Back and forth across the Colombia–Venezuela border: 
the Wayúu face poverty, drought, dispossession and violence

Marked by trade since colonial times, the Indigenous people of La Guajira live along the Colombia–Venezuela border. Between a lack of drinking water, the extractive industry, wind farms and the humanitarian crisis, the Wayúu survive despite dispossession and food insecurity. In recent times, violence caused by the militarisation of the region and the territorial disputes between paramilitary groups, smugglers, drug traffickers and the illegal trade in fuel has only added to the problem. The closure of borders is leaving family and community dynamics at crisis point.

By Carlos Salamanca Villamizar - December 1st, 2021

In 2018, when the number of Venezuelan migrants in Colombia was heralding a serious humanitarian crisis, the streets of Maicao, the main commercial city of La Guajira region, were crowded with men and women. Many of them were Indigenous Wayúu endeavouring to sell all kinds of products, food and services. Setting up small, makeshift stalls along the side of the road like a classic Latin American street market, they arranged themselves as best they could among the shouting and bidding, the motorcycle fumes, street food sales, stray dogs and small mountains of waste.

There were so many people, and so little space available, that it did not take long for some to start renting out spots to vendors and or trying to take over other people’s spots. It was then that scuffles and fights broke out: all over just one or two metres of space on which to set up a stall and sell. It became common at that time to see parents, accompanied by their children, crossing the border to sell the last of their family's belongings for a pittance: a blanket, a radio, a mirror, a flashlight, a couple of screwdrivers, a pair of trousers or simply an old pair of shoes.
Early in the morning, the streets would be lined with dozens of families seeking shade from the heat. Parents would register their children in State-run canteens set up with support from international cooperation so that they could get a meal in their stomachs. At night, the disputes over market stall spaces would give way to the silence of hundreds of families asleep on the ground. Street after street of people sprawled out with no belongings other than the clothes they were wearing. In the more commercial quarters, drunken brawls intermingled with women of all ages prostituting themselves for very little money so that they could pay for some item, a hot dog or a couple of cigarettes.

A history marked by trade

From the early 16th century on, the Wayúu would interact closely with colonial authorities, missionaries and traders. Because the peninsula is located at the epicentre of both Colombia’s and Venezuela’s trade routes, the economic activity of this Indigenous people was to reshape the regional geography through ports and roads which, due to the desert-like nature of the terrain, were used almost exclusively by the Wayúu.

During the first half of the 19th century, the governments offered gifts to the Indigenous people as a way of “attracting them into civilised life”. In addition to aguardiente (liquor), tobacco and panela (unrefined sugar cane), this practice became institutionalised by means of land, tools and livestock. Once the nation state had been consolidated, the governments opted for military deployment, founding towns such as Maicao (1927) and Uribia (1935), and controlling trade with the aim of nationalising the territories and their inhabitants.

As the territory is crossed by a border that is more theoretical than effective, smuggling between Indigenous people, foreigners, settlers and authorities continued until the early 20th century. It was in this context that the Wayúu were able to maintain their political autonomy and relatively effective territorial control.

A cross-border people

The Wayúu are one of Colombia’s 81 ethnic groups. Approximately 150,000 of the country’s 700,000 officially-recognised Indigenous people are members of this people, while in
Venezuela they account for 57.3% of the national Indigenous population. In Colombia’s La Guajira, 44.9% of the population is Indigenous. Although the Wayúu are the largest ethnic community in the region and the country, they are also one of the most vulnerable. Today, they live in rural family dwellings, so-called “rancherías” built from yotojoro sticks and mud, and in peri-urban neighbourhoods spread out along some 15,000 square kilometres of the Caribbean shoreline.

The department is divided into three natural sub-regions: Guajira Alta, Guajira Media and Guajira Baja. In La Alta, the vegetation is sparse, the landscape is desert-like and the territory is organised into approximately 23 traditional Wayúu clans. La Media is of higher agricultural potential although most of the area is composed of semi-desert zones. Given its proximity to the Santa Marta and Perijá mountain ranges, the best conditions for agriculture and access to water sources are to be found in Baja Guajira. Here, small towns are located along the Ranchería and El Cesar river valleys. However, this is precisely where the large-scale extractive activities are located, and these are destroying the environment and polluting the water sources.

In recent years, the “Venezuelan crisis” has hit the survival of the Wayúu people hard on both sides of the border. And yet it is just one more crisis among many for this people. On the Colombian side, in the last two decades, the Wayúu have had to face up to the advance of mining companies onto their territories and serious situations of violence. More recently, their problems have been compounded by a lack of access to drinking water, food insecurity and climate change. Amidst poverty, drought, dispossession and violence, thousands of Wayúu travel in and out of their territory, attempting to eke out a living, activating family networks of care and reciprocity, and trying to defend their territory and culture.

Dispossession, scarcity and violence

Coal, gas and oil mining projects are springing up on both sides of the border. To this must be added, in Colombia, international tourism and “green energy” initiatives, such as wind farms. As a result, the constitutionally-recognised rights of the Wayúu are not being respected because companies are (with the consent of the State) resorting to all sorts of legal, technical and commercial strategies (some legal, some not). In this way, they are
therefore manipulating the Indigenous authorities and buying their acquiescence in order to obtain licences and consents. Gradually, the Wayúu are losing control of their traditional territories and the younger members are taking the decision to migrate to the outskirts of cities such as Maicao, Manaure and Riohacha, or even to other regions of the country.

This expansion of extractivism is going hand in hand with the degradation of their territories. In 2014, the serious nutritional situation of the Wayúu children in Colombia's La Guajira region made headlines, with malnutrition and death statistics far above the national average: a true humanitarian crisis that prompted the intervention of various Colombian government offices, international cooperation agencies, multilateral organisations and the IACHR.

Although this assistance was provided from a logic of solidarity, ultimately no-one questioned the extractive logic that prioritises the over-exploitation of natural resources to the detriment of the Wayúu’s territorial rights and their possibilities of life and existence. Around the same time, the El Niño weather phenomenon triggered a long drought in the region. During this period, infant mortality rose substantially, while average monthly rainfall declined and the acute food insecurity crisis deepened.

Another factor contributing to a weakening of the Wayúu's living conditions is violence. During the first decade of this century, different areas of La Guajira in Colombia suffered violence caused by the armed conflict – mainly from paramilitaries – and many families had to flee to Venezuela. Although, years later, they were able to return, the ruptures in personal and family lives live on in their memories.

More recently, gangs linked to smuggling, drug trafficking and the illegal fuel trade have begun to dispute the territory. Significant militarisation has therefore been taking place, both from the Colombian and Venezuelan sides, through the creation of battalions and military facilities. Since 2004, growing tensions between the two governments have led to successive border closures, making it impossible for the Wayúu to access basic necessities, damaging their economic activities, affecting their family ties and jeopardising trans-territorial practices.
Survival on the move

During the 18th and 19th centuries, members of the Wayúu community migrated to Venezuela to work on the cocoa, coffee and indigo plantations. This migration intensified yet more during the 20th century due to the demand for labour in the oil facilities. For its part, contraband – one of the most common economic activities since the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in the region – continued until the 1970s, when marijuana trafficking became an alternative source of income.

In the second half of the 20th century, many Wayúu benefited from selling products in Colombia, subsidised by the Venezuelan government. Inhabitants of municipalities such as Uribia and Maicao, located along the border in Guajira Alta and Guajira Media, coped with drought through seasonal migration to Venezuela where they worked in the construction industry and dairy farming. Traditionally, the Wayúu have lived simultaneously on both sides of the border, a status reflected in the fact that many have dual nationality. This territorial practice is increasingly being hampered.

With the onset of Venezuela’s economic collapse in 2013, the Wayúu are now having to resort ever more frequently to the more than 100 “illegal” trails that cross the border. Although the use of these trails was common in the past, the violence that occurs between illegal gangs disputing these circuits is now also manifesting itself in attacks on those trying to cross the border on their own. Many of these victims are Venezuelan Wayúu families – or Colombians living in Venezuela – trying to access health and education services on the Colombian side of the border. Parents travel daily or weekly with their children, and are suffering from the upsurge in aggression. The periphery of cities such as Maicao, Uribia and Riohacha has thus become a destination for migrant Wayúu families who, already impoverished, end up fighting over access to the few public resources and opportunities.

Faced with this adverse landscape, the Pütchipü’üi or “palabreros” (moral authorities), true experts in Wayúu philosophy, have called time and again for the preservation and development of their culture, a culture that has enabled the Wayúu to survive as an Indigenous people for centuries. The Pütchipü’üi are demanding not only respect for their
customs but also for their territory, their language and their legal and political institutions. This is just the first step in the Wayúu people’s development and in the preservation of their common heritage.

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