

## **Reflections of an Indigenous Student on the Realities of His People**

Author: Lorenzo Muelas Tróchez, Indígena Wambiano

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## A Personal View

### Reflections of an Indigenous Student on the Realities of His People

*"Of mud we were born, of corn we are, we live of sorrow, of the pain which becomes hope we are nourished. We are the Indians that we are. True Indians are we. Indian people of true heart, we are people of true blood. People we are, we are here, true people we are. Of the Land we come. Of the Mother we are formed. Of the Earth we are born. Before light existed, the seed was already sowed in the dark womb of the Earth, in the moist and warm heart of our peoples. That is where the word sprung forth, the one that gave us heart, the one that gave us history, the one that made us into peoples. Of the Earth's heart we come. Of the five corners of the world we were born, of the seven colors of the Earth we have come. We are mud. We are rain. We are sun. We are color. We are the worthy memory. We are the tender tomorrow. We are the dream that we are. Heart of our history. We are the Indians that we are. True Indians are we."*

Don Juan Chávez Alonso, Indigenous Purépecha Representative of the National Indigenous Congress, Michoacán, Mexico, March 2001.

(Quoted from: **Toledo VM**. 2002. Una m nidad alternativa. In: VI Maestría en Agroecología y Desarrollo Rural Sostenible en América Latinas y Spain. Memorias CD/ROM. Baeza, Spain: Universidad Internacional de Andalucía.)

For centuries, the Guambiano people have inhabited the great valleys and mountains of the Andes, under the blue skies of the cosmos, basing their lives on a symbiotic relationship with nature. Their environment nurtured wholesome, religious beings whose very existence is proof of their durability. Respect for the land is paramount and is an integral part of everything. The Guambiano

are a product of co-evolution with nature, in a circular universe of reciprocity, which has resulted in ways of seeing the universe in common and imitating the natural development of life in the *piro* (Earth).

Starting by observing their surroundings, it was not difficult for the Guambiano to develop agroecological technologies based on their great respect for the condition of the land, in order to guarantee sustainability that would ensure their permanence as a farming people. Our society adapted to the characteristics of nature, integrating us into the natural world, without us adapting nature to our whims. Agricultural techniques were developed in harmony with local conditions and the demands of crops. Efficient use of energy and use of the resources at hand are basic characteristics of Guambiano agriculture that have resulted in wholesome products. These nutrients provided the biological basis for development of the creativity that would allow us to shape our destiny as a community, and which also allowed our culture to flourish. The land also gave us the strength and the wisdom to create a spiritual conscience as a way of looking into ourselves: this was the bridge to creativity, ideas, and architectural forms (houses, irrigation systems) that required human labor and knowledge of math, geometry and physics.

The relationship of the *Misak* (Guambiano) to their surroundings led them to know the latter with a degree of subtlety and wisdom that allowed them to use elements of the ecosystem, such as plants, animals, and minerals. Water is considered to be of medicinal use by people, animals and plants—beings that represent earthly sanctuaries. Seed and animal management led the Guambiano to understand elementary genetic concepts, carry out interbreeding of species, and domesticate plants and animals, thus becoming creators of biodiversity. They also came to know biological

processes such as the fermentation of food and the geo-biochemical cycles of chemical elements in the soil, the most outstanding of which is the water cycle—*Osik waramik lincha tap*. We consider this the same as Western scientific knowledge, which Guambiano culture expresses in other codes and another language.

Guambiano society is characterized by principles of equality, equity and mutual aid, with a conscience of love, identity, memory, and perpetual living of the values inherited from our great *cacique* (leader), *Payán*. Social authority, framed in community work, is sustained in the profound and real philosophical thoughts with which we grow up, and of which we are proud. Joy is expressed in every activity of daily life by Guambiano men and strong, tireless women, who nurture the dreams and hopes of their children.

It was not surprising to hear the sound of *quena* flutes in the great mountain range of the Andes—a product of social harmony announcing the emergence of splendid, original music. Thus began the generation of beautiful songs that sang of life, of a medicine full of love and knowledge for the soul, small animals, and philosophy, in such a way that music has now been incorporated into the cultural patrimony.

Never before did our shamans, after chewing coca, foretell with such precision the ways of the universe. They developed their own flight, as wide as their wings, oriented to the water cycle. Never had they traveled so far visiting other Andean peoples, peoples who, as they, were evolving on this continent, under the same sun, breathing the same air, sowing the same corn, drinking the same juices from the earth. Our great doctors, always wise, sowed, gave and gestated their own destinies in their own bodies. In those days, life was an endless stream of miracles: it was easy to be poets, good farmers, excellent musicians, tender healers of the body, and

**FIGURE 1** Guambiano women exemplify the syncretism of the local and colonial cultures. (Photo from *Dagua Hurtado A, Aranda M, Vasco LG*. 1998. *Guambianos: Hijos del aroiris y del agua*. Bogotá: Editorial Los Cuatro Elementos.)



philosophers of the *musik* (soul) expressing happiness. Above all, they forged human beings capable of respecting everything, from the flight of a butterfly to the gigantic steps of our clean consciences and actions. Beings capable of trembling beside a mountain, beside a flower, beside a child's dream; the gaze of an elder with calloused hands; the river breeze; the presence of a pretty woman; the trance of the *amza jicha*; the lightning, the rain, the power of night; the healing touch of a mother; death, mistakes, the force and power of the mind—everything was a reason for inspiration in finding one's own way. And everything glowed, thanks to the blood of *Pishimisak*, our wise *cacique*, whose blood is now a symbol of America and indigenusness. After walking this spiritual and earthly world, there is no doubt about why the Guambiano thinks as he does.

The history of indigenous peoples reflects pain and suffering, and the Guambiano people have suffered too. Spain, which did not see or respect what confronted it, inflicted violence on an admirable culture, which it oppressed. It had come to ravage a continent, seeing Earthly Paradise, an empire of gold. Thus began a history of bitterness, one of the darkest episodes of man exploited by man. Foreigners entered our valleys killing and shattering the Indian's crystal body, filling us with wounds, symbolized by theft of land and the inevitable decline of our culture. These wounds were incurable, even by our masters. We have endured over 500 years of exclusion, exploitation, and, most painfully, destruction of our culture and identity. A process of co-evolution, with indelible episodes of suffering, began. Syncretism served as a survival mechanism that helped fuse Spanish and Guambiano cultures, so the latter did not succumb to slavery forever (Figure 1). Great sacrifices were made in finding ways to preserve the culture, even though it was

masked by the cultural features of the conqueror.

There were moments in which, forced by the persecution and oppression of great landowners who cut off relations with nature, the Guambiano migrated to far-off territories, in misty forests, where they were forced to destroy fragile ecosystems, reflecting the culture of lumbering and burning used by the Spanish, with no ethical or religious considerations. However, the original culture was reflected by the fire shamans or elders who reestablished bonds with nature, and, in the case of the Guambiano culture, with *Pishimisak*.

The Guambiano people have preserved their dignity in the face of this history. This gave rise to social movements that have been able to recover lands usurped by the Spanish, and, later, by the *criollo* landowners descended from the former. But a silent movement has emerged, the fruit of humble work by men and women to rescue our culture from oblivion, and, with it, our dignity as human beings.

All societies need writing to solidify their language and become a universal culture. This was the

reason to begin the hard work of structuring our mother tongue through written means. But my people lived and suffered conflicts that are universal and affect all cultures. We are hurt by alcoholism, the marginalization of women and children, generational conflicts between parents and children, the rejection of other ethnic groups, and—most painful of all—the way in which we ourselves reject our own culture.

That is why we must not fall into the temptation of turning our community into a myth. As Indian people, we have been shaken and beaten for almost 500 years, and are now influenced by a modern world that is violent, intolerant and homogenizing. Like all human beings and the cultures they created, we have lived moments of pain, hatred, and intolerance. But as men and women, we must reflect and transform ourselves through the quest for maturity, through sincere, honest and humble acknowledgment of our own strengths and weaknesses.

A conflict currently being experienced by the Guambiano people that might have an impact more

unfavorable than any other is the quest for cultural strength. This involves a loss of the ethics of reciprocity. This form of social conduct, which was the key to permanence in many indigenous societies, is gradually collapsing. We now live the struggle between distribution and accumulation. Our *cacique*, Payán, once taught us that “enough was enough,” but now we have forgotten this because we are taught that more is everything.

The Guambiano of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must seek universality, but never forget our roots in the land that saw us grow and be able to fly and to embrace the universe. May the Andean *quena* flute sing next to the highland bagpipe! All human beings in all cultures have been unable to resolve the problem of fear of facing what is different, foreign, or strange. This fear has led us to commit crimes against ethnic, racial or social minorities. That is why we must see the Other—that which is different—as the biological and cultural wealth on which our differences and originality as human beings and cultures are founded. We Guambiano want to be recognized as unique and original, and we must also recognize these traits in other cultures. In relationships among the different peoples of Colombia, as between all human beings, we want the basic conditions

of life to consist of some objective in which the goal is not the destruction of the Other, but the progressive development of everyone. Also, as a society that co-evolves with social and natural change, we understand that changing does not mean forgetting or rejecting the past. As a people with a culture marked by mistakes and achievements, we must place ourselves in the present, but still be able to look at the past and build a future.

Perhaps these reflections will help us to value the greatness of my Guambiano people, a greatness that strengthens other peoples on the planet, since human beings must comprehend that every time a culture, a dialect, a legend, an animal or vegetable species, or a piece of jungle or a spring disappears, we become less worthy and sustainable as human beings. Paradoxically, and as a consequence of the history of pain, oppression, and forced exclusion which we have withstood for half a millennium, we have been able to protect many of our customs, our beliefs, and our cosmovision in general, as well as our gene pool.

We believe that this diversity is a human treasure that will allow human beings from other cultures to fortify their lives and facilitate cultural and biological processes of adaptation to the changes the cur-

rent century is exposing us to. As in the history of other peoples, the armed conquerors will then end up being conquered by the spirit of those subdued. Neither the alleged conquerors nor those who came after them through half a millennium could steal or subdue the soul, which lives on in a greater struggle.

#### AUTHOR

**Lorenzo Muelas Tróchez Indígena Wambiano**  
Lorenzo Muelas Tróchez is a member of the younger generation of the indigenous Guambiano people, who have lived together with the Paeces in Colombia since time immemorial, in the valley of Cauca, which means “Mother of forests.” His family played a leading role in the successful struggle to recuperate parts of their ancestral territories and revive the spiritual foundations of Guambiano culture. Lorenzo Muelas Tróchez grew up learning to see, feel, and behave according to the cosmovision he describes here. His voice allows us to overcome conventional forms of “mute anthropology”—outsiders writing about member of other cultural groups—and permits insight into the feelings and reflections that emerge from contact with formal university education. Listening to Lorenzo Muelas Tróchez reminds us that the knowledge and attitudes produced at our universities, although of some significance for indigenous people, are still too distant from the aims, content and methods of indigenous notions of development, according to which education is understood as a simultaneous and interdependent process of knowledge and community building. By calling attention to this ethical aspect of knowledge production, the author helps us to recover a fundamental and often underestimated quality of people from other social and cultural backgrounds engaged in promoting sustainable mountain development.

(Editorial note by **Stephan Rist**, Centre for Development and Environment, University of Berne, Steigerhubelstrasse 3, 3008 Berne, Switzerland. Stephan.Rist@cde.unibe.ch)

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