

SCHOOL OF GLOBAL STUDIES



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

Todas somos Lideresas

**A qualitative study of female leadership and political participation within the
Comarca Ngobe-Buglé in Panama**

Isabelle Persson Vargas

Bachelor Thesis, 2013
Advisor: Maria Clara Medina
Field Contact: Maribel Uribe

Abstract

Throughout Latin America there seems to have been a significant increase in indigenous women's involvement in politics and many female political leaders have risen in the political ranks. This suggests a shift from their traditional role and raises questions of what this means for indigenous women's struggles and for indigenous peoples' politics as a whole. The purpose of this study is to investigate indigenous female leadership and political participation within the *comarca* Ngobe-Buglé in Panama by examining how politically active women move into political spaces and how they understand their own political impetus with regards to gender and ethnicity. This has been done by employing qualitative methods during two months of fieldwork in Panama in the spring of 2013. The gathered data is analyzed in relation to a theoretical framework consisting of perspectives from postcolonial theory, intersectionality and empowerment approaches. The study concludes that politically active Ngobe-Buglé women have successfully transgressed the boundaries and the traditional place of women and now occupy vast political space and important leadership roles although internal contestation, contradictions and ambiguities still exist. In sum, politically active Ngobe-Buglé women showcase great dynamism in their ability to reinvent and reconstruct identities in unpredictable and progressive ways in order to gain political participation and attain leadership positions.

Keywords: Indigenous women, gender, ethnicity, Panama, Ngobe-Buglé, intersectionality, empowerment

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank the women who so kindly and openly shared their experiences with me. I hope I have made your dedication and courage justice in this study. I would also like to thank the Swedish Agency for International Development SIDA for granting me the MFS scholarship that made it possible for me to conduct fieldwork in Panama. I want to highlight the great dedication and guidance of my field contact, Mrs. Maribel Uribe and her husband Mr. Urraca Ortega. Thank you for taking me into and guiding me in the *comarca* territory and for so patiently helping me with all my questions. Also, I would like to express my greatest gratitude to my supervisor Maria Clara Medina for the helpful advice I have been given throughout this process. Lastly, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my family and friends who in different ways have supported me. You have advised, you have listened but most importantly you have encouraged and comforted. Without you I would be lost. *Gracias*.

Preface

“When and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.”

— “Womanhood: A Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race” by Anna Julia Cooper.

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved father, Tony Persson, whose strength and perseverance I admire so much.

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 STATEMENT OF PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS	2
1.2 SCOPE OF WORK	3
1.3 SOME CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS	4
1.4 RELEVANCE AND ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTION	5
2. METHODOLOGY AND METHOD.....	7
2.1 STANDPOINT THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION	7
2.2 ABOUT THE RESEARCHER	9
2.4 DATA COLLECTION.....	10
2.4.1 Population Sampling	10
2.4.2 Semi-structured Respondent Interviews.....	11
2.4.3 Observation.....	12
2.4.4 Key Informant Interviews	13
2.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	13
2.6 ANALYTICAL METHOD	14
3. CONTEXTUALISING THE STUDY	15
3.1 PANAMA AND ITS INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS	15
3.2 THE COMARCA NGOBE-BUGLÉ AND ITS PEOPLE	16
3.2.1 Recent Events.....	16
3.2.2 Women's Entrance onto the Political Arena.....	17
4. PREVIOUS RESEARCH	19
4.1 ON THE NGOBE-BUGLÉ	19
4.2 ON GENDER WITHIN INDIGENOUS POLITICS	19
4.2.1 A Few Words on Complementarity	23
5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	24
5.1 POSTCOLONIALISM AND THE COLONIALITY OF GENDER	24
5.2 STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM	25
5.3 INTERSECTIONALITY	26
5.4 EMPOWERMENT	27
6. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS.....	29
6.1 AWAKENING AND EMPOWERMENT.....	29
6.2 THE REDEFINING OF MOTHERHOOD AND DOMESTICITY AS EMPOWERMENT.....	31
6.3 ESSENTIALIZING FEMALE LEADERSHIP AND THE LACK OF IT.....	32
6.4 BEYOND FEMINISM.....	34
6.5 THE RECOVERY OF BALANCE.....	35
6.6 DOUBLE OPPRESSION ALSO DOUBLE POSSIBILITIES?.....	37
6.7 DIVERSITY AND SIMILARITY	38
7. CONCLUSIONS.....	40
7.1 FURTHER RESEARCH	40
8. BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	42
APPENDIX 1.....	46
APPENDIX 2.....	47
APPENDIX 3.....	49

APPENDIX 4..... 50
APPENDIX 5..... 51

1. INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have seen the emergence of various political actors in Latin America for whom indigenusness is their basic social identity. Across the region indigenous mobilization has gained much ground to national governments who in the light of this development have been obligated to respond to demands of recognition of cultural difference and self-determination (Varese, 1996). Women have played a crucial role as they have actively taken part in and greatly contributed to the political advancements made in the collective struggles of indigenous peoples. Yet, the role of indigenous women has not been rightfully recognized by their male companions and external observers alike (Figuroa Romero, 2011). Thereto, indigenous women suffer from quite substantial social, economic and political exclusion. They remain extremely vulnerable to poverty and human rights violations and suffer from limited access to healthcare, high levels of domestic violence, high rates of illiteracy, and underrepresentation in the political system (Vinding, 1998). However, throughout Latin America there seems to have been a significant increase in indigenous women's involvement in politics and many female political leaders have risen in the ranks of their respective organizations.

The rapid change in indigenous women's political involvement suggest a shift from their traditional role and raises questions of their ground of struggles and what this means for indigenous women's struggles and for indigenous peoples' politics as a whole. Within academia there is an ongoing and vibrant discussion on how to interpret indigenous women's new found political space within the overall context of identity politics.¹ Indigenous women's site of struggle is complex and the intersection between the categories 'woman' and 'indigenous' and often 'poor'. Many scholars suggest it involves two contradictory and seemingly immiscible aims: to reproduce and defend their community's cultural difference which in many instances is disadvantageous to gender equality and to strengthen women's position within that same community (Figuroa Romero, 2011; Perrin, 1997). Academic debate over how to understand this is vivid and quite diverse. While some argue that the rise of indigenous politics in Latin America has led to a decrease in indigenous women's status others hold that the politicization

¹ Woodward defines identity politics as "to assert ones membership in a disadvantaged or marginalized group as a political strategy. Identity then becomes a decisive factor for political mobilization" (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2009, p. 56). Indigenous politics are framed in this way and can thus be seen as manifestations of identity politics.

per se instead has led to women's increased political involvement (Figuroa Romero, 2011; Lavinias Picq, 2008; Radcliffe, 2002). These divergences in interpretations reveals the topic requires further investigation. This study will explore how politically active indigenous women within the *comarca* Ngobe-Buglé in Panama engage in politics. ²

1.1 Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

I am particularly intrigued by how the relatively rapid proliferation of female leadership and women's political participation relates to the argument some scholar's make that identity politics have lessened efforts within indigenous communities to increase indigenous women's rights. With this backdrop, the overall purpose of this study is to investigate indigenous female leadership and political participation within the *comarca* Ngobe-Buglé by examining *how politically active women move into political spaces* and how they *understand their own political impetus with regards to gender and ethnic struggles*. In relation to this, I am also interested in how the variances in trajectories cutting across indigenous women's political activity affect the possibilities for women to participate in the overall context of indigenous politics.

In order to operationalize my research aim I have formulated the following research questions which constitute the guidelines for this study.

- What articulations and maneuvers do politically active women use in order to advance in politics?
- How do politically active women perceive and articulate their political calling?
- What effects do their actions and articulations have on their political participation?

The formulation of the purpose of this study can be said to have been done as a counter reaction to the hegemonic academic literature (presented further under "Previous Research") that tends to describe indigenous women in a homogenizing manner and as caught in a hopeless dilemma. This study should be seen as an attempt to enrich the narrative of indigenous women's political

² In Panama *comarca* refers to semi-autonomous administrative regions where indigenous population is substantial. There exist three *comarcas* in Panama. The *comarca* Ngobe-Buglé is inhabited mostly by people belonging to the Ngobe and Buglé indigenous groups. Because of their close connection and the formation of their jointly owned *comarca* these two separate groups are collectively referred to as the Ngobe-Buglé, or in everyday speech, the Guaymi (Young, 1971). Also, it is vital to note that the spelling of varies. Some of the variations include Ngabe-Buglé, Ngäbe-Buglé, Gnäbe-Buglé, Ngöbe-Buglé, Nwagbe-Buglé. The name I have chosen to use in this study is the most commonly used in academic literature and popular media.

participation by casting light on the great diversity that exists as well as their common site of struggle.

1.2 Scope of Work

Given this study's time limitation of ten weeks establishing some limitations were necessary in order to make the investigation manageable. The limitations and other decisions that were made during the research process shape the focus of this study and will therefore be briefly presented in this section.

The multifaceted nature of the topic can of course be explored in a number of ways by highlighting different aspects of it. Undoubtedly, many interacting factors have laid the ground for indigenous women's greater involvement in politics. Nonetheless, rather than trying to explain why there has been an increase of female leaders and politically active indigenous women this study focuses on how politically active Ngobe-Buglé women themselves understand and frame their political activity and commitment. Additionally, there exists a critique that "social sciences [have] uncritically adopted the idea that the public and the private are two distinct realms of social life" and that the personal indeed is political (Sprague, 2005, p. 8f) While I as a researcher concur with this stance, a deep take on it could not be achieved due to the limitation requirements. Although this study does not deal with this issue in depth it is touched upon when discussing the study's findings.

Because of the need to make limitations an active choice was taken to focus on Ngobe-Buglé women who currently reside and engage in political activity within the territory of the *comarca*. Ngobe-Buglé women whose political commitment is within the national parliament and women who operate on grassroot level across the country are thus excluded from this particular study. As a consequence, the study does not reflect indigenous women's political immersion in general Panamanian society nor does it shed light on the geographical and cultural differences that cut across lowland/upland and rural/urban divides. In the light of the quite substantial migration to urban centers this limitation represents an important constraint that is important to bear in mind. Lastly, it should be noted that no attempt is made to value or rank the different political forums that women take part in nor does this study aspire to determine in what political spheres indigenous women are most successful. A final delimitation that is important to note is that this study does not depart from a single indigenous rights organization, as many other studies do.

Instead the analytical focus lies on the *comarca* territory's political structure as a sphere of common solidarity and resistance.

1.3 Some Conceptual Clarifications

Before continuing, it is of essence to clarify what is meant by some recurring concepts in this study. First of all, I want to clarify the usage of the term politics in this study. Politics is a concept typically defined and associated with the acquisition and application power within the spaces of government and state (Safire, 2008, p. 566). However, if one emanates from Michel Foucault's (1998) conception of power that "[p]ower is everywhere" and "comes from everywhere" it transcends the traditional way of viewing power and thus also politics (p. 63). From this perspective, power and subsequently politics is instead seen as an everyday and socialized phenomenon. Hence, a state-centric view of politics is not ample enough to understand the various power dimensions within a political arena. By the same token, this colloquial view of politics was confirmed during my time in the field. Similarly, when doing the fieldwork for this thesis I found that indigenous women are involved in various spaces that are imbued with power and therefore can be argued to be of importance for their political participation and leadership. From this vantage point, the definition of politics has intentionally been kept rather broad which in turn has shaped the overall study in a number of ways. Notably, when I refer to political participation I do not merely denote it to be within national government. Equally, when I refer to politically active indigenous women and female leadership no differentiation is made to whether they have been elected into their posts nor to what level or political sphere they operate in. It is noteworthy that the term female leadership, in Spanish *liderazgo femenino*, was frequently used by the respondents themselves.

As a final point, I would like to discuss the term indigenous and its conceptual underpinnings. There is no broad consensus over a definition and as such it can have different connotations depending on geographical and sociopolitical contexts. The discourse of indigenesness, and the process of labeling that it entails, is highly politicized due to the many diverging interests of many different stakeholders. However, indigenous claims are supported by conventions and declarations by the United Nations and the International Labor Organization (ILO). In these agreements some criteria upheld as defining characteristics include; 1) continual connection with pre-colonial cultures 2) strong historical links to territories 3) distinct social, economic and

political systems 4) distinct language, culture and beliefs and 4) identification as different from the national identity (NCIV, 2010).

1.4 Relevance and Academic Contribution

Inclusiveness in the political system is generally seen as a central principle in a healthy and consolidated democracy (Smith, 2011). In the light of this, the enfranchisement of conventionally marginalized groups is an utmost crucial step towards justice, sustainability and democratic consolidation within any society. Moreover, seeing as though Latin America grapples with the highest levels of inequality in the world, acknowledging and confronting group-based divisions must be an intrinsic part of the overall fight to reduce the endemic disparities plaguing the region (De Ferranti, Perry, Ferreira, & Michael, 2004). Also, understanding the premises for indigenous women's political inclusion is central to better understanding the indigenous movements and their agendas. This is also important in order to understand the specific dynamics that influence the political contexts in each country and in the region as a whole. In many Latin American countries indigenous peoples occupy and demand control over vast stretches of land by drawing on historical claims. Often times these lands hold some of the country's most strategically significant natural resources in the quest for "national development" (Jordan-Ramos 2010). Taking this into consideration, indigenous politics are essential components in many Latin American countries. As a final note, this study connects to the field of Global Studies by drawing upon issues of social justice, social sustainability and power as well as to globalization.

Indigenous peoples' movements in Latin America have been greatly examined by different academic fields with a wide range of themes and approaches. The noted political scientist Donna Lee Van Cott (2010) identifies three themes as being particularly prominent; the changing nature of citizenship, the transformation of identity-based social movements into political parties, and the reform of the state in recognition of indigenous peoples' rights. Van Cott claims that the focus of existing research has led to gaps in the academic knowledge. She argues that there is a bias in the case selection because scholars typically investigate particularly unusual or successful cases and ignore cases where indigenous peoples have had little or no success. Countries where the indigenous population is large, for example Bolivia, Ecuador and Mexico, and where indigenous people have been exceptionally successful, have gotten most of the attention which results in a distorted understanding of indigenous political mobilization in

the region. Thus, our understanding of “ordinary indigenous politics” and of movements operating under more adverse conditions is limited. *Vis à vis* the selection bias, Van Cott asserts there is a need to explore a wider selection of cases, including countries where indigenous populations are small and where dramatic or overthrowing events have not occurred, in order to better explain more common types of indigenous political mobilization in the region. This motivates for more theoretical and empirical analysis and further research in countries such as Panama.

One final aspect is vital to mention as an argument for the relevance of this study. As I discuss further in both “Previous Research” and “Theoretical Framework” there is a wide base of criticism towards academia’s tendency to depict ‘third world’ women as a helpless homogenous in need of western salvation from subjugation. In the case of indigenous women there is a risk that this analytical starting point may lead to distortions that reduces their agency and produces misguided knowledge. In the literature study made to inform this thesis many academic works that can be argued to fit into above mentioned description have been found. Some of these are presented and discussed further in the chapter named “Previous Research” As a means to counterbalance this unilateral and misrepresentative view many critical scholars argue for the production of research that sheds light on the diversity of struggles women in various locations and social positions in the developing world face. Against this background, this study and its consideration to diversity among indigenous women’s political activity makes it highly relevant. Hopefully, this study can contribute to showcase both diversity and similarity among politically active indigenous women and ultimately provide a better understanding of how indigenous women’s political struggles are constituted in terms of gender and ethnicity.

2. METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

As it has great implications for any research and in order to give the reader a better understanding of the choices of methods made in this study I find it of essence to beforehand clarify some of the ontological and epistemological assumptions that serve as its foundations. The philosophical underpinnings of this study cannot easily be placed within a specific school of thought. As a researcher my outlook on social science is largely inspired by the social constructionist paradigm. It is my conviction that any knowledge production about reality, both social and material, always is socially and discursively constructed through interaction with our physical and social environment. As a result, any form of knowledge production is always subjective and context specific. However, I do not reject the positivist notion that there exists a reality regardless of how we humans experience it. Nonetheless, as an adherent of the social constructivist paradigm I discard the idea that there is an objective truth that can be objectively studied. Instead I consider that “the truth, is the creation of the very process that ‘discovers’ it” (Sprague, 2005, p. 36f).

In accordance with the epistemological foundation of this study; that I am not aiming to reach an objective truth or fixed meanings in my respondents’ testimonies, I have chosen to make use of qualitative methods. They are well suited when one is interested in understanding respondents’ own experiences, intentions and accounts of the social world. Also, it is often thought that by interacting with the people that we study in their own social context, we can better avoid the tendency to see research subjects as abstract individuals detached from their social context (Sprague, 2005, p. 119f) . Nevertheless, I am aware that qualitative methods often are critiqued for being scientifically problematic in the sense that it is hard to make generalizations from them. However, since it is not my intention to make any generalizations I have determined that qualitative methods are the most suitable in terms of achieving the purpose of this study. Lastly, I would like to add that this study is primarily theory consuming since its purpose is to get deeper understanding of an individual case by using existing theories as explanatory factors (Esaiasson, Gilljam, Oscarsson, & Wängnerud, 2012, p. 99f).

2.1 Standpoint Theory and its Application

The practical application of social constructionism in this study has been greatly inspired by standpoint theory as presented in the book *Feminist Methodologies for Critical Researchers* by

sociologist Joey Sprague. One of the main assumptions in standpoint theory is that knowledge is constructed “[...] in a specific matrix of physical location, history, culture and interests [...]” (Sprague, 2005, p. 41). Given this assumption, standpoint theorists hold that knowledge can never be value-free. Despite the postulation of it being a social construct, knowledge is not seen as being relative in the same way radical social constructionist do. Instead it is understood as “partial, local and historically specific” and dependent on the knower’s social position *i.e.* standpoint (Sprague, 2005, p. 41). Standpoint theory concedes that different kinds of knowledge are available from different standpoints and thus acknowledge a plurality of truths. Standpoint theorists have convincingly shown how knowledge often times is produced from the vantage point and in favor of the dominant classes and that the perspectives of marginalized and/or oppressed people can contribute to creating more objective knowledge in the sense that “those ideas that that are validated by most standpoints become the most objectives truths” (Sprague, 2005, pp. 42,47). Standpoint theorist Patricia Hill Collins even goes so far as to say that “marginalization is an epistemic advantage because it distances [them] from hegemonic thought and practices, facilitating the development of a critical attitude” (Cited in Sprague, 2005, p. 45). Societal groups that in any way are marginalized thus hold a unique position to point out patterns of behavior that those immersed in the dominant culture are unable or unwilling to recognize. The idea of creating knowledge from different standpoints is very enticing when one wants to understand issues of power, such as social change and inequality and it is one of the fundamental reasons I have chosen to draw upon standpoint theory in this study. Herein I would like to clarify that I do not intend to be an advocate or a “voice-giver” for the research subjects. I am solely attempting to take precautions to avoid the distorting effects unequal power relations can have on research.

As a final note on standpoint theory, I would like to mention how its practical application has been dealt with in this particular study. Sprague suggests incorporating standpoint theory by implementing four main principles into one’s research and also mentions a few very concrete ways on how to do so. The four main guidelines are to; work from standpoint of the disadvantaged, ground interpretations in interest and experience, maintain a strategically diverse discourse and create knowledge that empowers disadvantaged. (Sprague, 2005, p. 75). The additional practical techniques Sprague mentions for making standpoint theory applicable in research include to question research questions and whether or not they reflect a hegemonic worldview, to make the researcher visible in the text and to critically question one’s own standpoint and how it may affect the research process (Sprague, 2005, p. 165ff). All these

principles have served as guidelines through the research process, however I want to especially discuss an important aspect concerning one of them; to always work from the standpoint of the disadvantaged. I am well aware that my respondents may not be considered as disadvantaged within their communities. They are more often than not considered as leaders and often hold a prominent place within social hierarchy. However, indigenous women are by and large marginalized because of their gender, class and race.

2.2 About the Researcher

As stated above, standpoint theorists hold that the researchers own social standpoint has implications for their findings. Not only does the researcher have the power over how research is interpreted and produced, but also over what constitutes a viable research topic. A number of ways to compensate for this have been developed by standpoint theorists and feminist scholars alike. Many standpoint theorists accentuate the importance of being reflexive and transparent about the researcher's own "biography and biases" and of making the "researcher's perspective obvious" (Sprague, 2005, p. 57). In keeping with this, I will in the following paragraph briefly share my own trajectory and the origin of this study. I would also like to add that it became quite clear to me during my fieldwork that my own standpoint was of great importance in the interaction with my respondents.

Unmistakably, I have been shaped by the academic traditions that characterize my educational background. As a student of Global Studies, where concepts such as social justice and power have had a prominent place, I have become more attentive to issues that involve them. Going into this study, I can be said to have had a predominantly positive view of indigenous peoples and women's struggles in general in the sense that I find their cause of importance in efforts to attain a more equitable society. For me, it is quite salient that my interest in Latin America and in Panama in particular has ties to my own partly Latin American heritage. Being female myself, it's perhaps somewhat unsurprising that I have a genuine interest in women's issues although from an academic perspective I also hoped my own gender would able me to better connect with my research subjects. As half Swedish and half Panamanian I have a direct connection and quite substantial knowledge about the surrounding context. As Sprague points out, each researcher's standpoint has its own set of advantages and disadvantages in interaction with any given group (Sprague, 2005, p. 63). I found that being part, at least to some degree, of the mestizo majority as well as representing western academia affected my communication with

the indigenous women I interviewed in many different and sometimes unexpected ways. At times I felt it created a distance between the respondents and me although sometimes I experienced that my respondents in a positive manner emphasized my Panamanian nationality as a means to point to our commonality. Lastly, by being clear with my own point of entry into this project I hope to have given the reader ample conditions to assess its results and conclusions.

2.4 Data Collection

The empirical material analyzed in this study was collected during two months of fieldwork in Panama in the spring of 2013. It is mainly derived from 9 semi-structured interviews made during this time (See appendix 1). However, additional relevant information has been collected through informal conversations, participatory observation and through informal key informant interviews.

2.4.1 Population Sampling

During the initial stages of the fieldwork I identified four main spaces where Ngobe-Buglé women residing in the *comarca* engage in political activity; 1) within the various strands of the Ngobes-Buglé *comarca's* own political structure 2) within different levels of the national structure of party politics 3) within various organizations 4) in the various movements against globalism and neoliberal encroachment as well as for collective rights. These categories were the lodestar during the population sampling. In compliance with the intersectional theoretical approach of this study and with the assumptions of standpoint theory in mind, the quite broad selection criteria was intentional. Moreover, during the early stages fieldwork I found that indigenous women are indeed a very heterogeneous group - with very different historical, geographic, social and cultural backgrounds - that take part in various political projects and I wanted to capture this in herein thesis. As, mentioned earlier, a criterion of residing within the territory of the *comarca* Ngobe-Bulgé was also set in order to pinpoint suitable respondents in accordance with the study's purpose. It should be noted that despite conscious efforts to achieve a broad spectrum of respondents, the actual selection of interviewees was made mainly in consultation with my field contact Maribel Uribe³ as well as through snowball sampling. Hence

³ At the time of the fieldwork Maribel Uribe held the seat as Vice Governor of the *comarca* Ngobe-Buglé. She is also one of the respondents in this study.

I relied quite heavily on her contacts and the willingness and accessibility of potential respondents. I realize that the sampling method may not have been ideal although it was necessary because of my dependence due to limited familiarity with research subjects and the *comarca* territory.

2.4.2 Semi-structured Respondent Interviews

A semi-structured interview format was chosen because it, as Esaiasson et al. (2012) point out, is suitable for studies that aim to examine how people perceive their own social world (p. 253f). Additional advantages with this interview format is that it is flexible in the sense that it offers the researcher the opportunity to be sensitive to the direction the respondent takes the conversation as well as it opens up for the possibility to make follow-up questions. The interviews were conducted with a beforehand prepared interview guide that was designed with consideration to theory and research questions and in accordance with the guidelines proposed by Grant McCracken (1988) that stress comprehensive connection to previous research and awareness of the researchers own preconceptions of the topic (p. 29f). In compliance with this approach the research questions were broken down into a number of more specific questions that were grouped into 3 themes (see appendix 2). The underlying idea behind this is that the questions become more manageable and comprehensible and thus facilitate communication between researcher and respondent. With the ambition to achieve high cultural sensitivity the interview guide was revised upon arrival to Panama with help from my field contact. Furthermore, it was continually revised during the fieldwork since I gradually became aware of the usage and meaning of certain expressions. However, the essence of my inquiry remained the same throughout the interview process.

It is often recommended that interviews be conducted in a neutral setting in order to create a relaxed atmosphere where the respondent feels comfortable to speak his or her mind. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to various factors such as the geographical remoteness and the tight schedules of many of my respondents. Most interviews were conducted in the respondent's homes or in connection to a meeting or gathering. Because of this, the interviews were not always conducted in private. More often than not an audience, of children, adult family members or colleagues, of both genders was present. This setting may not have been ideal but often there seemed to be no other viable option at the particular junction of time and place. All of the interviews were conducted in Spanish and recorded with consent from all respondents as

well as transcribed in whole in the original language. Only quotes used in the thesis have been translated into English by myself.

2.4.3 Observation

The method of observation has been valuable during the whole period of fieldwork. Esaiasson et al. (2012) hold that observation is especially suited when exploring processes and phenomena that are not easily expressed verbally (p. 303ff). The idea behind data gathering through observation is that the researcher through interaction with respondents gets immersed in the context which in turn enables deeper understanding (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. 2). Observation was ongoing throughout the fieldwork although it was mostly concentrated to the various meetings and gatherings that I attended. A brief summary of these is presented below.

First, I had the privilege to partake in a high level political meeting where the heads from all three branches of the *comarca* Ngobe-Buglé's political administration were present; the highest traditional leader, the General *Caciça* Silvia Carrera, the Governor Antonio Molina and the President of the General Congress Celio Guerra. I was also invited to a several workshops and meetings held by the government authority responsible for women's issues, COORDEMUNG (Coordinadora de Mujeres Ngobe-Buglé). The content of these involved both strategy and administrative dialogs and topics ranging from health issues to empowerment and skill building. One of the meetings I attended had the distinctive goal to promote female political leadership. Lastly, I attended two mixed-gender gatherings of the M-10 movement where strategy and tactics were discussed⁴.

Generally, it is my interpretation that I initially was invited to observe as a bystander. However, as the meetings progressed I was often encouraged to actively participate by being invited to hold speeches or to express my thoughts on the discussed topic. Needless to say, this constituted a significant methodological constraint. However, I tried to mitigate this by being as neutral as possible and by trying to keep in the background. Likewise, observation of the interaction between participants was somewhat hindered because of the mixed language usage of both Spanish and the native tongues Ngobere and Buglére. Although the main language was Spanish the possibility cannot be excluded that things considered sensitive or of importance were hidden

⁴ M10 is an abbreviation for Movimiento 10 de Abril which is an Ngobe-Buglé activist group determined to halt the Barro Blanco hydroelectric project. The group has gradually grown and transformed into a movement in opposition to neoliberal and extractive encroachment in general.

from me as a researcher by speaking native tongue. Notes were continuously taken during observation and later systematized according to the analytical method described in the subchapter titled “Analytical method”.

2.4.4 Key Informant Interviews

Many informal interviews and conversations were conducted with people I identified as having key information about the topic at hand. This also proved very helpful for my overall understanding. Following Esaiasson et al.’s (2012) advise, these interviews did not follow a specific interview guide (p. 253f). Questions were formulated according to the informant’s area of expertise and were not recorded. Instead the notes taken serve as data. The key informants cited in the text are presented in appendix 3.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

As in any research, certain ethical considerations must be pondered and dealt with in a timely fashion. In this study the ethical principles formulated by the Swedish Research Council have been carefully applied throughout the course of the research (Vetenskapsrådet, 1990). Special attention has been paid to the principles of awareness and consent by prior to an interview taking time to inform respondents and informants of the purpose of the study and of their choice of if, how and when to participate. Regarding the issue of anonymity, many of my respondents actively requested to remain identifiable in the study. I understood their eagerness as an expression of pride, and part of their political actions, and for that reason I want to reflect it in herein study. Therefore, out of respect for every individual’s choice, I have chosen to write out the actual names of the respondents who asked for this in the “List of Participants” and to anonymize those who wished to be unidentifiable. Out of the nine respondent interviews four are anonymized.⁵ Additional information such as age, marital status and occupation is provided for all respondents in order to give a better understanding of their backgrounds (see appendix 1). Moreover, the possibility that the topics touched upon might be considered sensitive by some respondents was taken into account throughout the research process. As a means to mitigate this, special attention was directed at maintaining as sensitive and reflexive as possible during the interviews.

⁵ The anonymized respondents are marked with * in appendix 1.

On a final note, I would like to discuss one more feature of ethical nature that I repeatedly stumbled upon in the field and is linked to the matter of expectations. Although much effort on my behalf was put into explaining my inquiry and that my study was a project within the framework of my academic schooling some confusion over my background and objective seems to have existed among some of the respondents. For example, I was often times introduced as *licenciada* which implies I was seen as a fully trained professional.⁶ Furthermore, some of the respondents expressed their contentment over my interest and some even voiced their joy over the attention and possible support they seemed to anticipate that the study might lead to. In these instances I again carefully clarified the nature of my study and in what way the final result can and will be used. It should also be noted that, many of the respondents expressed a will to receive the final thesis for potential usage it in their various activities.

2.6 Analytical Method

To conclude the methodological part of this thesis a short word on the analytical method of this study will be discussed. After reading about and being inspired by thematic analysis I assessed this method to be suitable for herein study. According to Alan Bryman (2011) thematic analysis does not contain a series of specific methods. However it does in some way include coding in the sense of identifying how and how often words are mentioned. Hopefully, after doing this kind of coding a series of themes can be identified and can then serve as the basis for analysis. Bryan also mentions “Frameworking” as a method in which indexes with themes and subthemes are created. Although not explicitly shown in table form this method was used to identify and classify the themes and subthemes in this study. As the empirical material was created with the use of an interview guide the themes should be seen as both products of the operationalization of the research problem, in the form of the interview guide, as well as of the specific themes that respondents raised during the interviews. The method can thus be said to be abductive as it continuously moves between theory and the empirical material. After transcribing all the material I went through all of them individually and highlighted and what I perceived as central things in all the respondents accounts and to the research questions. Then I proceeded to compare all the interviews to find recurring words and themes. These themes have been the basis for the result and analysis of this study will be presented under “Results and Analysis”.

⁶ Crudely translated *Licenciada* means Bachelor graduate. In many Latin American countries it is commonplace to use the term to refer to lawyers as well as other professionals with academic degrees.

3. CONTEXTUALISING THE STUDY

3.1 Panama and its Indigenous Affairs

Because of its geographical location Panama has historically been strategically important for navigation and trade as well as for the colonization of Latin America. Consequently, this small country has been prone to relatively substantial foreign interest which undoubtedly has played a decisive role in the country's social, political and economic development. In order to fully comprehend Panamas contemporary context one must recognize the sheer significance the Panama Canal has had both politically and economically as it is the driving force of the economy. In recent years Panama has experienced the highest growth rates in the region although the country still suffers from developmental issues such as disparate distribution, corruption and weak institutions (UD, 2012).

Panama holds one of Latin America's most ethnically diverse populations and its indigenous population, consisting of seven different groups, constitutes approximately 10 per cent of the country's total population (De Ferranti et al., 2004, p. 78). However throughout the nationalist project that has been ongoing since the country's creation, deep tensions between discourses of universal citizenship and of cultural and ethnic difference have been present. As Lynn Horton (2006) points out, indigenusness has been an uncomfortable category for elites pursuing a 'homogeneous' nation and that it is only in recent decades that the Panamanian state has acknowledged Panama as a *de facto* multiethnic nation. Horton notes that one of the most palpable indications of Panama's embrace of multiculturalism is the process of which indigenous peoples have gained control of 20 per cent of the national territory through the formation of *comarcas* (Horton, 2006, p. 830). As part of this, Panama has successfully projected an international image as a country respectful of indigenous autonomy. This aside, within the national political arena, indigenous politics is generally considered marginal and is commonly overlooked (Jordan-Ramos, 2010, p. 13). Furthermore, the indigenous population endures widespread prejudice and stigmatization which results in exclusion from many important areas of society and from vital state services (UD, 2012). The vast extent of their marginalization and the patronizing perception of them in general Panamanian society became evident to me during my fieldwork as I frequently was met with disdain and incomprehension over my interest in indigenous affairs.

3.2 The *Comarca* Ngobe-Buglé and its People

The *comarca* Ngobe-Buglé is located Western Panama and borders to the provinces of Bocas del Toro, Chiriquí, and Veraguas (For map see appendix 4). It was formed in 1997 as a consequence of years of political pressure from the indigenous people living in the area (Jordan-Ramos, 2010). Indeed, the *comarca* Ngobe-buglé is home to great wealth in terms of natural resources and the interest in mining, hydroelectric development and tourism has meant that the *comarca* and its people have suffered continuous encroachment even after the formal declaration of political autonomy in 1997. There has been a tendency by private and state partners to intensify counteractions during periods when hydro or mining development have been in the process of establishment and the methods used have been varied from co-optation to the use of brute force . Despite the *comarcas* natural riches, its indigenous population live in poverty (Jordan-Ramos, 2010, p. 13ff). During the mobilization that ultimately lead to the creation of the *comarca* Ngobe-Buglé several new forms of leadership and organizational forms were created and strengthened (Jordan-Ramos, 2010, p. 10). Today, the administrative structure consist of three branches with different functions - the traditional *cacice* leaders, the traditional congress configuration and the national government structure (Sarsaneda del Cid 2010, pp. 13-20).⁷

3.2.1 Recent Events

Recently, state action to legally open up for resource extraction within the *comarca* has been in progress. Since 2009 the Panama Assembly has passed a series of laws that have gradually amended the Mineral Resources Code, ultimately allowing foreign direct investment in the Panamanian mining sector. As a response to this, a large-scale indigenous rights mobilization has arisen and sparked new life into Ngobe-Buglé resistance. Although the protest have been ongoing since 2009 the conflict hit boiling point in January 2012 when a considerable portion of Ngobe-Buglé population took to the streets and shut down all lanes of the Pan-American Highway in an attempt to pressure the Panamanian government. Government officials responded by dispatching the national police force to quench the protest. Violent confrontations that lasted for days finally forced the government to initiate a dialogue with leaders of the *comarca* Ngobe-Buglé (Key informant 3). On February 7 2012 road blocks came to an end when the so called San Lorenzo Accord was signed. Although the agreement recognizes the

⁷ See appendix 5 for a figure over the three administrative branches and how they are structured at different levels

right of the Ngobe-Buglé people to make their own decisions about projects within their *comarca* the conflict is still underway since there is a disagreement on what it truly entails. As in most political disagreements, not all supported the decision to sign the agreement with the government as some claim the agreement only applies to mining and not to hydroelectric development (Key informant 1).

3.2.2 Women's Entrance onto the Political Arena

The highest leader of the *comarca* Ngobe-Buglé, the General *cacica* Silvia Carrera arose as the front character of the indigenous resistance against the legislative changes pursued by the Panamanian Government. She is the first female to ever hold this office and has become a symbol of determination for Panamas indigenous peoples and Panamanians of humble origins (Rodriguez & Sorensen, 2012). This image has in turn been perpetuated because of the attention she has gained from both national and international observers who have portrayed her as an exceptional leader and heroine. Moreover, Silvia Carrera's path to political power has been seen, by many, as an attest that Latin American indigenous women are taking much greater part in the political struggles of their people. Certainly, in Panama, indigenous peoples' leadership has become rapidly feminized in the last twenty years. During my fieldwork, I became aware of many capacity building initiatives with the purpose of strengthening leadership skills among indigenous women - an observation which further indicates women's deep commitment and immersion into indigenous politics in Panama. This can also be said to be an emblematic trend for Latin America as whole (Safa, 2005). Nevertheless, discussions about the actual effects of these changing circumstances are taking place among various experts and involved individuals both in Panama and abroad. In an interview with The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) the prominent Panamanian feminist and human rights advocate Mariela Arce de Leis stated the following about the feminization of indigenous leadership in Panama.

“This does not mean that an accelerated change in the leaders' patriarchal and male-chauvinist mentality has taken place. But in terms of numbers, great progress has been made. Indigenous community-based organizations have been feminized, and strong indigenous women's leaders are emerging. This is why, for the first time, a general female chief – Silvia Carrera – was elected in 2012”.

Similar discussions are also an ongoing and current topic within the Ngobe-Buglé community itself. Debate about the true meaning of being Ngobe-Buglé in the 21st century and about the appropriate position women is constant (Jordan-Ramos, 2010, p. 32). It should be noted that Ngobe-Buglé women always have been active members of their communities. Historically,

their activities have been of great importance for cultural reproduction but they have also participated in marches, uprisings and even wars. However, the manner of their participation has been distinctive to their gender (Key informant 2).

Notwithstanding, indigenous women's participation in the crisis of early 2012 was key. They were there during the days of intense conflicts, participating in all the actions to defend and protect their people. Their participation resulted in multiple violations against them by police. Several claims of rape by the police force were reported to have occurred during the clashes (AWID, 2012). The fact that women, in some sense, were the very locus of battle gives a sense of the intricate between gender and ethnicity within indigenous politics itself and in relation to national politics. A respondent's quote clearly exemplifies the essence of this connection and the tension it causes. "They raped us women because they wanted to humiliate us and crush our confidence. Not just the women's, but our whole people's confidence" (Interview 1).

4. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

4.1 On the Ngobe-Buglé

Perhaps due to the selection bias Van Cott points out research made specifically on the Ngobe-Buglé is scarce and the academic knowledge produced is mostly ethnographic work of shifting quality. Nonetheless, there are some more politically orientated scholars who in various ways have taken on the Ngobe-Buglés political struggle for self-determination. Stephanie Wickstrom (2003) examines the resistance strategies made by the Ngobe-Buglé and identifies a change in their political organization driven by the need to effectively resist threats of state plans for economic development in their lands. However, it is unclear in her work whether this change has effected or been caused by the changing role of Ngobe-Buglé women. Osvaldo Jordan-Ramos's (2010) dissertation explores the viability of the Ngobe-Buglé's political autonomy in the midst of neoliberal globalization. *Inter alia*, he concludes that the penetration of external actors in the daily lives of the Ngobe-Buglés has caused diverse responses inside the community that are not yet well-understood by outsiders. He also mentions the lack of knowledge on gender relations as a blind spot that prompts for further research.

4.2 On Gender within Indigenous Politics

In order to situate the study, an attempt to outline and present some of the most prominent features of the body of research related to my inquiry is made in the following section. Since, as mentioned earlier, academic research on Ngobe-Buglé affairs is scarce, a broad spectrum of research on gender in Latin American indigenous politics has been used to inform this study. Rather unsurprisingly, most existing research has been conducted in countries where indigenous movements have had considerable success and where the indigenous population is quite substantial, such as Mexico, Ecuador, Guatemala and Bolivia. Certainly, sensitivity to the great diversity among different contextual settings must be taken into account. However, during fieldwork and erstwhile literature study I found that indigenous women in Latin America have formed a pan-continental network from which they have articulated a common activist discourse. Lynn Stephen (2001) calls this process of coming together “the projection of sameness to outsiders” (p. 54f). Conceivably, it is because of this sameness that scholars commonly bundle Latin American indigenous women's activism and indigenous politics.

Before continuing, it should be noted that the scholarly discussion about gender within indigenous politics needs to be seen in the light of the overall debate over multiculturalism's effects on gender relations. This debate can be said to be sparked and most well-known by the debate between Susan Moller Okin and Will Kymlicka where Okin critiques Kymlicka and other advocates of multiculturalism to legitimize and protect gender discriminating practices thus perpetuating continued subordination of women. Okin emphasizes what she perceives as strong tensions between feminism and multiculturalism by claiming that the multicultural project, and thus also identity politics, harms the struggles for gender equality (Okin & Cohen, 1999). Traits and arguments connected to this discussion are the main features of the academic debate on the topic.

Most scholars seem to agree that the colonial history of Latin America is an important contributing factor for the "strained" relation between "traditional" gender relations in the indigenous communities. As Helen Safa (2005) notes indigenous women have historically been confined to the domestic realm since they have been seen the repositories of cultural tradition and thus in need of protection from outside encroachment. Indeed, indigenous women are the main social reproducers of their cultures as their main assignments have been to "ensure the transmission of language, the culture in which children are raised, the knowledge to farm, heal, and take care of nature, as well as uphold the spirituality necessary for community wellbeing" (Figueroa Romero, 2011, p. 25f). There seems also to be wide consensus that Latin American indigenous women gradually have been striving for a stronger voice and that they increasingly have been addressing specific women's concerns such as domestic abuse or reproductive health (Figueroa Romero, 2011; Safa, 2005). Safa (2005) argues that they have been inspired by the growth of the "white-led" feminist movement in Latin America but that there has been a widespread feeling that their concerns have been neglected in this movement. However, many scholars have identified that their specific concerns are hidden or neglected within the collective struggles for ethnic recognition and suggest this poses an increased risk of indigenous women being "left behind" because "indigenous women fall between the edifice of rights constructed by states and political movements of the region" (Radcliffe, 2002).

Manuela Lavinas Picq (2010) has studied how disjunctures caused by gender relations are manifested in the indigenous movement of Ecuador. She holds that the emergence of the indigenous movement has been accompanied by a weakening of the women's movement within the country and argues that while women have often been mobilized, their causes have rarely

been advanced in the political arena. In other words, the new politics of identity within indigenous movements has lessened efforts to increase women's rights. Furthermore, she holds that this is not a phenomenon unique to Ecuador, but rather points to contradictions of indigenous movements throughout Latin America. Some scholars, such as Michel Perrin and Marie Perruchon, go so far as to conclude that indigenous women are trapped in a "no-way-out commitment" that essentially hinders them from addressing gender-based discrimination (Perrin, 1997). This pinpoints what many scholars have identified as a "tension between indigenous rights, or collective rights, and women's rights, which are posited as individual rights" (Blackwell, 2012). Such a notion does hold seemingly paradoxical elements when considering indigenous women's advancement in indigenous peoples' politics in recent decades. However, in the statement cited above lies a distinct assumption that women's rights issues can solely be channeled through an individual human rights approach. Similarly, such a statement constructs the two, women's rights and indigenous rights, as opposing dichotomies that contract each other.

As many scholars working from a postcolonial school of thought argue, hegemonic academic knowledge about indigenous women can be said to have a tendency to homogenize and fix them as victims of multiple oppression that have no way out of their disadvantaged situation. Besides the obvious problem of producing ethnocentric and patronizing knowledge, conclusions made from this perspective are not useful when trying to understand and explain the progress indigenous women have made in terms of political participation and leadership nor the complexity in which this progress has been made. In contrast to the widespread notions that indigenous women's concerns are hidden under the veil of indigenous politics, several recently produced academic works have identified women as becoming increasingly reflexive socio-political actors well aware of their political agency (Figueroa Romero, 2011, p. 26). In general terms, these scholars have assumed postcolonial, social constructivist and critical feminist perspectives which has enabled them to successfully deconstruct the dichotomized view of the relationship between the categories *woman* and *indigenous*. Because of this they have also effectively criticized the ahistorical, victimizing and overgeneralizing representations of indigenous women's in academic literature (Figueroa Romero, 2011; Hernández Castillo, 2006). This type of research more adequately explains the emergence of indigenous women in indigenous politics and the ways they engaged in challenging the various forms of discrimination that operate against them. They offer a critical and more diversified view of the changes, tensions, and continuities that mediate gender relations within indigenous politics.

This particular click of scholars have informed and inspired this study and thusly I to assume that indigenous women are active agents, byproducts of their social and historical contexts, who make decisions according to what they consider possible, desirable and needed.

Although most of these scholars concede that “Indigenous women, as a subordinated group within their communities, are ‘trespassing’ the boundaries of traditional gendered spaces and, in the process, are becoming active contributors to the politics of indigenous peoples” it does not imply that they do not acknowledge that indigenous women undeniably have a conflicted position between the struggle for the recognition of their peoples and of a gender-oriented agenda (Figueroa Romero, 2011, p. 29). On the contrary, it is agreed that conflict between genders certainly exists although not dealt with in a way that scholars and other external actors perceive or find of importance. About indigenous women’s gender related activism within indigenous politics Dolores Figueroa Romero writes:

“They want to insert [their] agenda into the demands of indigenous peoples without disturbing or breaking the organic links that they maintain with larger indigenous political projects. In attempting to keep [the links] intact, indigenous women are placed in a disjunctive position where they feel it important to support their indigenous male companions, even though these companions may not be empathetic with the indigenous women’s process” (Figueroa Romero, 2011, p. 26).

Indeed, this description entails two contradictory aims: one that pursues the wellbeing of the community as a whole and a second one that tries to change the harmful practices that are exerted against women. This contradiction aside, many scholars agree that indigenous women are gradually redefining gender relations within their communities by pushing forward their agendas for women’s advancement within indigenous politics albeit in a different way to traditional feminist activist’s. For example, Emma Cervone (2002) has found that instead of following a gender specific path of political mobilization in opposition to men, indigenous women address gender based inequalities by redefining concepts that have previously set boundaries and norms for their activities. She holds that indigenous women hold up values traditionally accredited to them in the private sphere in order to legitimize their political activity. For instance, she shows how they reinterpret the meaning motherhood in such a way that it justifies their political leadership skills (p. 193). Also, Cervone and many others scholars effectively demonstrate that there are various political paths women can embark on and that each of these has its set of gains as well as difficulties which in turn makes indigenous women’s site of political struggle very varying (Cervone, 2002; Figueroa Romero, 2011).

4.2.1 A Few Words on Complementarity

Many scholars identify indigenous females as actively being part of a project that aspires to restore equilibrium between genders through the claiming of gender complementarity. Complementarity is a concept that defines gender relations from an indigenous peoples' perspective (Speed, 2006, p. 47). The concept of complementarity has innumerable significances, but a common interpretation is that it entails the thought that men and women are an equally integral part of a unity that resembles the order and equilibrium of nature. It involves a metaphor about healing and recovery that is given importance in the indigenous process of decolonization. It is also understood as "a symbolic representation of the organic interrelation of elements that together ensures the reproduction of life, which, in the case of indigenous peoples, means the reproduction of themselves as a collective" (Figuroa Romero, 2011, p. 146). It can be argued the meaning of complementary is no longer relevant in contemporary indigenous peoples' life. However, indigenous women often times seem to place their struggles in a conceptual frame that evokes this perspective.

5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Next, a short presentation of theoretical and conceptual foundations of this study is made. No attempt is made to give account to whole theoretical fields and conceptualizations. Instead specific aspects considered as relevant for this particular study will be presented and discussed. The different conceptual approaches should not be seen as opposing nor as inherently related as I perceive each one independently provides useful perspectives that may help to better understand the research problem at hand.

5.1 Postcolonialism and the Coloniality of Gender

The concept of *postcolonialism* refers to the thought that colonial events and structures still have deep and all-encompassing effects on social, political and economic life around the world, not only in the countries that were colonized. As Franz Fanon pointed out, the colonial powers of the time continually reproduced an image of their own superiority over the colonized peoples as a means to legitimize and consolidate their power and that this image has been internalized by the colonized and thus lived on (Eriksson, Eriksson Baaz, & Thörn, 1999, p. 41). By critically questioning patterns of thought postcolonial theorists have intended to “think beyond” the categories and boundaries constructed during the colonial era (Eriksson et al., 1999, p. 14ff). The main tool to do this has been the deconstruction of the meta narratives and categories such as race, gender, class, nation and sexuality that create the basis of our individual and collective identities. By deconstructing them they have exposed that identities can never be truly pure nor stable and that they actually are fluid and cross-cutting (Lundahl, 2006, p. 204). The critique of an essentialist approach to identity is thus central within postcolonial theory. Identity is instead seen as constantly constructed and re-constructed through identification and dis-identification (Eriksson et al., 1999, s.33f).

In relation to women, scholars adhering to the postcolonial school of thought have criticized how mainstream academia and ‘western’ or ‘hegemonic’ research consider women as a homogenous group with common claims and struggles. According to many postcolonial thinkers, the category woman contains such variety and disparity within itself that it is questionable if such a group even exist. A researcher that has convincingly confirmed this is Chandra Talpade Mohanty who demonstrates how researchers tend to favor female subjects’ gender identity which results in a distorting and even hiding of their class and ethnic identities

(Mohanty, 1999). Within postcolonial research there is also a vivid critique of the way mainstream research describe women in developing countries since it is argued non-western women often are represented as victims in need of salvation and protection from their male counterparts. This is argued to create a sense of “otherness” that perpetuates their oppression additionally (Eriksson et al., 1999, p. 24ff).

Several postcolonial thinkers have shown how assumptions regarding male and female characteristics have affected the character of colonial rationale and hence also the ideology behind the counter reactions to it. Ania Loomba (2006) notes that the female body was used as a metaphor for the conquered territories during the colonial period. She writes: “Both the colonizers and the anti-colonial nationalists languages [used the] image of rape as [...] a metaphor for colonial relations” (p. 166). On the same token, Ashis Nandy (1983) notes that the same structures of thought that were used to dominate and de-legitimize women in Europe were used to civilize the native populations in the colonies. According to Nandy, this gave legitimacy to “supposed” masculine characteristics such as aggression, control, competition and dominance and had the effect that many resistance mobilizations adopted this approach (pp. 184-186). It is likely that a consequence of this process was a downgrading femininity and an objectification of women as it made them the battlefield between colonizers and colonized. However, it is not so that it is thought that there were no gender differences before the occurrence of colonialism, although it does reveal a politicization created by notions of sexuality, gender and race.

5.2 Strategic Essentialism

As previously mentioned postcolonial theorist have directed vast criticism towards essentialism. Its theoretical unfeasibility is mostly linked to the argument that identities and categories are ever-changing and fluid. It may also be said that, in general, essentialism has negative connotations within academia as it is often used as a slur word, intended to be derogatory. Nevertheless, it is often argued at least some degree of essentialism cannot be avoided because it is politically necessary an even, some argue, psychologically inevitable. (Phillips, 2010, p. 2). Through the concept of strategic essentialism introduced by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak the theoretical predicament of essentialism is diverted by affirming that it is possible to acknowledge that essential categories can be invoked by a collective facing similar oppression in order to form temporary alliances whilst simultaneously

keeping with the criticism that essentialism *per se* is theoretically unviable (Lundahl, 2006, p. 226; Phillips, 2010, p. 1ff). The concept composes of the thought that while a group may be heavily heterogeneous it may sometimes be advantageous to temporarily set aside differences in order to forge a sense of collective identity in pursuit of achieving certain common political goals even though it erases significant differences and distinctions. Essentially, the term acknowledges that these acts of identity formation support political ends and thus serve an important purpose (Phillips, 2010, p. 2). In this study, the concept is seen as useful because it may explain how and why certain characteristics are endorsed by the respondents.

5.3 Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality seeks to highlight how various categories such as gender, ethnicity, class, ability and sexual orientation do not exist independently of one another. On the other hand, attention is laid on the fact that they are interrelated and together contribute to creating systems of oppression and discrimination that lay ground to societal inequalities. Discriminative conditions are often constructed through the placing of categories in hierarchical structures as well as through the construction of dichotomies where one opposite is defined as the norm and the other as deviant. Furthermore, categories can together create special conditions of subordination such as the "double oppression" that has been identified by some scholars and that refers to the circumstance that women of ethnic minorities besides being discriminated against on the basis of their ethnicity also are considered subordinate in two different gender orders; that of their own society and that of the hegemonic society (De los Reyes, Knocke, Molina, & Mulinari, 2002, p. 31ff). As shown, constructs of inequality are complex and multifaceted and analysis on power relations should therefore not be inclined to highlight any category more than others. From this perspective, the failing to balance attention to all present categories is even seen as a discriminating and oppressive practice since it tends oversimplify and naturalize differences that lay ground for injustices (De los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005, p. 38ff).

According to this perspective, gender dynamics will always be altered by other intersecting categories. Hence, the category or social position 'woman' can only be understood by also regarding other social positions that a subject might have (De los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005, pp. 99,123). As such, intersectionality stresses how identity is affected by many different collective

categories in a certain context which influence the individual's political sympathies and actions and may thus be useful in order to distinguish how the multiple identities of Ngobe-Buglé interact and affect their political participation and motivation. By stressing the contextual nature of identity intersectional analysis also emphasizes and problematizes space and time in a way that is often unseen in academic analysis (De los Reyes, 2006, p. 39).

5.4 Empowerment

Empowerment is a very broad concept that imbues many different aspects, meanings, interpretations and definitions as it is used in a diverse range of disciplines. The sociological use of empowerment is often directed towards groups that in some way are excluded from decision-making processes because of social discrimination processes that differentiate on the basis of categories such as race, gender, age or sexual orientation. Empowerment is also often associated with feminism and conscious raising of women's subordination since it is generally understood this may lead the questioning and subsequently challenging of unequal discourses and practices. The concept stems from radical feminist and black-power ideologies developed during the 1960: s and 1970: s and was in the onset a political counter reaction to collective discrimination. The main core of empowerment is thus a concern with equality (Askheim & Starrin, 2007). The rejection of the view of disadvantaged people as passive and ignorant of their own position within their surrounding environment is a key aspect as most conceptualizations highlight the notion that people have the capacity to understand and identify their own needs and goals as well as the means to develop the strategies needed to meet these (Askheim & Starrin, 2007; Payne, 2008). The focus on people as self-reflective subjects with agency is thus central to the conceptual foundation of empowerment. Many theorists stress collective action through the formulation of collective goals as an essential part for empowerment to be sustainable and substantial. The concept has evolved and today it is also used in connection to individual self-realization within a liberal perspective where people are seen as autonomous and inherently free. Identity is a key theme within empowerment conceptualizations and theorists such as Srilatha Balitwala understand empowerment as a linkage between individual and collective identities where individual identities are the cornerstones for collective sites of action and solidarity (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2009, pp. 56-57; Payne, 2008).

Robert Adams (2003) defines empowerment as“ [...] the means by which individuals, groups and/or communities become able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their own goals, thereby being able to work towards helping themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives” (p. 8). This implies empowerment is self-directed and voluntary as opposed to being implemented or forced upon by an external actor. The quote above also illustrates one of the concepts characteristic features; the power dimension, which is pervading in most definitions. For instance, Batliwala (1994) defines empowerment as being a process of ”challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power” (p. 130). Naila Kabeer (1999) describes empowerment as the “ability to exercise choice” and as a “process of change” which suggests it has a dynamic rather than fixed nature (p. 437). Further, Kabeer identifies three aspects of power that all effect a group’s or an individual’s capability to exercise choice and thus the process of empowerment. The first is *resources*, of both material and social resources that set the preconditions for the possibility to be empowered. The second is connected to *agency* and the ability to define and act upon ones goals. In relation to this, Kabeer defines agency as being a “transformative potential of power within” which pinpoints that empowerment not merely includes observable actions of power but also a sense of confidence in one’s own capacity to exert power. According to Kabeer agency is the very process through which empowerment is created. Kabeer calls the third aspect *achievement* and with this she means the outcomes of empowering actions or states (p. 438).

It should be noted that the concept of empowerment has been vastly criticized for being excessively celebratory of weak group’s and individual’s capacity to overcome deprivation and to transform unequal relations. Some scholars caution that the term is prone to co-optation by neoliberal discourse, while others suggest the use of it is unreflective and nothing more than a hollow buzzword (Archibald & Wilson). This may be accurate to some degree but the usefulness of the concept does not necessarily have to be reduced if proper account is taken of surrounding structures and how they affect subjects maneuvering space. Thus, the concept of empowerment can be a beneficial analytical tool in order to understand how individuals and groups of people act to improve their lives in a given context.

6. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The findings concerning the research questions and the purpose of the study will in this chapter be presented and analyzed in relation to the theoretical framework. Thus, result and the ensuing analysis are integrated. Through the thematically influenced analysis of the material, explained in “Analytical Method” a number of themes were identified and are here presented in different subchapters. Also, I have chosen to use plenty of quotes in order to let the respondents own experiences and accounts shine through as much as possible.

6.1 Awakening and Empowerment

The empirical data seems to point to that Ngobe-Buglé women have come to play an important role in inducing positive changes for their community and that they gradually have been occupying more and more space, principally on local and regional levels of politics. Most respondents voiced thoughts very similar to Batliwalas conception of empowerment - of challenging existing power relations and achieving greater control of power sources - as the main reason for their improved political inclusion and acquisition of leadership roles. As Silva Carrera, the highest leader of the *comarca* articulates;

“If you go to any office there is a woman working as a secretary. But there are also women in all parties, in our congresses, women mayors, and even some in parliament. We are occupying important space in this society, something that has not previously been seen. The difference is that we now question our exclusion from politics, and we do not accept it anymore” (Interview 2).

In point of fact, statements that indicate that empowering processes are taking place in politically active women’s lives are plenty throughout the empirical material. They can be perceived both through a reading of the respondents overall descriptions as well as through the terms used. The frequent usage of the term awakening is a telling indication, since it signifies an element of reflexivity, a distinguishing feature in conceptions of empowerment. When asked why women have taken a step into the political realm one respondent said;

“We are no longer asleep. Women have awakened to participate and make a difference because we now know we as woman are worth it [...] this has made us become inclined to be more involved in this thing of politics. To receive what we are worth” (Interview 1).

Beside the mention of awakening, this statement also makes reference to self-worth which suggests Kabeers understanding of empowerment as “power within” has had an influence on Ngobé-Buglé women’s increased political participation and leadership.

Essentially all respondents’ enunciate the importance of education for their recent entry into the political arena and for their success in rapidly acquiring leadership positions. This indicates education has been a major precondition for their entrance into politics and it may be argued it has made their “power within” flourish, enabling them to take a step into a realm previously unreachable to them. Hence, education can be understood as a *resource*, such as Kabeer describes it, strongly affecting the success of Ngobe-Buglé women’s transcendent path into political life. Conversely, data from the interviews also display signs of how the lack of the education is experienced to have an opposite effect on women’s political involvement. One respondent expressed the following thereof;

“We who dare to take a step into politics, we are prepared, we have experience, we have capabilities, we have education [...] but those ladies who do not have a profession, it’s harder for them, much more difficult” (Interview 3).

Of all respondents, all but two have secondary education or higher. Although no generalizations can be made with such a small population it does support the many statements made during the interviews about the importance of education for indigenous women in politics. It is likely education and the great investment it entails, both for the individual and the family, signals value very early on in life which in turn strengthens the sense of self-worth. About education, one respondent expressed a sentiment that can be interpreted as exhibiting one of the central significations of empowerment; to develop the means to identify one’s own aims and objectives and to reach them.

“[Education] has opened the possibility to say that I also have the same rights as a man. I also have ideals. I also have visions and goals I want to accomplish” (Interview 8).

Besides the symbolic and highly personal value of education it is evident women appreciate its resourcefulness in a more practical sense to. Many respondents stated that they are confident in politics because they know they have both the rhetorical and practical skills to be able to associate with male colleagues and political opponents. It is plausible that the practical and the subjective effects of education are mutually reinforcing.

Many respondents' explanations to why Ngobe-Buglé women have not participated in politics as much earlier indicates that the time-factor influences women's political activities. The duties and responsibilities within the domestic realm and the time they occupy are often offered as explanations to why women previously have been omitted from the political realm. One response reflects this quite vividly;

“Sometimes our commitments, since we have children and do not want to leave them alone and husbands that need to be attended to, leave no time for us to go to meetings and have political commitments. Since we don't have time, we have fallen behind in politics. We lack proper experience. And because we were always home we did not know our rights as citizens” (Interview 2).

This statement has connections to the meaning of empowerment in the sense that it pins down something that can be understood as a disempowering circumstance. It can be said the lack of time has left women unable to gain the experiences necessary to gain legitimacy in politics. However, as will be shown in the next subchapter women seem to, at least to some extent, have overcome this by upgrading and redefining precisely what has kept them outside of the public sphere.

6.2 The Redefining of Motherhood and Domesticity as Empowerment

Contrary to the above reasoning that domestic life is a hindering factor towards female political participation and leadership, the empirical material contains an abundance of testimonies that motherhood and other roles within the domestic sphere are invoked to legitimize women's political participation. The logic behind this is exemplified in the following quote;

“Women have three jobs, as professionals or in the fields, then we come home to fulfill our obligations to our family, as mothers that is. You come home to attend your children, without letting them see your exertion and the tiredness you bring from work. When we finish, perhaps, women need to meet their responsibilities as wives, and that can be very exhausting. But because of the discipline a woman has all must be fulfilled, like it or not. In my opinion, it is from this discipline that women's success stems. It begins in the home. Yes. Success starts in the home and is then translated outside” (Interview 4).

Here, the respondent seems to apply the virtues and merits women acquire within the private space of their homes to their political capabilities. In doing this, traditionally feminized activities, that have kept women within the private sphere are transcended into the public sphere and serve as sources of empowerment and legitimation of their political activity. In this way,

traditionally female responsibilities, such as childcare, are transferred and extended into the public sphere of politics, where they reflect women's political responsibilities. Similarly, women's excellence and discipline in the execution of their domestic duties seem to be used as markers of ability, even in public life. In relation to getting credibility and support from male companions one respondent seems to appeal to the same logic;

"We are their mothers and we raised them to be good human beings. We corrected them when they were children. So they must have faith in our ability to lead in politics to (Interview 9).

With this type of reasoning the respondents seem to posit themselves as social reproducers and guardians of social values in a manner that stretches their identities from the private into the public sphere. As such, it seems to legitimize their place in politics. On the other hand, there lies a contradiction in this situation as the respondents seem to be calling and negotiating for a restructuration of traditional gender roles and at the same time act to break traditional gender divisions through their political activity. This dilemma seems to be somewhat remedied by drawing upon complementarity and will be further discussed in the subchapter called "The Recovery of Balance". Seen through the lens of postcolonial theory it may be argued this kind of reasoning is an example of how identities are fluid and how, in this particular situation, the meaning of being mother, woman and politician is constantly redefined and subject to change. It does also imply women are actively taking part in the reconstruction of their identities in the quest for inclusion and greater power acquisition.

6.3 Essentializing Female Leadership and the Lack of It

As with the reasoning about motherhood presented above, there seems to be a lot of indications that Ngobe-Buglé women extensively draw upon and practice what can be read as strategic essentialism in their efforts to legitimize and occupy political space and authority. Time and again, the respondents return to the domestic realm when they talk of their political activism. The material also illustrates most respondents make efforts to distinguish and hold up female characteristics as support to the argument that women are well suited to be politicians and leaders. One respondent exemplified this reasoning well by saying;

"The woman is more serious. She is more dedicated to the task at hand, both at home and at work. Women are always aware of their time of arrival and departure and if you are tardy or absent it is because of an important reason. Not because we were, as the male, out drinking the evening before or because we woke up far from

home or with another lady. Those are the excuses men generally give, but women do not. If we miss one day it is because our children are sick” (Interview 4).

Read through the lens of strategic essentialism, it could be argued testimonials such as this one attest Ngobe-Buglé women, who customarily have faced the same exclusion from politics, through these types of essentializing cognitions construct a collective identity from where they can demand and create political space. By showing how women as a group have habits and properties that coincide with the demanding work of politics, they are able to gain political legitimacy while simultaneously reinforcing their joint identity as women. Moreover, declarations like the one below seem to confirm women use strategic essentialism in order to create space for women’s political participation since it reflects that there is a linkage between individual and collective identities where individual identities are the basis for collective sites of action and solidarity.

“Women help and support each other, because we all have the same struggle. In elections or meetings I always try to support my female companions. I even get along with women from rivaling parties. You see, we are all mothers. And we are all leaders” (Interview 3).

Accounts such as this one suggest politically active Ngobe-Buglé women do have a sense of common purpose and struggle even though they operate on distinct levels and within diverse political spaces. A lot of data gathered through observation also suggests crosscutting solidarity is quite strong. For example, women from many different political backgrounds attend workshops held for female empowerment and they seem to generously share experiences in support of one another. They seem to benefit from setting aside differences in pursuit of achieving common political goals.

A substantial part of the empirical data also seem to support that essentialist methods are used contrawise as well, in the sense that essentializing descriptions are often put forward to explain why women have not engaged in politics in the past. The following accounts illustrate this quite well;

“It is not the men that have built barriers. It is mostly due to ourselves. Women by nature are timid” (Interview 6).

“Sometimes in meetings, men say ‘well, let the women talk’ and all the women say ‘I am not going to talk!’. And then they say there is no participation for women. [...] It is because women are born shy” (interview 4).

By repeatedly referring to women as timid by nature women seem to naturalize their own identity, on the contrary to what they seem to be doing when they invoke motherhood in order to gain political recognition, which reveals an ambivalence in Ngobe-Buglés women's political actions and discourses exists. These accounts also suggest the respondents understand their lack of political participation as a voluntary absence rather than as an exclusion which seems to have connection to their relationships with their male counterparts. This will be further discussed in the two subsequent subchapters.

6.4 Beyond Feminism

During fieldwork and while analyzing the data it became clear that the traditional interpretation of feminism and its conceptualization of gender relations and patriarchy is not well received nor perceived as accurate by indigenous women in the *comarca* Ngobe-Buglé. The concepts and assumptions associated with conventional feminist theory seem to be perceived as alien and even threatening to indigenous culture. When asked if she had a feminist agenda a respondent answered;

“Feminist agenda? No. It is not necessary. It can and should be done within the collective. [...] Because feminists want to cut the bonds to our old lives” (Interview 5).

Here, feminism seems to be linked to the exploitation and dismantling of indigenous culture that many respondents express they feel subjected to. As a result, the respondent seem to instead address gender inequality by invoking complementarity in order to restore a pre-colonial balance. Feminism seems to be perceived to only favor women's emancipation over other kinds of oppression. When viewed in this manner, feminism seems to ignore the intersectional discriminations indigenous women are subjected to. Yet, signs that many of the respondents have been inspired and informed by feminist theory and women's struggles in hegemonic society, can be deduced in the reading of the empirical material. For example many respondents maintain that the fact that Panama has had a female president, albeit a mestiza, has served as inspiration for them to take the leap into politics. Hence, there seems to be a disconnect between the theoretical understanding of feminism and its practical application among the respondents. However, it is of important to clarify this does not imply they have misunderstood feminism it

simply means feminism does not seem to appeal to them and their particular point of struggle. These findings do however reveal an ambiguity in the respondents' actions and discourses that seem to line up with the findings presented in the subchapter above. This indicates politically active Ngobe-Buglé women gather strength in a multi-layered and complex way which resembles their own multidimensional social position.

6.5 The Recovery of Balance

By constructing a common female identity, male characteristics are also chiseled out. Men's failures and shortcomings, both in private and political life are upheld as the opposite to women's characteristics in a similar manner to the binary and dichotomous practices postcolonial theorists have shown are important elements in power relations. On this theme a respondent stated the following;

“Men promise and promise and end up doing nothing. They just leave promises and when they finish their term they disappear and not much change or progress has been made. It is just their way. Women on the other hand, are honest and do the things they promise” (Interview 1).

It is difficult to disentangle if this type of reasoning is caused by beliefs in true essentialism or if the more pragmatic strategic essentialism is at play here. Perhaps it is not even relevant to make this distinction. What seems pertinent is that the respondents by creating such a dichotomous relationship to men questions are raised on how they collaborate with their male equivalents. Indeed, when asked if differences between the sexes may be habitual or socialized the responses often incorporated essentializing elements such as descriptions of male's innate tendencies to be more aggressive and less thoughtful. Notwithstanding, men do not seem to be perceived as rivals. Instead they are mainly described as partners in a unified struggle to overcome exploitation and deprivation. When asked how to best tackle gender discrimination most respondents contemplated ideas that suggested it can only be done with the full acceptance of men. Sentiments about how this might be done often made reference to the invoking complementarity. One respondent stated the following;

“The key is to convince men of the need to restore equity in our society. They also want to take action to restore the dignity of indigenous women” (Interview 6).

Articulations like this serve as important arguments for the partnership between men and

women and are reminiscent to the ideas of restoration and healing are key aspects of complementarity. Quotes similar to this one can be found throughout the material which indicates politically active women call upon complementarity in order to gain legitimacy and access to political space. It is plausible, that by raising and leaning on a traditional thought complex, such as complementary, women more effectively gain the support they needed from male colleagues and relatives. Also, drawing upon complementarity seems to provide the possibility to address inequitable gender relations without neglecting or challenging the ethnic struggle. The interrelatedness of gender and ethnicity is unmistakable in essentially all respondents' accounts. The subsequent quote clearly illustrates this interwoven connection;

“Women are not only fighting for gender equality, at the same time we fight for economic, social and cultural rights. We, indigenous women of Panama, bearers of life, we are united in the fight with our sisters and brothers in defense of our territorial rights, natural resources, autonomy and gender equality. [...] These cannot be separated” (Interview 7).

In similarity to what the intersectional perspective advocates, herein statement illuminates how the respondents perceive that their multiple identities cannot be untangled from one another. Moreover, the frequent references to complementarity and restoration seem to also be connected to colonialism. As the following quote displays, it appears as if inequitable gender relations often times are associated with the process of colonization;

“It is natural that women collectively represent all our people because that is what we have learned from Mother Earth. Women are the ones who take care of life and the land. Men by nature know this but as we have been denied participation from governments this has been forgotten” (Interview 2).

It may be argued that accounts that stress that limitations on Ngobe-Buglé women's political lives are colonial legacies, strengthen women's efforts to achieve political participation. This because it is likely that this idea appeals to Ngobe-Buglé men struggling for ethnic recognition. This interpretation is strengthened by some respondent's accounts that men's main concern is to protect and restore women's honor which has been taken away and that ultimately has led to the demise of their whole society's honor. In the following citation, one respondent reflects on how this has affected women's political involvement and leadership.

“When the Spaniards arrived in Panama they massacred and tortured our people. They made the men work and they abused the women or stole them. And our people suffered. So today, in the demonstrations, women come to fight and they fight

together with their husbands. With time, we have learned more and become aware of the discrimination against us. [...] So that made us want to take up the fight even more. Not against our husbands, but against the foreign powers seeking to destroy our culture” (Interview 6).

Judging by this description and others similar to it, the respondents seem very well aware of the global structural determinations that deploy them in a westernized paradigm which in turn seems to spur them to initiate a highly ideological project to recover and find solutions that are grounded in their worldview.

6.6 Double Oppression also Double Possibilities?

Even though women take part in the struggles for recognition and autonomy, side by side with men, they have to cope with discriminating practices towards them by their peers. The quotes below illustrate some respondents’ descriptions of how internal discrimination against them can be manifested;

“Many speak ill of women who want to be leaders. Sometimes they criticize and say bad things, like that we are out to find another man” (Interview 2).

“Yes, the doors have opened, but sometimes we still lack credibility because we are appointed a number of things that always are appointed to women. Like, that we are submissive, have a softer spirit and do not have the firmness to make hard decisions” (Interview 5).

When encountering descriptions such as these, the “double oppression” discussed within the intersectionality approach becomes visible. Not only do politically active Ngobe-Buglé women have to endure discrimination and defilements by hegemonic society. They also have cope with harassment and opposition from their companions and colleagues. By using the intersectional perspective and its focus on how different categories work together and reinforce one another, it may be argued that Ngobe-Buglé women also accentuate and use the intersectionality in order to gain political legitimacy. The following quotes seem to support the argument that Ngobe-Buglé women invoke their indigenous identity in attempts to equate gender relations;

“There are sexist ideas, men who think women cannot reach higher and occupy important positions. And when women aspire and leave the house people start talking that she left the husband and the children abandoned. But as we know this, we do not pay attention to it and go anyway. Through our accomplishments they see that we, indigenous women, to can do good for our people. And so we get respect” (Interview 4)

“When I started I was criticized. I had great difficulties in the beginning but I did not give up. And with time, I noticed that people wanted to support me because I talked about our people’s common struggle” (Interview 3).

From this perspective, the intersectional nature of identity, may not only mean women are exposed to multiple oppressions. It may be so that a categorical identity is called upon in order to strengthen another. As previously shown, evidence of the reverse can also be seen in the material, in the sense that women also seem to accentuate their female specificity in order to achieve increased political participation and leadership within indigenous struggles. As such, it seems as if no one category is given more importance than the other. Instead they seem to be highlighted and used in a dynamic manner according to what specific oppression they are addressing at a given time or place. This goes in line with the intersectional approach which stresses how social positions are affected by many different collective categories in a certain context that in turn influence political action.

6.7 Diversity and Similarity

In the material it is evident the respondents have taken many different paths and have varying backgrounds. These variances seem to influence their political activity in a number ways, even though, great solidarity and commonality exists between them. Differences seem to cut across properties such as age, class as well as location and level of political involvement. As shown below, many of the older respondents state that their absorption into politics has been gradual and somewhat unexpected;

“Politics is everyday life. I started to solve from a very young age and after a while a moment came when people said to me ‘you should run for local congress’. And so I did. (Interview 6)”

“Well, actually, it started when I was treasurer in the regional congress. I was quite young and innocent really. I was ignorant to the struggle [...] and well, as I started to participate in meetings I became more and more aware. [...] And day after day, it has strengthened my spirit to continue participating” (Interview 5).

In these accounts, structural factors and respondents own personal efforts and qualities seem to have contributed to Ngobe-Buglé women’s political advancement. On the other hand, the younger respondents accounts more often bring forward education, leadership training and what

can be read as empowerment as explanations to their success in gaining political ground. Younger women also more often seem to make reference to women's progress within hegemonic Panamanian. This suggests that women's site of struggle and the discourses used to back these are constantly changing in relation to the surrounding context.

A class divide can also be discerned in the empirical material. It seems as class affinity has an impact on the possibility to engage in certain political arenas, such as national party politics where one is dependent on votes and thus obliged to campaign. The following respondent's testimony can be related to this;

“You have to have certain friends, and family. The support from them is important. Also because, it is not free to campaign, you know. You need the financial support in order to succeed” (Interview 4).

Correspondingly, respondents with weaker social and economic resources seem to be found on grassroots levels. There also seems to be a rift between how women from different levels and spaces handle male hegemony. In general, most respondents seem to not openly challenge male hegemonic dominion as they instead seem to opt for negotiation and collaboration with men. However, respondents operating on grassroots level do not make any attempts to hide the existence of domestic violence nor the existence of sexist practices. It should be noted that, at the same time, respondents from grassroots levels also voluntarily cooperate with their male companions. However, as they are not dependent on men's direct support, in the form of votes, they may be inclined to speak their minds more freely. Respondents operating within the official political structure seem to consistently be more cautious in their talk of sexism although no one denied its existence. This situation might at first glance be lacking meaningful changes for Ngobe-Buglé women. Nevertheless, the data holds many attestations that these respondents indeed do work within their respective spaces to empower the broader group of women while simultaneously working to legitimize their own presence in the public sphere. In sum, many important differences and distinctions are present within the group of politically active Ngobe-Buglé women. However, as shown earlier, there seems to be a sense of solidarity and common site of struggle uniting them. In the light of this, a concern might be that the essentializing practices presented earlier could erase these differences, making some women's particular struggles invisible. However, as shown throughout this chapter, Ngobe-Buglé women seem to constantly reconstruct, recover, reframe and re-imagine their identities and solidarities according to their political point of departure.

7. Conclusions

The empirical data presented in this study seems to support the argument that indigenous women have emerged as reflective sociopolitical actors that decisively have claimed political space and thusly become intrinsic parts of the comprehensive project of indigenous peoples' liberation. In terms of gender struggles, politically active Ngobe-Buglé women, as a subordinate group, have quite successfully transgressed the boundaries and the traditional place of women and now occupy quite vast political space and important leadership roles. However, respondents' experiences and accounts also shed light on the internal contestation their new political presence has caused. The material also reveals a great deal of contradictions and ambiguities within Ngobe-Buglé women's political struggles. Nevertheless, the most telling revelation is that politically active Ngobe-Buglé women showcase great dynamism in their ability to reinvent and reconstruct identities in unpredictable and progressive ways in order to gain political participation and attain leadership positions. Conversely, the empirical material diverts away from the view that the relationship between gender and ethnic struggles is negative and that women are trapped in a limited place deemed to be passive reproducers of ethnic identity. On the contrary, there seems to be a constant redefinition of indigenous identity and gender roles in the respondents' attempts to legitimize and gain political recognition and operating space. Moreover, through the analysis of the results it has been shown that all identity categories and sites of oppression are given importance for the respondents' political calling. In line with the intersectional perspective, the confrontations with hegemonic society and the struggle for gender equality seem to be intertwined and seem to be sites that hold both oppression and empowerment in the respondent's efforts to increase their political inclusion. It is also found that there exists great solidarity between women involved in different political spaces which suggest a common site of struggle. However, great diversity is also noted among respondents' backgrounds and political activities. In conclusion, politically active Ngobe-Buglé women have successfully developed various ways to legitimize their move into politics and although contradictions and opposition exist they effectively navigate and call upon many different discourses and identity categories to attain political participation and leadership.

7.1 Further research

Many interesting aspects that unfortunately have fallen outside of the scope of this study deserve to be mentioned as they may be of interest for future researchers. As made clear through

this study there exists a vast body of research on gender relations within indigenous societies in Latin America. However, there seems to be a void on men's role and how notions of masculinity effect social and political life within indigenous communities. During fieldwork I also noticed how women and men insert themselves differently into politics and leadership position. To study how their strategies differ might be an important step to better understanding gender in relation to indigenous politics. Similarly, I found women have very different conditions to engage in political matters whereupon a Bourdieu inspired inquiry of how social capital is used by female indigenous leaders may be relevant. Finally, it may be well-suited for academic research to investigate the very clear tendencies such as the vast migrations flows to urban areas and the transnational networking and how these circumstances affect indigenous peoples and women's identities and their political activity.

8. Bibliography

- Adams, Robert. (2003). *Social Work and Empowerment*. (3 ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Archibald, Thomas, & Wilson, Arthur L. *Rethinking Empowerment: Theories of Power and the Potential for Emancipatory Praxis*. Cornell University.
- Askheim, Ole Petter , & Starrin, Bengt (2007). *Empowerment - olika infallsvinklar Empowerment i teori och praktik*. Malmö: Gleerups Utbildning.
- AWID. (2012). The Ngoebe Buglé's Community Resistance from <http://www.awid.org/News-Analysis/Friday-Files/The-Ngoebe-Bugle->
- Batliwala, Srilatha. (1994). *Women's empowerment in South Asia: concepts and practices*. New Delhi: Asian South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education.
- Blackwell, Maylei. (2012). The practice of autonomy in the age of neoliberalism: strategies from Indigenous women's organising in Mexico. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 44(4), 703. doi: 10.1017/S0022216X12000788
- Bryman, Alan. (2011). *Samhällsvetenskapliga metoder* (2 ed.). Malmö: Liber.
- Cervone, Emma. (2002). Engendering Leadership: Indigenous Women Leaders in the Ecuadorian Andes. In R. Montoya, Frazier, vLessie Jo, Hurtig, Janise (Ed.), *Gender's Place. Feminist Anthropologies of Latin America* (pp. 179-196). USA: Palgrave Macmillan.
- De Ferranti, David M., Perry, Guillermo E., Ferreira, Francisco H. G., & Michael, Walton. (2004). *Inequality in Latin America: breaking with history?* Retrieved Book, Whole
- De los Reyes, Paulina. (2006). Global o(jäm)likhet och intersektionalitet: om feministiska gränsdragningar och hegemoniska röster. *Tidskrift for kjønnsforskning*(1/2), 36-50.
- De los Reyes, Paulina, Knocke, Wuokko, Molina, Irene, & Mulinari, Diana. (2002). *Maktens (o)lika förklädnader: kön, klass & etnicitet i det postkoloniala Sverige : en festskrift till Wuokko Knocke*. Stockholm: Atlas.
- De los Reyes, Paulina, & Mulinari, Diana. (2005). *Intersektionalitet: kritiska reflektioner över (o)jämlighetens landskap*. Malmö: Liber.
- DeWalt, Kathleen Musante, & DeWalt, Billie R. (2011). *Participant observation: a guide for fieldworkers*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, Md.
- Eriksson, Maria, Eriksson Baaz, Catharina, & Thörn, Håkan. (1999). *Globaliseringens kulturer: den postkoloniala paradoxen, rasismen och det mångkulturella samhället*. Nora: Nya Doxa.

- Esaiasson, Peter, Gilljam, Mikael, Oscarsson, Henrik, & Wängnerud, Lena. (2012). *Metodpraktikan: konsten att studera samhälle, individ och marknad*. Stockholm: Norstedts juridik.
- Figueroa Romero, Maria de los Dolores. (2011). *Comparative Analysis of Indigenous Women's Participation in Ethno-politics and Community Development: The Experiences of Women Leaders of ECUARUNARI (Ecuador) and YATAMA (Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua)*. (Dissertation/Thesis), ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing.
- Foucault, Michel. (1998). *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*. London: Penguin.
- Hernández Castillo, Aida. (2006). Between Feminist Ethnocentricity and Ethnic Essentialism. The Zaparistas' Demands and the National Indigenous Women's Movement. In S. Speed, Hernández Castillo, Aida, Stephen, Lynn (Ed.), *Dissent Women. Gender and Cultural Politics in Chiapas* (pp. 57-96). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Horton, Lynn. (2006). Contesting State Multiculturalisms: Indigenous Land Struggles in Eastern Panama. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 38(4), 829-858. doi: 10.1017/S0022216X06001623
- Jordan-Ramos, Osvaldo. (2010). *Indigenous mobilization, institutionalization and resistance: The Ngobe movement for political autonomy in Western Panama*. (Dissertation/Thesis), ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing.
- Kabeer, Naila. (1999). Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3), 435-464. doi: 10.1111/1467-7660.00125
- Lavinás Picq, Manuela. (2008). Gender within Ethnicity: Human Rights and Identity Politics in Ecuador. In G. O'Donnell, Tulchin, Joseph S., Varas, Augusto (Ed.). *New Voices in the Study of Democracy in Latin America*: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
- Lilja, Mona, & Vinthagen, Stellan. (2009). *Motstånd*. Malmö: Liber.
- Loomba, Ania. (2006). *Kolonialism/Postkolonialism: en introduktion till ett forskningsfält*. Stockholm: Tankekraft.
- Lundahl, Mikaela. (2006). Från genus till sexuell och etnisk skillnad. In L. Lennerhed (Ed.), *Från Sapfo till Cyborg - Idéer om kön och sexualitet i historien*. Södertälje: Gidlunds.
- McCracken, Grant David. (1988). *The long interview* (Vol. 13). Newbury Park, Calif: Sage.

- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. (1999). Under Western Eyes:. In H. Thörn, C. Eriksson & M. Eriksson Baaz (Eds.), *Globaliseringens kulturer: den postkoloniala paradoxen, rasismen och det mångkulturella samhället*. Nora: Nya Doxa.
- Nandy, Ashis (1983). The Intimate Enemy. In C. Eriksson, M. Eriksson Baaz & H. Thörn (Eds.), *Globaliseringens kulturer: den postkoloniala paradoxen, rasismen och det mångkulturella samhället* (pp. 179-194). Nora: Nya Doxa.
- NCIV. (2010, 1 November, 2010). Definition of Indigenous Peoples. from <http://indigenouspeoples.nl/indigenous-peoples/definition-indigenous>
- Okin, Susan Moller, & Cohen, Joshua. (1999). *Is multiculturalism bad for women?* Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.
- Payne, Malcolm (2008). *Modern teoribildning i socialt arbete*. Stockholm: Natur och kultur.
- Perrin, Michel, Perruchon, Marie (1997). *Complementariedad entre el Hombre y la Mujer. Relaciones de Género desde la Perspectiva Amerindia*. Quito: Abya Yala.
- Phillips, Anne. (2010). What's wrong with essentialism? *Distinktion: Scandinavian journal of social theory*, 11(1), 47-60.
- Radcliffe, Sarah. A. (2002). Indigenous women, rights and the nation-state in the Andes.
- Rodriguez, Isidoro, & Sorensen, Barbara. (2012). Silvia Carrera: A Symbol of Dignity for Indigenous Women in Panama. *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, 36(2), 6.
- Safa, Helen I. (2005). Challenging Mestizaje: A Gender Perspective on Indigenous and Afrodescendant Movements in Latin America. *Critique of Anthropology*, 25(3), 307-330. doi: 10.1177/0308275X05055217
- Safire, William. (2008). *Safire's Political Dictionary*: Oxford University Press US.
- Sarsaneda del Cid , Jorge. (2010). Ni ngöbe nünadi kóre - El pueblo ngobe siempre vivirá.
- Smith, Peter H. (2011). *Democracy in Latin America: political change in comparative perspective*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Speed, Shannon, Hernández Castillo, Aida, Stephen, Lynn M. . (2006). *Dissident Women. Gender and Cultural Politics in Chiapas*. . Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Sprague, Joey. (2005). *Feminist methodologies for critical researchers: bridging differences*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press.
- Stephen, Lynn. 2001. "”, Vol. 28. No. 6: 54-69. (2001). Gender, citizenship and the Politics of Identity. *Latin American Perspectives*, 28(6), 54-69.
- UD. (2012). Panama Landrapport Utrikesdepartementet

- Van Cott, Donna Lee (2010). Indigenous Peoples' Politics in Latin America.(Author abstract). *Annual Review of Political Science*, 13(1), 385-405. doi: 10.1146/annurev.polisci.032708.133003
- Varese, Stefano. (1996). The Ethnopolitics of Indian Resistance in Latin America. *Latin American Perspectives*, 23(2), 58-71.
- Vetenskapsrådet. (1990). Forskningsetiska principer inom humanistisk-samhällsvetenskaplig forskning. from <http://www.codex.vr.se/texts/HSFR.pdf>
- Wickstrom, Stefanie. (2003). The Politics of Development in Indigenous Panama. *Latin American Perspectives*, 30(4), 43-68. doi: 10.1177/0094582X03030004006
- Vinding, Diana (1998). Indigenous Women: The Right to a Voice. Copenhagen: IWGIA - International Work Group on Indigenous Affairs.
- Young, Philip D. (1971). Ngawbe: Tradition and Change Among the Western Guyamí of Panama. *Illinois Studies in Anthropology*(7).

Appendix 1

List of participants

Interview 1. Member of women's organization ASMUNG (Asociación de Mujeres Ngobe-Buglé)
28, tertiary education, single.*

Interview 2. Silvia Carrera - *Cacica* General
45, primary education, married.

Interview 3. Galata de Gracia – Representative, *Cambio Democratico* party
39, secondary education, married.

Interview 4. Maribel Uribe - Vice Governor
42, secondary education, married.

Interview 5. Natividad Arenas Mendoza - Vice President of COORDEMUNG
40, secondary education, married.

Interview 6. Juliana Santiago Santo - President of the Regional Congress (Nedrini region)
36, secondary education, married.

Interview 7. Member of women's organization CONAMUIP (Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Indigenas de Panama)
26, secondary education, single.*

Interview 8. Member of M-10
24, secondary education, single.*

Interview 9. Member of M-10
45, primary education, married.*

Appendix 2

Introduction

Name

Age

Marital status

Education

Political experience

Female leadership, political participation and representation

Do you believe that the political participation for women has increased?

¿Cree usted que la participación política de las mujeres ha aumentado?

Why and how have women taken a step forward in politics?

¿Por qué y cómo han dado un paso adelante las mujeres en la política?

Has this development changed the overall role of women in Ngobe Buglé society? If so, how?

¿Este desarrollo ha cambiado el papel general de la mujer en la sociedad? Si es así, ¿cómo?

How is the identity and the struggles of your people affected by the changing role women seem to play?

¿Cómo es afectada la identidad y la lucha de su pueblo por este cambio de papel que las mujeres parecen tener en la política?

How has the female leadership helped prioritize women's interests?

¿Opina usted que el liderazgo femenino ha ayudado a priorizar los intereses de las mujeres?

Are women better represented by female representatives? Why? Why not?

¿Opinas que, las mujeres son mejor representadas por representantes femeninas? ¿Por qué/porque no?

Are there any obstacles for the political participation of women?

¿Hay algunos obstáculos para la participación política de mujeres?

What have been your personal obstacles when engaging in politics? Are they connected to your gender?

¿Cuáles han sido sus obstáculos personales al involucrarse en la política? ¿Están conectados a su género?

Are there any advantages with being a woman in political life?

¿Hay algunas ventajas con ser mujer en la vida política?

Political mission / women as political actors

In your opinion, what is the main struggle for your people?

¿En su opinión, ¿cuál es la principal lucha de su gente?

What is your personal conviction and political mission? Is it connected to your identity as a woman?

¿Cuál es su convicción ideológica y misión personal para ser activa en la política? Está conectado a su género?

What is your opinion about having a separate space for the struggle for women's rights?
Cuál es su opinión sobre tener un espacio separado para la lucha de los derechos de la mujer?

Subordination of women

Do you think that there is equality between men and women in Ngobe-Buglé society and in general?

¿Considera usted que hay igualdad entre el hombres y mujeres en la sociedad Ngobe-Buglé y en general?

Is the oppression of groups according to class or ethnicity secondary or primary to the oppression of women?

¿Opina usted que la opresión de grupos por clase o etnia es primaria o secundaria a la opresión de las mujeres?

What is your opinion about machismo / patriarchy?

¿Cuál es su opinión sobre el machismo / patriarcado?

From where does gender inequality and women's subordination stem and what is the reason for its existence?

¿De dónde surge la desigualdad de género y la subordinación de mujeres madre y lo que es la razón de su existencia?

What is the ideal relationship between men and women? How does reality differ from this ideal?

¿Cuál es la relación ideal entre los hombres y las mujeres? ¿De qué manera la realidad difiere de este ideal?

Appendix 3

Key informants

Key informant 1.

Maribel Uribe - Vice Governor

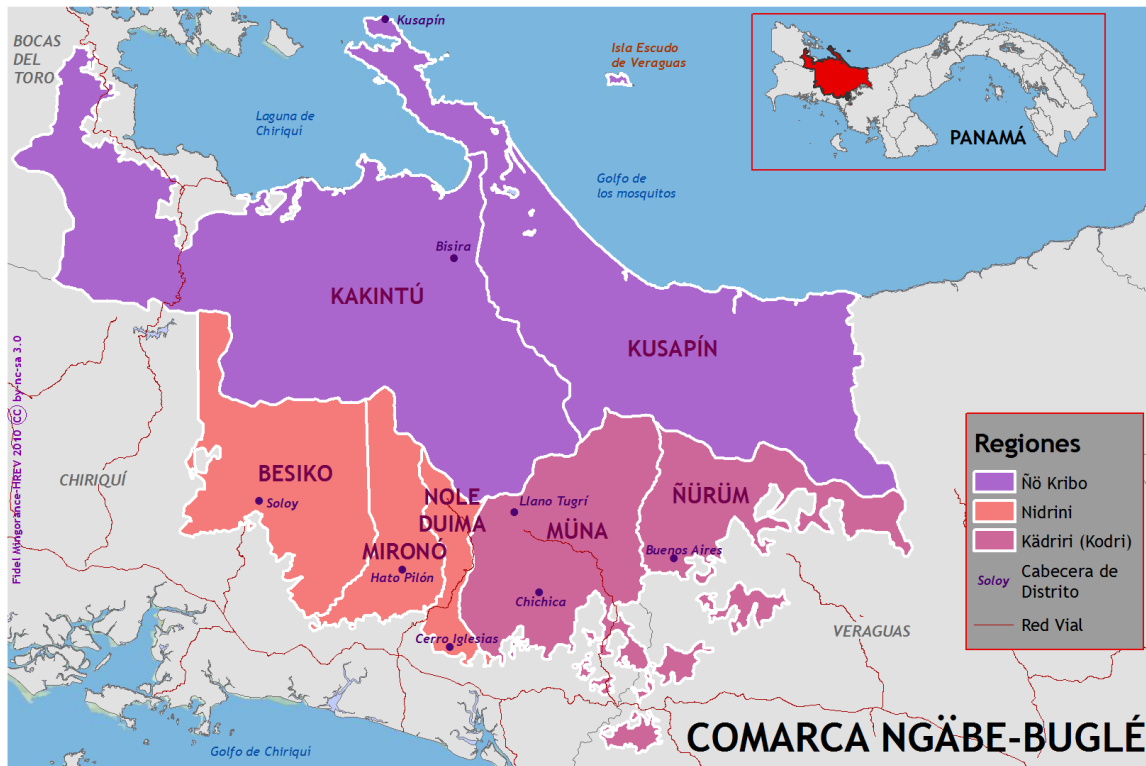
Key informant 2.

Urraca Ortega - Professor at Universidad Autónoma de Chiriquí (UNACHI)

Key informant 3.

Ricardo Miranda – Coordinator in Movimiento 10 de Abril

Appendix 4



<http://geoactivismo.org/>

Appendix 5

Political system in Panama

