



UNCOVERING THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF THE ARHUACOS

A century ago, six Arhuacos came to Bogotá to demand that their rights be respected. The government responded by issuing decrees whose loopholes only increased abuses against the indigenous community. A seven-year-long research project by the Intercultural School of Indigenous Diplomacy at the Universidad del Rosario revealed the details of these events.



← Research shows how the arrival of religious missionaries and the forced relocation of Arhuacan children to an orphanage brought about the social decomposition of the community through oppression and violence.



↑ Stories passed down mouth to mouth provide a profoundly historical approach to the past. According to Bastien Bosa, researcher at the Intercultural School of Indigenous Diplomacy, these memories highlight Arhuacan history as it is understood by Arhuacans.

authorities because they are enemies of our race,” said Villafaña in the same newspaper interview.

Thanks to research conducted by Professor Bastien Bosa of the Intercultural School of Indigenous Diplomacy (*Escuela Intercultural de Diplomacia Indígena* - EIDI) of the School of Human Sciences at the Universidad del Rosario, we know a lot

more about this visit, its immediate causes and historical antecedents, as well as what transpired from that point on until 1930.

“The Arhuacos brought clear and detailed petitions that were apparently heard with interest. That’s why they did not understand the arrival just five months later of a group of Spanish Capuchin friars who worsened the situation and generated greater violence,” says Bastien Bosa, professor at the School of Human Sciences and coordinator of the project.

The EIDI has worked with the Arhuaco community of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta for over 10 years, several of them devoted to the reconstruction of the community’s historical memory of what happened a century ago.

Bosa had to review dozens of documents, letters, missives, photographs, writings, and accounts of the events. “We sought out available sources. The Capuchins heavily documented their missions. I even went to Valencia, Spain, where many of the written mission

documents are now stored. And the Arhuacos, too, had preserved many official documents from when San Sebastián de Rabago, now called Nabusímake, was a settlement known as a *corregimiento* (hamlet) within the Prefecture of Valledupar,” explains Bosa.

RECONSTRUCTING HISTORY

According to Bosa, one of the most valuable aspects of the research was reconstructing family histories. With the help of a group of students, these were documented and family trees were con-

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“We are victims of the civilized people, those who have taken away our rights.” With these words, Juan Bautista Villafaña (also known as Duane) made it clear to the Bogotá daily *El Nuevo Tiempo* on November 15, 1916, little more than 100 years ago, what he and his people thought of the settlers in their territory.

Villafaña was one of six Arhuaco indigenous people who traveled for three months to get to Bogotá, hoping to “reach an understanding” with the then-president of Colombia, José Vicente Concha, to find a solution to the injustice and mistreatment that they suffered at the hands of settlers. “We don’t like the civilized

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THERE WAS A HISTORY OF RESISTANCE IN THE 1920S. FAMILY STORIES TOLD OF SMALL CHILDREN WHO WALKED OVER 100 KM TO RETURN HOME BUT WERE PURSUED AND RECAPTURED UNDER THREAT OF PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT OR RETALIATION AGAINST THEIR FAMILIES OR ANYONE ELSE WHO HELPED THEM FLEE

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Bastien Bosa
Researcher

structed. “The historical depth in stories passed down by word of mouth enable a very interesting approach to the past. And these memories do not merely relate to the presence of settlers or missionaries; they allow for a focus on history from the Arhuacan point of view.”

Through this research, the reasons for the delegates’ 1916 trip to Bogotá came to light along with what happened in the following years with the arrival of the religious missionaries and the opening of an orphanage, where Arhuacan children were taken by force “to be Christianized and civilized.” The research shows how this intervention forced a social recomposition of the community through oppression and violence.

In their audience with Colombian President Concha, the Arhuacos stressed three important needs: 1) to recover their political autonomy, which they had lost with the naming of settlers as local administrative officials (*corregidores*); 2) to no longer be victims of different forms of exploitation by “civilized” people; and 3) that their cultural expressions and traditions be respected, because some of them were prohibited.

The research shows that the Arhuacos’ petitions seemed to have been heard, with a decree having been issued by the Magdalena departmental government in response to the requests, at least on paper. In practice, however, loopholes and misinterpretations led to even greater abuses against the indigenous group.



Hundreds of stories came to light recounting how children were forced to leave their families (in many cases snatched from their homes), were taken to the orphanage, where their hair was cut, their clothing confiscated, and where they were prohibited from speaking their language and raised in the Catholic religion.

“Families also remembered the history of resistance in the 1920s. Small children walked over 100 kilometers to return



One of the most valuable aspects of the research was reconstructing family histories, which allowed for the reconstruction of family trees.

home but they were pursued and recaptured under threat of physical punishment or retaliation against their families or anyone else who helped them flee,” says Bosa.

THE HORRORS OF CIVILIZATION

The archives of those days contain many missives stressing the powers granted to the Capuchins to carry out their mission and describing the ways that Arhuacos themselves hired workers, or how Indian police were used to pursue children. “This is not just a history of the missionaries, but of the Colombian State that empowered the Capuchins to Christianize and ‘civilize’ the Arhuacos,” points out Bosa.

At the same time, and in addition to the aforementioned, indigenous people were also exploited financially through exorbitant collateral charges that allowed settlers and hacienda owners to “hire themselves” to the Arhuacos for the acquired debts, sums they were generally unable to repay.

The Capuchin mission orphanage did not close its doors until 1982, after the Arhuacos peacefully submitted petitions for the return of their lands. “They had control of the community and its education for 65 years,” concludes Bosa, “and the Arhuaco community continues to be very strongly marked by this history.” ■

BACK TO THE CASA DE NARIÑO

One hundred years later, in October 2016, a delegation of 100 Arhuaco indigenous people followed in the footsteps of their ancestors and came to the presidential palace in Bogotá, the Casa de Nariño, to deliver a letter to President Juan Manuel Santos. As opposed to what took place in 1916, the contents of this missive asked the head of state to clarify the history of that earlier event. It also described how the indigenous group has worked to follow a path of peace for the last 100 years.

It took the delegation only an hour to get to the capital in an Army aircraft, and this time they were not required to have their photos taken with visiting Colombians in return for room and board. Once they arrived in Bogotá, they marched as a group from the Center for Memory, Peace, and Reconciliation to the Plaza de Bolívar, and spent two days commemorating the events of the 20th century in meetings organized by the Universidad del Rosario, in which all participants contributed their reflections on aspects of the past. Some of them focused on the violence and pain, while others exalted the dignity of the Arhuaco people.

EXCERPTS OF AN INTERVIEW PUBLISHED ON NOVEMBER 5, 1916 IN THE BOGOTÁ DAILY EL NUEVO TIEMPO.

What is the goal of your visit here?

We have come to reach an understanding with the President so that the Government will protect us.

What is happening to you?

We are victims of the civilized people, who have taken away our rights.

What do you intend to say to the president?

That if it is not possible to improve our situation we will have to emigrate somewhere else where we don't have to suffer so much, because some hacienda owners require us to work without pay and it's not unusual that we even have to sell ourselves to keep from dying of hunger.

Are you satisfied with the authorities?

No, sir. We don't want to be subject to those civilized authorities because they are enemies of our race. We will also talk about that with the president and we will ask him to name Adolfo Antonio Garavito or Carmen Izquierdo as *corregidor* (administrator) of our people. They are indigenous and they understand our way of life.

What do your people do for amusement?

Nothing! We can no longer practice our celebration as we used to according to our traditional law, because the civilized authorities have prohibited it. It is called The Dance of Casa María, which lasts a month. During that time, the tribe rests and celebrates festivals. We cannot dance anymore because they punish us, and the tribe is very disgruntled about that.

Are you Colombian?

Yes, sir. The whole tribe wants to be part of this country, but if they persecute us in la Guajira we will leave.