



Wikiakua'ipa, knitting ancestral roots in Wikipedia



Wayú voices are woven for the universe. Today, they are heard and read through the most consulted online encyclopedia: Wikipedia or *Wikiakua'ipa*, in native language. Ancestral knowledge, culture, territoriality, and histories written by women from La Guajira in their mother tongue are part of the available contents of this platform built by humankind.

By Ximena Serrano Gil
Pictures Isur - U.Rosario

Wikipedia, women, indigenous languages, and ancestral knowledge from the global South in the Colombian context is the project that contributes to the preservation of the said linguistic pluralism, led by Julio Gaitán, director of the Centro de Internet y Sociedad (Internet and Society Centre) of Universidad del Rosario, Isur, doctor of la Universita Degli Studi Di Lecce; and linguist Mónica Bonilla, researcher of Isur, with the support of the Wikimedia Foundation.

This Wikipedia project, which, in *Wayuunaiki* (wayú language), is called *Wikiakua'ipa*, was conceived, according to Gaitán, “With the aim of training women editors in their language, not to translate the Western knowledge that the Wayú will read; rather, there is a goal of epistemological revolution that involves autonomy, territoriality, and inclusion in Wikipedia construction.”

Wayuunaiki is a language that belongs to the Arawak linguistic family spoken by the Wayú, the most numerous binational indigenous people inhabiting La Guajira peninsula (in Colombia) and the state of Zulia (in Venezuela). From the Wayú worldview, a characteristic of this language is its particular and accentuated component of words and expressions in feminine, unlike others that adopt the masculine. Such is the case of *lapü*, which translates the article that agrees with the term dream in the feminine (*la*), while, in Spanish, they use the masculine article for such terms (*el*). This word evokes a central function of this culture wherein the women are the ones in charge of interpreting these *dreams* in feminine.

Wikipedia, an instrument for literate societies

“If Wikipedia is seen as a universal encyclopedia, it should consider other formats, as there are diverse and particular forms of communication that do not necessarily use the written form and are narratively rich, for which indigenous peoples such as the Wayú are really strong.” This was one of the initial approaches of the study, as explained by the researcher, who added that for that reason, they devised a project that will reach underrepresented subjects and peoples on Wikipedia.

The hegemony of some majority languages in Wikipedia imprints an ethnocentric bias with a Western approach that de-

termines the contents and their descriptions, to which is added that, by 2018, about 90 percent of those who fed the platform were men, which undoubtedly conditions and ignores approaches and ways of being and describing the world.

This was noted during the early stages of the work with Wayú women, wherein they found that many articles on Wikipedia on indigenous communities and particularly about their culture, present decontextualized visions or inaccuracies.

One of the purposes of the project is to revert the notorious gender asymmetry in the information feeding of the encyclopedia. This way, in its development, more than twenty Wayú women leaders and professors were involved, who, through co-design and co-creation exercises, participated in workshops to identify various technologies (own and assimilated) and discussed the risks and benefits of the Internet, its impact on rights, possibilities for educational development, and possible risks to culture in a broad and participatory exercise of media and information literacy.

Cultural relevance was the cross-section axis of the entire exercise, wherein they tried to reach a consensus on what constitutes own research and epistemological autonomy to build Wikipedia in *Wayuunaiki*, following the protocols, and complying with global Wikipedians community validation parameters, explained the researchers.

For her part, Mónica Bonilla, since Isur leads digital inclusion projects for speakers of indigenous languages, argues that all activities incorporated transversely a component promoting the use of indigenous languages on the Internet and social participation. “All the work done is supported in reliable sources on different topics that have been of interest at the community level and that have allowed a cultural and linguistic consolidation.”

Wikiakua'ipa, the verbosity of intelligence

Wikiakua'ipa is, without a doubt, an encyclopedia built from the wayú worldview that can be consulted on this website: <https://incubator.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wp/guc>. “This is a space where unpublished content and narratives in the mother tongue are incorporated, in which editors materialize thought through the use of the word. They are the ones who make the selection of what they want to communicate about their culture, taking into account that what is relevant to a Westerner person may not be so for a native and vice versa, which is an epistemic objective,” indicated the investigator.

Linguist Bonilla emphasizes that at this moment, there are 550 articles, more than 50 of



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← The project was conceived to train women editors in their language, not to translate the Western knowledge that the wayú will read; rather, there is a goal of epistemological revolution that involves autonomy, territoriality, and inclusion in Wikipedia construction, comments Julio Gaitán, director of the Centro de Internet y Sociedad (Internet and Society) of the Universidad del Rosario, Isur.

which are produced by the publishers. Furthermore, edits and adjustments to articles have been made on Wikipedia both in Spanish and in the version for *Wayuunaiki*. These productions, which are accompanied by audios and videos, are found in a place on the platform that is called incubator, where the information curatorship is done, references are linked, and corrections, contrasting, and verification of the support of the contents are made.

“*Wikiakua'ipa* is an incubator project until it gets a considerable number of articles and above all until an active group of publishers and editors who continue to write has been consolidated,” Bonilla pointed out. Once this objective is fulfilled, the *Wayuunaiki* will be part of the list of languages that appear on the

Steps to access the *Wayuunaiki* content in Wikipedia

From any search engine write:

1. Wikipedia incubator guc (guc is the ISO universal code that identifies the *Wayuunaiki* language)

Wikipedia incubator guc



home page of Wikipedia. For now, to do a search on the platform is necessary to know the universal ISO code that identifies the language, which, in this case, is guc.

According to the work of research, Wikipedia currently has approximately 600 entries or consultations in *Wayuunaiki*, against the millions that exist in English, Chinese, or Spanish. Nevertheless, for the Wayú, it is an important instrument because it allows students to consult the information in their language, which influences the cultural strengthening in a medium initially very westernized but frequently consulted by the schoolchildren of this ethnic group.

Pedagogical constructivism

This project, apart from technically training women to make entries in *Wayuunaiki*, was based on, and had as its central axis, the educational, media literacy, and informational component from the perspectives, models, and purposes promoted by UNESCO and of course a political component expressed in the purpose of strengthening the culture.

Throughout history, the Wayú people have preserved and reinforced their own cultural codes to the point that today, it preserves a legal system and language of its own, as well as a system of matrilineal lineage (that is, they adopt the mother's last name). This is so despite having been a culture the practices of which were articulated to trade and exchange in the Caribbean Sea since colonization.

So, making it possible for Wayú children to find in Wikipedia descriptions of their world, with which they can identify, and to learn to narrate themselves and their essence in the school space, means providing them with tools for reaffirmation and conservation of their cultural heritage.

From sorceresses to spiritual guides

Wayú women have a fundamental role in conservation and reproduction of the social structure. They are the ones in charge of transmitting certain knowledge reserved to them, to

2. Select the link: <https://incubator.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wp/guc>

Click on “All pages in this test wiki”



3. That leads to all articles created so far in *Wayuunaiki*:

<https://incubator.wikimedia.org/wiki/Special:PrefixIndex/Wp/guc/>



4. Select an item: For example: Aippia

<https://incubator.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wp/guc/Aippia>



teach the language, and to safeguard the identity of the town. They are also agents of change, in charge of preserving, caring for, and passing on the legacy of generation to generation through orality.

“Satanized for a long time as sorceresses by their knowledge, women are the representation of the sacred and *Wikiakua'ipa* has been the means to vindicate them, empower them, and enhance their social and political participation at the community level,” indicated the researcher.

“In this process, they are in charge of the formulation, design, execution of projects and the inclusion of Wikipedia within its activities. In the medium term, they will be the leaders and instructors of indigenous women of the Zenú, Arhuaco, and Muisca peoples that will join this task,” added Gaitán.

Besides implying a building effort of an academic space, this project allows the preservation of ancestral knowledge and the knowledge of different origins through dialogs inspired by the realities of each town or territory as well as the consolidation of their identities.

“It is a win to surf the Internet in indigenous languages because this goes beyond the platform. It is an exercise of vindication of rights, of listening to voices that have been silenced for centuries, and of collaboration and participation through a platform based on the principles of open knowledge, cooperation, and community. This type of exercises are a great contribution to the construction of the plural identity of the country that, among other things, evidences, recognizes, and values the indigenous component of the linguistic and cultural richness of worldviews, with other ways of communicating also being present through the Internet,” concluded Bonilla. ■

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Wayú territory

To talk about the wayú and understand their worldview is necessary to make a geographical reference of their territory. In the north corner of Colombia, in the coastal desert accompanied by an amazing sea, La Guajira was built from the centralist hegemonic vision as a territory of illegality and smuggling. However, that activity has always been perceived by this ethnic group as trade and their livelihood. Culture knows no political-geographical limits; thus, the Wayú nation occupies the Colombian Guajira and the states of Zulia, Mérida, and Trujillo, from the northeast of Venezuela.

This indigenous group belonging to the Arawak language family is the largest in Colombia, with 380,460 individuals, according to the last National Population and Housing Census of 2018. On the other side of the border, in the neighboring country, there are 750,000 individuals, approximately.

Their native language is *Wayuunaiki*, which means “language of the Wayú people.” It is spoken by more than 80 percent of its population, which shows a high degree of survival of their tongue, in which the word wayú means “person, ally, or spouse.”

The language is of great importance for the Wayú because through this, they transmit and preserve traditional knowledge, beliefs, stories, and cultural values. Likewise, the word is a fundamental element of its culture for the resolution of conflicts.

The Wayú nation is a town that has fought for its rights and has managed to articulate regional and national processes in the economic, cultural, social, political, and economic spheres. In the constitutional context, 29 years ago, its jurisdictional autonomy was constitutionally recognized, together with that of the other indigenous peoples from Colombia. Its regulatory system, wherein the *pütchipü'üi* (“babbler”) was included by UNESCO in the representative list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.