Vivir sabroso or to live well or joyfully in Colombia: an alternative to the collective trauma experienced by ethno-territorial peoples

The lengthy armed conflict has left most Colombians with psychological, physical and community scars. Faced with this traumatic reality, the philosophy of “vivir sabroso” offers Colombians a new vision of life for their country. This sentipensar or thinking-feeling of Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples is helping to reshape the narrative of how we imagine the nation.

By Marcela Velasco – August 1st 2022

Colombia is going through momentous times in terms of how we rethink the narrative by which we imagine the nation. At the heart of this reflection are the visions of ethno-territorial peoples, the Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples whose identities are forged by intercultural, environmental, and socio-economic relations in harmony with the land and the community. The Colombian Pacific is the area that best represents this intercultural way of life so characteristic of colonized peoples.

Two significant events are resulting in a reassessment of the way in which the Colombian nation is represented. First, the rallying cry of the Vice-President elect, Francia Márquez, of “vivir sabroso” (to live joyfully), offering Colombians a way of thinking about their existence that is specific to ethno-territorial peoples, whose struggles she also leads. Second, the Final Report of the Commission for the Clarification of the Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition, which spelt out the devastating impact that the war has had on the bodies, emotions, and territories of the Colombian people.

On the one hand, Afro-descendant peoples are offering the rest of Colombia a new world vision with which to view life and escape the political and civilizational crisis that the country is going through. On the other, the Commission is testament to the barbarism of the socio-political
violence and documents what we must never forget, ignore or repeat. Both visions must be understood as part of the same process: the collective trauma that Colombia is experiencing.

The process of trauma

Trauma is a psychosocial condition caused by events that threaten the life or sense of well-being of a person or group, leaving permanent psychological, physical or community scars. To understand why certain harmful events cause trauma and others do not, it is important to see trauma as part of a process that comprises different phases. Sociologist Jeffrey Alexander proposes understanding trauma as part of a process. This process begins with a damaging event, in the case of ethno-territorial peoples it is the consequence of a history of violence and territorial dispossession, it is intensified with the violent expansion of capitalist and state borders, and becomes embodied in the destruction of the community bonds that historically sustained alternative ways of life.

According to specialist Bessel Van Der Kolk, the psychological reaction to such a distressing reality of diminished individual and collective autonomy is social isolation and difficulty in finding the words to describe the event. Despite this, victims feel a strong need to reconnect socially and form a community. If many people within the same group suffer similar psychological damage, a social crisis characterized by mistrust, fear, and despair ensues.

In this phase of the trauma process, new public representations may emerge, usually disseminated by collective spokespersons such as leaders, thinkers or authorities. These personalities identify the trauma and represent it using symbols and meanings that reflect the cultural values or ideas prevailing in the community. It is in this phase that the image of a collective group united by an emotional vision of the world is able to emerge. For sociologist Marina Ariza, this emotional vision may represent a new sense of identity and solidarity and makes the reconstruction of politics possible. The idea of vivir bien or vivir sabroso is an example of this.
As a leader of the socio-environmental struggles in western Colombia, Francia Márquez has placed the aspirations of the ethno-territorial peoples for a “vivir bien” or of “vivir sabroso” within their territories on the national agenda. Comparable to the Quechua “sumak kwasay” or “living in abundance”, “vivir sabroso” is a philosophy of life for the ethnic groups of the Americas. Researchers Ángela Mena and Yeison Meneses explain that this philosophy is innate in the cosmovision of the black communities of the Pacific: “A spiritual, social, economic, political and cultural organizational model in harmony with the environment, nature and people”. This Afro-Colombian sentipensar (thinking-feeling) has been developed in dialogue with African and Amerindian philosophies as a reaction to the policies that are destroying their lands.

**Ethnic territories as affective communities**

In a 2021 report on resilience and adaptation in the Colombian Pacific undertaken jointly with the Interethnic School of New Pacific Coast Leaders, the Jenzera Collective presented a series of interviews conducted in the Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities of rural Buenaventura and Valle del Cauca. The testimonies demonstrate the suffering that has been caused by the violations of their ancestral values, the deterioration in community relations, and the devastation of common goods, goods that previously sustained a generous traditional economy and encouraged the demographic and cultural recovery of people devastated by colonization. Through their testimony, they illustrate the presence of collective trauma and the existence of an affective community in the Pacific that identifies emotionally and politically with the land. In addition, they share a general vision of the territory as a space for life, culture, autonomy, and freedom.

Below, we share some of the testimonies gathered during the interviews and which appear in the report on these Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, almost all in rural areas of Buenaventura and Valle del Cauca, on the Pacific coast.

For Indigenous People, “The territory is a living being. It is our Mother Earth: the ethnic groups live on it and it is of extremely important value for us Indigenous People because we live here and grow our crops here; the territory represents life and harmony with our nature.” It is also
“a space for the reproduction and rootedness of Indigenous Peoples, where cultural practices, the mother tongue and personal relationships are strengthened, particularly the sense of identity with Mother Earth” and a “sacred site full of knowledge that exists between the human being and Mother Earth in which we can care for our culture and live in dignity and peace”.

For Afro-Colombians, territory “is the living space in which we create and recreate our culture according to our own particular and distinct way of seeing the world and things within our habitat. It is here that autonomous participation is exercised with regard to our own choices and future as a people”. Most notably, the territory is a “legacy passed down to us by our ancestors”. It is “health, work, our happiness, water, land, rivers. Without territory we cannot live”.

In contrast to these affective visions of territory as a place of life, Colombia's economic elites and political authorities are de-territorializing Indigenous and Black peoples to expand the productive frontier and economic development. This situation has resulted in the obstruction of traditional forms of governance and the destruction of nature, the devaluation of traditional work, and the stripping of the ethno-territorial peoples’ political and legal rights. Worse still, armed groups are entering their lands with impunity and devastating community processes in order to grab their resources and control the populations.

**Vivir sabroso and vivir bien: alternatives to collective trauma**

Trauma is more than a psychological condition. It has structural causes based on colonialism, class, and gender hierarchies, and political conditions that justify the ill-treatment of entire categories of people. In response to this ill-treatment, ethno-territorial groups propose to live well or joyfully. Instead of deriding this vision, many Colombians clearly understood the message reaching them from the margins of the country. They see themselves reflected in that same history of violence and dispossession that has exhausted the capacity to heal and prevent further abuses, and to *live well* in one of the most biodiverse and complex countries in the world.

Political and governmental leaders or organizations that may stand to lose or benefit politically from the collective trauma that is affecting ethno-territorial peoples, and Colombians generally,
will try to represent the problem for the collective, hence the importance of the election of Francia Márquez and all that she stands for.

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