

Healing Mother Earth: Arhuaco indigenous women and the defence of their ancestral territory. A case study of the Gunmaku community in Colombia

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Key words: women's land access, defence of the territory, indigenous women, Arhuaco, collective land tenure, land registration.

SUMMARY

The Arhuaco people are advancing in recovering their ancestral territory after being displaced during the colonial period. It is a process they have carried out as a community and have used various strategies to get closer and closer to their goal. Members of a community often have different tasks to achieve that common goal. For this reason, in this research, I aimed to answer the following question: How do Arhuaco indigenous women of the Gunmaku community engage with the defence of their ancestral territory in an ongoing land registration program? This research is framed in the following theories: property as an analytical category, the theory of access, claim-making practices, and community feminisms. I implemented qualitative research with an ethnographic and intercultural approach; in-depth interviews and participant observation were conducted. The results show that, although the women and men of the Gunmaku community make the collective struggle for ancestral territory the centre of their daily lives, a prioritization by women is observed in specific concerns regarding their territory and the expectations of the land registration project. Through their daily work at the family level, they help heal the land physically and spiritually, which is a fundamental part of conservation as a strategy for defending the territory. This makes their tasks more visible in defending the territory from within the community. Likewise, the research shows that the women of Gunmaku are a heterogeneous category, where there are women who dedicate to housework, and there are women who have teaching work at school that allows them to have more visibility in the discussions regarding the territory in the community level and with other society members. Finally, the findings demonstrate that cultural dynamics within a collective land system are complex and intertwined at the family, community, and outside community levels.

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The perspectives and positions of the women of Gunmaku regarding the recovery of the ancestral territory are framed in the collective process of the Arhuaco indigenous people. For this reason, I wanted to understand this historical process in the research. The results show that it has been a process marked by territorial conflicts between the indigenous groups of the Sierra Nevada and various actors who have settled in the area and/or have demanded rights over this territory, such as the peasants, the government, and armed groups. For this reason, the Arhuaco people have consolidated their internal political organization. Also, they have entered into dialogues with the national government to acquire land, which goes hand in hand with a commitment by the Arhuaco people to conserve the territory following their customary practices. This has been accompanied by strengthening education, a social hierarchy where elders are respected, and cooperation with governmental and non-governmental institutions.

Among the reasons that women give to defend their territory are: (i) the fundamental role of the Arhuaco in the conservation of the environment; (ii) the importance of the territory for the development of their culture and that of their children; (iii) and the little land they have available to inhabit because culturally not all land is for living. These reasons derive from their relationship

with the territory, which goes beyond a place of subsistence. They see the territory as Mother Earth, a living being that must be healed and has sacred places essential for spiritual and environmental balance.

Currently (at the moment of this research), the Arhuaco people are still in the process of recovering the territory, and the Gunmaku community is a strategic point for this objective. In addition, at the time of this investigation, a land registration project was implemented in the community. For this reason, in this research, I wanted to find out the current concerns of Gunmaku women regarding their territory and how this interacts with the land registration program. In conversations with the women, they expressed concern that land acquisition has been more complicated than they thought. In addition, they are concerned about the loss of cultural identity due to the proximity to peasants, the environmental deterioration due to the large population in the area and the concentration of information in a few hands, especially information related to the sacred points of their territory. In this sense, the women expressed great interest in the creation of maps within the framework of the project for the identification of the sacred points of their territory for the knowledge of the community and the clarification of boundaries, which they believe will help the reduction of conflicts with their (non-indigenous) neighbours outside the community.

In this process of understanding the struggle for ancestral territory, I identified two main strategies: (i) the recovery of the land through the acquisition of plots; (i) the regeneration of nature and conservation of the territory they inhabit. This second element has been carried out through an internal organization of the Arhuaco people that regulates land access and governance. For this reason, in this research, I sought to understand how this internal organization works in the Gunmaku community and how women are situated.

I first found that conservation (healing) has a physical and a spiritual dimension for them. Physical healing is related to practices to regenerate the environment where women have a great responsibility for their work on family farms. Spiritual healing is carried out by traditional ceremonies led by the mamos, where the behaviour of women as the representation of Mother Earth also has a fundamental role. Regarding access to land, I found that it is determined at the

family level and not necessarily by gender and having a behaviour following cultural guidelines is essential to be considered by the community as deserving of the land. For their part, in land governance, some women express that their opinions are taken into account at the family level and are then taken by men to community instances.

In general, the research findings show that, although the women and men of the Gunmaku community make the collective struggle for ancestral territory the centre of their daily lives, a prioritization by women is observed in specific concerns regarding their territory and the expectations of the land registration project. Through their daily work at the family level, they help heal the land physically and spiritually, which is a fundamental part of conservation as a strategy for defending the territory. This makes their tasks more visible in defending the territory from within the community. Likewise, the research shows that the women of Gunmaku are a heterogeneous category, where there are women who dedicate to housework, and there are women who have teaching work at school that allows them to have more visibility in the discussions regarding the territory in the community level and with other society members. Finally, the findings demonstrate that cultural dynamics within a collective land system are complex and intertwined at the family, community, and outside community levels. This is why public policies and projects must understand these dynamics to achieve the communities' objectives satisfactorily and not have unwanted effects due to their actions.

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