Indigenous Summit in Colombia: unity is built from the kitchen

The summit took place on July 27-30 and was attended by seven national Indigenous organizations and 8,000 participants. The event produced a document that will be submitted to the new government setting out a road map for the relationship between both parties. Ancestral thinking and dialogue as a basis for building unity were the cross-cutting themes of the different committees. Neither the President, Gustavo Petro, nor the Vice-President, Francia Márquez, kept their promise to attend the summit.

By Mauricio Martínez – September 1st 2022

Year after year, a number of events are held to commemorate the important actions of the Misak people’s elders, who initiated the recovery of a part of their usurped territory and ancestral culture. While coordinating the 19 July commemorations in the municipality of Silvia (Cauca), the director of the Ala Kusrey ya- Misak University, Taita Fabio Calambás, and members of the Student Council were surprised to hear the news that it had been agreed to hold a national meeting involving seven Indigenous organizations: National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC), National Organization of Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon (OPIAC), Movement of Indigenous Authorities of Colombia (AICO), Indigenous Authorities of the Southwest (AISO), Tayrona Indigenous Confederation (CIT), Cauca Regional Council (CRIC) and the Gobierno Mayor.

Within just a few minutes, this news was no longer news, it was a mandate: they were to pull a large team of Misak people together from AISO to coordinate this event along with a delegation from the CRIC and the Territorial Council of Indigenous Authorities of Eastern Cauca (COTAINDOC). When we were in touch later that same night, Taita Fabio surprised
me by saying: “Are you sitting down? What I’m about to tell you is going to blow your mind.”

It was indeed a surprise. Organizing this national event in less than 15 days was a daunting task: accommodation, food, health services, communications, electricity and sanitation all had to be provided for around 8,000 people. The first thing the coordinators needed to agree on was the name of the event: The Summit of Indigenous Peoples: Weaving Unity.

In addition to the logistics, the conditions needed to be in place to ensure that this historic event, to be held between 27 and 30 July, would culminate in a unified document between the seven organizations, to be presented to the incoming government during its forthcoming visit, in the presence of the Vice-President, Francia Márquez, and the President, Gustavo Petro.

Prior to his electoral triumph, each of the Indigenous organizations had separately sent Petro a document containing their vision of the country that needed to be built, and not only from an ethnic perspective. Now the President had asked the Indigenous organizations to agree a unified position through which to draw up a road map for the government’s relationship with Indigenous Peoples.

Unity through love

The first day of the Summit opened at 9:00 a.m. in Silvia’s main square. The myriad of different delegates from Colombia’s native peoples and the distinctive colours of their clothing was evident. Gradually, though, the cold weather forced guests from warmer parts of the country to don Ecuadorian-made ruanas or ponchos, purchased in the local stores.

In the central square, the commanders of the different Indigenous guards could be heard working separately. On the left, facing the church, the Pubenence Guard of the Misak people had lined up with some solemnity; on the right, a few metres away, the CRIC guard, well-uniformed and carrying batons interwoven with coloured ribbons, were doing warm-up exercises while receiving their instructions. Meanwhile, the guards from other
organizations were continuing to arrive: from the Pijaos of Tolima department to the Pastos of Nariño. As the minutes ticked by, the ranks of the different guards began to join up and their commands unified.

At 10:00 a.m., people were allowed to enter the municipality’s covered marketplace, the agreed site for the Summit. At the bottom end, in full view, was a stage with a large screen as backdrop, its front adorned – from one side to the other – with bouquets of red and white anthuriums accompanied by yellow chrysanthemums and green foliage. Nothing was left to chance: these colours represent the flags and symbols of the various Indigenous Peoples and of the seven convening organizations.

The authorities were seated around a large rectangular table facing the audience. Mama Mercedes Tunubalá, the first Misak woman to hold the office of Mayor of Silvia, and thus representing the host authority, opened the Summit and welcomed all delegates. All the Indigenous leaders then took to the floor with messages of unity and a stated commitment to reach a consensus and, at the end of the Summit, present the conclusions to Gustavo Petro.

While the organizing committee was working out the agenda for the summit, Gunadule village leader Abadio Green was invited to the stage to reflect on the politics of unity and to link ancestral wisdom to the current situation. His words distinguished between politics as profit and the politics of the common good of everything that exists out of maternal love: “We need education from a basis of love, and where is the love? In mothers and women. In other words, it is the time of motherhood, it is the time of the mother’s government, it’s what we need. The unity of our peoples comes from the mother’s heart. What does this mean? We have to go back to our origin and, when we go back to our origin, all the cultures represented here started in a woman’s womb. The seven organizations here were born with a purpose. What is that purpose? To care for and protect Mother Earth. To care for and protect our territories”. 


At the end of his speech, he called on the men to unleash the feminine and maternal energy that nature has given us and work for unity through love and the heart rather than through reason. All those in attendance responded with a massive ovation. It was exciting to hear and see how the policy of unity was supported by ancestral thinking.

**Building a roadmap through consensus**

Early on the second day, we met with our Misak co-worker, Dario Cuchillo, who was mandated with finalizing the thematic agenda and the locations where the committees would do their work. Over a cup of coffee, he told us about the seven committees that would be set up:

- First Committee: Assessment of the Colombian Indigenous movement's road to unity
- Second Committee: Legislative agenda and structural reforms
- Third Committee: Challenges facing the Colombian Indigenous movement in relation to the 2022-2026 National Development Plan
- Fourth Committee: Relationship and dialogue with the national government and international actors
- Fifth Committee: Women, family and generation
- Sixth Committee: Youth
- Seventh Committee: Environment

The committees had a day and a half to discuss and come to their conclusions. The first, second, third and fourth were the most popular, and enjoyed the greatest participation of the authorities and leaders. The fifth, sixth and seventh were attended largely by young people and women. On the third day, as planned, the conclusions were presented.
In the Seventh Committee, the young people produced an autonomous declaration that picks up and reaffirms ancestral thinking, the *raison d'être* of the native peoples. The declaration thus demands that the State recognize and protect it: “We declare Mother Earth, and all her forms of life, as subjects of rights in order to guarantee the survival, maintenance, prevention, restoration and regeneration of her life cycles, structures, functions and evolutionary processes. The ancestral and traditional knowledge and wisdom of the native and original peoples and communities is of vital importance in this as it is they who, for millennia, have coexisted in complementarity, harmony and balance with nature and whose participation as its legitimate owners must be recognized, protected and guaranteed.”

The organizations’ authorities and leaders also considered the issue of territorial autonomy. It was inevitable that the issues discussed and their conclusions would be the very same ones that have already been repeatedly discussed with previous governments, albeit in vain given the results. The difference now is that all these issues are being comprehensively exposed so that they can be worked on structurally. The need to implement an Indigenous health system, Indigenous education system, implement the Ethnic Chapter of the Peace Agreement, expand and reorganize the Indigenous reserves, comprehensively protect the leaders, and the right to free and informed prior consultation, are just some of the important issues that have been on the agenda for years and which were included in the final document.

**Hope for change**

The final day of the summit arrived and it was now public knowledge that neither Petro nor Francia Márquez would attend. In the end, they were represented by a delegation of senators, representatives of the Historic Pact and the new Minister of the Interior, Alfonso Prada. Voices rang loud and clear complaining at the President’s and Vice-President’s failure to attend. Nevertheless, history can only be built on the circumstances that present themselves to us.
The tension created by their non-attendance was broken by the first notes of the anthem of the CRIC Indigenous guard. “Guard, guard! Strength, strength! For my race! For my land!” all those present chanted in unison. Meanwhile, the Indigenous guard entered from the side, made up of community members from all the towns, spiralling into the centre waving the different flags. At the end, in silence, the guard crouched down to leave a Misak girl and a Nasa boy standing. It was their responsibility to hand over the document. Alfonso Prada was asked to descend from the stage to receive the conclusions of the summit. The new Minister of the Interior had to move forward spiralling until he reached the centre where the children carrying the document of hope for change were standing.

Senators and representatives spoke but perhaps the most compelling words of the whole summit and this chronicle were those of Mama Luz Dary Aranda Morales, Governor of Guambia Indigenous reserve: “We have been able to meet here today, all the peoples, here in our diversity, in this ancestral territory of Silvia, Cauca. We have been able to sit down and look inwards, to reflect on our processes. But we cannot speak of unity, we cannot speak of change for life, if there is no change from the bottom, from my being, from my kitchen, from the organization, from the Indigenous Peoples. If we don’t sit down, how are we ever going to talk?”