Nemboro. The Power of Fictions

How Invented Ritual Artifacts Enter Archives, Markets, and Memory

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I. The Gaze of the *Nemboro* Woven Masks

Hanging on a wall that they completely covered, three hundred faces woven from plant fibers watched me with their three hundred pairs of empty eyes. They formed a landscape of hollow, tawny, cream, mahogany, and ashy gazes — their rough threads tracing curves and straight lines, their ancestral designs evoking animal profiles...

I'd just arrived in Panama City (Panama), and one of my first strolls had taken me straight to the Old Town: a gridded colonial peninsula overlooking a bay that stretched toward the Pacific, nestled among islands and mangroves, within the *tristes tropiques* that Lévi-Strauss so well described in his renowned travel diary.

And in that corner of a small, humid, and intense city —hotter than the fifth pot of hell, as we say in Spanish— I found a curious place: a kind of store-gallery tucked along a narrow street. A street strung with colorful hats, suspended several meters above the ground by ropes stretching from sidewalk to sidewalk.

There, in that gallery, *nemboro* were sold. *Nemboro*: the by-now-famous "masks" made by the women of the Embera Indigenous people of Panama's Darién rainforest, woven from the fibers of the *chunga* palm, and always representing animals.

The gallery's owner told me that the Embera of Colombia made them too, as did their Wounaan neighbors, inhabitants of the Chocó department's lowlands. But I don't recall hearing about them during all my years living in Colombia. Here, however, the artisanal

creations of the Panamanian Embera seemed to be very well known — for their designs, their details, and, above all, their meanings.

Nemboro, I was informed, are not actual masks. They are not merely meant to disguise their wearers or conceal their identity. At least, they are not *only* that. Their original name —which, I was told, translates as "head" in the Embera language— offers a clue to their deeper function. By wearing them on their faces, those who don them not only obscure their features but assume the nature of the being the *nemboro* represents.

And they literally become something else.

Hence, a "mask" of an eagle is not just a disguise: it transforms the person wearing it into that bird. And it does so to protect the life of the one behind the mask. Apparently, *nemboro* were originally used only by the *jaibana* —the "shamans" of the Embera people— during their healing ceremonies. Armed with sacred wooden staffs and entranced by hallucinogenic herbs, those healers battled against the evil spirits that dared to afflict the bodies and souls of their communities. And during those long rituals, they would place one or many *nemboro* "heads" over their faces. Transformed into something else —or into many consecutive beings— the *jaibana* were able to mislead and confuse their adversaries… and continue the fight.

Once their mission was accomplished, the *nemboro* used in those healing ceremonies were burned. Inevitably. No one wanted the defeated spirits, in a fit of vengeful rage, to seek out and find those false faces that had humiliated them.

Moreover, these objects were reportedly imbued with a particular energy after the ritual — an energy no one wished to harbor in their home. It would be like someone in our Western culture deciding to save the flowers used at a wake or funeral and display them in a vase as a centerpiece. Most would agree that such flowers should be discarded, as they carry a symbolic charge few would welcome in their daily lives.

Interestingly, *nemboro* are nowadays among the most coveted artisanal products in Panama, alongside the *mola* textiles made by the women of the Gunadule Indigenous people from the San Blas archipelago, on the eastern Caribbean coast.

It is within this commercial context that I had my first encounter with the Embera "masks" — there, in the Old Town of Panama City, on a January Sunday, taking refuge inside a shop to escape a noonday sun that scorched everything in its path.

II. A Mask is a Document

At the gallery, the "masks" were sold in what I supposed to be their normal sizes —large enough to cover a human face, or even larger— as well as in medium and smaller versions. Aside from a couple of long strips that serve as support structures, made either from vegetal materials (generally *naguala* palm, *Carludovica palmata*) or wire, the entire piece is meticulously woven from short, stiff threads using a variety of patterns. Those fibers were extracted from the youngest leaves of a palm known locally as *chunga*, *macora*, or *guérregue* (*Astrocaryum standleyanum*), found from southern Costa Rica to northwestern Ecuador, and traditionally used for baskets and household objects.

I was told that those producing these pieces in the Embera communities of Panama — mostly located in the Comarca Embera-Wounaan, in the Darién region near the Colombian border— were women. They had seemingly managed to preserve and recover traditional structures, techniques, and patterns, even continuing the ancient processes of dyeing fibers with natural pigments. However, those artisans had also innovated — incorporating vivid aniline dyes into their work, as well as unusual cutting, weaving, and braiding patterns that updated the "masks" of earlier times.

Nemboro were no longer used in the rituals of the *jaibana*, who could be either men or women. For some time, those characters had seen their role diminished within Indigenous societies, where influences such as evangelical Christianity had a deep

impact. As a result, since the "masks" were no longer widely used in healing ceremonies, they could be sold without concern. Apparently, there were no taboos prohibiting their trade — and, more importantly, no maleficent beings would come seeking revenge for the false faces that once defied them. In fact, as I stood there again, in Panama's Old Town, confronted by dry gazes, beaks, open mouths, and curved or angular silhouettes, I sensed no "bad energy" at all.

But they did carry meanings, knowledge, and memory. That, I could feel.

I felt an entire universe hanging on that wall in front of me. It held the worldview of a people — the knowledge of generations of artisans and *jaibana* who collaborated to devise the most effective ways to ward off dark souls by using the resources provided by the forest. Crests, fangs, and more and more empty eyes watched me from the depths of time.

While standing right there, I thought that those *nemboro* might be considered authentic documents — vessels for transmitting specific kinds of information. That is, if we adopt the broader concept of "document" now common in museums and in contemporary currents of information science.

Those were not just crafted objects — they were information items that demanded to be read through the lens of document theory. As Suzanne Briet famously wrote, a document is any physical or symbolic sign, preserved or recorded, intended to represent, to reconstruct, or to demonstrate a physical or conceptual phenomenon. The "masks" spoke in threads and textures, not ink. But they still spoke.

And they talked about specific materials (fibers, frames, dyes, ornaments), about the strategies used to gather and apply them, and about the local ecologies and biologies they were drawn from; about construction techniques, with their many variations across time and territory; about the spiritual meanings of colors and shapes, and the symbolism

embedded in their iconographies; about the figures they represented — and about the many healings they once witnessed, successful or not, which were in essence battles against forces of darkness. Ultimately, each mask represented the convergence of all those elements: a node, or a knot, in the intricate weaving of Embera traditional knowledge and memory.

Those *nemboro* spoke of territories and people, and of the benign and malignant spiritual entities that inhabited their world. And they did so solely through their silhouettes, volumes, textures, and shades. Those features, incidentally, rendered them aesthetically striking — and thus, materially valuable.

And, therefore, very marketable.

(Documents —especially Indigenous or semi-commodified ones— exist within power structures. Their legibility, circulation, and value are shaped by the systems that catalog, sell, or display them — systems that often privilege aesthetics over provenance, and visibility over context.)

On my second visit to the gallery, I decided to buy one of the smallest "masks" among those on display. The larger ones felt too imposing. I preferred one that didn't invade my space but kept me company. One that might allow me to linger on its details: the repetitive interweaving of fibers forming a pattern, the color that deepened here and faded there...

And one that might tell me a story. Its story.

Its potential story, for example: what might have happened if it had once been worn by a *jaibana* in some corner of the ancient Darién forest, to fend off the nauseating claws of a mythical beast, or the dark influences of a particular shadow.

But also its real story. The story of the many women who harvested the *chunga* leaves, painstakingly extracted the fibers, dyed them, skillfully wove them, and imagined this or that form, detail, or structure... Or the story of those who walked for kilometers to sell their creations, striving to earn a few coins to survive — or those forced to undersell their work, or deceived by unscrupulous intermediaries... Stories of resilience and exploitation, of shifting identities, and of loss and oblivion.

I opted for one without bright aniline colors — one displaying dark brown, cream, and beige tones. It was shaped like a feline. Or was it? I was not entirely sure; it might be a deer. As soon as I held it in my hands, I instinctively began to classify it. After all, wasn't it a document? And wasn't I a librarian?

And I realized how unaccustomed we were in my profession to classifying anything beyond paper-based materials — and how many possibilities opened up as I contemplated this knowledge-turned-"mask," held timidly between my fingers.

That moment —mask in hand, librarian's gaze awakened— was my first rupture. I saw how classification could stretch far beyond paper, how every thread and color could become metadata. But I also sensed that to treat these objects as documents meant asking what kinds of worlds our descriptions bring into being. That question would open a door into the seductive, and sometimes dangerous, realm of metadata fictions.

III. Metadata Fictions

I pondered how that piece, that *nemboro*, encapsulated within its fibers an entire grammar and symbolic semantics: a vocabulary crafted from hand-dyed plant materials, and a layered historical narrative. A narrative that was decidedly nonlinear — more like three-dimensional literature, a visual language of threads whose origins were shrouded in the mists of time.

I reflected on how many components of that "mask"-document could be understood as metadata: encoded information about specific aspects of Embera culture — whether historical, social, religious, or artistic. Which thesaurus or ontology could encompass them? What relationships could be established between such metadata? What kind of indexing structure could we imagine? Would those elements fit within traditional, "Western" thesauri or ontologies? And if not, how would they converse with them? As Olson and Furner have shown, metadata are ontological claims. They don't just describe the world; they propose what kind of world exists.

(False or fictional metadata still shape reality — sometimes more powerfully than accurate ones.)

What I was tracing was less a catalog and more an ontology: a set of possible worlds hidden in the threads of a single mask.

Some of that metadata, I believed, might have carried a ritual nature — defining and organizing ceremonial spaces and processes. Each color or pattern might have served as a distinct descriptor, guiding the unfolding of particular events or rites. And I wondered: what would a classification system centered on ritual meaning look like? Wouldn't it show that the "mask" was a living document — one that functioned as a reference for a constellation of cultural and socio-economic practices?

I understood that, like any manuscript in my collection —with its temporal layers of revisions and marginal notes—, that document could have revealed level upon level of cultural influences and adaptations over the centuries. After all, the Embera people were shaped by powerful external forces: European conquerors, other Indigenous societies across Latin America, and, notably, enslaved African groups who sought refuge in their ancestral forests. Would I be able to construct a chronology using the *nemboro* itself, tracing events inscribed or translated into its physical structure, as I might have done with a book?

I supposed I could view that object as a performative document — one whose true essence might only be grasped within a ceremonial context. How would it interact, in that setting, with its surroundings, with people, with its wearer? Would it have its own voice? Would its features shift? Wouldn't a document fluctuate with its environment, depending on its readers or its users? Wouldn't its voice change?

In that sense, I believed that the "mask" was a multisensory document. Unlike traditional ones, which are usually uni- or bidimensional, that one engaged multiple senses. How would I classify its tactile qualities, so inherently subjective? Or its olfactory presence? Could that particular dry aroma be described using standardized international descriptors? Did its colors align with Pantone charts? And more importantly — was such standardization even necessary? Or useful?

What if I built a vocabulary of textures? A tactile thesaurus: rough, braided, fibrous, cool to the touch. What if smells became metadata — vegetal, earthy, pungent, smoky? What if the document's weight, its balance, or even the sound it made when tapped could be indexed — not because it mattered to everyone, but because it might matter to someone, somewhere, within a particular epistemology?

I believed that when cataloging, classifying, or indexing the "mask," the process should be collective, multicultural, and multilingual — involving the community to whom the piece belonged. A communal cataloging process might yield outcomes that were richer, more intricate, more captivating — and fundamentally different. These would be community-driven technical practices that examined a document that was still alive.

I imagined that in such an analytical process, intergenerational annotations could emerge. Perhaps older generations might wish to inscribe, in the "margins" of that document-object, commentaries about its nature, its original use, its transformations, and its journeys... How would we document those cultural annotations? And three-dimensional ones? How would we make visible those marginalia that, under ordinary

circumstances, would remain purely oral? How would we gather such "marginal notes" into a singular narrative — one that reflected, among other things, the ruptured or silenced dialogue between different eras and age groups?

And if I accepted that any document could be translated, how might I approach this *nemboro* as an act of cultural translation into new meanings, or new contexts? How would the ancient and the contemporary circumstances surrounding the "mask" shape its singular narrative?

Could the cultural connections embedded in that mask —ultimately a node within a larger network of meanings— be extracted and rendered through data visualization? Could digital and ethnographic storytelling unfold across different media, narrating the journey of the *nemboro* from its moment of creation to the instant I hang it on my wall? And could that storytelling include a critical dimension — one that examines why the "mask" traveled from Darién to my home, when it was never meant to take such a path?

Would it be possible to go a step further? To design a dynamic, interactive map of cultural constellations, where the relationships encoded in the "mask" formed clusters of interwoven narratives? A map that integrated real-time data to reflect contemporary interactions, and remained faithful to the cultural commitments of the document-object?

Could I imagine that network of relationships as a system of quantum-linked particles — such that when one shifted, even slightly, all the others changed too? Could we simulate, using the metadata derived from the *nemboro*, an ecosystem in which cultural and documentary elements behaved as living organisms — interacting, evolving, migrating? Where would they go? How far could they reach?

And how far would I —the librarian— go, if I kept asking these kinds of questions?

These questions were exhilarating. They opened vast possibilities for thinking about metadata differently — as tactile, olfactory, ritual, communal. But they also carried a risk. Because if metadata are ontological claims, what happens when those claims are built on invention? The answer would come when I began searching for evidence of the *nemboro* in ethnographies and archives — and found only silence.

IV. The Fiction and the Void

I looked for the word *nemboro* in Embera dictionaries, linguistic corpora, and ethnographic records. I consulted old anthropological sources on the Embera and Wounaan: Nordenskjöld, Wassen, Reichel-Dolmatoff… I traced references to Chocoan material culture, ritual implements, and shamanic paraphernalia — from Stout's chapter in the *Handbook of South American Indians* to the foundational work of the Panamanian Reina Torres de Araúz. I combed through handicraft inventories and regional reports up to 2010.

And I found nothing.

Nothing. No mention of *nemboro*, or of "masks" whatsoever. No references to ceremonial face coverings. No documentation of ritual burning of palm-fiber heads. No visual record. No ontological precedent. The closest linguistic trace to the entire story might have been the expression *nem(e) boro* — "animal's head," according to Holmer's dictionary.

All the rest was silence — and not the sacred kind, but the archival kind. The kind born not of erasure, but of invention.

Then, slowly, another kind of evidence surfaced. Design blogs. Tourism brochures. Ethical décor boutiques.

On the website of *Ethic & Tropic* —an artisan platform aimed at "conscious consumers"— the word *nemboro* appeared prominently. I dug deeper. And in *Madame Figaro*, a French lifestyle magazine, I found a lead: a 2022 article celebrating the "extraordinary adventure" of these so-called shamanic masks, allegedly "revived" by a French interior designer for high-end home décor.

There it was. The full story — or the full fiction. A reinvention of traditional Indigenous basketry techniques, first adapted in the 1960s and 70s for the souvenir market, rebranded in the 80s and 90s for export, and now transformed again for global ethical consumption.

The narrative was beautiful, seductive. It spoke of spirits guiding a European woman into the Darién, of ancestral rituals, of techniques on the verge of disappearance now "saved" through design markets. It might even be that some Embera artisans echoed those ritual claims when speaking with outsiders — not as deception, but as a way to meet demand, to supply the ritual authenticity that buyers were already expecting. Yet whether invented in Europe, offered in the Darién, or co-constructed between them, what mattered was the desire that drove the story forward.

And that desire was not grounded in Embera ceremonial life. It was not attested in linguistic or ethnographic memory. Not claimed, as far as I could tell, by any *jaibana*.

So what, then, was hanging from the wall of my apartment, looking at me with its empty eyes? Who authored it — and who profited from it?

Was this part of an internal process, as described by Theodossopoulos, in which Indigenous groups in the Tropics rearticulate identity under the pressures of cultural tourism? Was it a myth of resilience? A tactical fiction? A mirror held up to the expectations of outsiders?

Or was it simply another act of symbolic dispossession — another archive built on absence?

And more importantly: what did it mean when librarians, archivists, and researchers catalogued such objects without questioning their provenance — as I did? What were we preserving? What were we legitimizing? What kind of knowledge system were we extending, when we "listened" to a document scripted by someone else's desire?

(In that moment, I realized that librarianship is not only a descriptive apparatus — it is a desiring machine as well. It classifies not only what exists, but what it hopes exists. And I remembered that classification and documentation systems are never neutral. They easily absorb invented stories when shaped by aesthetic desire, market logic, or colonial expectations.)

Even if many of my reflections on the "masks" —semantic, classificatory, conceptual— remained valid in the abstract —and even more interesting and challenging regarding this "invention"—, mine was not a minor misstep. For me, it felt like an epistemic rupture. A fracture in the ethical scaffold of documentation.

And from there, there was no neutral position.

That silence, and the seductive fictions that filled it, forced me to confront my own profession. What happens when libraries and archives absorb inventions as if they were truths? What kind of systems are we sustaining when we classify desires rather than realities? These questions led me into a deeper reckoning — with librarianship itself.

V. The Library That Watches Back

Eventually, I did not hang a ritual object on my wall.

I hang a beautiful fiction. One made of vegetal fibers and colors, yes — but also of aspirational mythology, symbolic invention, and curated exoticism. Still, even as fiction, it carried metadata. And metadata, regardless of truth-value, have power: to circulate, to legitimize, to canonize.

What I welcomed into my home was not a *nemboro* rooted in Embera ritual use, but a document fabricated to fulfill the expectations of a market seeking aestheticized authenticity. A narrative tailored for consumers —often Western, often well-meaning— who yearn for "ceremonial objects" with just enough mystique to feel meaningful, and just enough silence to avoid resistance.

This had implications far beyond my wall. As a librarian and memory worker, I was trained to treat documents —even unconventional ones— as vehicles of knowledge. But what happened when the metadata were invented, at least partially? When provenance was projection, at least partially? When "tradition" was constructed, at least partially, precisely to be legible within colonial structures of value?

And how "partial" were all those "partially"?

(Rupture, contradiction, absence, and uncertainty are not failures of documentation — they are data. And librarians, archivists, and researchers have ethical responsibility not only to describe, but to interrogate.)

What I had catalogued and analyzed was not just an object, but a projection of desire — the consumer's, the collector's, the librarian's— wrapped in a descriptive structure that masked its invented nature. And yet, had I worked in a museum or library collection, my mistaken description might have passed into official metadata, reinforcing a fiction with the legitimizing force of classification.

(As a matter of fact, a number of Panamanian official webpages are quoting the nemboro *as authentic ritual artifacts, based on contents create by commercial firms online. Unverified information expands quickly and unchecked.)*

Mine wouldn't have been a simple error: it could have been a case study in cataloging ethics, where epistemic responsibility demanded more than neutral description — it required scrutiny, positionality, and accountability.

This is why critical cataloging efforts —especially in Indigenous contexts— call for community-led, multilingual metadata infrastructures. It's not enough to correct the record. We must change the epistemic terms of recording. Decolonial LIS scholarship has shown how traditional cataloging embeds colonial imaginaries —often unintentionally— through vocabulary, authority control, and descriptive priorities. What we describe is shaped by what we expect to see.

What I encountered was not an isolated event. It was a systemic possibility: the ease with which mythographic storytelling —cloaked in the language of heritage, powered by the engines of business— might enter collections, databases, exhibitions, and archives. Not necessarily through malice, but through enchantment. And through our eagerness to believe that beauty means belonging. That ritual means legitimacy. That Indigenous means always-already sacred.

And that librarianship, if neutral enough, would not participate in any of it.

This experience did not invalidate the object I bought — or my reflections around it. It reframed them. It forced a shift in gaze — from the item to the infrastructure. To the circuits of desire, commodification, and symbolic violence that brought a fictional "mask" from Darién into my hands, wrapped in a story designed to resist scrutiny.

This rupture was not incidental — eventually, it became a method. A process of ethical unlearning that demanded I narrated from the fracture, not above it.

It also demanded sharper questions. Not just how do we catalog objects like this one, but how do we critically catalog cultural artifacts designed for external consumption? How do we surface invention, rupture, or absence as metadata themselves? What does ethical documentation look like when the object resists being described truthfully — or when its truth lies precisely in its artifice?

And also: how much of the current Embera way of life is encoded in this artifact? What kind of real stories —about Indigenous survival, identity, and struggle in the Darién— are trapped inside its fibers?

This is not a call to doubt everything we see. But it is a call to interrogate everything we think we know — especially when that knowledge serves our own comfort.

To document is to choose. To classify is to enshrine. And to describe is to intervene.

VI. Even Fictions Have Power

The fiction was not real — but the gaze was.

It was mine: curious, attentive, trained to decode documents, and seduced by the possibility of holding something ancient, charged, and meaningful. That gaze built a scaffold of interpretation around a palm-fiber object. And that scaffold held — until it didn't.

But the gaze did not disappear. It changed.

It now knows to pause before it classifies. To ask about authorship before assigning authority. To recognize the power of metadata not only to describe, but to invent — and to erase.

The librarian, too, remains. Still committed to the ethics of description, still believing that documents can teach. But now committed, above all, to asking: Whose story is this? And who has the right to tell it?

The mask still hangs on my wall. It is not a ritual artifact. But it is still a document. One that now holds multiple layers of interpretation, interruption, conflict, interest, myth, exoticism, and rupture.

This was never just a story about a mask. It is a case in metadata epistemology — of how librarianship may participate in the construction of cultural meaning, of how we may be complicit in the ontologies we describe, and of what it might mean to build descriptive systems that can hold contradiction, rupture, and doubt. It is the story of what we make visible —and what we make true— when we choose to describe.

This is the gaze that remains: wounded, sharpened, accountable.

Post-script

Before publishing this piece, I shared it with a colleague who has worked closely with Embera communities for over three decades. She confirmed what my own research had begun to suggest: "Yep, the masks were a suggestion by some development consultants so that Embera could diversify from plates (which they excelled at, while Wounaan excel at the fine baskets). I would say that was in 2005-2010, but I am not entirely sure of the year."

Her memory does not claim archival certainty — but it aligns with the broader patterns described in this series, where external imaginaries and market pressures shape Indigenous production. The masks, in other words, were not the continuation of a ritual tradition but a diversification strategy, born at the intersection of community needs and outsider expectations.

I also confirmed that the "masks" are simply an application of techniques the Embera had long used in basketry. The European company that later branded them as "unique" ritual items offers products easily found on the streets of Panama City for a fraction of the price — something I discovered while assembling my own personal collection (depicted in the images accompanying these posts) and, in the process, supporting several Embera artisan women directly.

It seems likely that this same company amplified, and perhaps codified, the ritual mythology surrounding the *nemboro* — crafting a fiction to boost their market appeal. Yet whether that fiction originated in development initiatives, in strategic local storytelling, or in European marketing, what matters is how quickly it took on the weight of truth.

This text has traced a path from enchantment to rupture, from object to ontology. What remains is a practice of librarianship that can hold uncertainty as carefully as it holds fact — one that recognizes that even fictions have ontology and metadata power.