

COLOMBIA SHOULD RETHINK ITS MIGRATION POLICIES

About 80 years ago, indigenous Otavalo Kichwa people from Ecuador crossed the border and came to the Colombian capital to expand their business networks. Now, Bogotá has become a base for migration to other countries. It became a case for research into transnational migration and Colombia's migration policies, called into question by Haitian and Cuban migrants in 2016.



→ The migration of Otavalo Kichwas to Colombia began with their sale of woven goods and artisanry. This was the motivation behind the first wave of migrants to the country, who established the first settlements in Bogotá, and with them the first generation of these indigenous peoples in our nation.



The women carry their children on their backs, wrapped tightly to their bodies using large shawls. Their image is completed by gold earrings and necklaces, and embroidered blouses. They are now a regular sight on the streets of Bogotá, where they sell elaborately-woven textiles to passers-by. The men are also easy to recognize by their long, jet-black, braided hair and the reed flutes, pan pipes, and guitars they use in playing traditional Andean music.

They were born in Imbabura, a province in the north of neighbouring Ecuador, and Bogotá plays two roles for them. First, they have expanded the scope of their trading activity to the city, but it has also become an enclave where they plot migration strategies to move to other countries in North American, Europe, and Asia.

The Otavalo Kichwas first came to Colombia in the 1940s considering it a land of greater business opportunities. "It had larger markets and different structures of discrimination, which they found to their liking. Older adults from Cotacachi (one of the towns of the province) still remember that as children they had to step off the sidewalk if a mestizo was approaching," explains Juan Thomas Ordóñez, professor of anthropology at the Universidad del Rosario and member of the Rosario's Identity Studies Research Group.

Since 2012, Ordóñez, who earned his Ph.D. in medical anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, has conducted research on Otavalo Kichwa relations with Bogotá and the Colombian State. These relations with Colombia and its capital have lasted nearly 80 years, and are of increasing interest to researchers who want to understand other migratory phenomena occurring within the country and to anticipate those that may develop in the future.



← Researcher Juan Thomas Ordóñez says that their long relationship with Colombia has allowed the earliest Otavalo Kichwa settlers in Bogotá, as well as their descendants, to achieve a special political status in the country. In 2005, they were recognized as an urban indigenous council (*cabildo*).



“It is important to note that Colombia is a transit point on migratory routes. We have Haitians and Cubans trying to get to the United States in the near future, and it isn’t out of the question to think that Colombia could become a receiving country for migrants if the country keeps growing at the same rate and conflict genuinely eases. We are seeing this with Venezuelans. It may be time for the country to start thinking about itself this way and prepare for that eventuality, because it isn’t doing so yet,” adds Ordóñez.

FROM TEXTILES TO MUSIC

Migration by Otavalo Kichwas to Colombia began with their sale of woven goods and artisanship as a way to expand their trading.

According to research backed up by ethnographic studies of three generations of this population group, this was the motivation and occupation of the first wave of immigration to Colombia, which brought the first settlements

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“Eventually, they realized that it was more profitable to produce fabrics here than to bring them from Ecuador, so they set up their own looms. Soon they began to bring people to work in production, generally family members and godchildren, since the godparent-godchild relation is important in Andean populations. A person with economic resources there always ends up being godparent to the children of those who work in his business.

The same thing that was happening in Bogotá, began to occur in in Popayán, Ipiales, and Medellín,” explains Ordóñez.



← It is estimated that between 4,000 and 7,000 Kichwas live in Bogotá and another 4,000 come and go every year.

The second wave of Otavalo Kichwa migration to Colombia was in the 1960s, and also made up of young people interested in selling fabrics and artisanry, but in this case, they came and returned, maintaining tighter bonds with their country of origin. The third wave, which began in the 1970s and 80s, reflected a more itinerant pattern of migration. “The literature refers to a worldwide Otavalo Kichwa diaspora,” says Ordóñez, “with the Bogotá settlement being the first and oldest, the node of numerous migration networks. The literature refers to people passing through Bogotá, but not to Bogotá as central to the networks that then took them to Europe, the United States, and even Japan and Korea,” points out the researcher.

Since then, Bogotá has been central to this indigenous group’s transnational relations. Although the Otavalo Kichwa still sell woven goods and artisanry, they have also found other means of income, for example by playing Andean music in Russia, Italy, Spain, and other countries.

SPECIAL POLITICAL STATUS

Their long stays in Colombia allowed Bogotá’s earliest Otavalo Kichwa families and their descendants to be granted special political status in the country. In 2005, during the mayoralty

of Lucho Garzón, they were recognized as an urban indigenous *cabildo*, an officially self-governing indigenous community. This, however, created tensions within the group between those who belonged to the *cabildo* and those who did not, since this distinction led to unequal relations with the Colombian State.

As Ordóñez explains, “The *cabildo* can only recognize Kichwas with Colombian citizenship or who have direct kinship with a Colombian citizen. This excluded the many Kichwas who come and go from the country.”

The *cabildo* consists of 2,000 registered people, but there are an estimated 4,000 to 7,000 Kichwas living in Bogotá and another 4,000 who come and go every year. They require legal recognition and status as migrants, and their situation illustrates the pressing need for Colombia to rethink its migration policies. ■