Eliel Castillo: "We have never depended on anyone outside our culture"

As part of the regional seminar Right to autonomy and indigenous justice, the leader of the Wayúu people explains how communities are affected by wind farms set up in La Guajira: from the war amongst families, to damage to vision and hearing. The Colombian Caribbean leader speaks about his people's vision of self-government, the practice of ‘palabreo’ and the link to their territory.

By Debates Indígenas – November 1st 2022

Debates Indígenas: At the seminar, leaders from diverse Latin American Indigenous Peoples discussed the right to self-determination. How do the Wayúu people understand autonomy?

Eliel Castillo: Our way of being, living and existing is called Akuaipa. This is what allows us to walk in harmony and balance between the territory, the plants, the animals, the stars and the natural elements. We have never had anyone or anything from elsewhere to do with us. We accept autonomy as what our parents taught us: they gave it to us as an inheritance and we have passed it on from generation to generation. And we have kept it. We have never depended on someone outside our culture to exercise it, practice it and pass it on.

DI: How does the traditional practice of "palabreo" relate to autonomy?

EC: Wayúu culture is about listening and dialogue. In order to learn the ancient knowledge of our ancestors, one must learn to listen. The only way to understand is by listening. It is a way of learning that gives the human being back the possibility of quieting his life in order to learn. In this way, we pass on what we have learned to the next generations. The Wayúu have always been characterised by this: we can spend a week listening and then pass on our contributions
to continue strengthening the ancient knowledge of our parents. However, society has lost the ability to listen: we always want to talk, we always want to say, we always want to participate, but we never want to listen.

DI: The Wayúu people are organised through the matrilineal link, what is the woman's role?

EC: Amongst our people, there is the element of both complementarity and duality. The balance between light and darkness; the balance between rain (which for us is a man) and earth; the balance between cold and heat. The role of the woman is very important because she is the one who gives birth to life, who protects it and who has the duty to form it. The existence of our people depends on her. The Wayúu woman is born of the earth and is represented by the sea: they are the wombs that have given birth to our culture.

DI: What is the importance of the elders in the community?

EC: The man, the grandfathers, the father and the maternal uncles train the Wayúu men so that each one learns and has clarity about his role within the culture. So that when he meets a woman, he can balance the knowledge. As a man, I learned from my grandfather how to dress, I even remember him telling me that as a Wayúu we should even learn how to walk. So that we are respected, so that we are valued, so that we never have any kind of difficulty. My grandfather is 92 years old and he says that no one has ever raised his voice because he learned to live as his grandparents taught him. This is always his invitation for us to continue transmitting our way of being, living and existing as Wayúu people.

DI: How do Wayúu people connect with nature?

EC: The principle that defines my people is to be in harmony and balance with what is around us: with the spiritual, the natural and, of course, the human manifestations. I was listening to the experience of the Guaraní people who say that everything that exists in the territory has an owner. We, the Wayúu, say that everything that exists in the territory has protectors: the water, the land, the sea, the trees, the animals are the ones that protect everything from spiritual life to the existence of our world. In order to be able to relate to them, we must have a respectful attitude and follow the traditional rituals.

DI: What is life like for Wayúu children and young people living in the territory?
EC: As children, when we are 3 years old, we leave our parents to live with our grandparents until we are 12 years of age. In my case, I had the opportunity to live in the city, but always with the idea of returning to my territory; that’s where my grandparents were, my land, my home: it is not the same to be confined within the city as to be in a territory where you can run around in peace.

DI: What did you learn from the experience of living outside the territory?

EC: Living in the city taught me the value of Indigenous Peoples to the world, for they guarantee life and take care of the resources that nature provides us with. It taught me that as young people we must exercise leadership from within the territory. Although my territory is difficult to access and very vast, we are used to the dynamics of travelling, walking and hiking. We remain committed to staying in the territory to bring the knowledge we don’t have and to strengthen the processes.

DI: How do the Wayúu people relate to the development model promoted by non-indigenous society?

EC: There is a notion of development that has to do with water, energy, gas and all the things that people in the city need to be able to live on a little piece of land. Without these resources, cities do not advance. The big multinationals have projected this way of life as development: to have a place with the right conditions for people to live. Supposedly that makes the economy grow. They have also tried to convince Indigenous Peoples that adopting this way of life would also allow us to develop. Fortunately, this has not happened.

DI: With the aim of reducing the use of fossil fuels, the various Colombian governments are promoting wind farms in La Guajira that affect the Wayúu territory.

EC: Coal mining arrived 45 years ago in the Wayúu territory, promising development. According to the 2018 census conducted by the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), La Guajira is the second poorest department in the country. Our poverty level is 92.5% at a multidimensional and monetary level, so much so that a woman working as a domestic maid earns 20 dollars a month. Then came coal, 30 years ago gas began to be exploited, 25 years ago we had the first wind farm, and yet poverty continues to grow. The
so-called "clean energies" are supposedly better than coal, gas and oil, but for the Wayúu people they still have the same natural, social, ancestral and spiritual impact.

**DI**: So the wind farms have not benefited the Wayúu people?

**EC**: Today we have an invasion of wind farms that were installed under the conditions of other governments with the sole aim of generating profits. Wind farms are presented to us as a better option, but they have the same impact. Windmills are justified as an energy that contributes to mitigating climate change, but the only thing they seek is to continue filling the coffers of multinationals at the cost of deforestation of the territory, death, poverty and misery of the Wayúu people. The name has changed, but it has the same level of impact as before.

**DI**: Specifically, what is the impact of wind farms?

**EC**: As a result of the arrival of multinationals in La Guajira, wars have broken out between Wayúu families, resulting in deaths. Many of them for defending the value of the territory and conservation for our survival. In addition to this, there is the extraction of metals used to build these windmills: in the department there is authorization to exploit copper, gold and even more coal. However, the windmills are not built in Colombia, but in other parts of the world; we export the low value-added raw material and then import the final product. Finally, the sound emitted by the blades affect hearing, while the shadows cast by the spinning mills cause damage to vision.

**DI**: Do Wayúu communities have energy?

**EC**: The communities do not have any kind of energy so far. There is neither energy nor any guarantee of improving the quality of life in a desert territory that is large and difficult to access. There is also the pollution caused by the spillage of hydraulic oil consumed by the engines that move the blades. And it's not just the wind farm. With the wind farm comes an electrical substation that stores the energy generated by the windmills. In addition, there is the transmission line that crosses the territories: electromagnetic energy is concentrated in these current paths.
DI: What is the effect of pollution on the Wayúu people?

EC: As a result, the Wayúu are no longer going to die as elderly people, as used to be the case. Either we are born with malformations or we die very young, or we develop pathologies related to pollution. What used to be a beautiful landscape is now full of wind farms. To close what pollution is: on a spiritual level, people will no longer be able to dream, and dreaming is what guides Wayúu life. We are heading towards what the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights warned of: the physical and cultural extermination of the Wayúu, one of the most numerous peoples in Colombia.

DI: How did the Wayúu people respond to the historic change brought about by the arrival of Gustavo Petro to power?

EC: We hope to change the relationship between the territories and the companies. First, so that the contracts of the companies already installed in La Guajira can be reviewed. Second, to improve the quality of life of the communities and provide better opportunities for the children who will be born in the territories where these parks are located. Petro visited La Guajira for the third time in the aftermath of storm Julia. The times he has been there, he has said that the Wayúu need to be partners with these companies. Petro is a hope, he gives us the opportunity to change the relationship, the negotiation and the living conditions that the Wayúu have had for a long time.