Indigenous agency through visual narratives in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia

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Abstract

This article focuses on the Wiwa community in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia. This community has been reviving its traditional music as part of an effort to reconstruct its social network. Moreover, its members have recently embraced visual arts as a versatile medium in the context of the armed conflict. The local community of Siminke has started using visual tools not only to explicitly address their social and political issues on a regional level, but also to develop a new cultural space for self-expression and social (re)construction. Video and photography are being used here to preserve a cultural knowledge traditionally transmitted from generation to generation, a process disrupted by the armed conflict in the region. Methodology encompasses communicative methods such as interviews, visual analysis and photo-elicitation in order to understand and highlight the community’s internal perspective on the use of visual arts to reinforce their agency in pursuit of political goals.

Keywords

Cultural agency, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, music, visual arts, ethnic identities

Introduction

Figure 1, a photo taken on a July morning in 2017, shows Jacinto Conchangüí Sauna, one of the grandsons of mamo Eusebio, an elder musician and the spiritual leader of Siminke, a village inhabited by the indigenous group called the Wiwa. Every day Jacinto works his crops of vegetables: avocados, plantains, manioc roots, agave and coca plants. On that day he wanted to show me the path towards Ranchería River, the one closest to Siminke, where I was staying at that time. As always, I took my camera with me, as well as my bathing clothes and a tangerine. On our way to the river we passed through various landscapes, including some of the places where Jacinto grows his crops. We followed a dirt path leading up a small mountain from where one can view the whole village. Afterwards, on our descent, we found numerous stones of different sizes as we started to hear the sound of the river and could smell its fresh water. The environment of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta region, which borders on the Caribbean coast of Colombia, is experienced as a complete palette of colours, sounds, and fragrances.

Besides farming his crops, Jacinto is also a musician. In fact, Wiwa culture reserves a central place for music as a traditional source of knowledge, and as such it is a vital part of the community’s cultural and social life. The communal practice of music is a concrete part of the fulfilment of precepts established by the sewá, their ‘Law of Origin’, and more generally involves and links all aspects of Wiwa life, including spiritual conceptions regarding their territory. Nature and music are not just very important for Jacinto in his daily life, but for him they are logically...
connected too. As soon as he saw me taking pictures of plants and other elements of the scenery around the river, he asked me if he could use it too, and so another story began. My camera was the object that triggered Jacinto to speak about his perspective on Siminke, especially in relation with the surrounding nature, and more broadly about his views on the village’s cultural life.

In the present article I will present part of my current research dealing with the indigenous communities in Colombia, in the context of sharing Jacinto’s story. The research studies the ways in which they exercise forms of cultural agency, or more precisely the efforts of (indigenous) individuals to overcome external challenges and political adversity through cultural practices (Sommer, 2005: 34). The Wiwa community in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta has entered a process of reviving their traditional music from the desire to strengthen community bonds and has recently embraced audio-visual tools and started to integrate them into several of their political and social processes. Visual narratives are becoming an important part of these processes as means of memory preservation and cultural revival or revitalisation.
First of all, I will introduce the methodology guiding my research. It is mainly taken from the field of anthropological ethnography, combined with tools common in cultural studies, notably those concerning audio-visual practices. It will be followed by a contextualising discussion of the ways in which audio-visual tools have been adopted by various indigenous communities in Latin America. During the last decades such tools have become central to the creation of a space for developing new strategies to reinforce communities and achieve social and political goals relating to the national contexts. What follows is the main part of the article, which I divided into three sections, titled ‘green’, ‘white’ and ‘black’, inspired by the colours on the photo shown in figure 1. In these sections I will go into more detail regarding the perspective of Jacinto and his community on nature and culture, and in particular on the significance they attach to audio-visual tools. The section ‘Green’ will focus mainly on environment, providing a description and analysis of the point of view of Jacinto and his community with regard to nature and its meaning, as he shared it in the context of a photo-elicitation exercise. The following section, ‘White’, considers the meanings at the intersection of nature, territory and music, in an effort to shed light on the motives of the elders to introduce visual tools into this process. In the final section, ‘Black’, I provide an analysis of the combination of nature, cultural memory and heritage, by describing some of the visual materials the community has produced thus far, that have strengthened their resolve to continue the ongoing cultural process of preservation.

Methodology
My personal perspective is that the research process ideally involves a relationship of sharing with the communities, in order to contextualise and situate all reflections. It was thus carried out on the basis of constant reflexivity, a concept I will explain below, with regard to the information exchanged. In other words, I consider my role to be that of a mediator, sharing voices and experiences. This section means to clarify this perspective and the methods that support it.

Because indigenous communities tend to find themselves in a vulnerable position, any attempt at exchanging and sharing with them must be built upon a relationship of mutual trust. A vital aspect of the research, therefore, is the practice of ‘reflexivity’ or the building of reciprocal relationships with regard to communication and the exchange of perspectives. The process of working and becoming familiar with the Wiwa people over the course of about eight years made this research possible. My approach and practical methods are supported by and strive to establish a permanent dialogue with the communities, to form a long-term collaborative effort. I have relied primarily on three ethnographic methods, based on the approach suggested by Rosana Guber (2001). The aim is to form a consistent representation of the attitudes to which members of a given social group give expression, interpreting in a manner that involves the deconstruction of presuppositions in favour of reflexivity. The methods applied include ‘participant observation’, the taking of field notes and the open interview. Moreover, I have drawn on other methodologies to aid in understanding the attitudes of the Wiwa in Siminke with regard to the engagement of their current issues, in particular through visual media. The use of photo-elicitation and visual analysis help to bring out how a person or community interprets, describes and assigns meaning to specific situations, spaces and contexts on the basis of their own visual observation. Finally, in my research I consider some visual documentaries made by the Wiwa community since 2012, in order to identify – following Grady’s (2008) proposal – historical patterns, cultural meanings and potentially important issues as they emerge in the material.

Regarding the methodology of photo-elicitation, or visual autobiography, Lombard (2013) has characterised it as an exercise in which images give rise to discourses constructed by communities based on their perception of space and place. At the same time, the visual autobiography allows the researcher a degree of access to the daily life of the people wherever verbal communication fails to convey the experience. Simply put, photo-elicitation helps us get
a grasp on social constructs and meanings that people assign to various aspects of their life, as it may enrich the social interaction between researcher and community by means of a more subjective experience. Researchers have thus used photo-elicitation to highlight the needs and assets of communities, provoke critical dialogue about their issues and to support social change by communicating issues to both communities and policy makers (Torre & Murphy, 2015: 6).

Audio-visual Tools and Indigenous Communities in Latin America
The appropriation of audio-visual tools by indigenous communities is an ongoing and widespread process. During the last three decades various local communities from Latin America have been exploring the uses of visual arts such as photography and video as tools that allow them essentially to communicate, exchange and highlight their social reality and issues, simultaneously challenging their structural conditions. Although the practice of making documentary and fiction films about indigenous life is well known from countries like Bolivia, Mexico and Ecuador, the stories of Jacinto and his community represent its development in Colombia.

We may consider audio-visual devices as cultural resources, which have been taken up especially by the younger generations of Wiwa to express their thoughts on various issues they have had to deal with during the previous decades, such as (restricted) access to their lands, struggle for human rights and more generally the various consequences of the conflict and more recent political policies. Video can be understood as part of a strategy employed by Wiwa communities to resist adverse political policies, discourses and representations. Thus, by highlighting their own practices, thoughts and knowledge, with special focus on their relationship with nature in daily life, they tell their own stories through image, and seek self-representation.

The depiction of Amerindian people in images, photographs and films has been historically rooted in colonial and capitalist power relations. This has converged in the construction of stereotypes often based on the idea that native peoples represent a premodern age and an ‘otherness’ regularly deemed inferior to whiteness. In this context various film productions have been supported by the North American Industry and meeting its technical standards, labelled ‘ethnographic cinema’, that reproduced the type of the exotic Indian or barbaric other for Western audiences (Schiwy, 2009: 2). However, as Schiwy points out, the same idea of exoticism in image was used by indigenous peoples of Bolivia to garner attention for issues they faced relating to territorial interventions by mining companies and megaprojects undertaken by various actors in the region (Schiwy, 2009: 5).

Thus, we can see how indigenous communities, as they started to be recognised as part of the nations in the late eighties, attempted to turn over such hegemonic imaginaries and forms of discrimination by engaging in a revaluation of their practices and knowledge, even appropriating the stereotypical images that had set them apart (Schiwy, 2003: 118). Among a variety of political claims, certain social groups with an ethnic identity developed an interest to re-signify the homogeneous imaginaries by which they had been represented on different levels, supported by technological developments, such as – in the case of Bolivia – the Centro de Formación y Realización cinematográfica (CEFREC), and the Coordinadora Audiovisual Indígena de Bolivia (CAIB) (Schiwy, 2009: 50). In other Latin American countries, a similar process took place, connecting visual productions to political mobilisation of communities confronting or resisting neoliberal politics. In Mexico, the Zapotec communities in Oaxaca started their own communication organisation with the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI), named Ojo del Agua comunicación. Similar organisations emerged in other regions such as Michoacán and Yucatán. In Ecuador, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) started to develop means to connect a variety of different communities from the Andes to the Amazonian region since 1994. In Brazil, an initiative called Video de las Aldeias (Video in the Villages) was founded in the nineties around Waiapi Indians, and in the region of Cariri, the Yawalapiti community
developed visual productions funded by former cultural policies, such as Cultura Viva Comunitaria (Turino, 2011:31).

The use of photography and video as technological devices to enhance indigenous political and social initiatives can be approached in various ways, a few of which I will discuss. Firstly, as Schiwy (2009) points out with regard to the documentary La otra Mirada ('The other Gaze') (1999), CEFREC has used video in Bolivia to expose the ways in which communities are structurally challenged by post-neoliberal politics, for example in the form of exploitation of natural resources in their territories. Secondly, video is used to restore indigenous modes of knowing that had been suppressed by the colonial system, meaning the revitalisation of their own practices, languages, economic systems and ethnic identities (Schiwy, 2009: 39, 54). In that regard, the uses of technology go beyond concrete demands related to lands, rights and the re-distribution of resources, seeking also to revive the traditional epistemics of communities. Thirdly, video is used to re-signify racial categories such as 'Indian' within the racial contract, along with other representations used to marginalise their communities. In the production processes of documentaries such as La otra Mirada, communities have a chance to discover one another culturally and find shared political goals (Schiwy, 2009: 39, 60). One way in which they aim to subvert the colonial discourse is by promoting the replacement of the general category ‘indigenous’ for more precise designations, such as Aymara, Quechua or Guaraní (Schiwy, 2009: 39, 54).

According to Himpele (2008), the discourse representing a culture is crucial to a movement’s self-determination. Thus, video serves as a cultural medium to serve specific cultural goals and practices (Himpele, 2008:10). In that sense, from a broader perspective, documentaries such as La otra Mirada in Bolivia, help to re-signify the imaginaries and stereotypes that make up what Himpele (2008) and other authors have called indigenismo or ‘indigenism’. The latter concept refers to a paternalistic social construction by non-indigenous as well as mestizo people that represent the communities as exotic, folkloric and/or stuck in the past. These representations tend to control and instrumentalise the indigenous communities to serve political programs, such as presenting them as a part of mestizo nationalism (Himpele, 2008: 189, 191). In light of the above, Schiwy (2009) suggests the need of ‘Indianising’ visuals, meaning the communities’ appropriation of technological resources, allowing them to express their own narratives of identity, and their own symbolic and social orders (Schiwy, 2009: 48). Himpele (2008) also proposes to ‘indigenise’ popular media, allowing for the creation of video and narratives that stimulate community projects and may simultaneously replace the hegemonic representations mentioned above (Himpele, 2008: 199-200). In that way, popular media may become resources that represent the culture, consciousness and memories that define the everyday life and the experience of the communities.

In Colombia, Aguilera & Polanco (2011), based on the experience of the Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca (CRIC) communication program, propose the notion of imagen-política, or ‘political-image’, to designate the appropriation of media by communities. They use the concept to refer to the ways in which communities or organisations use audio-visual tools to support social efforts to improve local communication, striving for a broader participation and empowerment. Video is thus used to depict what the authors call the experiencia vital, or ‘vital experience’, of everyday life of the communities, as the latter develop workshops around video to stimulate exchange of thoughts, feelings and ideas among themselves. Additionally, as Schiwy (2009) points out, a CRIC film like La huerta de los Nasa (‘The Nasa Garden’, 1994) illustrates the bonds that communities feel with their natural environment and the present-day indigenous struggle with mining projects and environmental disasters (Schiwy, 2009: 150). In conclusion, considering the CRIC experience in Colombia, video has a double-function. On the one hand, technology is used as a space to perform identities and practices, on the other, as a means to highlight specific epistemic traditions in contrast to the universal and objective view characteristic of colonial
discourse (Schiwy, 2009: 52). Likewise, the communities in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, such as the Wiwa, among whom filmmaking and training in other visual arts are still at an early stage, are interested in developing these tools further and produce films inside the community based on its own experiences and narratives.

Contrary to Bolivia or Mexico, Colombia's indigenous population forms a minority, about 2% of the total population (Hernández, 2004: 52). Indigenous movements have been organising themselves through social networks since the 1970’s. Firstly, they claimed an equal redistribution of lands that had been expropriated by landlords. Secondly, they demanded the protection of their human rights in the context of increasing violence by armed actors threatening their control over their own lands, especially in the Cauca region in the south of Colombia. It was in this context that in 1971 the CRIC was founded. The Nasa community was at the heart of this movement, seeking to find acknowledgement of their right to their lands by highlighting their existence, their specific language and cultural practices that were being threatened by violent interventions in the region. At present, after a long process of resistance by communities, at times even armed, CRIC is the most visible and influential indigenous movement in Colombia. At the same time, however, the Cauca region still suffers some of the worst consequences of the conflict due to its geopolitical importance. For that reason, since 1997 CRIC started to produce videos with educational ends, aiming to make visible and revitalise local cultural practices and languages (Schiwy, 2009: 50). Furthermore, after the creation of the Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte del Cauca (ACIN) as a branch of CRIC in the northern part of the region, they established a communication program called Tejido de comunicaciones para la verdad y la vida (‘Network of communication for truth and life’). This network served to gather and organise regionally produced audio-visual materials, in order to share them on their website and throughout their network, and also sought to provide an educational space for the local communities (Aguilera & Polanco, 2011: 67).

In comparison to the network established in the Cauca region, that of the communities in the Sierra Nevada is still relatively fragmented. This can be explained from the facts that populations are smaller and the social organisations were created later in the nineties, with a less active political involvement. As a result, other actors and institutions have become involved in the decision-making process, such as NGO’s and international cooperation organisations, but most of all until recently there was no strong integration between organisations and communities. This general reality undermined the development of the communities’ autonomy as well as efforts to reinforce themselves. Their situation got worse due to the armed conflict that displaced local populations, causing the loss of communal bonds such as language and cultural practices in the period between the eighties and nineties. Finally, in 1999 the Consejo Territorial de Cabildos (CTC) was founded, as a political space that aimed to integrate communities with the purpose of serving their needs, especially with regard to territorial organisation, and to promote the dialogue between different communities to align their priorities, such as securing autonomy, ‘food sovereignty’ and reviving endangered cultural practices (Ulloa, 2010: 169).

Starting in 2006, the CTC began to build alliances with other institutions, such as the Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (CINEP), in order to find support for their initiatives of conflict resolution, justice implementation and peacebuilding, according to the priorities of each community. In that context, the Wiwa people decided to prioritise the revival of their traditional music and learn more about media for communication. This way, as happened among the Zapotec in Mexico (Schiwy, 2009: 34), young members of the Wiwa community have taken advantage of audio-visual training and technologies provided by institutions to explore their possibilities, with the support of anthropologists and activist filmmakers. Projects of CINEP supporting the revitalisation of Wiwa music encouraged the communities to plan and project goals as a way of organisational reinforcement. To mention some notable achievements: firstly, the joining of social actors such as traditional leaders, bilingual teachers and the youth; secondly,
the circulation of knowledge associated with music in towns where it had been lost during the conflict; finally, the systematic collection of information in pedagogical booklets for schools, conserving and promoting knowledge about songs and dances and the use of traditional instruments (CINEP, 2009: 21). In the context of the latter effort, audio-visual tools were employed to register knowledge and memories of the elders about the history of their music.

As a result, in 2010 the Wiwa community created Zhimashai, which means ‘speaking’, to serve their desire to strengthen the communities by exchanging information through image, especially about their territorial conditions and issues (CINEP, 2014: 9). From this perspective, visual media are used as a complement to the educational environment, allowing the telling of stories about the community’s relationship with their territory and cultural practices (CINEP, 2014: 11). In the years after the conception of Zhimashai, the group of young people that started learning about audio-visual tools have been creating different materials, some of them I will discuss in the following paragraphs. However, these developments have been rather unstable due to a lack of commitment by local authorities to keep developing the communication programs, on the one hand, and changing priorities in the face of newly arising issues, on the other. Still, during my recent visits to the Wiwa community my personal experience was that the elders and teachers do still believe in the importance of video as a cultural project for the younger generations that might register and preserve cultural memories, especially with regard to music and the knowledge surrounding it. There have moreover been other visual initiatives by communities in the Sierra Nevada, such as the ‘Zhigoneshi’, a group established by some leaders from the Arhuaco community, anthropologists and international filmmakers (Morales, 2008: 28). This group has become better known internationally, because their productions are technically more elaborate, due to the fact that the Arhuaco community has historically had more intensive contact with institutions and external actors. Moreover, one could say that their visual narratives are addressed primarily to international audiences, as they present themselves as guardians of ‘the heart of the world’ (the Sierra Nevada) tapping into stereotypical frameworks and appropriating them.

As mentioned above, what happens among the Wiwa people in Colombia can be seen as part of processes of indigenous audio-visual creation across the whole of Latin America. Since the colonial period, indigenous communities in Latin America have faced various challenges to the survival of their cultural practices. Nowadays, they are finding audio-visual language as a means to register memories at the root of their cultural identity, as well as the realities that challenge the preservation of this knowledge. These processes are by no means divorced from power relations. They are coming to play a role in processes of decision-making and perhaps in the construction of new narratives (Triana, 2014: 81).

As previously mentioned, the rest of this article is divided into three interconnected paragraphs, based on the picture shown in figure 1 and its role in the photo-elicitation exercise with Jacinto. The first of these, titled ‘Green’, focuses on nature and the Wiwa community’s relationship to it as their traditional living environment. I will provide a geographical description of this territory and discuss the main issue the community faces at this moment, namely the consequences of the construction of the Dam of the Ranchería River. Apart from disrupting the natural environment, the dam also symbolises conflict on a cultural and political level, as I will discuss below.

**Green**

As previously said, the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta is a region in the north of Colombia, nearby the Caribbean coast. It is a geostrategic region due to its biodiversity, presenting a great variety of climates and tropical ecosystems – based in the sea (marine), coastal and mountain regions – packed within a relatively small area. These environments include coral reefs, mangroves, seagrasses, beaches, dry forests, tropical humid forests, moorlands and perpetual snow (Aja, 2007:
Moreover, the area has the unique characteristic of being the only snowy mountain system in the world that is so near to a coast. Because of its snowy peaks – which, on a side note, are increasingly melting these days due to climate change – and central position where three provinces meet, the Sierra Nevada is an important water provider for its surrounding region, with various rivers springing from its glacial lagoons. For these reasons, the area has always been geographically strategic and thus the centre of historical disputes between regional actors.

The mountains are also home to four indigenous populations, together approximately 64,500 people, some of them previously mentioned. The Arhuaco community has 26,000 members, the Kogui 16,000 and the Kankuamo 13,000. The Wiwa population has more than 11,500 members and inhabits the mid-low areas of the Sierra – between 1000 and 2500 metres above sea level – in what are currently the departments of La Guajira, Magdalena and Cesar. Its population is spread over two departments, Cesar and La Guajira, concentrated around the Barcino, Marakazo, Ranchería and Potrero rivers (CINEP, 2006). These communities have lived there since before the Spanish colonisation, retaining many of their own perspectives on (the surrounding) nature and the notion of territory, which are intertwined with their spiritual beliefs and codes of behaviour.

First of all, I want to describe Jacinto’s perspective on Siminke, to whom the nature and uses of natural resources within and surrounding the village are vital. As he was taking pictures he talked about the various kinds of plants in the forest, pointing them out with the camera. For instance, he spoke about the maguey (agave), or vii, a big palm that one can easily distinguish from the rest of the plants, used by the community to make the mochila, a popular local bag. Furthermore, the fibres of dokra or machata are used to build their houses by treating the material in a special way. Likewise, the plantain tree or shikula has different uses for the community, not only the fruit itself. When it blooms, the yellow flower is used as a remedy for headaches, by making it into a tea and bathing with it. Jacinto also took a picture of a cassava (also yuca or manioc) which is one of their primary food sources, grown also at home, and he described the process of harvesting and cooking it. No less important is the avocado plant or akushi – which was being harvested at that time – as a prolific vegetable part of their daily based diet. Finally, he showed me his picture of Ranchería River, which they call dokshi, whose source is close to Siminke. On the photograph in the upper right of figure 2, one can see that up there the water is still transparent, get a glimpse of its beautiful falls and the big stones scattered all around.

Returning to what Torre and Murphy (2015) suggest, photo-elicitation is used to illustrate the daily experiences of communities, such as the description of plants in and around their villages, but also the various issues they face. Here, we reach an important issue with regard to these ‘green’ resources, an issue that has affected the community’s quality of life both from an environmental and a cultural perspective. In continuation of the stories that Jacinto shared about the surrounding nature and especially about the river in the context of the photo-elicitation exercise, he pointed out the troubling situation around El Cercado (‘The Fence’), a hydroelectric dam built in the Ranchería River. It caused several problems for the communities, including damage to their living environment and public health due to stagnant waters (Bocarejo, 2011: 151). From a spiritual perspective, the region is demarcated by what the community calls the Zen Zare re’kumana or ‘black line’: an imagined line dividing darkness from the light of the ancestral territory, which comprises the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. In the experience of the elders and spiritual guides of the community, the construction of the dam, a violent intervention in the environment, has disrupted the spiritual link between the communities and the integrity of the territory. This spiritual link may be once again strengthened through the practice of music, which is central in the traditional transmission of knowledge (Triana, 2014: 89). In that sense, the elders are always concerned to preserve the spiritual balance in the relationships between community, communal practice and nature. Therefore, based on the above context, younger generations of the Wiwa have started a process of communication training, with the support of the CINEP.
In light of these circumstances, the Zhimashai collective created a film in 2012 titled *De Shizhiwa a Ashina: El cercado que interrumpe el flujo del Río Ranchería* (‘From Shizhiwa to Ashina: The fence that interrupts the flow of the Ranchería River’). Through images and interviews it shows the damage the dam caused in the Wiwa territory, not only for the indigenous people but also for the peasants. One of the multiple consequences was an overflow of the construction, which forced people from the communities near the villages of Caracolí and Piñoncito to abandon the crops that had fed them, as well as their homes and possessions. The *mamos* or elders argue that the institutions underestimated the strength of the river, as well as that the dam was constructed in a spot that represented the balance between health and disease. However, in the final sequence of the documentary, *mamo* Eusebio Conchangüi Sauna, from the Siminke community, explains that the lack of understanding of the relevance of maintaining the natural balance in the territory was the principal cause of troubles. From his perspective, a vital problem was that they could no longer perform the rituals in that area that prevent disease and other misfortunes. Similarly, in the experience of Jacinto as a musician in the community, singing to the river is a concrete strategy to reconnect with their territory and restore the balance between the community and nature. One can thus understand how the revival of the practice of music, complemented with other tools to enhance its functions such as video, are felt as necessities for the integral process of strengthening the community. In the following paragraphs I will more closely discuss the importance of music as a cultural practice for the Wiwa, as the main vehicle for dissemination of knowledge.
White

This section is titled ‘White’, in reference to Jacinto’s and the community’s traditional clothes, as visible in the picture. We will highlight the Wiwa community’s practice of music and associated knowledge, which currently serves as a strategy of communal reinforcement in the face of the environmental and cultural consequences of the dam. Historically, Wiwa communities have been facing multiple interventions in their territory. However, in the last three decades of the 20th century, further issues arose related to the control of lands in the region of Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta that added to the conflicts. The eighties saw a surge in the illegal cultivation of crops, which came with an increased presence of armed agents and violence. This led to the displacement of some of the communities and eventually to incursion by paramilitaries, which intensified the conflict. In addition, a process of evangelisation took place in the region, which exerted influence on their cultural practices and beliefs, which at times became absorbed into the dynamics of Christianity. Afterwards, all these circumstances led to some of the communities losing their own cultural practices, such as language (Damana, which is currently endangered), traditional knowledge about medicine, social organisation, dance and music, all of which, as said above, were connected with nature and the territory (Morales, 2008: 26). However, since the recognition of indigenous rights in Colombia in the nineties, a form of resistance by indigenous communities emerged on the basis of their own cultural practices and knowledge. The revival of traditional Wiwa music was an initiative that facilitated the reinforcement of their communities in response to environmental, legal, economic and cultural issues exacerbated by post-neoliberal politics and national conflict. Thus, by 1993, the Wiwa community created their own political organisation, called Organización Wiwa Yugumaiun Buankanarrua Tayrona, in order to promote dialogue among communities to align their priorities, and the reconstruction of social and cultural practices lost due to the conflicts (Ulloa, 2010: 169).

The spiritual and political authorities perceived music education centres as vital to the revival, transmission and dissemination of their traditions. For each member of the community, the cultural significance of the music depends on the role they play in the musical performance, which extends beyond the activity of the musicians and includes all the people who participate wherever it is practiced. Approaching the performance of music from how it is experienced by its participants, is based on a recognition of a continuous dynamic of feedback between discourse and practice. It is since 2005 that the community has started to revive its traditional music through music centres, although this process has been rather unstable due to a lack of financial support for such projects. Nevertheless, in villages such as Siminke, the community has continued practicing music and tries to keep giving lessons in the local school to the children and young people. Jacinto represents this communal interest to keep the practice of music alive. As the grandson of mamo Eusebio, he is following in the latter’s footsteps as a musician. In fact, he currently plays different instruments and wants to preserve consciousness of what they call shihkakubi, or the deep significance inherent in the practice of music, for coming generations. Through the transmission of shihkakubi, children learn the values and norms of behaviour from an early age on. Similarly, it is part of teaching adolescents the meaning and use of the poporo, in the case of men, and a red tissue or scarf in the case of women, which are sacred objects that symbolise the transition to adulthood.

The link between music and territory is associated with the belief that music begins in the sea, then flows up rivers and ends up in the snowy peaks, reflecting the temporal transition from night to morning. All the music that Wiwa perform is connected to ritual moments and traditions like baptism, marriage and funeral, as it is one of the ways in which they re-establish the equilibrium with nature in moments of change or transition. Dancing also accompanies the music and the steps are associated with stories. In fact, in the circles of music and dance, men wear a white outfit and women use a red scarf in their performance. Each piece of music contains
guidelines and norms of behaviour for the members of the Wiwa, since during the performance certain regional animals are evoked that have symbolic value for the community. Other significances may include asking permission from nature, such as trees and water, to be used by the community. From the perspective of the community, music is the language universally understood by the spiritual guides, and everything is performed in accordance with the phases of the moon (Triana, 2014: 95).

The creation of traditional instruments requires that the Wiwa travel across the territory, in accordance with specific cultural beliefs. To provide an example: the watuhku is a set of two reeds, one ‘male’ with a single hole, the other ‘female’ with five holes, which is made from a plant called kaushi. This plant grows in cold ground and cannot be cut when it is close to water. The procedure must also be performed during a waning moon. The cutting of the plant to create the reed is called bunkuizhi. The upper part of the reed is made with the wax of a bee species that is located a few metres deep in temperate earth. A feather of a white condor is placed on the head, and only the mamos know how to collect it. The sound of the reed imitates the song of birds and natural beings and phenomena (Triana, 2014: 97). Another example is the aguna, a maraca used in shibkakabi. It is produced from a plant called taguna, or calabash, that is obtained in the lower areas with a warmer climate. The fruit is used as a base, and a stick of the same tree is attached to it. Inside the cavity of the fruit the seeds of a plant called tasuhku, or ‘cow tongue’, are placed to produce sound through movement of the hand. The seeds are collected when they have dried, in the month of March. The sound of the aguna imitates the breeze and falling water in the mountains and river.

Furthermore, the community assigns specific roles with regard to playing the instruments. Women play the kumana (a hollow drum) and men the watujku (a reed) and the abovementioned aguna. Additionally, the music is accompanied by nasal humming (maleba), mainly by women and children. Some songs can only be performed by the mamos, who have the power and authority to transmit their specific knowledge. In short, each piece of music and the steps of the dance represent patterns of behaviour and harmony transmitted through the tones and the rhythm of the music. According to one of the spiritual guides, mamo Ambrosio, ‘the rhythm of the reed is being sung, and the dance comes from singing and the interpretation of the instruments, and the shape of the circle protects of the spiritual work that is being done’ (Triana, 2014: 98).

The teaching of music still proves a challenge to the elders, and they are concerned that the influence of western music, particularly valenato, distracts the younger generations from learning traditional music. Understandably, from their perspective this would have repercussions for the transmission of their cultural knowledge. All of the meanings of Wiwa music discussed above constitute only one specific part of their cultural identity. In light of this, the community has started looking for strategies that allow them to increase the dissemination of the knowledge around music. They also began to record the music and the stories around it by means of audio-visual tools. In that sense, the commitment of the younger people, who became interested in such media through the efforts of the Zhimashai group, was essential. Likewise, the support of independent filmmakers and researchers was vital. The process of recording might prove an educational way to stimulate interest and preserve knowledge among the communities as a complement to the practice of music as such.

**Black**

This final section, which derives its title from the black camera that Jacinto is holding, will turn to the use of visual tools among the Wiwa and more generally their audio-visual training initiatives. For the Wiwa, the audio-visual production may be characterised, on the one hand, as a medium that allows them to express their concerns facing the political situations such as, for instance, the issue with the dam in Ranchería River. On the other hand, it develops a space to revitalise their
cultural practices, due to the potential in the camera to preserve a memory, which in this case is knowledge concerning the territory transmitted through music.

For example, one of the films produced by the Zhimashai collective is titled Bunguinguma utunanzhe: Enseñanza de mayores (2014), a story told in the language of Damana, in which the mamo of the community presents the importance of the dissemination of cultural knowledge. He highlights how this knowledge was taught by the spiritual ancestors or elements of the universe for generations. The story begins with the mother’s womb, followed by close-up images of the full moon, fire and the coca leaf, which are sacred elements to them. Another example is Duganyina mamonun: los niños y el mamo (2014). It is a story without dialogue that is told through the images and natural sounds recorded by the camera. One sequence shows the children watching the ‘traditional work’ of the mamo. Integrated into the sequence are exterior shots of Izwama, or the sacred ritual place, where the mamo uses leaves, corn, fire and smoke to perform certain rituals. Likewise, the film includes interior shots inside Kankuruas and Unguma, other sacred meeting places in the village. At the end, the only actual words found in the film are ‘de esta manera es como se enseña y se aprende’ or ‘this is the way of teaching and learning’. These visual works of the Wiwa are far from melancholic depictions of Indians struggling against a colonial order. Their visuals rather represent the strong association between communal knowledge and the relationship with nature. Moreover, the Wiwa use visual tools to improve local communication and to exchange their feelings about political issues (Aguilera & Polanco, 2011: 19). This is a way in which these peoples exercise their agency. The realisation of such film projects is a path to the development of a community’s confidence in technology and visual tools. In fact, the photo-elicitation exercise with Jacinto somehow represents this growing confidence in visual media.

The taking of pictures also provoked a dialogue between Jacinto and me. Through our conversation, I came to appreciate his deep connection with nature and his awareness about the current issues. Moreover, it was a pretext to discuss the visual work produced by the Shimazhai collective with regard to those issues, as well as the current efforts to keep using video as a means to make their cultural knowledge visible. The camera is a tool to focus attention on specific details in the environment that might otherwise go unnoticed, elements that are rich in meaning for members of the community, such as the avocado plant, the seeds used in an instrument or the river.

On the basis of visual recordings, stories may be developed that serve the preservation of communal knowledge, which in turn serves as a guideline for behaviour. Members of the community have expressed awareness that this traditional knowledge was never before narrated in any way other than through oral transmission, and now the camera has been discovered as a support in protecting that knowledge and other aspects of collective memory. By the time I was doing my research in Siminke, mamo Eusebio expressed the wish to continue teaching music within the community as a formal project in the educational context, as it used to be when they had the support of the CINEP. He is looking for the support of the political Wiwa organisation to secure resources for building instruments and to extend the project to the schools in nearby villages. By making films and recording stories behind musical performances they aim to grow collections that help preserve their memories and, therefore, their identity (Triana, 2017: 29).

Conclusion

We may regard it as important, even mandatory in a post-colonial context, to vindicate the episteme of indigenous communities and the tools they use to revitalise it. Even if they do not identify themselves through a category or label, they may contribute to the construction of a new and wider framework of knowledge. Among the Wiwa, the elders consider film as a narrative means to share knowledge with future generations. In a way, learning about video has even stimulated young members of the community to practice music in their own rituals more regularly,
looking forward to seeing themselves on the screen.

In the last part of the photo-elicitation exercise with Jacinto, he expressed that, as part of the elder musician’s line of heritage, he plans to teach his son and the coming generations the importance of shikakubi in the practice of music. Methods like photo-elicitation or visual analysis are helpful in observing continuity and change within the community, as its members revisit their own lives depicted in films and photographs. The method’s power lies not only in the images or films themselves, but also in the discussions they trigger, which enables us to identify and reflect on issues, needs and priorities.

In conclusion, this article aims to highlight Amerindian film theory, based on this ongoing contextual process in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Ideally, research such as this could be associated with other national projects such as CRIC in the Cauca region, which are already more established. Still, in the end it is the Wiwa organisation that needs to continue supporting the media communication program that started in 2005. That, above all, is a political decision to put these issues on the public agenda. It is a wish particularly alive among the youngest generations, generally supported by the mamos. They tend to be conscious of the potential and importance of such tools to highlight their positions in the context of interventions in their territories, but also to promote their own cultural practices. This is a way to reinforce their identities in the current post-conflict context, by sharing an alternative gaze in the form of their own visual narratives.

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