Mama Luz Dary Aranda Morales: “Don’t let this moment pass us by”

Colombia’s new government faces enormous challenges, but the Indigenous movement must "not let the moment pass it by" to support it, says Mama Luz Dary Aranda Morales, governor of the cabildo of the Guambia Indigenous reservation and host of the “Weaving Unity” Indigenous Peoples’ Summit, where she participated on behalf of AISO (Indigenous Authorities of the Southwest) in the summit's board of directors.

By Mauricio Martínez - September 1st 2022

Máma Luz Dary Aranda Morales is the current Governor of the Indigenous Reservation of Guambia, located in the department of Cauca where the largest number of Misak people live, numbering 14,700 inhabitants. She has a degree in ethno-education from the University of Cauca and a Master's degree in Education in Diversity. She has been a community teacher since 2001 and a permanent teacher since 2004.

She was shaped as a leader by accompanying her husband Samuel Almendra Velasco, who was Governor in 2009. In this accompanying role she remained silent; however, when she considered that she learned enough concerning the reality of the Misak people, her voice became heard. After having been part of the administration, she was nominated to her current position.

Indigenous Debates: As the host of the “Weaving Unity” Indigenous Peoples’ Summit, you called the event “historic”. What makes this summit so important and historic?

Mama Luz Dary Aranda Morales: Being able to sit down and talk as Indigenous Peoples and as organizations has always been of great importance. The struggles of our elders in the 1970s and 80s aimed at recovering our territory and vindicating our rights demonstrated the need to sit down and talk together.
We have the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC) and also ourselves, the Indigenous Authorities of the South-West (AISO) in this region. But we had never previously sat down to talk; I did not know their advisers. It was therefore a challenge to jointly organize and coordinate this summit with the Territorial Council of Indigenous Authorities of Eastern Cauca (COTAINDOC). What’s more, working together in the different committees and reaching conclusions by consensus was also an historic achievement.

Repeatedly, different organizations’ constituencies called on the leaders to work and represent their peoples based on ancestral thinking. As an authority with a seat at the summit’s board of directors, you affirmed this approach. Is the connection of the current Indigenous organizations with the struggle and teachings left by the elders being lost?

Under the rallying cry of “Recovering the land to recover everything”, our elders guided us to reclaim our territory, memory, history, as well as our habits and customs. It was our elders’ struggle that earned us recognition of our existence as native peoples with our own culture and autonomy. Alongside this, we demanded the right to territory, not as a piece of land, but as the space in which the Misak relate to all things living therein.

Much has changed over time and much has been lost. It’s time to say: “Let’s recover ourselves in order to recover everything”. If we do not recover ourselves, we cannot recover the thinking of our elders. And if we don’t do this, things will get very complicated. We have already been invaded by so many foreign values: power, ambition, envy, churches, all of which have gradually erased our original thinking.

Faced with these challenges, what is the thinking of the elders?

At the summit, our friend and former leader of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC), elder Abadio Green, stated: “Territory is like the human body: everything, no matter how insignificant it may seem, is important. You have to relate to, you have to communicate with the community seamlessly, like blood flowing through veins or water
flowing through rivers, so that everything works”. Sometimes, we may not have this capacity to interpret but we can at least sit down with others to hold a dialogue, to coexist. This has been the hardest part. If we do not keep in mind the original philosophy our elders taught us then it will be difficult to start to weave this unity.

Our elders said of the summit: “We are only at the spinning stage, we are just sitting down to spin. Weaving will be the next step, we’ve made a start. We are spinning so that we will then be able to weave this unity”.

**What’s your view on the outcome of the summit’s First Commission on unity?**

This first commission was important. Our grassroots members criticized the fact that everything was being left to the organizations, to a handful of leaders, and so there have been some difficulties in our relationship with the people. It was useful to conduct a self-evaluation to see how we are doing and how much progress we have made.

We also asked ourselves, as Indigenous Peoples, what contribution we are going to make to the country now that Gustavo Petro has been elected. We concluded that the bulk of our actions should be focused on building the country and seeking unity. It was noted that we are neither government nor co-government, and that we will continue to be territorial authorities in order to be able to hold a dialogue as *authority to authority*, as the elders put it.

**What are these limits and points that need to be clarified in order for the relationship with Petro’s government to flow and, at the same time, maintain autonomy and governance in the territory?**

The Indigenous Senators and representatives that have been elected are telling us: “Now we are the government”. But this was clarified at the summit: “Yes, you’re in government, you’re its representatives, so you will form a bridge to us”. This means that we will continue to have authority in our territory, as we have done ancestrally, and they, as senators, representatives
and recognized leaders of the Indigenous Peoples, will form a bridge by means of which we can create an open and honest dialogue, authority to authority.

Petro’s presidency will undoubtedly be a friendly one but, at the same time, it will be very difficult to fundamentally change the system in which we are immersed. Together with our grassroots members, we will support the government, and this is why it will be important to maintain communication with our representatives. They will be the ones to say: “The government is making progress in this”, “These actions are being carried out”; they are the ones that will be supporting us. This significant clarification was agreed upon.

It is the authority that governs the territory and communicates with its people directly.

On the closing day of the summit, you complained to the president-elect’s delegates about the non-attendance of President Gustavo Petro, which had already been confirmed. What more can you tell us about this situation?

We were in Bogota. We ascertained that the President would be in the territory and he confirmed that he would attend the summit along with Francia Marquez. They both confirmed they were coming but they subsequently told us that Petro was sick. And then later we learned that he was actually somewhere else. So you’re left asking yourself what happened? Was the summit not important enough? Had they already achieved what they wanted and moved on from us?

I know security was an issue due to the threats but, if he had come, the community members could have confirmed that we stand with him. The bonds would have been strengthened, the people would have said: “Yes, we’ll lay down our lives for you”.

We, the people, worked hard to get Petro into the Presidency: we made a huge effort, we mobilized, we produced radio broadcasts, we organized regional assemblies, we went from street to street and we took elderly people to the polling stations. So the people were saying: “We want to see Petro now”.
The summit was historic and important, so he should have come to build this fellowship, and they almost always send delegates. But we wanted to have that dialogue authority to authority.

**How would you assess the political situation and economic conditions of the country to move forward with the conclusions produced by the summit to be worked on with President Petro’s government?**

I think it’s rather complicated. We have experienced 200 years of a republic, with a whole system and structure already in place. How Petro will go about transforming all of this is going to be complicated. We believe he is capable. He’s a very smart person who can help transform this, but it’s going to be a long-term project. The Indigenous Peoples have to understand how great a challenge this is: after four years, the same old people could come back. We have to work, we have to occupy every space, grasp every moment, give our support. I believe we can continue to build nationally.

Analyzing what is to come in the first 100 days of Petro's incoming government, a period in which the trend of his policies will be set, we have seen that he has prioritized other more urgent needs, such as tax reform, the hunger of many, and agrarian reform. Because of the deficit problems left by the previous government, health has been left for the moment as secondary.

The Misak compared the difficulties and challenges that we face in the struggle for change and transformation with a woman giving birth – there are those moments of crisis of pain that one has as a woman, they are strong, they are very hard, but in the end, there is a life.

(Unedited interview at request of the author)