually shift in response to ongoing territorial transformations?

To address these concerns, it is decisive to consider the intersection of indigenous resistance and epistemic agency. The embera people have long engaged in strategies of resilience that challenge the imposed fragmentation of their territories and knowledge systems (Nemogá, Appasamy, & Romanow, 2022). Whether through political mobilization, environmental activism, or the strategic negotiation of state policies, the embera actively assert their right to maintain their cosmological frameworks in the face of encroachment. In this regard, *jai* functions as an ontological principle but, even more relevant, as a symbol of cultural endurance—a site of resistance against the epistemic erasures enacted by colonial and capitalist structures. The capacity of *jai* to persist, adapt, and transform under these conditions underscores the broader resilience of indigenous thought and the ways in which knowledge is preserved and actively reconstituted in the face of adversity.

Ultimately, the inquiry around the embera category of *jai* reveals a broader dialectic between continuity and change, stability and transformation. It illustrates how indigenous ontologies are both deeply rooted in historical and territorial contexts and dynamically responsive to the challenges imposed by external forces. The fate of *jai*, then, is inseparable from the fate of embera territoriality itself. It can be argued that in order for the Embera people to maintain their unique way of life, they must undergo undefined transformations in a landscape of perpetually confronted territorialities (Bartolomé, 2010).

As long as the embera continue to assert their spatial and epistemic sovereignty, *jai* will remain a living, evolving category—one that is able to contain the vitality of all beings, and an ethnographic reference for the enduring struggle for indigenous self-determination in a world where territorial and cognitive autonomy remain sites of contestation.

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