Settlement and Subsistence Change Among the Chocó Indians of the Darién Province, Eastern Panama: An Overview

Peter H. Herlihy
Geography & Anthropology
Southeastern Louisiana University
Hammond, Louisiana 70401

The Chocó Indians are a large, yet little-studied tropical rain forest group occupying the Pacific lowlands from northern Ecuador to the Panama Canal. The Chocó are primarily agriculturalists who take pride in their hunting and fishing skills. In historical times, they were confined largely to the Department of Chocó, western Colombia, whence came their popular name. The ethnic term "Chocó" is applied to two distinct linguistic groups, the Embera and Wounan, both of whom share an otherwise uniform culture and history. Statistics concerning population numbers, density, and distribution are scarce and notoriously unreliable; nonetheless, my recent investigations in eastern Panama, coupled with previous estimates of Colombian populations, indicate that roughly 40,000 Emberá and Wounan speakers currently live in the Pacific lowlands. [1]

Recent changes have altered the traditional settlement and subsistence patterns of Chocó Indians inhabiting the Darién Province, eastern Panama (Figure 1). The Darién, with 16,803 km^2, is Panama's largest and least developed province. As an area still largely outside the effective control and understanding of the national society, it is considered a resource-rich area that offers potential for future colonization and settlement. In reality, the provvince is well-occupied by an ever-expanding Chocó population. For centuries, the Chocó have settled along Darién's rivers in a simple pattern of dispersed household units rather than villages. Historically the Chocó have had no structured social or political organization beyond the family level, with each household a self-contained economic unit where the eldest male serves as the ultimate authority. Recent organizational efforts have changed these patterns. Darién's Embera and Wounan populations now settle in villages. They have adopted tribal social and political organization with chiefs and village leaders. The Darién Chocó are developing a terrritorial imperative aimed at the acquisition of a *comarca*, a distinct autonomous political region.

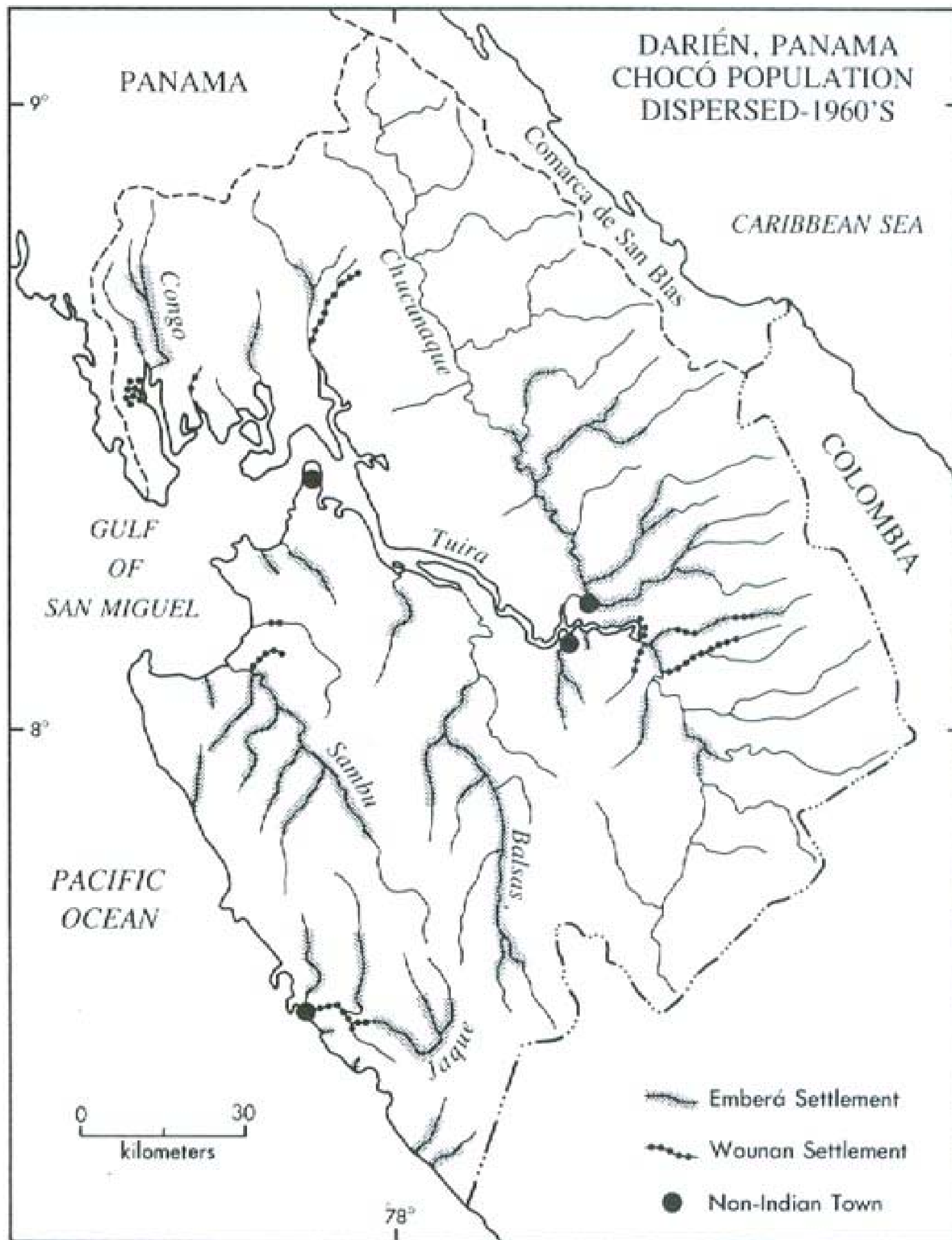

Fig. 1. Distribution of traditionally dispersed Chocó population in the Darién Province, eastern Panama, during the 1960s.

This paper will provide an overview of the recent settlement and subsistence changes among the Darién Chocó.[2] The traditional settlement and subsistence patterns of the group provide a baseline for contrast. A variety of economic, cultural, and ecological factors that set the stage for the changes that have occurred are outlined and discussed briefly. The new village settlement model and associated subsistence patterns contrast sharply with the former dispersed pattern. The discussion and conclusions about the overall change relate to other indigenous groups throughout Latin America today. **[end p. 11]**

TRADITIONAL SETTLEMENT AND SUBSISTENCE

Ethnographic accounts and oral history indicate that since colonial time Chocó social structure has been egalitarian--without formal tribal leaders, chiefs, councils, or a structure of elders. Certain religious beliefs and ceremonial activities center on the shaman who, with an intimate knowledge of the medicinal, toxicologic, and hallucinogenic properties of the surrounding plant and animal world, cures through exorcising malignant spirits. Yet, in terms of political, economic, or interpersonal relationships, no individual has held special leadership status. The head of the extended family stands as the highest authoritarian figure, and he allocates household resources and settles disputes. Occasionally, a kin group along a stretch of river might be guided by the eldest and most respected male.[3]

Traditional Chocó culture can be defined by common language (either Emberá or Wounan), kinship ties, custom, and subsistence. Historically, territoriality never characterized this group, and the Chocó did not recognize delimited tribal lands. Instead, natives expanded and contracted their range along river basins regardless of political or geographic boundaries. The Chocó speak only informally and broadly of claims to these river basins by their ethnic group; but all recognize, with pride, their river of birth. Not surprisingly, however, the ethnic claims to Darién's rivers have been altered over time:

Most of the Darién Province now settled by Embera and Wounan populations was once settled by Cuna Indians. The absence of regional territoriality and formal leadership to solidify political unity is expressed in the landscape through the Chocó settlement pattern.

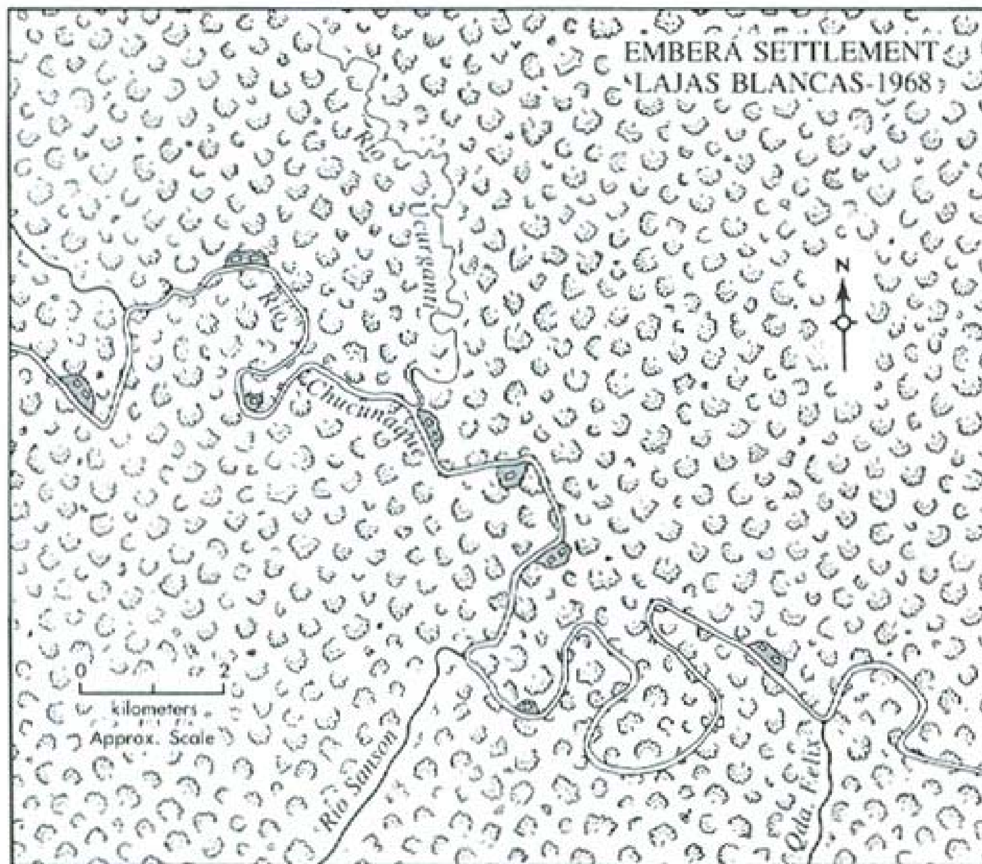

Fig. 2. Dispersed Emberá settlements along the Chucunaque River at the Lajas Blancas riverine sector in 1968.

Traditional Chocó settlement consists of dispersed household units in a distinctive riverine pattern (Figure 2). The extended family serves as the settlement unit. No villages or large agglomerations of dwellings exist.

Thatched-roof, pile-dwellings are scattered along the river margin, usually constructed on levee tops and high alluvial terraces. Population densities vary from one river to another, but houses are generally situated at least several hundred meters from one another, with intervening forests and river bends blocking the view of a neighbor's house. Settlement density is usually greatest where occcupation periods have been longest.

As Chocó families occupy vacant stretches along a river they tend to form loose clusters or sectors of closely related families. These sectors are often named after a local stream, river bend, common fish, or plant. The most densely settled sectors are usually located in the mid reaches of the river, away from the mouth yet below the headwaters where year-round dugout canoe navigaation is possible. Land ownership within each sector develops with usufructuary rights. The transfer and inheritance of property occurs traditionally among kin groups. Population growth within each sector is normally accompanied by agglomeration and lateral expansion into the surrounding forest and by movement up or down river until densities are sufficient to cause migration into another river valley.

Traditional Chocó subsistence patterns relate closely to the settlement pattern of dispersed household units (Figure 3). The settled area has three zones of land extending back from the river (Bennett 1968, 27). The

first zone, adjacent to the river, is narrow, usually confined to the best levee soils or elevated alluvial terraces. It is roughly 50 to 75 meters wide, containing the house site, animal pens, plantain-banana grove, and cultivated dooryard orrchard-garden. The second, intermediate zone consists of swamplands and monsoon forest of varying extent, but generally less than a kilometer in width. This zone keeps pigs and other dooryard animals from wandering into the third zone of grain cultivation, while also providing forage for marauding pigs. It also serves as an important reservoir of wild plant materials and game animals. The third zone is the smallest in area, but it contains important grain and tuber production, as well as other horticultural activities. In this zone, amidst a patchwork of tall monsoon forest and regrowth vegetation (*rastrojo*), small fields are planted in corn, rice, and yams. Occasionally other areas are cleared for additional grain cultivation across the river both up and down river from the house site.[4]

AGENTS OF CHANGE

Certain changes began to alter the traditional organization of the Darién Chocó in the 1960s. Basic economic considerations underlie many of these recent developments. With increasing exposure to Western products in the early twentieth century, the Chocó began to enter a cash economy. Initially they traded agricultural products **[end p. 12]** to earn cash to buy machetes, axe-heads, and pots and pans. Then later, rifles, bullets, manufactured cloth, and other goods were purchased. Their efforts to sell agricultural products to earn cash brought them into contact with Black, Spanish-speaking populations in Darién's non-Indian towns.

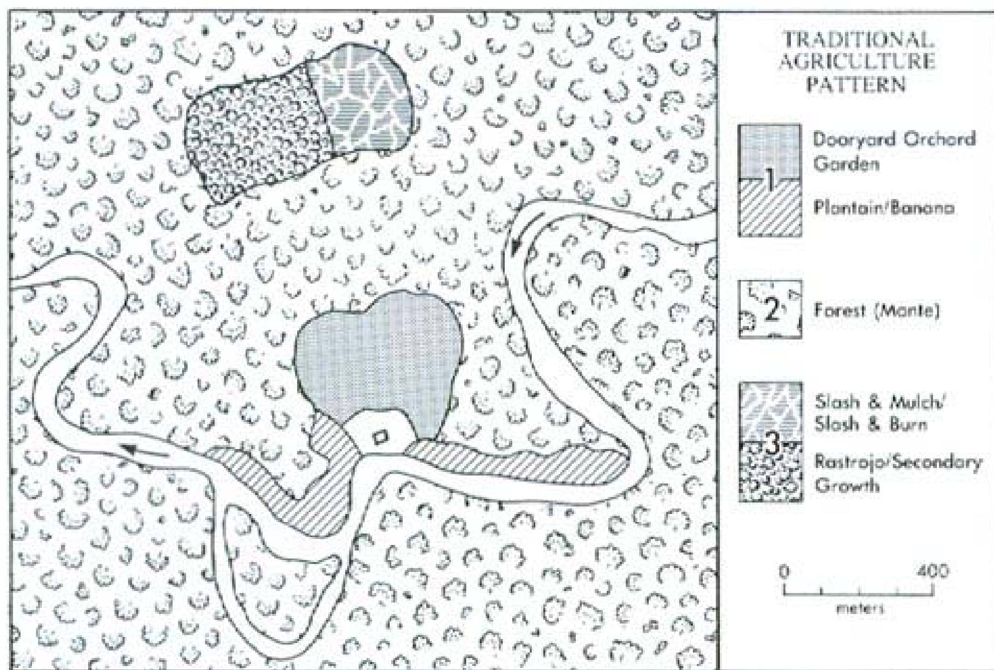

Fig. 3. Schematic representation of the traditional Chocó agricultural pattern.

Other ecological conditions have pushed them further into cash-earning activities. For example, much of the Darién Province serves as a buffer zone against the spread of hoof-and-mouth disease northwestward from Colombia into Panama and the rest of Central America. Since 1960 government regulations and international agreements have placed certain restrictions on the raising of domestic cloven-hooved animals. As a result, Embera and Wounan populations relied on the wild fauna for fresh meat until hunting pressure reduced game animal populations to remote interfluves and headwater areas. The Chocó now eat canned meat fairly

regularly and depend increasingly upon other imported foodstuffs and Western products bought with money. Most men earn cash almost exclusively by selling their agricultural prooduce, including plantains, rice, corn, and yams. To earn more cash, they simply increase the amount of land culltivated.

The early development of the village settlement model was a slow, almost evolutionary process. At first, "villlages" were little more than a grouping of hut-households surrounding a thatch-roofed school. The schools were built when the older generation of Indians, having experienced the gradual, yet persistent, increase in contact with the outside, non-Indian economy, realized that their children would not be able to deal effectively with outsiders without being able to communicate in Spanish. Some complained to local political authorities that the government should provide teachers and schools for their riverine sectors. The government complied with their wishes and the first agglomerations of Chocó settlement began when schools were built at Pulida along the Tupisa River in 1953 and at Naranjal along the Chico River in 1956.

Other villages formed as a result of missionary indoctrination. Independent missionaries of a Southern Baptist affiliation worked during the 1950s to bring the Christian message and ministry to the Darién Chocó. Other mission groups soon followed them. The first "mission village," was little more than a cluster of huts. In 1956 another nucleus of Indians who were receiving religious instruction from missionaries formed the village of El Marney farther up the same river. Four years later, a group of Christianized Chocó Indians left the Jaque River to cross the Gulf of San Miguel and settle Chitola along the distant Congo River. By 1960, six communities had developed: three as a result of parental desires to educate youngsters faced with increasing contact with non-Indian economies, three others closely associated with native desires to learn a new religious faith. Although these early initiatives reeflected the wishes of some of the Darién Chocó, the agglomeration process was not, at first, widely accepted.

The first impetus to more widespread settlement change occurred along the Balsas River in the 1960s. At the beginning of the decade, Harold Baker Fernández, a mysterious explorer and adventurer who later became a missionary, arrived in that area. Nicknamed "Perú" by the Emberá, he may have been born or lived in that country, but the natives insist he looked like a "gringo. " Settling along the Uruganti, a branch of the Balsas River, he bought land from a Negro and planted fruit trees. The Emberá who lived with him there say that he adopted certain Indian ways, including the wearing of a loin cloth.

Perú recognized the native's problems in dealing with Spanish-speaking Black and Panamanian nationals. At the time, the Pan-American Highway had reached the frontiers of the Darién Province, bringing agricultural colonists from the densely populated provinces of westtern Panama. Missionary influence was also increasing literacy and fostering educational efforts. Perú understood the problems confronting the Chocó from an insider's perspective. He taught them the importance of educating youngsters, securing land rights, and gaining effective control of their traditionally occupied territory. He instructed them that, under Panamanian law, through the formation of villages they could solicit government officials to provide teachers, schools, and medical suppplies. He told them that through more effective occuupation of their traditional lands, they could obtain a *comarca* like the one of the Cuna Indians of Panama's San BIas Islands, guaranteeing them legal rights to land and resources.[5] As a result, among the Darién Chocó Perú is a larger-than-life romantic folk figure.

Changes in social organization came after Emberá families along the upper Balsas River formed the villages of Manene in 1963 as the first formal village of the Darién Chocó. From there, the village model was diffused widely throughout Darién. Perú played a vital role, traveling widely to many riverine sectors and instructing the natives of the need to organize. In 1965, with Perú's guidance, the community of El SaIto formed along the Chucunaque River; two years later Boca de Trampa developed along the Sambú River. A school was built at Punta Grande along the Tupisa River in 1964 and a group of evangelized Chocó from the Jaque River crossed into **[end p. 13]** the Sambú Valley to settle Churuco in 1967. The prior knowledge of the Cuna experience may underlie much of the broad acceptance and adoption of an alternative village settlement model among the Chocó: Tales of Cuna rebellion and social organization presented the Chocó with a model for their cultural development. By 1967, the village model had reached some of the most

densely occupied Chocó lands in Darién, and a total of eleven villages had formed with very little outside support.

The emerging movement to organize the traditional Chocó populations gained official status under the revolutionary government of Omar Torrijos in 1968. Of modest *campesino* upbringing, Torrijos empathized with the plight of Panama's poor rural populations, especially the Chocó. As Panama's leader he commenced improvements of the Indian's position in the national society. He enlisted the aid of Estanislao López, the third cacique (chief) of the Comarca de San Bias. The first "National Indian Congress" was held in 1968. At this meeting, López instructed Chocó representatives that they needed to organize their populations if they were to receive govvernment support. López, given the authority by General Torrijos, appointed a "chief" for the Darién Chocó, who in turn nominated other chiefs. These new leaders were to organize the dispersed populations, as the Cuna model of *caciquismo* was introduced among the Darién Chocó.

Formal adoption of a new political organization came in 1970 when the Darién Chocó held the first province-wide reunions at the newly formed villages of Boca de Trampa, Sambú River, and at EI Saito, Chucunaque River. Such region-wide annual reunions, as well as more frequent village reunions, are a function of the new political organization adopted from the Cuna. The four nominated chiefs are confirmed by popular vote at these meetings. Village leaders (*nokos*) are chosen for certain riverine sectors and populations are encouraged to settle into communities. The Chocó have been instructed that after forming villages they would receive government aid and support. Between 1968 and 1972, twenty-five new communities were established. Another seventeen commmunities have formed since that time.

MODERN SETTLEMENT AND SUBSISTENCE

The village settlement model now dominates the cultural landscape of the Darién Chocó (Figure 4). Today, 53 Chocó communities line Darién's rivers. Of these, 37 are Emberá villages, 12 are Wounan, and three contain a mix of both language groups. One village, along the Pan-American Highway, which now reaches the interior of Darién, has a group of Emberá speakers living with agricultural colonists who recently migrated from western Panama. Three-fourths of the entire population of the Darién Chocó have adopted village settleement. About 25 percent of the total 11,140 Darién Chocó population choose to maintain the traditional dispersed settlement pattern.

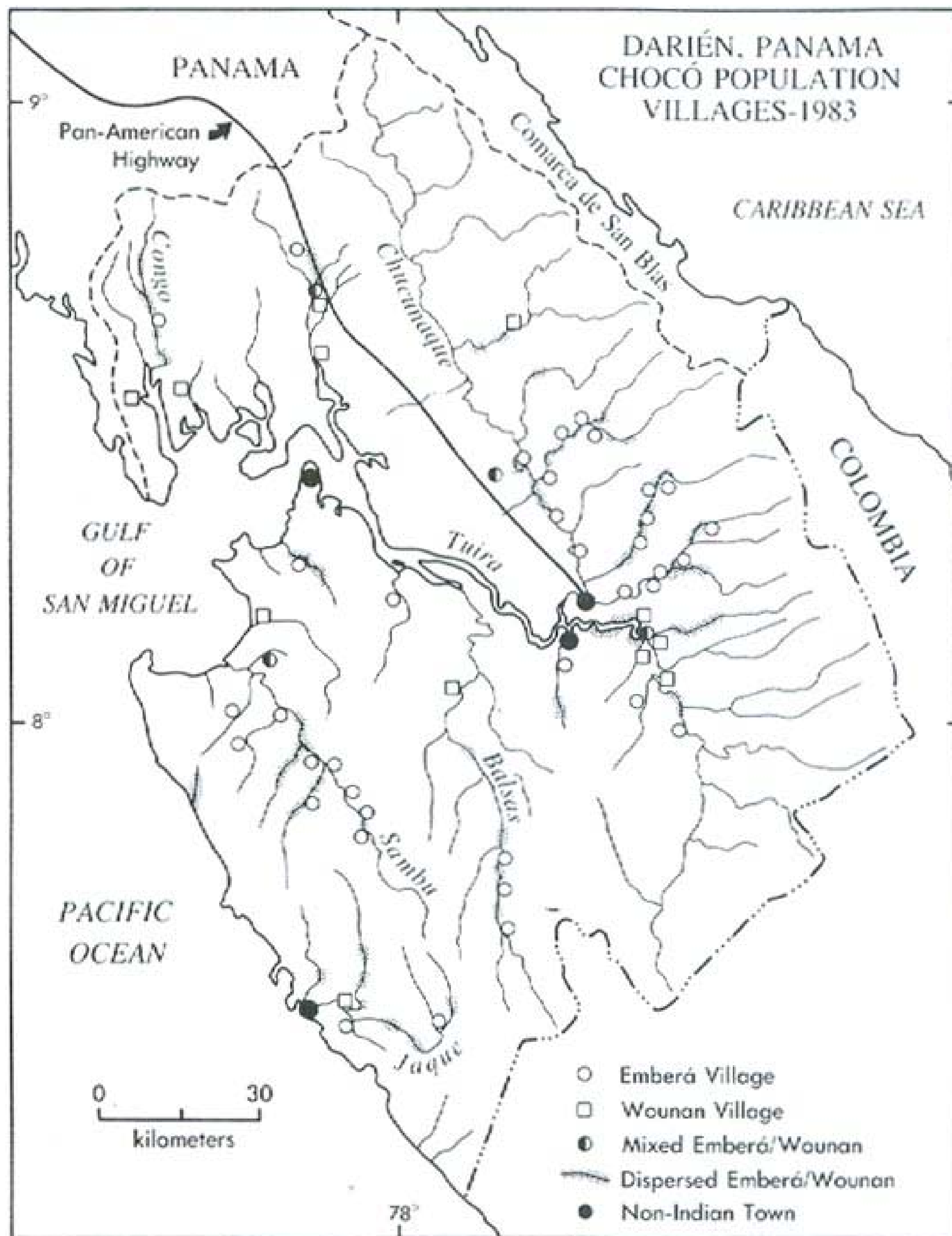

Fig. 4. The distribution of Emberá and Wounan populations in the Darień Province, eastern Panama, August 1983.

The move to village life has greatly modified the traditional spatial arrangement of Chocó settlement. In most cases the villages, varying in size from 25 to more than 450 inhabitants, are located on high, well-drained land along levees and alluvial terraces, but some are also found on hillsides. In all cases the villages are restricted to one side of the river. Population growth is no longer accommodated by the establishment of new isolated households arranged linearly up and down the rivers. Households are agglomerated, instead, into settlements that extend laterally into the surrounding forest.

The three zones characteristic of the traditional settlement patterns are no longer discernible. Households are clustered in a large area cleared of natural vegetation in which are located a schoolhouse, teacher's dorm, and meeting hall. Usually there is also a village store, basketball court, and sometimes even a health center (Figure 5). The native monsoon forest has been cut over to a distance of three to six kilometers or more behind the village, depending on the village size. The intervening zone is covered with a patchwork of small cultivated clearings and extensive tracks of secondary growth of variable age.

Subsistence patterns are also greatly modified. In most cases subsistence and cash-crop activities are now located at considerable distance from domestic sites. Dooryard orchard-gardens are greatly reduced in size and importance (or are not present at all), although a few may still be found at the margins of the settlement away from the bustle of village life. Many Darién Chocó now cultivate **[end p. 14]**

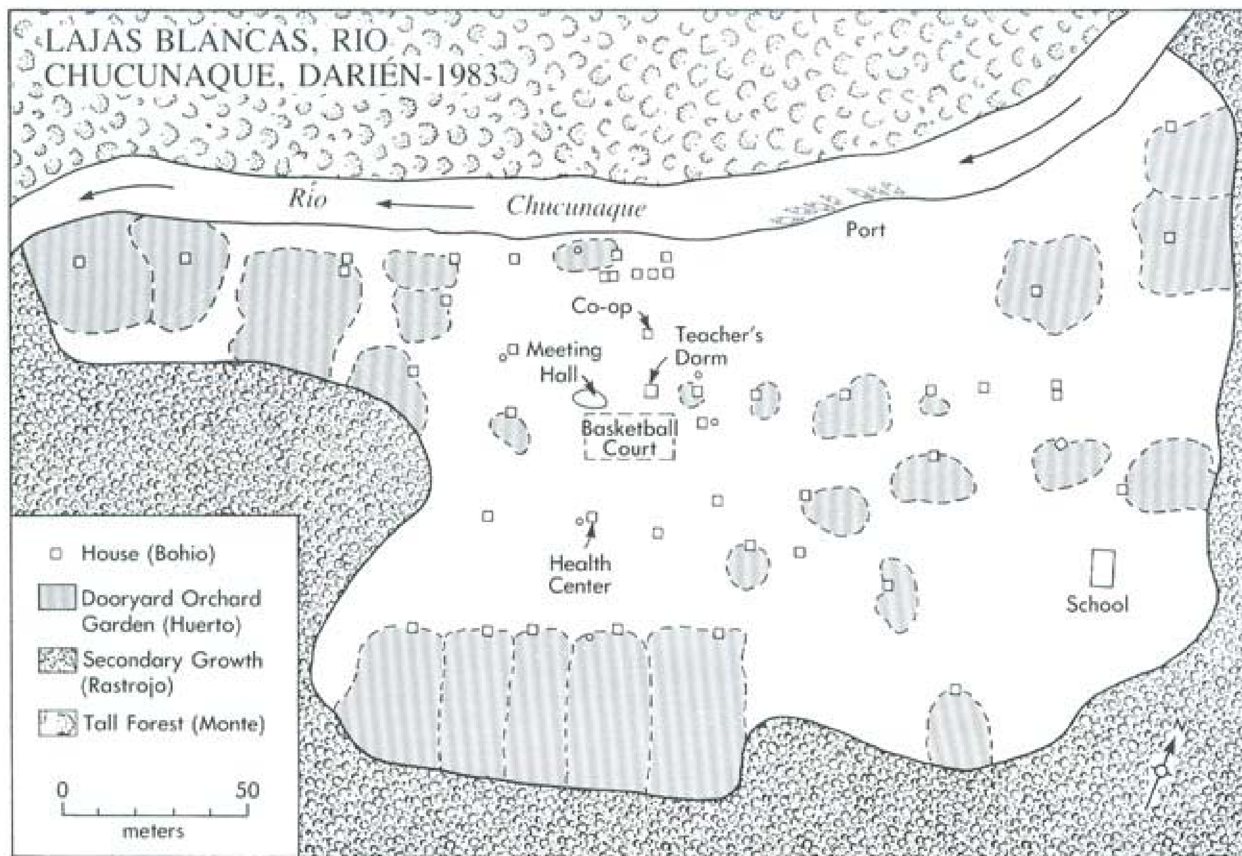

Fig. 5. The present-day Enberá community of Lajas Blancas along the Chucunaque River in the Darién Province, eastern Panama, August 1983. Although Chocó settlements vary in size, this may be considered a representative example of the new village settlement model.

their fruit trees in orchard groves distant from the village rather than in their dooryard gardens. Other cultivated plots such as slash-burn, slash-mulch, and banana planntations are no longer close to and surrounding individual houses, but are located some distance behind the village in an outfield system. Around many large villages nearly all areas within reasonable walking distance are claimed and are either in cultivation or in *rastrojo*. As a result, hunting, collecting, and fishing activities also take place at considerable distance from the villages.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Indian groups throughout Central America are leaving their traditional lands for economic or political reasons, but the Chocó stand somewhat apart in their efforts to maintain their lands and cultural heritage. The adoption of the village settlement model has as its ultimate goal the acquisition of a *comarca* that will not

only delimit tribal lands, but also allow the Indians to govern themselves. The national government, along with internaational agencies, has given support to these efforts, but the ultimate success or failure of the village model remains unclear.

Some features of the recent changes are definitely poositive. As the leaders of the new Darién Chocó tribal organization work to structure the emerging political system, they are learning how to deal more effectively with the economic and political problems that are increasing as the Darién Province becomes more accessible to others. It is no coincidence that the one ethnically mixed Chocó community occurs along the Pan-American Highhway; and it is to be expected that such cross-cultural contact will increase. A strong sense of ethnic consciousness will help the Chocó deal with these encounters without losing their identity. The Chocó also are developing a territorial imperative that will be increasingly important as a defense against the advances of agricultural colonists from Panama's densely populated western provinces. Perhaps most important is the Chocó effort to get a comarca that will guarantee them the right to determine their own social and economic destiny.

There are other less desirable features of the changes in Chocó settlement and subsistence patterns. The expanding inhabited area reflects changing cultural ideas about land ownership and inheritance. A tendency has developed to view agricultural land not as a common resource for subsistence, but as a commercial asset. This tendency is taking on regional dimensions in that, as concepts of group territoriality emerge, the Chocó now covet all lands within the proposed limits of the *comarca*. **[end p. 15]**

Population agglomeration and increased commercialization of subsistence economies associated with village life place more local pressures on natural resources. The resulting accelerated deforestation and wildlife extermination suggest an upper limit to the population size of any single village given environmental constraints under the present resource management system.

The movement to organize Chocó culture, which originated in the eastern part of the Darién Province in the 1960s, spread rapidly. In less than two decades, a cultural landscape that had been largely intact since colonial times has been transformed. The movement continues to diffuse throughout other provinces inhabited by the Chocó in both Panama and Colombia. The story of the Chocó exemplifies a larger ecological dilemna that confronts other indigenous groups in Central America today: on the one hand, their traditional settlement and subsistence patterns are well suited to the rain forest environs they occupy, and there is the potential for the long-term survival of their subsistence base. On the other hand, the village model, which places more stress on the environment, may encourage the development of social survival strategies that will serve the Chocó well as they face increasing economic and political contact with the non-Indian society.

The balance of the scales and the ultimate impact of the adoption of the village settlement model remains to be seen. Given combined subsistence and commercial needs under Chocó land-extensive agriculture, village size appparently has an upper limit. Future research might consider the carrying capacity of the village model under the present cash-oriented subsistence base. Whether the Darién Chocó are successful in their adoption of the village model, one thing remains certain: at a time when most indigenous peoples are being overtaken by the national society within which their territory falls, the Darién Chocó are developing an adaptive strategy that may allow them to maintain control of lands and resources that they might otherwise lose.

NOTES

1. Colombian estimates are based on research by Padre Constancio Pinto García, Misionero Clarentiano (1978, 24) with the following Departmental breakdown: Chocó 20,000; Antioquia 2,000; Caldas 5,000; Cauca 1,000; Córdoba 2,000. Estimates of Panama's Chocó population are based on my own research in the Darién Province (11,122) and a rough estimate of the populations in the Provinces of Panama and Colón (2,500).

2. This overview is part of the author's dissertation research that was funded by a Fulbright Full Grant (August 1982-July 1983) and a Robert C. West Field Research Grant from the Department of Geography and Anthropology, Louisiana State University (August 1981).

3. For good ethnographic description of the Chocó, see the works of Reina Torres de Arauz (1966, 1980) and Louis C. Faron (] 961. 1962) for Panama. and that of Geraldo Reichel-

4. Considerable variation occurs in this general pattern among the dispersed settlement of the Darié Chocó today, yet it is useful as an explanatory model. Some brief and excellent descriptions of traditional Chocó settlement and subsistence have been made by geographers and anthropologists: see Gordon (1957), West (1957), Faron (1961, 1962), Eder (1963), Bennett (1968), and Isaccsson (1975).

5. The identity of Harold Baker Fernández, alias Perú, remains somewhat obscure. Despite his seemingly unselfish humanitarian concerns, malicious rumors were spread about him. Perú was jailed and returned to Panama City in the mid 1970s. He apparently never returned to Darién, but went instead to live and work among the Chocó population in Colombia. The last reports of him noted that while he was working as a missionary in Quibdó, Department of Chocó, perhaps organizing villages, his appendix ruptured and he died en route to a hospital in Panama City.

REFERENCES CITED

Bennett, Charles F. 1968. Notes on Chocó ecology in Darién Province, Panama. *Antropológica* 24:26-55.

Eder, Herbert M. 1963. *A geographical reconnaissance of the Rio Siguirisua Valley, Chocó District, Colombia*. Berkeley, California: Department of Geography, University of Caliifornia.

Faron, Louis C. 1961. A reinterpretation of Chocó society. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 17:94--102.

__________. 1962. Marriage, residence, and domestic group among the Panamanian Chocó. *Ethnology* 1:13-38.

Gordon, Burton L. 1957. *Human geography and ecology in the Sinú country of Colombia.* Berkeley California: University of California Press.

Isaccsson, Sven-Erik. 1975. Observations on Chocó slash-mulch culture. *Arstryck, Goteborgs Etnografiska Museum*, 20-48.

Pinto García, Constancio. 1978. *Los Indios Katios: su cultura -su lengua.* Medellín, Colombia: Pedro Grau Arola.

Reichel-Dolmatoff, Geraldo. 1960. Notas etnográficas sobre los indios del Chocó. Revista Colombiana de Antropología 9:73-158.

Reichel-Dolmatoff, Geraldo. 1962. Contribuciones a la etnografía de los indios del Chocó. Revista Colombiana de Antropología 11: 169-185.

Torres de Arauz, Reina. 1966. *Estudio etnológico e histórico de la cultura Chocó*. Panama City, Panama: Centro de Investigaciones Antropológicas de la Universidad de Panamá.

__________. 1980. Panama Indigena. Panama City, Panama: Instituto Nacional de Cultura Patrimonio Historico.

West, Robert C. 1957. *The Pacific lowlands of Colombia: a negroid area of the American tropics.* Baton Rouge, Louisiana: LSU Press. **[end p. 16]**