

*«I am a woman who finds power and strength in the river»: Afro-Colombian Women
Organising Around Ancestral Knowledges for Social Transformation*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	I
ABSTRACT	IV
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
1.1 Background	1
1.2 A Brief History of Guapi and the Pacific Coast of Cauca	2
1.3 Guapi's Social and Communitarian Organisation	3
1.4 Research Objectives	4
1.5 Central Concepts	4
1.6 Thesis Outline	5
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework	5
2.1 Mapping Global Debates of Ancestral Knowledge	6
2.2 Ancestral Knowledge in Latin America	7
2.3 Afro-Colombian Women and Ancestral Knowledge	8
2.4 The contribution of this study	10
2.5 Theoretical Framework	10
2.5.1 Decolonial Critique: The Coloniality of Power	10
2.5.2 Black Decolonial Feminism: Feminism In-Place	11
Chapter 3: Methodology	12
3.1 Research Approach	12
3.2 Case Study Design	13
3.3 Data Generation Methods	14
3.3.1 Study site	14
3.3.2 Recruitment	14
3.3.3 Semi-Structured Interviews	15
3.3.4. Observation, Field Notes and Supporting Documents	16
3.4 Data Management	17
3.5 Data Analysis	17
3.6 Trustworthiness of The Research	17
3.7 Ethical Considerations	18
3.8 My Role as Researcher	19
3.9 Challenges and Limitations	19
Chapter 4: Findings	20
4.1 Identity and Uniqueness: "We cannot get rid of what actually represents us"	21
4.2 Continuity and Survival: "Those are important things in the community, and for one's living"	22
4.3 Ancestral Knowledge Transmission: "The elders are being taken as living libraries"	25
4.4 Organising from The Margins	27
4.4.1 Union and Solidarity to Cope with Exclusion: "If we women separate, violence against women will continue"	27
4.4.2 Positioning and Resignification: "We must empower ourselves from there, and make ourselves visible"	29
4.4.3 Resisting Institutional Neglection: "This is another country"	31
4.5 Ancestral Knowledge and Development	33
4.5.1 Understanding Development: "Those practices had allowed us to generate development from within"	34

4.5.2 Interaction with external actors: “What comes from outside, is to strengthen what we already have”	35
Chapter 5: Discussion.....	37
5.1 Ancestral knowledge: A project of Being.....	38
5.2 Ancestrality as a multifaceted insurgency to Be Black women.	41
5.3 Development, Women’s Participation and Citizenship	45
Conclusions.....	49
Appendices	60
Appendix A: Ethical Clearance from NSD	61
Appendix B: Consent Form	63
Appendix C: Interview Guide	66
Appendix D: Maps.....	68
Appendix E: Field images.....	69

List of Tables

Table 1: Overview of participant’s profiles

ABSTRACT

Afro-Colombian women from the Pacific region of Colombia embody and defend their ancestral practices and knowledges. This is reflected in their grassroots movements. At the same time external actors deploy their development projects and programs in the territories these women inhabit, and make women target of those interventions. This research explores the role of ancestral knowledge for women's individual lives and collective organising. Moreover, it explores the relationship between ancestral knowledge, gender relations, and development processes.

Based on findings generated through field observations and six semi-structured interviews, I propose a decolonial analysis of ancestral narratives and embodied practices in rural and urban areas of the Pacific Coast of Cauca, focusing on a specific group of women and their networks. These women are all connected one way or another to Fundación Chiyangua which constitutes the case of this study. The findings indicated that ancestral knowledge was deeply rooted in the participants individual and collective lives. It was part of their identity that characterised them as unique, but also it was important for their collective struggles and their survival in a context of state neglect. Losing their knowledges would be to lose themselves. However, marginalisation pushed women to safeguard their knowledges and practices, in order to preserve their existence. Moreover, women promoted ancestral union and solidarity to struggle against gender hierarchies, but their struggles were complex and intersectional. Finally, while women's vision of development was also associated to their ancestral values and knowledge, their interaction with non-state and state actors moved in a paradox: non-state development actors were assessed more positively than what the women viewed as imposed development by state-actors. Non-state actors seemed to be more sensitive to local needs and had comparatively contributed more to the women's agendas for social change.

From a critical perspective, I argue that the women's ancestral practices and knowledges can be viewed as a political-epistemic insurgency to transform gender arrangements and to challenge experiences of dehumanisation based on forms of intersecting racialised, classed and territorial oppressions. Furthermore, the women's engagement with development actors, reflects a colonial attitude from the Colombian state through top-down development interventions, but it also reveals how the women actively negotiate uneven power relations. A decolonial lens helps to understand the larger picture of the women's struggle, and their agency in the face of the colonality of power, colonality of being and colonality of gender to which they are subject. **Key Words:** *Afro-Colombian Women, Black Women, Ancestral Knowledge, Gender, Development, Coloniality/Decoloniality, Colombia.*

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

The Colombian Pacific has been an important ground for post-development thinking after Arturo Escobar's masterpiece "*Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*" written in 1995. A relevant part of the literature on post-development has addressed the cosmovision of black and indigenous peoples, also known as their ancestral knowledge (Escobar, 2008), as a way to counter colonising narratives of so-called "underdevelopment". Years have passed since then and with that, the discourses, and visions of Afro-descendants and Indigenous peoples of Colombia seem to have expanded beyond academic circles to reach broader sectors such as feminists, environmentalists, and youth. In March 2022, for the first time in the history of Colombia, Francia Marquez, an Afro-Colombian woman from a rural community, was nominated as a vice-presidential candidate (Collins, 2022). Marquez has called for structural transformations and a development model based on racial justice, democratic participation, and social investment to end the Colombian armed conflict and prevailing social inequalities (Marquez, 2021). She has called this "*La politica de la vida* [the politics of life]" versus "*La politica de la Muerte* [politics of death]". Additionally, Marquez's website claims that together with the people that has historically struggled, she has strengthened herself as a black woman with values, principles and invaluable ancestral knowledge" (Marquez Mina, 2022). It is estimated that only in January and February 2022 around 274.000 persons were affected by armed violence in Colombia (United Nations, 2022). Moreover massacres and killings had increased (Oidhaco, 2022). While the country is amidst of such a humanitarian crisis, many see in Francia Marquez the hope of a new country. New and old issues are on the political agenda, such as Colombia's historical problem with structural racism and discrimination, the spread of violence, the environmental degradation, and deep economic inequalities.

Thus, we must ask ourselves: is it true, as argued by Mosquera et al. (2018), that the voices and steps of black thought from Southwest Colombia, that convene for freedom of any community or territory, coincide and connect with the multiple struggles of peasants, indigenous peoples, the urban poor and Afro-Latin Americans? Do these struggles represent a decolonial turn in Colombia? What are the implications of this for the country's development model? Can ancestral knowledges, values, and practices contribute to shaping Colombia's future? In light of these questions, the current context of social transformation calls for new readings of the struggles of Afro-Colombian women and their embeddedness in gendered

inequalities and development objectives. This study sheds light on the relationship between Afro-Colombian women's organizing around ancestral knowledges and practices with a particular attention to gender and development. Drawing on qualitative data from field work in January 2022, it centres on a group of Afro-Colombian women from Guapi, on the Pacific Coast of Cauca, a region in Southwest Colombia.

1.2 A Brief History of Guapi and the Pacific Coast of Cauca

The Pacific Coast of Cauca, a subregion located in the southwest Colombian Pacific, is composed by three municipalities: Guapi, Timbiquí and López de Micay (Defensoria del Pueblo, 2014)¹. Most of the population is Afro-Colombian and to a lesser extent, indigenous. Before the Spanish colonisation, this territory was inhabited by indigenous populations. Due to the inhumane exploitation under Spanish colonial rule, the population declined. Therefore, from the 17th century the colonisers started to bring people from Africa who were enslaved to work in mining enclaves and in colonial estates (Castaño, 1987; Whitten E. & Friedemann, 1974). Nevertheless, since the beginning of Spanish conquest, there were also struggles for liberation. Those acts grew to the extent that runaway blacks constituted a major threat to the colonial society. Black people developed their own culture from their capacities and practices to achieve their own socio-historical space, despite the existing systems of domination. Once they achieved freedom they settled on the river banks (Whitten E. & Friedemann, 1974).

Today Guapi city, founded in 1772 by Spanish colonisers, is a small-size city of approximately 13,000 inhabitants (Municipality of Guapi, 2020). Guapi, as the Colombian Pacific in general, is characterized by an extensive fluvial network. For Afro-Colombians the rivers are symbols of resistance, while forests are mystical places where territorial and spiritual understandings are intertwined (Murcia Acevedo et al., 2017).

There has been considerable discussion about the reasons that have maintained the population of regions like the Pacific Coast of Cauca at the margins of national political life despite their long-term settlement. However, it is well-known that throughout the 20th century the Colombian State was unable to consolidate its institutional representation as it did in other parts of the country. It expressed itself in precarious ways by focusing on basic services and through a political-institutional system in which the members of certain ethnic communities are treated as second-class citizens (Colombian Ombudsman, 2014).

¹ See appendix D.

Furthermore, since the 1980s, the ongoing armed conflict began to expand through the rivers of the Pacific Coast of Cauca.² This dispute for territorial control that increased in the 90s had high levels of impact on the population, who have become victims of forced displacement and forced recruitment along with a range of other consequences. In addition, the implementation of extractivist development models has negatively impacted a large segment of the population and the environment (Colombian Ombudsman, 2014). In the aftermath of the 2016 Colombian peace agreements, the Pacific Coast of Cauca should have been a priority under the figure of the “Development Plans with Territorial Approach” (Bravo, 2021). Nonetheless, lacking political will to implement the peace agreements, coupled with the rapid reconfiguration of the armed conflict, continue to result in forced displacements and new records of killings of social leaders (Zulver, 2021).

1.3 Guapi’s Social and Communitarian Organisation

Colombia was considered a “color-blind” state prior to the nineties. Behind the discourse of a homogenous three-race nation and with no legal racial domination, racism and structural inequalities were denied (Paschel, 2010; Wade, 2003). However, the 1991 Colombian Constitution recognised the country as “pluri-ethnic” and “multicultural” and established protections of the country’s diversity through a politics of difference.³ In front of this legal opening, rural Afro/Black Colombian movements strategically emphasized aspects such as ethnic difference, ancestrality, culture, territory, and biodiversity preservation to push the state for the enactment of the Black Communities Law also labelled Law 70 of 1993 (Paschel, 2010; Vergara Figueroa, 2013). This strategy was developed in a context in which the armed conflict and large agribusiness corporations led to the widespread dispossession of the territories that black peoples had occupied since colonial times. Law 70 recognised the right to collective land titling to Black Community Councils, the units of social organization for rural Afro-Colombian ethnic communities. Also, it mandated the inclusion of Afro-Colombian history in the educational curriculum and granted Black Communities the right of development, as well as the right to be consulted on development projects that affected them (Paschel, 2010).

² Armed conflict between the Colombian government and subversive groups has haunted the Pacific Coast of Cauca since the 1960s. The armed groups are represented by paramilitary and guerrilla groups such as the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army) and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia, FARC).

³According to Paschel (2010) the racial equality frame is associated with sameness, integration, and equality. Consequently, the solution to racial discrimination under this frame would be to break down the barriers that enable discrimination to achieve the integration of all racial groups. On the other hand, the frame of ethnic difference relies on ideas of the right to cultural difference, and it involves claims of autonomy and territory.

Following the approval of law 70, the rural part of Guapi was collectively titled to five Black Community Councils. Likewise, several black women's organisations and networks had their genesis in this period. Kiran Asher (2007) a social scientist and postcolonial feminist that was in the field from 1995 to 1999 and documented the establishment and expansion of Guapirean women's organisational processes. She found that Guapirean women's organisations were shaped by the discourses and practices of development. My study on Afro-Colombian women from Guapi examines this relationship further and looks into how these processes have evolved to the day, linking them to struggles of preserving ancestral knowledges and practices.

1.4 Research Objectives

This study aims to explore the way ancestral knowledge shapes the lives and organization of a group of Afro-Colombian women engaged in organisational work and communitarian networks. Particularly, this research focuses on women who form part of a network named *Red Matamba y Guasa*, with a particular focus on a non-governmental organisation named *Fundación Chiyangua*, which is affiliated with this network and works actively to preserve ancestral knowledges and practices. I examine the following research questions:

- a) What role does ancestral knowledge play in these women's individual lives and collective organization?
- b) What relationships are found between ancestral knowledge and the women's negotiation of gender relations?
- c) What role does ancestrally play in the women's view of local development processes?

1.5 Central Concepts

Within the framework of the 2001 World Conference against Racism, the term *Afro-descendant* refers to the African diaspora in the world. As a legal category it provides status as a subject of international rights (OCHA, 2014). The Latin America pre-conference agreed on the term as an inclusive category for all the descendants of the African diaspora in the Americas (Antón Sánchez, 2013). Similarly, the term *Afro-Colombian* refers to Colombians of African descent. This term was proposed as a rejection to the category of *Black*, considered a racist, stereotyped and dehumanising imposition that converted Africans into "Black" (Mosquera Mosquera, 2005). Its use then would mean the recognition of a relationship of subordination since the transatlantic slave trade. Instead, the terms Afro-descendants and Afro-Colombians were proposed. However, others argued that denying the term "Black" would be denying not

only the history of oppression but also the history of struggles and resistance, thus they vindicate a positive construction against racist connotation (Grueso, 2007). Finally, the current Colombian legal framework recognises a ***Black Community*** as a group of families of Afro-Colombian descent who share a common history, traditions and customs within the rural-urban relationship, revealing and preserving an identity awareness that distinguishes them from other ethnicities (Congreso de Colombia, 1993). With the aim of including the two different definitions and constructions of difference, in this study I will employ the terms Afro-Colombian and Black interchangeably.

Ancestral Knowledge is defined as a collection of knowledge, practices, uses, customs, information, and ways of life that define the identity and existence of a community within its worldview. Therefore, ancestral knowledge is one of the most defining characteristics of its identity. It is called ancestral because it is created in an ancestral manner, has ancient roots, and has been manifested, shaped, and developed collectively (Antón Sánchez, 2015). With awareness to this definition of ancestral knowledge, in this study, I am primarily preoccupied with understanding the meaning the women themselves give to the term.

1.6 Thesis Outline

This thesis is organised into five chapters. Following this introduction, the second chapter reviews global literature trends and presents the theoretical framework that guides the analysis. Chapter 3 describes the research design, methods, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 and 5 present the empirical findings which are then discussed in light of relevant literature and theory. The final section provides the research conclusions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The following literature review relies on literature found in Oria and Google Scholar. It maps research trends and salient areas globally and locally around ancestral knowledge, development, and women. The inclusion criteria considered the research questions, scope and limitations and included search terms such as “ancestral indigenous knowledge”, “ancestral knowledge”, “women”, “gender” and “development”. This search was done both in Spanish and English. In Latin America indigenous knowledge could be understood narrowly as the knowledge of native pre-colonial populations, excluding the knowledge of other important groups such as Afrodescendants. Therefore, in Spanish I also included the term “*saberes ancestrales*” [ancestral knowledges].

2.1 Mapping Global Debates of Ancestral Knowledge

Prior research suggests that ancestral knowledge is widely discussed as a decolonizing alternative in the Global North, with some focusing on racial/ethnic minorities and others on native populations. Conversely, studies which examine the relationship between ancestral knowledge and development are more prevalent in African or Latin American countries.

A group of studies underline ancestrality and resistance among native populations, particularly among countries that were colonies of the British colony. Remarkably, this type of research seems to have been spawned after Linda Tahiwai Smith's "*decolonizing methodologies*", published in 1999, as a guide for research initiatives with indigenous communities or with minorities. Thus, there is a solid body of literature about First Nations' ancestral knowledges (Coté, 2016; Daniels, 2019; Joseph et al., 2022; McKinley, 2019; Neeganagwedgin, 2013; Stelkia et al., 2021). Another region where this type of literature is produced is the Oceania, with discussions about New Zealand and Australian native populations (Bruchac, 2014; Daniels, 2019; Hill et al., 2020; Oetzel et al., 2020); and in the South Pacific, particularly in relation to native Hawaiian communities (Chandler, 2018). Whereas all focus on resistance in general, only a part of this research has an explicit focus on women (Chandler, 2018; Lee & Evans, 2022).

Another group of studies from the Global North discusses ancestral knowledges of cultural and ethnic minorities as a form of resistance within a larger context of colonial oppression and trauma (French et al., 2020; Harris, 2018; Moore & Gibbons-Taylor, 2019; Patton, 2013). For instance French et al. (2020) posit that racism and discrimination against minorities in the United States generate serious health effects, and for the purpose propose a radical healing method which consists in resisting colonial knowledge and practices but also in building a healthy identity. Likewise, Patton (2013) and Harris (2018) propose ancestrality as a healing pedagogy while focusing on Afro-American women and their importance in transmitting knowledge.

Although some studies from the Global North reflect on women's ancestral knowledges (Chandler, 2018; Harris, 2018; Lee & Evans, 2022; McKinley, 2019; Moore & Gibbons-Taylor, 2019), the relationship between women's ancestral knowledge and development is insufficiently explored. In general, the relationship between ancestral knowledge and development in Global North literature remains an open question which is not very surprising since development has traditionally been considered as something that should happen in the Global South, while the Global North has been imagined as already "developed", as argued by Escobar (1995).

Considering literature from Africa and Latin America, however, a solid body of scholarship links ancestral knowledge to development. Maunganidze (2016) finds that African indigenous knowledge has been the least mobilized for sustainable development. He argues that, in Zimbabwe, this is due to factors such as the spread of Christianity and the adoption of Western science and culture, but also because elders die without transmitting knowledge, resulting in ancestral knowledge's exclusion from mainstream development. Moyo and Moyo (2014), however, suggest that the problem is an ontological wall between development experts and rural farmers. Their research in Malawi reveal that development experts fail to accept and recognize progress according to ancestral understandings. Other studies focus on the ancestral knowledge of women and its relevance into the field of sustainable development (Aluko, 2018; Garutsa & Nekhwevha, 2018). Except from one article on women's grassroots organizing based on indigenous knowledge (Tolulope & Muthoni, 2017), there seems to be little research on how women's organizing can contribute to development by upholding their epistemologies and ontologies.

2.2 Ancestral Knowledge in Latin America

Latin-American scholarship has produced a relevant body of literature on ancestral knowledges. Over time, an extensive literature has developed on traditional practices, agroecology, and alternative forms of sustainable development. Much has been written about grassroots' organized resistance to regain control over agro-food systems and achieve food sovereignty in ancestral territories (Cáceres-Arteaga & Lane, 2020; Gonçalves et al., 2021; Intriago et al., 2017; Jacobi et al., 2017; Merino, 2021; Suárez-Torres et al., 2017). For instance, Suárez-Torres et al. (2017) describe the resurgence of Latin-American peasant organizations that are proposing an agroecological production that combines ancestral knowledge with modern research along with the principles of social solidarity and communal living. Multiple studies reclaim the role of ancestral knowledges in revitalizing sustainable forms of production and in creating development from within in contrast to external development organizations that often fail to achieve their development targets (Einbinder & Morales, 2020; Suárez-Torres et al., 2017). Others, such as Intriago et al. (2017), describe the establishment of an agro-food system as a liberation path that goes beyond sustainable development towards the recovery of food systems control to achieve food sovereignty.

Another trend in Latin American scholarship is the discussion about the interplay between ancestral knowledge, identity, and cultural heritage in shaping indigenous movements' interaction with governmental and non-governmental organizations (Benedetti, 2021; Coral-Guerrero et al., 2021; Intriago et al., 2017; Weitzner, 2017). Benedetti (2021) argues that even

though development projects are primarily established to overcome poverty and vulnerability they also include objectives such as “cultural preservation”. This makes certain minority groups working to preserve ancestral knowledges, a target for these development projects, ultimately benefitting these groups. Moreover, several studies also explore the interaction of the state with ancestral knowledge through the introduction of the popular *Sumak Kawsay*⁴ or *Buen Vivir* cosmologies in the national discourses and constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia. (Coral-Guerrero et al., 2021; Intriago et al., 2017).

Interestingly, existing research indicates a gendered trend in the literature about women and ancestral knowledge, and discuss women’s role in health care, food production or the guardianship of knowledge. For instance, some studies explore the relation between women, midwifery, and marginalization (Dixon et al., 2019). Within this group some discuss gender in agroforestry practices (Cáceres-Arteaga & Lane, 2020; Gonçalves et al., 2021; Lori et al., 2020). For example, the systematic review conducted by Gonçalves et al. (2021) finds that women play a fundamental role in management, education, teaching and income generation in indigenous communities. They contend that agroforestry practices carried out by women can empower them, but agricultural policies ignore those practices and do not contribute to enhancing gender equality. In contrast, Cáceres-Arteaga and Lane (2020) examine climate change adaptation through agroecological practices in Ecuador and conclude that agroecological practices have challenged the gendered dimensions of traditional agriculture and that policy support has contributed to legitimizing ancestral knowledge. The authors find that women engaging in those practices can generate income, improve their self-esteem, and empower themselves to make decisions within their families, participate in community organizations and assume leadership goals.

Like the studies mentioned above, research in Latin America has generally been devoted to ancestral knowledge of native indigenous populations. Less attention has been paid to ancestral knowledge of Afro-descendant populations.

2.3 Afro-Colombian Women and Ancestral Knowledge

Unlike research on a global level, studies in Colombia on ancestral knowledge seem to be framed within the narratives of resistance to institutional and armed violence. There is also a prevalence for studies from the Pacific region, and from those there seem to be more literature about the Choco Department than about Cauca.

⁴ Sumak Kawsay is an expression in Quichua language that can be

Existing research in Colombia follows partly the global trends. Some scholars explore the role of Afro-Colombian women in sustaining localized food systems and plant management (Camacho, 2017; Turner et al., 2020) or in relation to midwifery (Suárez-Baquero & Champion, 2022). However, most studies stress ancestral knowledge and Afro-Colombian women grassroots organizing as a means to overcome the physical and cultural effects of armed conflict, and to propose a collective reparation process (Cruz Castillo, 2020; Cruz Castillo & Baracaldo, 2019; Henríquez Chacín, 2020; Lozano Lerma, 2016b; Quiceno et al., 2017; Zulver, 2021). Grassroot organizing is also seen as a way to vindicate women's political and cultural goals (Carrascal & Riccardi, 2019; Guevara, 2013).

In this sense, the literature is broad, and gender perspectives are contentious. Zulver (2021) for instance, contends that Afro-Colombian women, who have historically suffered from racial violence, often reclaim femininity to regain their physical integrity and personal agency. This does not fit with mainstream feminism that has tended to view female liberation as women leaving traditionally female roles to enter male spaces. Camacho (2017), for example, argues that Afro-Colombian women's practice of home-gardening, traditionally a female activity, is an essential aspect for territorial appropriation and sociocultural reconstruction, and that gender arrangements are based on a principle of complementarity rather than equality. As forced displacement breaks Afro-Colombian people away from their territory and collectivity, scholars argue that the social production of a home place is not a political neutral activity, but rather part of a power struggle that helps the resettlement and reconstruction of life (Camacho, 2017; Henríquez Chacín, 2020; Turner et al., 2020). Interestingly, Camacho (2017) also highlights that women bring their struggle to the city: displaced women capitalize on the stereotypes of black women's "domesticity" to find economic opportunities as maids, cooks or street sellers. Carrascal and Riccardi (2019), on the other hand, identify traditional gender norms as patriarchal and problematic in limiting women's access to the non-care job market.

Some studies have explored the relationship between ancestral knowledge and development among Afro-Colombian women. According to Turner et al. (2020), ancestral practices do not only serve as a resource for food and well-being, but they also offer a framework for determining development priorities based on local identity and connection to the land. The study concludes that both state and non-state actors support male provisioning activities more than female provisioning activities. Moreover, the ability of defining communities' own vision of development has been presented as a form of reparation for displaced women and communities (Cruz Castillo & Baracaldo, 2019; Guevara, 2013).

2.4 The contribution of this study

Within the literature from the Global North, an understanding of the relationship between development and ancestral knowledge is still lacking. Literature from the Global South, however, provides different interpretations about ancestral knowledge, gender and development, yet exploration of women's organising remains limited. In Latin America, as in the Global North, studies tend to focus on ancestral knowledge of indigenous communities, while studies on Afrodescendants' ancestral knowledges are less explored. Previous research can only be considered the first step towards a more profound understanding of the relation among Afro-descendant women, ancestral knowledge, and development. This study aims to address shortcomings on a global, regional, and local level by exploring the ancestral knowledge and practices of an organised group of Afro-Colombian women, and how this is linked to gender and development.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

2.5.1 Decolonial Critique: The Coloniality of Power

This research is preoccupied with knowledge from the Global South. Therefore and in order to decenter Eurocentric perspectives of knowledge, the study builds upon the Decoloniality/Modernity framework, which was developed by Caribbean and Latin American scholars to offer an alternative interpretation of race, gender, and power (Mendoza, 2016). Particularly, I will refer to the concepts of *coloniality of power* and *coloniality of knowledge* (Quijano, 2000). Upon this perspective, the idea of "race" was created along with colonisation to classify the world's population. In order to establish social, mental and cultural hierarchies, this system of power controlled the knowledge production by assuming the superiority of colonizers (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Quijano, 2000; Quijano, 2007). Additionally, the ideas of rationality and modernity were claimed as purely European products, which excluded non-European peoples from rationality and modernity. Hence, those populations were considered irrational/primitive/traditional. Non-Europeans can become modern and rational through a process of cultural Europeanisation, essential to access power and "development". This colonial modernity represents a dichotomous hierarchy between the human and the non-human (Lugones, 2010). Although colonialism as a formal political system of domination has ended, the *coloniality of power* still manifests itself in the racist distribution of work or in the concentration of the control of productive resources (Quijano, 2000; Quijano, 2007). Not coincidentally the majority of those exploited, dominated, and discriminated against belong to

certain “races”, “ethnicities” or “nations” (Mendoza, 2016; Quijano, 2007). Thus, decolonization requires the liberation of knowledge, reflection, and communication from the pitfalls of European rationality/modernity. It requires acknowledging the heterogeneity of all reality, closing the doors to reductionism. It is a process of social liberation of the power organized as inequality, discrimination, exploitation, and domination. Quijano (2000) argues that a radical process of democratization entails the decolonization of race/ethnic relations and class redistribution of power, broadening citizenship and the representation of diverse and heterogeneous elements of the society. Thus, this framework, developed in the Global South, is appropriate to explore the potential of ancestral knowledge, as a non-modern epistemology from people of the Global South, but also to gain a more complex understanding of power relations between knowledge and ethno-racial categories.

2.5.2 Black Decolonial Feminism: Feminism In-Place

Gender is a central theme in this research. However, the Coloniality/Modernity framework has been criticised for not problematising gender thoroughly (Lugones, 2010). Similarly, Connell (2014, p. 525) has claimed that typical scholarly work within gender studies from the periphery combines local data with one or two theories from the metropole. In this research I rely on concepts developed in order to decenter Eurocentric notions of gender, race and ethnicity. I will draw on the concepts of *insurgence* (Walsh, 2010), *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1991), and the *coloniality of being* (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). These concepts are all employed by Afro-Colombian decolonial feminism. Decolonial feminism seeks to decolonize feminist thought by making visible the concealment and resistance practices of women from the Global South (Connell, 2014; Lozano Lerma, 2016a; Lugones, 2010; Moore Torres, 2018). Walsh (2010) has defined *insurgence* as a transgression that goes beyond resistance to transform and build new societies that challenge the coloniality of power. Following the concept of *insurgence*, Lozano Lerma (2016a) conceptualises Afro-Colombian women’s quotidian practices as an *insurgence* that surpasses the domestic to build communities. In this exercise, the space, thus the territory, is critical to the creation of resistances and alterities. Consequently, the *politics of place* are those practices and knowledges embodied by Afro-Colombian women that form a *quotidian and epistemic insurgence* to resist, reappropriate, defend, and reconstruct place/territory and community. Lozano Lerma (2016a) defines this as “Ancestral, Black, Insurgent, Afro-Colombian feminism” or as a *feminism in-place*, upon which making a place/territory is an economic, politic, and epistemological dispute within a context of historical enslavement, dehumanization, exclusion, segregation, and dispossession to which Afro-Colombian communities have been subjected.

Additionally, intersectionality developed by Black feminists, but coined by Crenshaw (1991), serves to understand how gender, class, race, ethnicity and sexuality, among other social categories, intersect in shaping experiences of privilege and oppression. In Latin America, the connection between “racial” issues and social inequities has been broadly debated, however, less has been said about its relationship with gender and sexuality (Vigoya, 2017). Since this research focuses on a group of Afro-Colombian women and ancestral knowledges, a decolonial feminist framework and intersectionality serves to capture the breadth, complexity, and inclusivity necessary to problematise coloniality in association with issues such as gender, race/ethnicity, territoriality, and/or class, and how these are connected.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This research was interested in exploring the personal experiences, meanings, and practices of a group of Afro-Colombian women in this particular historical moment and in a specific spatial and socio-cultural context. Therefore, a qualitative methodology was the most suitable research approach as it seeks to explore and understand the individual’s view of a particular issue (Creswell, 2009; Yilmaz, 2013), as well as the social context, considering time, space and emotions (Neuman, 2014b). This approach in addition to explaining the “why” and “how”, can give voice to people who are ordinarily silent or whose perceptions are rarely considered (Skovdal & Cornish, 2015).

Accompanying decolonial critique and the critical feminist approaches introduced above, I employ the interpretivist social science approach upon which meanings are socially generated by individuals, within a particular context, through the direct detailed observation of people in their natural setting (Creswell, 2009; Neuman, 2014c). Firstly, my epistemological assumption is that knowledge is a form of power. Based on Chilisa and Tsheko’s (2014) relational epistemology, this research views knowers as beings in connection with each other, beings in connection with ancestral spirits, and beings in relationship with the world around them that inform what they know and how they can know about it. (p. 223). Therefore, this research values communities as knowers, and it values the knowledge stored in their language, practices, rituals, proverbs, myths, and folktales. Secondly, this research is not value-free; it has a politically and socially motivated objective (Neuman, 2014c): the recognition of Afro-descendant/Black women leadership within a context of silence and social injustice. Writing about marginalized people is twofold: it deals with epistemological decolonization for an

interchange of experiences and meanings (Quijano, 2007), and it implies writing about silence which is:

To make knowable a life story that deserves to be told, it is turning into a text a life history that deserves to be told. It is to make text an experience, feeling, though, emotion, illusion, utopia. It is to challenge the epistemology of ignorance that, in the case of Afro-descendant women, makes humanity feel little empathy for their pain, for their tears, for their duels” (Vergara Figueroa, 2021).

Through this research, I intend to centre and problematize women’s diverse situations and the institutions that frame those situations (Creswell & Poth, 2018c, p. 27), and beyond interpretivist’s relativism, this research takes into account both women subjectivities as well as the broader long-term structural conditions for women and communities in Guapi.

3.2 Case Study Design

This dissertation follows a case-study design, with an in-depth analysis of the multiple perspectives, the complexity and uniqueness of a group of women within Guapi's social fabric around issues regarding gender, development, and ancestrality. Although culture is highly relevant for this research, a case study was preferred over ethnographic research whose main intent is to determine how culture works (Creswell & Poth, 2018b, p. 96). A case study design is consistent with the research's purpose: to develop a comprehensive, in-depth understanding of a real-life contemporary bounded system over time, based on multiple sources of data collection. The case study research also helps link micro-level action to a large scale of processes and structures (Neuman, 2014b). This case study began with an identification of an organization named Fundación Chiyangua as a boundary. Then, research methods were planned in order to connect the actions and meanings of women linked to that organization with larger institutional dynamics through the integration of multiple data sources.

3.3 Data Generation Methods

3.3.1 Study site

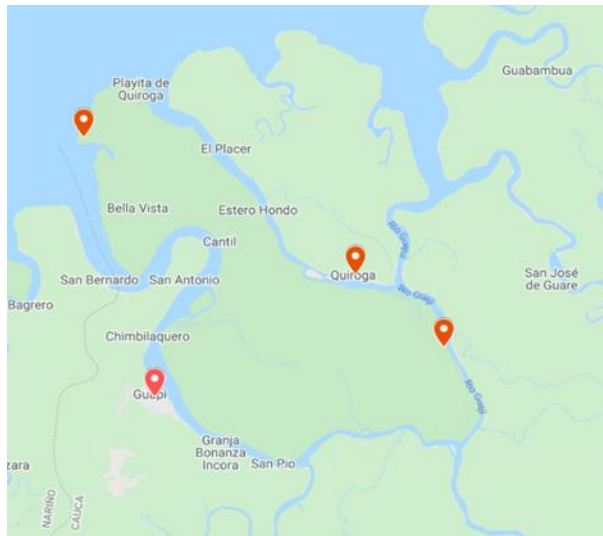


Figure 1. Map including four locations of data collection

The research was conducted in Guapi. About 60% of Guapi's population inhabits the urban area while 40% lives in the rural areas (Guapi, 2020). The rural area is collectively titled into five Black Communities Councils: (1) Alto Guapi, (2) Guapi Abajo, (3) Napi, (4) San Francisco, and (5) Guajuí. Fundación Chiyangua's headquarters is located in the urban area, while the rural communities in which research was carried out were part of River Guajuí and Guapi Abajo Community

Councils.

3.3.2 Recruitment

The selection of participants was based on purposive sampling. The aim of this type of sampling is to select and study a small number of people and unique cases to produce a wealth of detailed information (Yilmaz, 2013). This sampling selection was appropriate to ensure a diversity in terms of age, urban/rural, educative level, occupation, and situations. Participants were recruited with help of the organization staff who introduced me to potential participants. Additionally, before travelling to Guapi I requested to join the new sustainable tourism project "The spell of the mangrove" coordinated by Fundación Chiyangua along with two other organisations: *Asoagropesqui*⁵ and *Construyendo Sueños*. This was an opportunity for me to interact informally and less disruptively with people from Guapi, learn from their ancestral practices, observe behaviour among individuals before conducting interviews and, in the end, to build rapport and understand the social fabric of the community. Moreover, it potentially reduced the barrier to openness from locals, who did not see me as a researcher full-time, but as a curious individual with an interest in the Pacific Coast of Cauca. However, the people I met were made aware of the purpose of my visit and knew that I planned to collect information through observation and interviews.

⁵ The *Asociación Agrícola Pesquera de Quiroga* (Agricultural Fisheries Association of Quiroga) is the association of the farmers and fishermen in Quiroga township (Personal communications, 2022).

The research proposal was presented in June 2021 to the head of *Fundación Chiyangua*, who is also coordinator of a regional women’s network named *Red Matamba y Guasa*. After our dialogue, I decided to include the rural population, particularly rural women, who are the organization's target group. Therefore, two relevant categories were identified: women residing in rural areas and women residing in urban areas that participated in *Fundación Chiyangua* to some degree. As the organisation works with over 120 women spanning different generations, age diversity was an additional criterion that was taken into consideration. About half of the women were from rural areas. Two participants were over age 50, two were 50, and two were under age 50 (Table 1). All the rural participants were members of local organisations and interacted with *Fundación Chiyangua* in articulation with *Red Matamba y Guasa*, of which they were all part.

Table 1: Overview of participant’s profiles

Name or pseudonym	Age	Location	Occupation and role in organization	Education
Maria	39	Quiroga (rural)	- <i>Asoagropesqui</i> treasurer - Housewife	High school
Esperanza	70	Quiroga (rural)	- Fisherwoman - <i>Asoagropesqui</i> member	Primary school 3 rd grade completed
Esneda	50	Quiroga (rural)	- Legal representative and founder of <i>Construyendo Sueños</i> - Vice-president of the River Guajuí Community Council	High school
Yadira	36	Guapi city	- Manager of <i>Raíces de Tierra y Mar</i> , <i>Fundación Chiyangua</i> ’s restaurant - Nursing assistant	Vocational education
Sonelly	50	Guapi city	- High school pedagogue - Member of <i>Fundación Chiyangua</i>	Bachelor
Teofila	57	Guapi city (migrated from rurality)	- <i>Fundación Chiyangua</i> ’s legal representative - Coordinator of the regional feminist network <i>Matamba y Guasa</i>	Bachelor

3.3.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

I decided to gather information through in-depth semi-structured interviews, I chose this method because qualitative research relies largely on interviews for exploring people's

meanings, perceptions, and constructions of reality (Punch, 2014a). Considering that Afro-Colombian communities are largely oral, I drew upon the advantages of semi-structured discussions outlined Creswell and Poth (2018a): the relationship between the participants and me was not strictly scripted but rather constructed from flexible conversations through an interview guide that contained open-ended questions and which enhanced active listening from my side.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all the six participants. In the township, I invited participants to select comfortable and private places for the interview: One session took place in the participant's home, while the other two took place in calm outdoor locations. Women living in the city were interviewed in the organization restaurant *Raíces de Tierra y Mar* in a private room and outside the restaurant's operating hours. I also anticipated interviewing the organization's leadership face-to-face, but something unexpected occurred and the process had to be completed by telephone.

Around 20 questions were included in the interview guide, which started with an open question that allowed the participants to express their viewpoints and experiences without too much intervention on my part. Then I asked follow-up questions when needed. Whereas I specifically asked about their reflections on ancestrality and development, questions such as ethnicity and gender often came up without me addressing them. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one and a half hour. All were conducted in the native language, Spanish. In the thesis, however, I have translated all quotes from the interviews to English. Before conducting the interviews, I had the chance to spend time with participants on different kinds of activities. In the beginning, some participants were shy, but as the confidence and knowledge between the community members and I evolved, I noticed how the communication flowed more naturally.

3.3.4. Observation, Field Notes and Supporting Documents

In addition to interviews, I collected data from unstructured observation, through this method observations are made in a natural and open-ended way. The focus and cases may become evident as observations are made (Punch, 2014). I observed on multiple occasions and locations: township Quiroga and township Joanico, both situated along the river Guaji, in Los Obregones beach and Guapi city (see Figure 1). I observed participants daily lives and routines as well as other contextual dynamics. Notes and reflective thoughts were written in a field diary and supported with image data to ensure that relevant information was not lost. During my stay in Guapi I was introduced to different persons and organisation representatives that did not necessarily fit my inclusion criteria but who were willing to dialogue and share their points of

view. Moreover, in the township of Quiroga, I slept in the house of a local family. All those families and persons were somehow part of Guapi's social fabric. Additionally, I collected publicly available documents of Fundación Chiyangua, which served to support the field data.

3.4 Data Management

All the interviews were audio-recorded using my computer which was password-protected and through which interviews were uploaded to the SAFE Desktop of the University of Bergen, ensuring confidentiality for data processing. This was done as soon as possible after the interviews, although it was difficult to upload the recordings immediately given the almost non-existent internet access in rural Guapi. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and also field notes were safely stored.

3.5 Data Analysis

In this research, I employed thematic analysis for the organisation, integration, and examination of the data. Thematic analysis is not tied to a particular theory or epistemological position, making it a flexible and useful tool (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, it is a valid way to interpret data by looking into underlying structures, as the critical social science approach does. Additionally, I concur and make explicit the relevance of my role as a researcher in identifying patterns and themes. The process started first by familiarizing with the gathered data. Later I generated codes through Nvivo 12 software. Once all the data was collated, I looked for relationships and patterns to create themes. However, as I was aware that the coding process could put at risk the larger stories, I revisited as much as necessary the raw data to ensure significant information was not lost through the process of code fragmentation.

3.6 Trustworthiness of The Research

Given the qualitative nature of this research, I follow Yilmaz'(2013) four criteria for judging the quality of a research study: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. *Credibility* refers to the trustworthiness and plausibility of the findings (Tracy, 2010). Credibility in this research is derived from different strategies. Firstly, the guiding principles were made explicit in the proposal. Secondly, the research's design was thoughtful of complexity, setting the basis for rigorous research. Additionally, the main data for this research was generated in different settings and with different people from Guapi municipality. Moreover, the reader is provided with rich contextual descriptions, sometimes narratively illustrated and which were collected through different methods: interviews and observations. This combination of methods, also known as triangulation, guarantees a reasonable data volume to validate the potential claims, to provide an accurate picture of the

participants, of their settings and their perspectives ensuring the transferability of the findings to similar settings. Additionally, this research found meaningful parallelism between the data sources, key to ensure *dependability*: the consistency of the study over time, and across researchers, methods and programs (Yilmaz, 2013). This consistency is also found between the research design and the research objective. Finally, the findings are grounded on the interviews and observations, ensuring the *confirmability*, which is when the findings are based on the analysis of the collected data (Yilmaz, 2013).

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The participants were provided with a printed document that included an information letter and a consent form, a written agreement of voluntary participation. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) in December 2021. The information letter described extensively the purposes, involvement, and rights of the participants in issues such as participation withdrawal, access, rectification, or elimination of the data without penalties. This document was translated into Spanish. In addition, I encouraged participants to raise any questions or concerns they may have.

Furthermore, I rely on the first principle of the feminist communitarian model of research ethics (Neuman, 2014a; Tracy, 2010). This principle argues that research should depart from recognising that all human life is situated in socially constructed contexts such as gender, class, or ethnicity. Here, multivocality is endorsed by recognizing that participants live in multiple communities: as women, as rural, as Afro-descendants. The employment of a feminist research ethics means going further than not doing harm (Kingston, 2020), although anonymity is a common practice among social researchers, it is necessary to open an ethical discussion of its implications. For this research, the consent form offered participants two options: anonymisation or recognition. Several reasons were behind this choice. Firstly, and in line with reciprocity, this research sought to collect constructive data that would benefit both the researcher's learning process but also the group of participants. A form of recognition of Guapi's social fabric thrust participants to retain the ownership of their stories and exert their independence; hence full anonymity was not desirable. Furthermore, privacy is relevant but it is not exempt from disadvantages, as stated by Neuman (2014a), protecting the identity of individuals with fictitious names creates a gap between what is studied and what is reported to others, which can diminish research trustworthiness. Participants were well-informed of the possible risks of non-confidentiality. Finally, this ethical decision was justified to NSD and successfully assessed.

3.8 My Role as Researcher

In this research, I have followed Wigginton and Lafrance's (2019) feminist methodological considerations for critical research. I am committed to deep reflexivity in order to understand and question my positionality as a researcher, which is essential for honest research. My personal motivation for undertaking this study derive from my academic background and my personal experiences. Hence, I position myself within an antiracist, feminist and decolonial perspective. This position has also influenced the research's questions, approach, and design.

Finally, I acknowledge that my own identity and experiences may have influenced the data collection. In that regard, I consider the inter-categorical complexity posited by Carling et al. (2013) according to which it is possible to deconstruct the classical insider-outsider positions. In Colombia, I identify myself as a mestizo⁶ woman, born in the capital. I am conscious that some, if not all, of my privileges, derive from hierarchies of race, class, gender present in today's Colombia. I define myself as a cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied woman with educational privileges. If we assume the ethno-racial category as the only dimension of identity, in Guapi, I am an outsider. Conversely, positions are constructed in a context-specific and relational way. Therefore, besides my privilege due to lighter skin-colour, other personal characteristics could have interacted, such as the fact that I could have been perceived as a young woman and the fact that I have spent most of my life in Europe. Although I cannot control how the participants categorized me, to decentre my privileged position, in conversation with the participants I sought out common grounds as a Colombian woman from a humble family that has been also affected by social injustice due forced displacement. Thus, I believe this hybrid positionality might have contributed to both reinforce and blur boundaries between the participants and myself. Upon the return from Guapi I kept my contact with women from the organisation and continued to engage in reflexive practices. Finally, as I incorporated decolonial feminist thought into this case study, this implied an ethical reflection on how I represented Guapirean women and interpreted their knowledge without imposing a Western ontology, but also in order to build a critical case study based with a clear decolonial ambition.

3.9 Challenges and Limitations

There are different limitations in this research. Firstly, as participants were recruited through Fundación Chiyangua as a gatekeeper, it could have been that I was only introduced to

⁶ Category created with the Colonisation process to define people of mixed Indigenous and Spanish ascendance (Morales, 1998).

participants with positive views of these organizations, biasing the data gathered. However, I interviewed participants with different profiles, and contrasted information through triangulation. Secondly, as the interview guide included questions about development organisations, I may have been perceived as a development employee or as external evaluator however I made clear that I was a student. Finally, during translation of interview passages in Spanish into quotes presented in English, some cultural expressions may not have been translated adequately enough to reflect the original meaning of the participants. Yet, the translation was reviewed several times to ensure the accuracy of the information.

Chapter 4: Findings

Sanson is a township in Guapi, known for its characteristic musical tradition, and particularly for an instrument, the Marimba, also known as the forest piano, brought by the African ancestors to Colombia. In Sanson, Teofila Betancourt was born 57 years ago. She proudly identified herself as “*a woman, a black woman, a rural woman*”. Teofila was the leader and co-founder of *Fundación Chiyangua* and the coordinator of the regional feminist network named *Matamba y Guasa*. She had a bachelor’s degree in education. However, for her, it was the “*exchange with traditional knowers from the communities*” that gave her the background and knowledge she needed to design and create action within the communities. In Teofila’s family, there is a legacy as “*almost all profess a traditional practice*”, particularly in the field of traditional medicine: both her mother and grandmother were *Parteras* (ancestral midwives).⁷ At an early age, Teofila migrated to work in another city in Colombia, but she quit because “*racial discrimination was enormous*”. Moreover, she ended an affective relationship in which she faced “*barbaric domestic violence*”.

In the early nineties, she came back to Guapi to work with her mother selling goods in the market. There she started “*to heal the wounds*”. She became increasingly interested in the other women to whom she proposed the creation of a collective fund. This opened the door for the approval of an income-generation programme named “*thrifty women*”, supported by the Colombian Department of Social Prosperity. Later, women nominated her to represent the Pacific Coast of Cauca in the Encuentro Nacional de Mujeres Cimarronas (National Meeting

⁷ A woman who assists women during their gestation, birth, and reproductive years. *Partería* is an ancient practice in Colombia's south Pacific region deeply rooted in culture of African heritage, and in the wisdom of the rural women and grandmothers of those thick jungles, rivers, and coastlines along the Pacific coast (Suárez-Baquero & Champion, 2022)

of Maroon Women)⁸ held at the University of Cartagena. During this meeting, women had the opportunity to talk about issues that affected Afro-Colombian women. Teofila remarked that she felt lost, but that she was not the only one “[I was] almost like the rest of us, in a context of absolute unawareness, of who I am, where I come from, and what happens to women in my territory”. When Teofila came back from Cartagena, she committed and began to think of “an organizational process to make visible that role that women play”, especially for black rural women. In 1994 she co-founded Fundación Chiyangua to make visible, vindicate and struggle for women's human rights.

Like Teofila, all the participants in this study were connected to Fundación Chiyangua either through women's network *Red Matamba y Guasa*, or as direct members of *Fundación Chiyangua's* Participants from Quiroga (rural Guapi) were part of the organisations *Construyendo Sueños* (Building Dreams) and *Asoagropesqui* (agricultural and fishing association of Quiroga). This chapter presents the participants' view of ancestry and shows a common feeling: a sense of loss, but also struggles for preventing such a loss. Furthermore, it also focuses on women's organisational process and their struggles against marginalisation due to gender and other salient forms of oppression. Finally, the last section is dedicated to expose women's understandings of development and their interaction with development actors.

4.1 Identity and Uniqueness: “We cannot get rid of what actually represents us”

To the participants, ancestry does not seem to refer exclusively to possessing knowledge and bringing it into practice, it goes further: it is inextricably connected to race/ethnicity, identity, persistence, survival within the territory, encompassing health practices, culinary knowledge, environmental management, natural resource-based production, oral traditions, rituals, and spiritual practices among others.

Participants in rural and urban Guapi viewed ancestry as a legacy that allowed them to be who they are. Esneda was an Afro-descendant woman born in the township Quiroga in rural Guapi fifty years ago. The day I met Esneda she had just come from a meeting in San José de Guare, a township further north. Her voice was steady, and she seemed like a confident woman. She was now the vice-president of the river Guajuí community council and the founder of *Construyendo Sueños*, a women's association dedicated to the fabrication of piangua-based

⁸ Marronage is the practice of resistance to the brutal forms of racialized violence confronted by Afro-descendant populations during colonial time. This marginalized sector of society fought back against marginalization to break with the colonial system and to establish autonomous communities (Bledsoe, 2018).

products. *Piangua* is a type of mollusc and can only be found in the mangroves of the Pacific coast. According to Esneda, in Quiroga, there are around 150 women piangua collectors or *Piangüeras*, an ancestral activity which is also the only source of income for many women. Normally, they drive the early morning to the mangroves and dig with their fingers into the mud before the sea level rises again. Elaborating on her fear of losing the connection to ancestral practices, Esneda stated:

It is as if one loses one's identity, when one loses one's identity, one ceases to be that person. And it is the same with the ancestral, if we lose what we found, we cease to be black, which is our race and what we found, being children of black parents who had some knowledge and beliefs. Then, when we leave them, we leave our ancestry behind.

Abandoning ancestral roots signified losing their ethno-racial identity as black peoples. They **could not be. They would cease to exist as who they were today because the ancestrality found** in the cultural expressions and traditional practices allowed them to be.

Ancestrality was also the uniqueness that distinguished them from other ethnic groups and even from other afro-descendant groups of Colombia. Sonelly, a fifty-year-old woman who worked as a research pedagogue in one of the largest educational centres in Guapi, defined herself as a “*black woman and a teacher*”. She noted that ancestral practices “...are like all those own knowledges that characterize us as a black from the Guapi Pacific Coast of Cauca”. This characterization is dense, it is their own way of dancing, sharing, enjoying or cooking: “*That is the ancient knowledge of us here. What identifies us, what characterizes us (...) all my chores inherited from my ancestors*”. Hence, ancestrality is an assertion of their identity’s uniqueness. Teofila, the leader of Chiyangua introduced initially in this chapter, also claimed the uniqueness:

Some [ancestral practices], are similar to those of other ethnic groups, but there are some that identify us, which are the rituals we do when people die. The accompaniment that is done during the time of illness, everything that is done when someone dies, and the nine days of prayer when someone dies. All this marks us and really identifies us as unique.

As these narratives demonstrate, there is a fear of loss related to ancestral practices, which implies a loss of identity. These negative changes in ancestrality represent a risk for continuing to be, it means the loss of the uniqueness that characterizes their existence.

4.2 Continuity and Survival: “Those are important things in the community, and for one’s living”

All the participants emphasized the fear of losing ancestrality posing it as a harmonious existence with the environment and the community, but also as survival. The participants’

narratives of loss were associated with the disappearance of community bonding practices, economic distress, health risks, decreased levels of biodiversity and food inaccessibility. Moreover, the disappearance of ancestral knowledge appeared to be caused by factors such as the death of ancestors, and the lack of transmission, as well as to disappearing values.

Ancestral practices of collective help and care fostered community bonding. Maria a fifty-year-old rural participant, treasurer of *Asoagropesqui* and member of *Fundación Chiyangua*, expressed with nostalgia how she had been told by her grandparents, her ancestors, that, in the past, those houses were built-up very quickly with community help “*because it was like a Minga that they did before and now they don't. Now, if you don't have your money, you can't. So those traditions I don't want them to end*”.⁹ Her words suggest that existing solidarity practices and values are gradually disappearing. In this sense, she seemed to be experiencing a sense of disjointness: “*Before, the Balsadas (boats made of several canoes) were made in December, on the 24th, well, the Balsadas was made on the 8th. And now it is no longer being done, now it is very disjointed, and I do not want that to end*”. Teofila also explained that in Afro-descendant communities when a woman has given birth, one or two women take care of her and her family “*for forty days (...) it is prepared one month or two months in advance, the banana, the chicken, everything is prepared and done collectively*”. Particularly, rural participants emphasized how non-monetarized collective self-sustaining practices guaranteed survival. Communities were able to remain together by collectively embodying those characteristic ancestral practices.

Furthermore, ancestral knowledge and practices enabled the continuity of life, particularly through practices related to food sovereignty and traditional medicine. In these terms, the loss of the knowledges and values practised by the ancestors meant the deterioration of living conditions in manifold ways. Teofila noted:

They [ancestors] gave us life through midwifery, with traditional medicine they continued to take care of us, with production practices they generated food for us and enough. One did not lack anything.

In Guapi I observed the local hospital, a small one-floor hospital for an entire region. I was told that it had no capacity, and in complicated cases, patients were always transferred to cities that could give a more appropriate medical response. Yadira, was a nursing assistant, and the current manager of *Fundación Chiyangua*'s restaurant *Raíces de Tierra y Mar*, located in the

⁹ The concept of Minga is associated to communal work enacted by rural communities for the benefit of the same community, characterised by its voluntary character which results some form of solidary economy (López Cortés, 2018).

centre of Guapi. She was the youngest participant and explained that it was nice to “*see a Partera assist the pregnant woman to deliver the baby*” but it was also about the preservation of life:

Because it has happened to us that many women have died due to the trajectory of coming here to Guapi hospital from their villages, so they don't make it, or they bleed out or similar things had happened.

Consequently, the disappearance of healers and midwives means not being able to assist people in places where there were no hospitals, like in rural Guapi.

Food production was based on knowledge developed by the ancestors, and it was linked to the particular ways in which Guapirean people had occupied, lived and survived in the territory. Participants acknowledged how certain dynamics such as the import of products that once were locally produced or the disappearance of certain species due to large-scale exploitation of the resources, were affecting their capacity to access food. Maria in Quiroga mentioned how “*rice and corn were harvested here, everything related to agriculture was done here, and now everything...I don't want all of that to be lost*”. Maria’s fear of losing agricultural ancestral practices was twofold, it had economic and health consequences because according to her “*all those things they bring from outside contain a lot of chemicals, instead here our rooftops [we grow] all that is natural. It does not contain any chemicals*”. The impact of large-scale natural resource exploitation as opposed to traditional and artisanal production is another layer of the problem: when I joined the Quiroga community’s traditional activities, fishing and collecting piangua, on Los Obregones beach, we started looking for clams in the sand, but we could not find almost any. They discussed the potential reason: perhaps the consequence of shedding of chemical products in the sea. In the background noisy machinery could be heard, perhaps from intensive logging. According to both rural and urban participants, with the loss of ancestral practices, there was a decrease in food safety and food quality. On the other hand, large-scale exploitation seemed to have negatively impacted the eco-systems and their food access and availability.

Despite this, on my first day in Guapi, I went to visit and cultivate plants in the raised gardens or *cultivos de Azotea* owned by *Fundación Chiyangua*¹⁰. I was told that five herbs were the most common on rooftops: branch onion, pennyroyal, basil, oregano, and chiyangua [wild coriander]. According to the participants, these herbs have medicinal and flavouring properties. *Azotea* cropping is a paramount practice that characterizes and somehow seems to

¹⁰ See image 4 in appendices.

symbolize the region. Indeed, *Fundación Chiyangua* was trying to preserve these knowledges and practices by creating spaces for ancestral knowledge transmission.

4.3 Ancestral Knowledge Transmission: “The elders are being taken as living libraries”

Several participants expressed hope regarding the transmission and continuity of the ancestral legacy, but scepticism also surfaced for a variety of reasons. I found that the pedagogical process had changed from a more organic virtue transmission into a more institutionalised practice and that the grassroots organisations that I focused on in this study were playing a determinant role in these conservation processes.

According to participants both in rural and urban Guapi, in the past, the transmission of ancestral knowledges was a process based on a person’s individual virtue. The grandparents and wise elders selected persons based on attributes or talents. Furthermore, the transmission was done at home, orally and within the family. Sonelly explained that elders used to say “*‘she has a nice voice, so we can teach her oral tradition’ or ‘she enjoys cooking, we shall teach her how to cook’*”. Yadira, for example, said that she had been told by her grandmother that they in the past “*chose a person among her grandchildren in which she saw that potential of wanting to learn, of wanting to know (...)*”. The transmission was more organic and individualised. Nevertheless, participants affirmed that now the transmission was changing. Grassroots organisations such as *Fundación Chiyangua* were creating spaces designed for the transmission of knowledge, and printed materials were now used in addition to oral transmission. Teofila described how women’s organisations were the ones leading this exchange process: “*From the organizational processes of women, we are doing it from spaces of exchange, between young people and older adults, in an encounter (...)*”. Sonelly further explained that the elders are being taken as “*a living source of own knowledge*”. Recognizing them as “*living libraries*” as expressed by her, means assigning them and their knowledge a status, a position, even within more formalized spaces like schools. She affirmed that this was “*an opportunity to work from the school, with Law 70, ethnic education was extended to us, so we began to make use of it*”. Indeed, the organisation was creating intergenerational exchange spaces within schools and had designed pedagogic materials such as the handbook *The rooftops, the flavour and scent of Guapirean traditional cuisine* in which students were explained the importance of ancestral knowledge, they were also invited to identify and interview the wise elders. *Fundación Chiyangua*’s efforts in preserving ancestral knowledge simultaneously was transforming the

way in which legacy is passed to keep the thread alive. Moreover, schools' transmission of knowledge recognized the potential of ancestral knowledge vis a vis academic knowledge.

Conversely, knowledge transmission was not exempt from internal challenges such as the death of ancestors and the abandonment of ancestral practices. For some participants, there were other latent factors such as the proliferation of individualist attitudes and distrust. Sonelly for instance claimed that *“there is a lot of jealousy between people over their knowledge since we have been swindled a lot”*. This was also confirmed by another person in Guapi when he described a misunderstanding with a well-known Colombian chef who came and without permission was trying to video-record a secret local recipe without consent. It is possible that this form of plunder from outside has been one of the factors that caused mistrust among the community and negatively affected knowledge exchange among community members. Esperanza, a crab fisher, and member of *Asoagropesqui* said that most of the people were selfish because *“there are people here who know but don't like to teach anyone”*. This form of distrust represented a challenge to the continuity of ancestral knowledge, but it was not the only one.

Some participants from Quiroga considered that the younger generations were not interested in participating in ancestral knowledge transmission. Maria described the youth's attitude as a problem: *“the youth.... It's not that they do not teach them, it's that they do not want to learn or something like that”*. Esperanza shared the same perception:

(...) they are also careless because they don't want to learn, for example now, for Christmas they were looking for a boy to do the novenas [bible readings and singing], there was no one to play the bass drum.

Interestingly, women in Guapi city, expressed that youth enjoyed the intergenerational transmission spaces at school. Sonelly, for instance, noted that *“we completed a project together with Fundación Chiyangua and the high school students. They were delighted when the wise women came to teach them”*. She posited that young people liked it because the *women knowers* had the patience to teach them. Perhaps the younger generations in the city enjoyed transmission as a collective pedagogy, while rural areas had fewer educational institutions, and young people frequently migrated to achieve education.

In discussing ancestral knowledge, most participants expressed a fear towards the changes and the loss that threatened both knowledge and the communities that bear it. Nonetheless, new intergenerational spaces for transmission show how the communities have not just stood by watching these practices disappear. Rather, they were actively involved in bringing their ancestry into the classroom and combining traditional orality with newer didactic practices.

4.4 Organising from The Margins

The women were exposed to persistent oppressions but had resisted and responded to this through positioning ancestrality and centring women through organizational processes. I found that women's organising had allowed them to acknowledge their rights, their value, their humanity, and to create safe spaces because those things were denied to women.

4.4.1 Union and Solidarity to Cope with Exclusion: "If we women separate, violence against women will continue"

Women saw in themselves the potential for change, as bearers of ancestral knowledge. The participants' stories demonstrate that there had been a gendered division of spaces and labour. Additionally, women had been discriminated against in different forms. Most participants posited that in the past women had been denied the right to assembly, to public and private participation and to a life free from violence.

From the balcony of *Raíces de Tierra y Mar* restaurant, I saw women arriving early in the morning to sell fresh fish. Men, on the other hand, were sitting in the boats by the river filled with plantain and other goods. The same spatial and labour division was evident in Los Obregones beach: we collected piangua with women from *Construyendo Sueños*¹¹ and fished with men from *Asoagropesqui*. Yet, groups collaborated with each other. Women saw this gendered division of ancestral practices based on the purpose: women's practices were more related to care and solidarity while men on income generation. Teofila posited that "*the practices women do strongly are the solidarity ones. More about help, self-help, sharing (...) whereas men cut wood, or fish in the sea but always for generating income*". Maria also confirmed the spatial division, she affirmed that "*things for women are the sowing of Azotea herbs, also because there are medicinal herbs*" and that instead men were "*more focused on agriculture and fishing in the sea*". She said she would not dare fishing several days in the sea as men did.

Most participants described how they were made invisible. They referred to spatial distribution and segregation within the home. Sitting in Guapi, the restaurant manager, Yadirá noted that "*the woman [was] always for the house, and from the kitchen to there [inner part of the building], all that has [negatively] influenced [women]*". She also associated the possible impacts of this segregation with the house: "*the [rural woman] didn't believe in what she did. Like if you belong to the house, you stay there*". Likewise, in Quiroga, rural Guapi, Esneda

¹¹ See image 2 in appendices.

repeated the same: “(...) *the mother did not teach them [to cook] because the father from there [pointing with her hand to the inner corridor of the house] would not let them pass. Only the daughters could pass there, not the sons*”. Men could move freely to the sea or the forest, but women belonged at home.

The participants had different opinions on what caused their segregation and exclusion. According to about half of the participants, some ancestral practices were gendered and should hence be reviewed and modified. For the other group, gender discrimination was not inherent in ancestral practices but rather based on sexist assumptions. Esneda for instance affirmed that “*men believed that [only] they could do [certain ancestral practices] but we women also know and practice them*”. Likewise, Yadira claimed that “*all ancestral practices are good, but men have made us believe that the one who is outside is the one who does the hard work*”. Interestingly, Sonelly affirmed that in the past “*there was some machismo, right? Some practices were for men and others for women*”. When I asked if there should be any change in ancestral practices she expressed “*yes machismo because that comes from culture*”.¹² Teofila had an in-between view: she was open to change but did not qualify discriminatory behaviours as related to ancestral but to culture: “*all practices have been good for women, but some cultural practices have strengthened machismo*”. Thus, it seemed like women agreed on preserving and practising ancestral knowledge, but were critically engaging with it. They emphasized the relevance of their traditional female chores and their increased participation in what was seen as male activities.

According to the participants’ narratives, as their roles/activities had been downplayed, women had also been made invisible. To maintain this order, physical, psychological and symbolical violence had been exerted. Women were not allowed to attend or join meetings, if they did, they had been likely to be beaten up. While I was sitting in Esneda’s living room, in which peace reigned, she told me that “*you see everything calm, but there has been a lot of violence against women in these territories, women at least today can manage and can go to Guapi, yet some cannot do it*”¹³. Esneda explained that fewer rural women went to school than women from the urban area. She associated women’s inability to gather, to write and to read, with the oppression of the enslavement period, she affirmed “*here we still in that time of slavery in which our parents and our ancestors lived, in which the woman was for the stove and only*

¹² Spanish word popularly used to define men discriminatory and sexist behaviours, attitudes and beliefs against women (See Cowan, 2017)

¹³ See image 4 in appendices.

to be housewives, still you can find such homes, so it is very difficult (...) as the majority of women do not to read or write”.

In Guapi, Sonelly also declared that there were men who agreed and respected *Fundación Chiyangua*'s work whereas others “*claim we are liberating women, that we are causing debauchery, and that it is for ruckus*”,¹⁴ and others even “*continued beating women*”. Moreover, Teofila indicated that the exclusion reached higher levels, as “*there was a total ignorance (towards women), from the house, in the community, in the river, in the institutional framework, in the mayor's office*”, thus women's undervaluation was not limited to the realm of the house.

In sum, most participants pointed to the existence of a gender hierarchy, but had different opinions on its relationship with ancestral practices. In general, however, women seemed to engage with ancestral practices critically while they also countered exclusion, stigmatisation, and violence.

4.4.2 Positioning and Resignification: “We must empower ourselves from there, and make ourselves visible”

The women had organised to position their practices and ancestral knowledge in an effort to empower themselves. Thus, change had not been about abandoning ancestral knowledge, or assuming male-dominated chores, it had been about a resignification and positioning of women's activities through women's organising, to respond to multiple oppressions. Ancestral knowledge had contributed to generate change from inside and to make women visible and heard. *Fundación Chiyangua*, *Construyendo Sueños* part of the network *Red Matamba y Guasa*, are organisations that have a common aim: improving women's lives and safeguarding ancestral knowledge.

The process of *Fundación Chiyangua* entailed rebuilding ancestral union and solidarity to face the multiple issues that affected women from within. Teofila exposed how gender was not the only source of oppression because “*the discrimination on the coast has been triple, firstly for being women, secondly for being black, and third for living where we live*”. Thus, it was necessary to organise around something that could address these multiple oppressions. The answer was found in the ancestral practices as “*a traditional practice that brought us together, that had elements of strong identity, that led us to rebuild those ties of brotherhood, of sisterhood of solidarity*”.

¹⁴ Bulla o bochinche, popular term use in certain regions of Colombia to express noise, chaos, disorder.

Participation based on ancestral solidarity had allowed women to struggle against gender-based violence and gender hierarchies. Esneda, president of *Construyendo Sueños*, said that through participating in these organisations she had learnt how to defend her rights, claimed that *“If we women separate and we do not keep in contact, we can’t indicate [to other women] how they can learn to end, for example, violence against women”*. Similarly, Sonelly alleged that through participation she had been able to see what she could not before:

When I came to that meeting the first time, we were beaten, and we endured quietly. Yes, we endured many things like that. So, I came, and I kept thinking and that made me start to open my eyes because several times one has them open, but they are closed. And I started joining all the activities.

Maria, a board member of *Asoagropesqui*, who in the past did not participate much in meetings due to her shyness, said that through *“those workshops we open more our eyes, so we know our rights, and we do not let them decide over us”*. Particularly, she highlighted the trainings regarding gender-based violence and abuse of women. Yadira explained that *Fundación Chiyangua* had created a telephone service line for women *“so they are not afraid of denouncing or telling us what is happening”*. *Fundación Chiyangua*, through ancestral solidarity, was struggling to free women from physical violence and spatial segregation.

The ancestral legacy, present in their blackness as an identity or as an own body of knowledge, had been a source of strength against ethno-racial discrimination. Sonelly, the teacher from Guapi, affirmed that in the past she would not dare give an interview to a person with light-skin colour, because *“I had my concept that they had come to exploit me”*. She described how her experiences with racism took her to the point that *“when you are discriminated against, you start to discriminate as well”*. However, she claimed that after her engagement with *Fundación Chiyangua* she acquired confidence through her ancestral knowledge to challenge racism: *“They have taught me that we with our knowledge we draw attention. A person must have autonomy over its knowledge. So, If I must do anything I get prepared and empower myself from there so that I let them [sing of silence on the mouth]”*. Similarly, Teofila reclaimed her blackness to vindicate and contest racial discrimination:

We all have the legacy of the African diaspora which is what allows us to empower and make ourselves visible today. But somehow to self-recognise as black is a process of visibility from that discrimination against us. They have made us think that the black is bad. So that word is like a vindication, right? If a person has black skin s(he) is not ugly, right. It is like assuming that position to vindicate that word, and that discriminatory power that is exerted when people define it.

The women expressed and presented themselves in relation to their ancestral legacy, present in their blackness or their own knowledge, to contest the power of those who enact racism.

The women had also relied on the legitimacy of their ancestral legacy against class discrimination. Esneda explained that people had asked her if she “*was not ashamed*” of working as a *pianguera*. However, she responded by saying that “*my mother did it, my grandmother did it, and today I do it and I do not feel ashamed, I feel very proud*”. Viewing *pianguar*, a chore carried by Afro-Colombian rural women, as a shameful job could be understood as classed, gendered, and racial discrimination. Esneda said organizational participation had taught her to defend and empower herself from what she knows to do, to the extent that “*today I am a worldwide recognised woman*”. I did not understand her statement then, but later I learned that various articles had been written about her.

Grassroot participation based on ancestral solidarity had impacted the way in which women viewed and related to power relations. The participants showed awareness regarding issues such as gender-based violence, women’s rights, as well as racial, gender and class hierarchies. They vindicated ancestral solidarity, their blackness, and the legitimacy of their knowledges to build confidence and strength. From the spaces they had created, they have made themselves visible, from a position through which they could demand a life free from any kind of violence.

4.4.3 Resisting Institutional Neglection: “This is another country”

Through grassroots organising and ancestrality, the women had resisted the structural marginalisation, isolation, and exclusion that people from these territories were subject to. When Sonelly was explaining femicides¹⁵ and the high levels of violence women had faced, I asked her about the effectiveness of Colombian national laws, she smiled and said: “*This is another country*”.

The low coverage of public services in Guapi results in high levels of structural marginalisation. Guapi is a city with large traits of rurality, it is a small city, reachable only by plane or by boat. It does not have a proper aqueduct and sewage system, and the gas for cooking comes in expensive cylinders. Some walls on houses of the city, on which names of armed groups were written, testified to the discontinuous presence of the Colombian armed conflict. Health facilities were reduced to a one-floor hospital. In rural areas, this pattern became more prevalent. In Quiroga, there were less than four hours a day of electricity, which everyone took advantage of to switch on their televisions and charge electronic devices. Luckily, it rains often.

¹⁵ Femicide is a term that refers to the extreme female terror that end in the killing of women or girls.

The water was collected and then purified with sulphur in plastic buckets donated by humanitarian organisations¹⁶. When I visited Quiroga, there was no public connecting transport that connected the rural towns with urban Guapi. Grassroots organisations have been challenging marginalisation and isolation. Teofila explained that when Fundación Chiyangua was founded one of the biggest challenges was “*how to reach rural areas if not even the institutions decide to go there because of the costs involved in moving along the river*”. According to her vision, not even the armed conflict was a reason to abandon rural communities: “*we have armed conflict, yes, but it is possible to reach communities and meet with communities*”. It seems that the narrative of the armed conflict was perceived as justification to continue with the isolation of rural populations.

Ancestral practices had been promoted to create job employment opportunities for women and communities. *Construyendo Sueños*, the organisation of *Piangüeras* from Quiroga, focused on the piangua collection and production, was trying to do add value to the shellfish products “*to export the piangua from here, and then see if other women may join*”. She also described those practices as the only possibility because “*if we stop those practices and there is no other option, what do we do? We must start from what we have left, which is the inheritance that our ancestors left us*”. In this way, women performed their care chores but also generated income through self-employment. Furthermore, the continuity of ancestral medicine countered the marginalisation caused by the lack of health facilities, particularly in rural areas. Women were not only proud of the *Parteras* (ancestral midwives), and the *Curanderos* (healers), but they had been struggling for legal recognition of these practices. Yadira noted: “*We [Fundación Chiyangua] are even fighting for the Parteras to be recognized and for this traditional practice to continue to exist*”. Keeping alive ancestral medicine is protecting life in communities by resisting to illness, diseases and exclusion exerted by the inexistence of proper health services.

Moreover, ancestral epistemology had been positioned as a valid source of knowledge to create a life project. Sonelly, Yadira, Teofila and Esneda had previously migrated to work outside of the region. The presence of a military base, on the one hand, and the inexistence of universities, on the other, seems to be somehow the metaphor that best depicts the structural dynamics that often results in people either joining armed groups or migrating in order to survive. In an environment of persistent human rights violations, grassroots organising was offering an alternative, as clarified by Teofila:

¹⁶ See images 5 and 6 in appendices.

Because many young people who finish high school, do not have a way to go to university. However, if they are clear about what their context is, they can define a life project without going to university, and they do not take it as an alternative joining an illegal group.

On the way from Guapi to Quiroga, we passed in front of El Partidero, a community that ceased to exist due to forced displacement caused by the armed conflict. The territory was now empty. Esneda said that the Quiroga community “*shielded itself from the armed conflict*” and that it was probably “*due to the existence of the social fabric*”. The consolidation of community solidarity by placing ancestrality at the centre fostered strength to face the expulsion of people.

Marginalisation, however, is gendered, as women were not admitted in decision making positions, usually male-dominated spaces. The organising process prompted the creation of participatory spaces and the occupation of decision-making positions. Esneda, who was now the vice-president of River Guajui Black Community Council, affirmed that “*women started to join the [black] communities’ councils ten years ago, not even ten years, it was eight years ago. There have always been men, never women*”. She also explained that the women struggled so that Maria could enter the *Asoagropesqui* board. Additionally, the women had gone further by organising to demand the protection of women’s rights also in different arenas, as expressed by Teofila “*to influence decision-making spaces, from what we are (...) to get to interact with governments, with mayors, create advocacy spaces such as women's advisory councils, make the diagnosis for public policy for women*”. She acknowledged how the women together with *Fundación Chiyangua*, contributed to the inclusion of a gender perspective in the city's development plans, but also the lack of political will as they still heard “*there's no money for women*”.

Organizing and strengthening their leadership capacity had enabled women to create self-employment alternatives, promote ancestral medicinal practices and its transmission so that the people who were living in these communities could stay in the territory and simultaneously overcome the dynamics of structural marginality, violence, and avoid migration. Finally, they challenged women’s structural exclusion by occupying decision-making positions and claiming women's rights.

4.5 Ancestral Knowledge and Development

The participants’ views and notions of development were related in different ways to the ancestral practices and values. Moreover, their experiences with a range of state and non-state development actors were perceived differently.

4.5.1 Understanding Development: “Those practices had allowed us to generate development from within”

In Quiroga, situated in rural Guapi, women told me that they saw development as advancement, food security and good living conditions, but the narratives also revealed persistent challenges. Maria, who lived in Quiroga, described development through a metaphor of a three which linked development to food-provisioning and survival: *“People sow a plantain plant, and it does not die, but rather becomes very beautiful and develops well that it climbs like a tree. So, some people have hope, (...) because it contains the product that one can feed on”*. Likewise, Esneda perceived development also as advancement and *“salir adelante [getting ahead]”*. She expressed the challenges to achieve this advancement, such as corruption, power imbalances and the undervaluation of farmers’ work. According to her having a coconut factory would be an advancement because then third parties *“do not come to buy the coconut from the families as they do. It would give an added value that it can generate an income for community advancement. Now, others take the money, and the farmer does not gain anything”*. However, Esneda remarked that it was difficult to advance because *“people fear facing the one who has the power”*, and that despite the presence of government programs targeting communities *“we suddenly realize that the money has gone to this thing and that thing, at the end nothing arrives here”*.

In urban Guapi women rejected external dependency and considered their own values, culture, and knowledge relevant for achievement advancement. Sonelly, the schoolteacher, pointed to what she defined as *“adequate”* development, which was only possible if based on their own culture and values:

The development carried out properly because many believe that being developed is no longer dancing currulao but dancing salsa. No, that is being acculturated (...) It's like going on hand with everything that belongs to you and what comes along, doing like the mix, without losing your essence (...) Yes, for example, look, we were rice farmers here and we stopped producing rice because we began to consume the rice that came from abroad. There is no development there because the development would have been if we continued to cultivate that rice to also extract it. So, it is not to leave what is yours but to maintain it and bring it up.

Thus, she distinguished between a development that leaves behind their essence, to the extent that they become assimilated and externally dependent on the one hand and a development that prompts autonomy, the ancestral practices, and values. Similarly, Teofila affirmed that in the past, communities lacked nothing due to their values and practices. Development for her was *“well-being linked to some necessary and basic things for instance having a good university, having transport, security and food sovereignty”*. She rejected the idea of development based on dependency because *“it is not that they bring me something from outside, but that I position*

myself from what I do, so that gives me autonomy, security, (...) and some elements to face adversity". Consequently, according to these women, development can be only generated from within, although external interventions can help in the advancement of well-being.

In sum, the women in this study viewed development as food access and better infrastructures for the general improvement of life conditions. Some participants highlighted challenges such as corruption, and power imbalances. A critical vision distinguished between the possibility of achieving wellbeing, autonomy and survival relying on the communities' practices, values, and position, whereas the opposite would be acculturation and external dependency.

4.5.2 Interaction with external actors: "What comes from outside, is to strengthen what we already have"

Fundación Chiyangua had considerable experience in working with development actors such as the United Nations, Cuso International, Forum for Women and Development, and the Colombian Ministry of Culture, among others. According to the voices of the rural and urban participants in this study, it was strikingly evident that the Colombian State imposes a bottom-up development vision disconnected from local realities. Non-state actors, on the other hand, were portrayed in a positive manner. More importantly, the women demonstrated agency in claiming participation in development interventions.

The efforts of national institutions that offer decontextualised development solutions can be read as top-down imposed without participation, continuity and dialogue. In Quiroga, Esneda explained that the community council brought her a boat which was delivered by the Ministry of Culture, she said that the boat was "*something that is totally inappropriate for us here, it is totally wasted money*". When I asked her what the reason was, she claimed that "*they never consult with the community what they need and how they need it. Those are boats that have nothing to do with us here*". Teofila expressed this way of acting as an imposition that did not allow them to own the project and did not understand the context:

With national institutions, they have imposed, let's say they plan the projects from outside, without previous agreement, and if they do agree, they do with a group that does not represent our feeling, our knowledge about the causes of the context, so they arrive with punctual very de-contextualised projects, in which there is no follow up and capacity building so people can assume from its vision the advancement of those actions.

Fundación Chiyangua and the other organisations were therefore claiming that agreements be made directly with communities so that participation brings a better outcome to communities. Non-state actors, on the other hand, seemed to have maintained a better dialogue with local

communities, which had contributed to strengthening the organisational fabric of Guapi, such as *Construyendo Sueños* and *Fundación Chiyangua*. According to the study participants, development organisations had been supportive in different ways, either through the provision of economic and material resources or because they had contributed through capacity-building to strengthen women's network. Esneda underscored a Colombian non-governmental organisation named *Activos Culturales Afro* (ACUA) which reinforced local organisations, because “*they are committed to traditional programs. We worked a lot with them on traditional food*”. Teofila also remarked that ACUA “*left us absolute autonomy for us to propose, build, develop, execute, follow up; well with them we have also had elements that have strengthened us*”. Her statement suggests that the success lies in a more respectful encounter between the local vision of development and the external support for these local perspectives.

Non-state organisations had contributed to *Fundación Chiyangua*'s commitment to rural communities, through the donation of material and economic resources that directly served local needs. Sonelly for instance explained that many rural women “*do not have ways to arrive [to Guapi], so if you do not pay the transport, they cannot come to the sessions*”. Maria confirmed that sometimes, due to travel costs, she was unable to attend meetings. She claimed that external organisations “*contribute with money so [organisational] processes are done*”. Likewise, Teofila claimed that this type of support had permitted them to reach populations facing armed conflict on the Cauca Pacific Coast, because “*they have given us tools to be able to move and reach territories like López, which is a municipality that the [national] institutions do not reach but that the foundation does because it has those NGOs that have supported us*”¹⁷.

Despite the importance of the reliance on non-state actors, the women showed a certain degree of ownership and agency. In the conversation about the elaboration of public policy for women, Sonelly said that external organisations “*trained and supported us*”, although when I asked about the biggest achievement of *Fundación Chiyangua* she said, “*look the policy! we have a women's public policy*”. Together with the assistance of an observatory for gender equity and a Colombian university, *Fundación Chiyangua* elaborated the baseline for the Guapi's public policy for gender equity. Teofila also affirmed this ownership in their development vision:

I had many experiences that many things have been brought from outside, but they have not worked, what has allowed us to function here and persist through the time is that we have been positioning ourselves from what we have and what we know to do (...) women in Guapi that are

¹⁷ See image 7 in appendices.

not high school graduates, or technicians or university graduates lead processes with a political vision of development, starting from their cosmovision, with clarity and identity.

The women acknowledged the relevance of external actors, however, their conviction that change comes from within consolidated the ownership of their well-being and the priorities to be established for achieving it.

External organisations thus seemed to have done better at recognizing communities, showing more sensitivity to their ancestral practices and needs. They had provided material support but also capacity-building, recognition, and autonomy. Although they still found themselves within relationships of dependency, the reliance on external actors had been a way of coping with the lack of local and national support for Guapirean women and communities. Furthermore, women had not been passive recipients of external aid, rather they have led, developed, and executed with a grassroots vision of ownership and sustainability.

Chapter 5: Discussion

According to the Coloniality/Modernity school of thought, the domination established through European colonialism has ended as a formal political system, but the colonial structure of power, based on social discriminations and hierarchies, continues to be the framework in which the social relations of classes and states operate (Quijano, 2007). This form of domination repressed the specific beliefs, ideas, images, symbols, and knowledge that were not useful for colonial domination, while simultaneously expropriating from the colonized its knowledge, as a way of social and cultural control but also to impede the cultural production of the dominated. Thus, cultural Europeanisation was transformed into an aspiration because it gave access to power to conquer nature and foster what was defined as “development”. This research sought to examine how and why ancestral knowledge is relevant for the communities the women in this study are part of. Based on the findings of this research, I argue that the work of *Fundación Chiyangua* and their efforts to preserve and strengthen ancestral knowledge is part of a decolonial project to break with oppression through the liberation of their epistemologies and the re-establishment of humanity. In this chapter, I will discuss my findings in light of existing literature. The theoretical frameworks of coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge and feminism in place guide the discussion. Firstly, I examine how the women by engaging in ancestral practices, contest the coloniality of knowledge and how those practices can be seen as acts of insurgence for the project of Being Black communities. The second section problematises gender hierarchies and interprets women’s organising around ancestrality as an

epistemic and quotidian insurgence through which women transform gender arrangements and contest, with the aim of transforming, intersecting ethno-racial, territorial and class oppressions. Finally, the women's vision of ancestral knowledge and their relationship with development actors reveals the existence of contradictions and power inequalities.

5. 1 Ancestral knowledge: A project of Being

With regards to defining ancestral knowledge, the findings indicated its highly complex and multidimensional nature. It was intricately related to race-ethnicity, identity, persistence, and survival within the territory, encompassing health practices, culinary knowledge, environmental management, natural resource-based production, oral traditions, rituals, and spiritual practices among others. According to the participants' view, the ancestral knowledge of Afro-Colombian people from the Pacific Coast of Cauca is unique and different. Guapireans have some ancestral practices in common with those of other ethnic groups, but they also have a uniqueness that makes them stand out even among other Black/Afro-Colombian groups. Their views resonate with definitions of ancestral knowledge as network of knowledges, beliefs, traditions, practices customs, developed collectively and intended to preserve the existence and identity of a community within their worldview (Antón Sánchez, 2015). However, this research is focused on a specific ancestral knowledge: Guapirean ancestral knowledge, a knowledge produced by the ancestors, inherited and preserved by generations of Afro-descendent rural communities from the rivers and forests of the Pacific Coast of Cauca, Colombia. Quijano (2007) claims that Latin America is the most extreme case of cultural colonisation by Europe and that the populations were subdued to cultural repression. The colonisation deprived them of their own patterns of formalised, intellectual, or visual expression, leaving them with no other way of expressing themselves than with the cultural patterns of the rulers. Therefore, I argue that the existence of Guapirean ancestral knowledge, has formed part of the struggle against the coloniality of power: it represents a critique against the paradigm of modernity/rationality in Colombia, which continues to "racially" organise and classify the population, constructing the Other, in this case, Guapirean Afro-Colombians, as an object of domination that does not possess rationality and to which humanity is not extended. The coloniality of power manifests itself as the state neglect and generalised marginalization of ethnically diverse territories, resulting in few livelihood options and low quality of life.

The disappearance of ancestral knowledge would mean the result of domination based on a difference; it is the disappearance of their particular survival modes. The participants in this study feared losing their knowledges and expressed nostalgia for how they used to live before.

This fear was not only perceived as the loss of cultural heritage, but it was also associated with survival in face of decreased union and solidarity, economic distress, health risks, or even environmental degradation. These feelings were circumscribed in a context of marginalisation that represents *the coloniality of being* (Maldonado-Torres, 2007), structural conditions that prevent them from accessing even the most basic necessities, such as potable water, schools, hospitals and means of transportation. Previous research suggests that the revitalization of ancestral knowledge is a strategy to resist oppression (Bergström, 2021; Chandler, 2018; French et al., 2020; Moore & Gibbons-Taylor, 2019; Neeganagwedgin, 2013), whereas here I argue that marginalisation has triggered the action of women and communities from Guapi, not only to protect their epistemologies but to use them to spur social change and justice. In line with Walsh (2010), I suggest that the network of women from the Pacific Coast of Cauca form a “*political-epistemic insurgency*”: the action of groups, movements and organisations that goes beyond opposition and a defensive resistance. This insurgency is an action that intervenes and transgresses the social, political, cultural, and particularly the knowledge, to build a new decolonial society, that questions the coloniality of power and the coloniality of being. Thus, the action of *Fundación Chiyangua*’s, *Red Matamba y Guasa* or *Construyendo Sueños*, is about the re-construction of the community, where they create their Being full of humanity.

Firstly, ancestral knowledge operates on a cognitive level as an intellectual transgression. The Afro-Colombian women in this study presented ancestral knowledge as part of a collective identity, as a representation of what they *are*, without it they could not *Be* (Ser). This represents an intellectual transgression vis à vis the negation of their *Being*, precisely through the possession of knowledge, a knowledge that is inherent to their existence. Therefore, safeguarding the ancestral practices is about locating and constructing the collective *Being* built through the right to own their knowledge, an affirmation of their deep humanity to look at the self as a subject with agency and not an object of oppression.

To contest the construction of Guapi as a space of domination, it is vital to keep their epistemology alive. The findings showed how women’s networks had made use of different spaces to safeguard ancestral knowledge but also to re-establish its relevance. They perceived issues such as the lack of interest of newer generations, distrust, or individualism as persistent challenges to the continuity of their epistemology. Nevertheless, they demonstrated their agency by countering the exclusion of elders in the educational system or struggling against the lack of recognition of ancestral midwifery’s role within the Colombia’s legal system. In recent research carried out in Zimbabwe, Maunganidze (2016) found that ancestral knowledge bearers contribute to its erosion as they end up being ring-fenced and often die without

transmitting their knowledge. Conversely, in the case of Afro-Colombian communities from Guapi, *Fundación Chiyangua*, making use of the right to ethno-education, has led to a transformation in the transmission process so that the thread of knowledge is not lost. It has also been argued that formal education systems are not multigenerational, and are highly dependent on western epistemologies, which threatens ancestral knowledge and excludes the elders (Chandler, 2018). However, *Fundación Chiyangua* and the larger network of women had created intergenerational transmission spaces within schools that countered this dependency as well as the exclusion of elders and local knowledge. Likewise, the participants explained that *Fundación Chiyangua* was struggling to gain legal recognition for the work of *the Parteras* (ancestral midwives). These findings suggest that in addition to consciously owning knowledge, the women organise themselves to preserve it, thus intervening in the political realm to change a legal system that does not recognise alternative epistemologies.

Thus, the women's organisation transcends into a broader social, cultural and intellectual transgression for change, becoming a political-epistemic insurgency. Rooftop sowing relates to multiple goals: it is about being able to access a local and chemical-free produced food that reduces external dependency. Thus, they do not only promote *Azotea* cropping as ancestral practice, but they also aspire to achieve food sovereignty. Similarly, the *Partería ancestral* (midwifery) cannot be reduced to technical medicinal knowledge, it relates to a deeper feeling associated with the beauty of life continuity, it is a thread of life and existence in a place that denies the minimum living conditions. Precisely because of the nearness of death, present in hunger, unemployment, or high mortality rates of death is what characterises *the coloniality of being* (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Here I contend that women's organising around ancestral knowledge has moved beyond survival, beyond resisting the limitation on their being, towards a socio-political struggle for the preservation of their epistemological and territorial positions, to enact their *Being* a human in a complex place such as Guapi, particularly for a decolonial *Being Black*. This is in line with previous studies that have shown how organising for the revitalisation of ancestral knowledge is a political act that strengthens communities (Bergström, 2021; Joseph et al., 2022).

Fundación Chiyangua is part of a decolonial turn in order to Be Black (*Ser Negro*) on the Pacific Coast of Cauca. This affirmation can be contradictory, as blackness has been associated with the imposed social category of "race" which has produced identities to classify people globally, within societies and states as posited by Quijano (2007). However, Afro-Colombian thinking explains the value of an affirmative Being Black: they will continue to Be Black until the historical and determining conditions of being black as an imposition and subordination

from outside is completely transformed, because “to deny the Black would be to deny the libertarian project in order to be a full autonomous subject in conditions and capacities for its own development” (Grueso, 2007, p. 147). Consequently, Being Black becomes a collective project that confronts the denial of their integral humanity. The decolonisation of Being implies the recognition of Being a black female or Being a black male—*Ser Negro/Negra*—as a historical subject configured simultaneously from a relationship of subordination and history of emancipation and liberation. Therefore, *Fundación Chiyangua*’s work is at the core of fostering a Being Black community.

According to the women in this study, ancestral knowledge is seemed to be situated as an alternative life project and a response to a structural context of marginality and oppression. The awareness developed by the “*political-epistemological insurgency*” is present in the organisation's tenets which include ancestral knowledge, black women, territory, subjects, and spaces of oppression. Nevertheless, there is also an acknowledgement of their history of resistance and insurgence. The women’s organisations do not limit themselves to resisting oppression, rather they have an agenda of transformation. They are aware that Being Black entails the right to be a collective subject of rights, which they seek to promote, such as ethno-education. Therefore, the ancestral practices documented in this study can be read through Libia Grueso’s (2007) conceptualization: as the decolonial project of Being. While the purpose of this project is to nurture the internal reflection in order to transform the oppression of the Black Being by the dominant culture, it also implies a political proposal of cultural rights that gathers the different territorial struggles as well as their own options for development and future. The question that remains is: how long will they have to be Black?

5.2 Ancestrality as a multifaceted insurgency to Be Black women.

The participants of this study reported the presence of gender hierarchies, spatial segregation, gender-based violence and structural marginalisation. Hence, I argue that the women’s being was also oppressed, not only by a Colombian state dominated by white and mestizo middle-class white men, but from within the communities and in relation to ancestral practices, shaped by the compounded aspects that produced their exception from being as black women. According to Crenshaw (1991) intersectionality refers to the various ways in which race, gender and class interact in shaping women’s experiences. Therefore, looking at those dimensions separately would mean not being able to wholly capture the women’s experiences. This has also been discussed in relation to Afro-Colombian women by Afro-Colombian

feminists such as Lozano Lerma (2016a) and Vigoya (2017). I follow Walsh's (2010) concept of insurgence and Crenshaw's (1991) conceptualisation of intersectionality to argue that in this case study, Guapirean women's ancestral action is insurgent in the face of multiple internal and external intersecting oppressions. Thus, seeing women's organisation as an epistemological-political insurgence to build community, the following section deepens our understanding on how, through ancestral knowledges and practices, the women's epistemological and quotidian insurgence seeks to transform gender inequities, racism, territorial marginalisation and classed discrimination.

Ancestral knowledge, built collectively, fosters union and solidarity. This interdependency has prompted a struggle for transformation and social justice from within. The findings suggested that their ancestral union was essential to rebuild the networks of brotherhood and sisterhood, but also to transform gender-based violence. This ancestral practice, that convenes for union, became their source of strength. The participants affirmed that together they opened their eyes and became conscious, together *they knew that they knew* an ancestral knowledge. This *epistemic insurgence* emphasises the knowledge, practices and epistemologies produced by black women, nurtured with the ancestral memory of resistance, which is ignored for not corresponding to who is assumed to be the subject of knowledge (Lozano Lerma, 2016a). According to Lugones (2010) communities rather than individuals resist coloniality, within a way of a shared understanding of the world, because one does with someone else and not in individualist isolation. Hence, *Red Matamba y Guasa*, *Fundación Chiyangua*, and *Construyendo Sueños*, are organisations that foster women's union based on their ancestrality, which imply shared understanding and mutual recognition. The participants highlighted the existence of a violation of their humanity, as they could not freely move, they could not gather and were physically abused. Moreover, they associated gender-based violence with the enslavement of the colonial era in which Afro-descendant women were forced to work inside the master's house and rejected the idea that a woman's place was in the kitchen or at the back of the house. Following Lugones' (2010) *coloniality of gender* as an analysis of a racialised, capitalist, gender oppression, Lozano Lerma (2016a) argues that the Black woman is not even a woman, only the white woman is. Thus, the ancestral union of the women in this study strengthens the possibility of being black women within their communities, but without leaving behind the collective struggles through their ancestral pedagogy.

Women strategically organised to safeguard ancestral practices but also to re-signify and position their knowledge and themselves, to exist and re-exist within their territory through more fluid gender arrangements. On one hand, participants affirmed their gendered ancestral

positions. However, the women pointed precisely at the intersectional nature of their oppression. Thus, practices such as *Azotea* cropping or ancestral medicine are positioned as politically relevant activities. They are not merely “women’s tasks”, but necessary for the communities’ survival. Hence, through their engagement with *Fundación Chiyangua*, women’s ancestral activities highlight the insurgent character of their quotidian practices: practices developed by women which transcend home and the domestic sphere to build a community (Lozano Lerma, 2016a).

On the other hand, the participants posited that women also knew [*saber*] and could [*poder*]¹⁸ practice “man’s chores”: they fished, went to the forest, and generated income. Hence, they do not only master this type of knowledge, but they also claim the power to question gender-discriminatory assumptions upon which “hard work” was only done by men or the assumption that certain activities “were for men and others for women”. Previous research has interpreted women’s ancestral practices as collective resistance (Camacho, 2017; Grueso, 2007; Lozano Lerma, 2016a). Others as Asher (2007) had observed that women from Afro-Colombian communities were lauded for fostering a black identity through their quotidian tasks, but their essentialised positions in maintaining the family and the community life served to obscure and justify their more “domestic” roles in ethnic struggles. As a result, their gender roles restricted their possibilities to participate in more political aspects of ethnic struggles. In this research, however, I argue that women’s ancestral practices go beyond resistance. Through a critical engagement, women re-signified the gendered practices not to resist their undervaluation but to transform it. Additionally, beyond resisting their exclusion they had organised to surpass “women’s activities and places”, entering traditionally male-dominated practices and spaces, such as in the black communities’ councils or *Asoagropesqui*’s board to foster their own interests and end the oppression that prompted their invisibility, segregation and physical abuse. Whereas previous studies have mostly focused on ancestral knowledge as a reparatory mechanism for Afro-Colombian women victims of displacement and sexual violence within the framework of Colombian’s armed conflict (Cruz Castillo, 2020; Cruz Castillo & Baracaldo, 2019; Espinosa et al., 2021; Zulver, 2021), these findings show that ancestral knowledge can contribute to preventing gender-based violence as well as other forms of violence not necessarily caused by armed conflict.

Participants acknowledged that their oppressions were multifaceted. They manifested that they were discriminated against for being women, for being black, for being rural, and for

¹⁸ In Spanish can is the same verb as power.

living in Guapi. This indicated that their experienced oppressions intersected. Therefore there is a need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed (Crenshaw, 1991). The participants describe how they experienced discrimination for being *Piangüeras*. The discrimination against *Piangüeras* is simultaneously a gender and a classed discrimination towards an activity performed mostly by rural women. Furthermore, as it is a practice that characterises Afro-Colombian communities from the Pacific region, this discrimination also becomes a racialised one. In addition, these intersectional oppressions were also present at the structural and political level: Black Communities Councils, created by law 70 to recognise the rights of Afro-Colombian communities, had excluded women, creating different dimensions of disempowerment. Previous research has discussed how ethnic organisations relegated gender inequity and undervalued Afro-Colombian women's contributions within their organisational processes (Asher, 2018; Lozano Lerma, 2016a). Indeed, when one discourse fails to acknowledge the significance of the other, the power relations that each attempt to challenge are strengthened (Crenshaw, 1991). However, this research found that the women's insurgence has been complex: it was not characterized by assuming exclusively chores traditionally assigned to men, nor was it characterized by abandoning ancestral activities. Rather, the women promoted ancestral practices by emphasising the importance of traditionally female activities, while also entering male spaces. Thus, the women, by being insurgent in the face of oppression of multiple grounds, simultaneously challenge the coloniality of knowledge, the coloniality of being and the coloniality of gender.

In addition to the gender hierarchies, women had sought to transform racism, classism, and structural marginalisation through their ancestry. Participants mentioned how they had experienced racism. This racial oppression had generated scepticism and mistrust towards persons with a lighter skin colour. Nevertheless, the women claimed their ancestral legacy, both through their physical appearance as descendants of the African diaspora, to overcome the narratives that associated blackness with ugliness and badness. Likewise, the epistemic potential of their ancestral knowledge provided women with autonomy to handle racist behaviours. Lozano Lerma (2016a) claims that the place, thus the territory, extends to the body of black women as a geography and a corporality from which knowledge is produced. Therefore, I suggest that the women of this study embody an insurgence in-place that is, in their territory (Guapi) and from their black women's bodies. Previous research has found that people who self-identify as black are less prone to wish for a lighter skin colour than those who self-identify as white, which could be a contestation to the racial order (Vásquez-Padilla &

Hernández-Reyes, 2020). In this sense, women's vindication of ancestral identity may be seen as a contestation of Colombia's racial order.

The findings further suggest that the women's insurgence understands place as both Guapi's territory and women's black body. The women's stories showed how the marginalisation was perceived as discrimination towards themselves and their territory. Due to this structural characteristic, people had few options in life, which forced them to migrate in search of work and education, or worse, ended up joining armed groups. Additionally, it reflects the persistent colonial power in which salary is a privilege of 'Whiteness'(Quijano, 2000). The marginalisation of this territory pushed women to migrate. Because of this, the efforts of *Fundación Chiyangua* or *Construyendo Sueños* to build life alternatives could be viewed as a decolonial exercise so that their lives are not disrupted by forced migration. Following Lozano Lerma (2016) who extends the idea of a place to women's bodies, I suggest that women reclaim the ancestral legacy of their bodies, as a place against racism, but they also reclaim Guapi, the territory in which they produce ancestral knowledge, as a place for life in order to transform their dehumanisation, the coloniality of power. This is in line with Guevara (2013) who found that Afro-Colombian women re-signified their practices, cultural traditions and their ancestral knowledges, and organised to vindicate their role in the society from their triple condition as "black", "women" and "poor". However, this research focuses more thoroughly on a decolonial reading in which ancestral union, solidarity, and knowledge are the sources of social transformation from which women collectively build a strength to intervene in the social, political, cultural, and intellectual in order to foster more gender equal arrangements while simultaneously transforming intersecting oppressions of gender, class, ethnicity, or territoriality.

5.3 Development, Women's Participation and Citizenship

In Guapi, state neglect, armed conflict and development initiatives coexist. I argue that the Afro-Colombian women's relationship with development actors is determined by the structural conditions in which they find themselves. I suggest that their notion of development, shaped by their ancestral knowledge, practices and values also guides their interaction with development actors. Colonial relations in development are often highlighted in terms of North-South relations, in which development actors from the Global North come to intervene in countries from the Global South (Escobar, 1995; Ziai, 2017). My findings, however, show that the women's positive assessment of non-state development actors can be interpreted as a critique of state neglect. Beyond idealising perspectives, this implies recognising that

despite the strength of women's union, their interactions take place amid unequal power relations.

Women's vision of development was related to their ancestral knowledge. This study found that women associated development with food access, better working conditions and opportunities as well as improved health, transport, or educational infrastructures. Additionally, some participants were opposed to development notions and projects that would leave behind the ancestral practices that they had been practising for centuries, which would imply becoming assimilated and externally dependent. Yet, they did not reject the notion of development but posited that an adequate development would uphold their ancestral knowledge and practices.

The women engaged with state actors through a continuous paradox in which state development programs, thought to solve issues such as marginalisation, seemed to rather perpetuate marginalisation, hence also the coloniality of power. State-actor development interventions were criticised as "imposed". Moreover, the participants indicated problems such as corruption and existing power imbalances. While the population of Guapi lived in a state of marginalisation reflected in the affirmation of "this is another country", they were also the target of state-led development programs. But communities were not consulted or invited beforehand to plan and design the public development programs that targeted them. In this way, development discourse and practice are used to exercise power over those who are supposedly "not developed" (Escobar, 1995), in this case, Guapiorean people and women. This was exemplified by the case of the boat that the Quiroga rural community received without being consulted, which resulted in a waste. While other studies have highlighted that there is an ontological divide between development experts and rural populations, as experts fail to recognise development according to rural standards (Moyo & Moyo, 2014), I propose that this lack of understanding perpetuates the *coloniality of power* (Quijano, 2000). Therefore, rather than a lack of understanding, state development actors had assumed they knew better the solutions and the problems that communities face than the communities themselves. Maldonado-Torres (2007) has defined a *decolonial attitude* as the responsibility and willingness to take the point of view of those whose existence is questioned and produced insignificant. As state led-development interventions ignore the point of view of black communities, their failed programs can be considered a colonial attitude towards Guapiorean communities as recipients of aid that has been thought for them without them.

The colonial attitude of state development actors implies a violation of rights. According to Law 70, Afro-Colombian communities are granted their right to free prior and informed

consent in all the legislative and administrative measures that can affect them, including development interventions. Hence, not engaging with communities in the design of development programs implicates that the Colombian state violates the legitimate rights of communities (Paschel, 2010). This resonates with Aluko's (2018) claim that ignoring women in the planning and execution of development violates their rights to participation. Yet, considering the specificity of Colombia's ethno-racial legal frameworks, this exclusion can be interpreted as a colonial attitude that, through failed development interventions, prevents the end of the marginalisation, maintains the Colombian racial order and hinders real democratisation.

Nevertheless, the participants of this study showed their agency by openly denouncing this behaviour as an imposition and by demanding real participation. Participants acknowledged the risk of assimilation through "*inadequate*" development. Moreover, they did not only question dependency and the assumption that those outside know better than themselves, but they also affirmed that development comes from within because external interventions come "*to strengthen what is already here*" and not to develop. Confirming that their communities are "developed" by external actors would be the success of coloniality, it would imply the subordination of their difference. However, despite the constraints, in the women's discourse, there was an implicit denial of their underdevelopment. Guapiorean women rather pointed toward the state, corruption, and power as problems, not "underdevelopment". Critical development studies had criticised the reduction of all problems to development issue, which implies ignoring that often those problems are related to power issues (Escobar, 1995; Radcliffe, 2015). However, the women of *Fundación Chiyangua* and *Construyendo Sueños* emphasised the political nature of the problems they faced and countered these reductionist perspectives. This corroborates Asher's (2002) claim that Afro-Colombian women understand the power of words, discourses and representation, and they reject the vision that portrays them as in need of external help.

The findings suggest that the participants' positive assessment of their interactions with non-state actors seemed to be defined by their opposition to interactions with state actors. The women claimed that non-state organisations, both national and international, had supported women's networks through material and economic resources to reach rural communities. This support contributed to breaking the isolation of rural women that could not gather with other women. Moreover, they affirmed that non-state actors usually dialogued with the communities and assessed the needs before the execution of development projects. Therefore, the women claimed that non-state organisations allowed more autonomy *than* state actors. Paradoxically,

while on the one hand, the women openly criticised state neglect and the lack of political will to advance women's rights, on the other hand, their organisational process with assistance from non-state organisations, had strengthened women's claims in governance institutions. This was the case of the Guapi's Gender Public Policy for Equity, not developed by the mayor, but by Fundación Chiyangua with guidance from a non-state organisation. This seems to indicate that, in some ways, engagement with non-state actors had contributed to pushing state actors and advancing their agendas.

The interaction with non-state actors is not free from power imbalances, yet the women showed a certain degree of ownership and influence. Women expressed the relationship they had forged with non-state development actors as an alliance that had contributed to their struggles. Also, the participants highlighted that they were the ones who knew the territory, the ones that possessed the knowledge of the problem's causes and of the issues that needed to be addressed. Another possible signal of ownership is their approbation of the achievement of Guapi's Gender Public Policy for Equity. Nevertheless, external actors are the ones who control the economic and material resources, but it is necessary to recognise the women's ability to navigate the unequal power relation to construct a decolonial project amid constraints and contradictions. Thus, my research agrees with Asher's (2007) claims that in the case of complex political realities, viewing black women's activism either as autonomous organising or co-optation by the state is too simplistic. At the same time, by employing a decolonial framework, the findings in this study interpret failed state-led development programs as a way to perpetuate marginalisation, and thus the continuation of the coloniality of power, while paradoxically non-state actors, despite not being free of power imbalances, had been comparatively *more* supportive of the women's struggles.

Fundación Chiyangua transcended into an insurgent process: a network of women that seek to transform the *coloniality* of their exclusion locally and in the broader context of the Colombian nation. In the face of multifaceted oppression, the women had not only created local spaces for participation but had pushed state actors to do more. Their struggles, thus, form part of ongoing efforts of the deconstruction of Colombia as a colonial society and a colonial state, a path of restorative justice for a more ethical nation where heterogeneity is recognised and articulated into a real national democratic society. A decolonial Colombia where the Other, such as Black women, and Black communities, can Be in dignity as real citizens, and where epistemologies such as Guapirean ancestral knowledges are respected and protected.

Conclusions

The present study was designed to explore the way ancestral knowledge shapes the lives and organisation of a group of Afro-Colombian women engaged in organisational work and communitarian networks. The following text summarizes key findings for each research question, as well as unexpected findings that emerged from the study, while also providing recommendations for further research and practice.

Ancestral knowledge played a central role in women's lives. This knowledge, practices, and values were deeply rooted in their way of being, their physical appearance, and the practices that characterise them as unique, as black peoples from the Pacific Coast of Cauca. Furthermore, those ancestral practices, knowledge, and values, fostered their communal life and allowed them to survive. The fear of losing their ancestral knowledge was inscribed in the context of structural marginalisation that deprived them of minimum living conditions. Therefore, women had organised to safeguard their ancestral knowledge, which implied safeguarding themselves and their collectivities, as bearers of ancestral knowledge. Their organising process can be viewed as a *political-epistemological insurgency* that beyond resisting the inhumane conditions that are imposed on them, had sought to transform them. The women organised to transform the exclusion of their ancestral knowledges from schools or to turn their ancestral cropping practice into a struggle for food sovereignty. Thus, ancestral knowledge is essential to maintain a thread of life in Guapi, because through their ancestral practices they generate food, health, education, and even income alternatives, that create humanised communities.

The participants exposed the existence of gender hierarchies and discriminatory assumptions toward ancestral practices embodied by women. From their ancestral union and solidarity, women-built consciousness. They simultaneously positioned gendered ancestral activities as politically relevant and engaged in traditionally male activities which implies questioning the undervaluation of their own supposedly "female" practices and their segregation into certain spaces/activities, rendering gender arrangements more fluid. Thus, the women's struggle is thus not separated from racial/ethnic vindications in the face of oppression from outside, but they also challenge internal oppressions, so that women can be as black women. This implicates that the women can also foster change from their ancestral gendered activities.

Moreover, ancestral knowledge was central to transforming intersecting racial, classed, and territorial oppressions. Women found in the legitimacy of their black body and their

ancestral knowledge a way to handle racism, transform negative narratives of blackness, and derogate discrimination against rural black women. Guapi's territory and black women's bodies are connected. In both, ancestral practices are generated and practised, and in relation to both there are oppressions, therefore women's union to be able to stay in the territory is an insurgence for women's existence within the Guapi community.

Finally, the women's vision of development was related to their ancestral practices. They rejected assimilation and dependency. Their relationship with non-state development actors seemed to be defined by opposition from their experience with state actors that excluded them from participation in development programs. Comparatively and paradoxically, non-state actors had contributed more than state actors to the women's struggles. This does not imply a denial of power imbalances, rather it is a way to highlight the criticism towards the Colombian State that continues to violate the rights of Afro-Colombian women and communities.

The sample of this case study included only six participants; thus, it may not reflect the experiences of all Guapirean women's situations and perspectives regarding ancestral knowledge. Likewise, the sample size does not make it possible to generalise the findings in the context of Colombia at large. Future research with a larger sample could explore further if and how women's organizing around ancestral knowledges lead to change in gender relations within families and within communities. It would also be valuable to explore potential relations between racism and international development non-governmental organisations with ethnic Colombian communities. Finally, further research could also be conducted in other communities to uncover alternative spaces for ancestral knowledge transmission, and how these spaces impact intergenerational relations and the lives of elders and young people. Concerning development practice, greater efforts are needed to ensure that ancestral knowledge of communities is promoted. This could be done by supporting the creation of new spaces for intergenerational knowledge transmission. More importantly, it is essential to include rural communities and women in all phases of development programs and to employ decolonial and intersectional approaches to address and understand complex oppressions and marginalities.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethical Clearance from NSD

Assessment

Print

Reference number

486134

Project title

Ancestrality and gender: Afro-colombian women leadership in peace and development

Data controller (institution responsible for the project)

Universitetet i Bergen / Det psykologiske fakultet / Hemil-senteret

Project leader (academic employee/supervisor or PhD candidate)

Ann Cathrin Corrales-Øverlid, ann.overlid@uib.no, tlf: +4755582343

Type of project

Student project, Master's thesis

Contact information, student

Jessica Yamile Buendia Sanchez, djemila90@hotmail.com, tlf: 004746529041

Project period

13.01.2022 - 01.07.2022

Assessment (1)

23.12.2021 - Assessed

Our assessment is that the processing of personal data in this project will comply with data protection legislation, so long as it is carried out in accordance with what is documented in the Notification Form and attachments, dated 23.12.2021, as well as in correspondence with NSD.

TYPE OF DATA AND DURATION

The project will process general categories of personal data, special categories of personal data about racial and ethnic origin until 01.07.2022.

LEGAL BASIS

The project will gain consent from data subjects to process their personal data. We find that consent will meet the necessary requirements under art. 4 (11) and 7, in that it will be a freely given, specific, informed and unambiguous statement or action, which will be documented and can be withdrawn.

The legal basis for processing general categories of personal data is therefore consent given by the data subject, cf. the General Data Protection Regulation art. 6.1 a).

The legal basis for processing special categories of personal data is explicit consent given by the data subject, cf. art. 9.2 a), cf. the Personal Data Act § 10, cf. § 9 (2).

PRINCIPLES RELATING TO PROCESSING PERSONAL DATA

NSD finds that the planned processing of personal data will be in accordance with the principles under the General Data Protection Regulation regarding:

- lawfulness, fairness and transparency (art. 5.1 a), in that data subjects will receive sufficient information about the processing and will give their consent
- purpose limitation (art. 5.1 b), in that personal data will be collected for specified, explicit and legitimate purposes, and will not be processed for new, incompatible purposes
- data minimisation (art. 5.1 c), in that only personal data which are adequate, relevant and necessary for the purpose of the project will be processed
- storage limitation (art. 5.1 e), in that personal data will not be stored for longer than is necessary to fulfil the project's purpose

THE RIGHTS OF DATA SUBJECTS

NSD finds that the information that will be given to data subjects about the processing of their personal data will meet the legal requirements for form and content, cf. art. 12.1 and art. 13.

Data subjects will have the following rights in this project: access (art. 15), rectification (art. 16), erasure (art. 17), restriction of processing (art. 18), notification (art. 19) and data portability (art. 20). These rights apply so long as the data subject can be identified in the collected data.

We remind you that if a data subject contacts you about their rights, the data controller has a duty to reply within a month.

FOLLOW YOUR INSTITUTION'S GUIDELINES

NSD presupposes that the project will meet the requirements of accuracy (art. 5.1 d), integrity and confidentiality (art. 5.1 f) and security (art. 32) when processing personal data.

To ensure that these requirements are met you must follow your institution's internal guidelines and/or consult with your institution (i.e. the institution responsible for the project).

NOTIFY CHANGES

If you intend to make changes to the processing of personal data in this project it may be necessary to notify NSD. This is done by updating the information registered in the Notification Form. On our website we explain which changes must be notified. Wait until you receive an answer from us before you carry out the changes.

FOLLOW-UP OF THE PROJECT

NSD will follow up the progress of the project at the planned end date in order to determine whether the processing of personal data has been concluded.

Good luck with the project!

Contact person at NSD: Tore Andre Kjetland Fjeldsbø

be752cc6c

**Are you interested in taking part in the research project
“Ancestrality and gender: Afro-Colombian women
and community development”?**

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to understand the role of afro-Colombian women in peace and community development through traditional practices or “ancestral” practices. In this letter we will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

Purpose of the project

This master research project seeks to highlight and understand the integration of ancestral knowledge in community development in the organization “Fundación Chiyangua”. The objectives are to understand women’s role in ancestral knowledge and its articulation with community development. The data will be collected by the same researcher-student only for research purposes.

Who is responsible for the research project?

University of Bergen is the institution responsible for the project.

Why are you being asked to participate?

You are asked to participate because you are an adult woman engaged in the tasks of Fundacion Chiyangua. Your contact details were provided by the direction of Fundacion Chiyangua.

What does participation involve for you?

If you chose to take part in this involves for you to participate in an interview where you will be asked in a general form about your role, experience, perspectives, and knowledge in relation to ancestral knowledge. The interview will last approximately one hour, and it will be recorded electronically through sound recording but also through note taking.

Additionally, the researcher will participate in activities where you be also be involved. The participation of the researcher will help to observe how women engage, for this purpose the researcher will take general notes and these observations will be anonymous.

Participation is voluntary

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw. You may decline to answer questions you prefer not to answer.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data

We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act).

Only student and the thesis supervisor, Professor Ann Cathrin Corrales Øverlid, will have access to personal data. Additionally, no unauthorized persons will be able to access the personal data. If you chose to be anonymized, your name and contact details will be replaced with a code. Furthermore, the list of names, contact details and respective codes will be stored separately from the rest of the collected data.

However, participants who may want their contributions/identities to be known, will be made recognizable or their contributions acknowledge in the final draft.

Information will be securely stored in a protected device.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project? The project is scheduled to end the first of July 2022. The data will be stored until the end of the project for research purposes.

Your rights

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process your personal data?

We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with University of Bergen, NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?

If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- University of Bergen via Ann Cathrin Corrales Øverlid (supervisor) and Jessica Yamile Buendia Sanchez (student).
- Our Data Protection Officer: Janecke Helene Veim (personvernombud@uib.no)
- NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS, by email: (personvertjenester@nsd.no) or by telephone: +47 55 58 21 17.

Yours sincerely,

Ann Cathrin Corrales Øverlid
Project Leader
(Researcher/supervisor)

Jessica Yamile Buendia Sanchez
Student

Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project “Ancestrality and gender: Afro-Colombian women and community development” conducted by Jessica Buendia from the University of Bergen, and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I have read the information presented in the information letter. I have had the opportunity to ask questions related to the study and have received satisfactory answers to my questions and any additional details. I give consent:

- to participate in an interview
- I agree to my interview being audio recorded to ensure accurate transcription and analysis

Option A: anonymization	Option B: acknowledgement /identification
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> for information about me/myself to be anonymized in a way that I cannot be recognized/identified <input type="checkbox"/> I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any thesis or publication that comes from this research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> for information about me/myself to be published in a way that I can be recognized (name, age, gender, education level, occupation, number of children and civil status) <input type="checkbox"/> I agree to allow audio/video clips, digital images, or photographs in which I appear to be used in teaching, scientific presentations and/or publications with the understanding that I could be identified by name.

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approx. 1 July 2022

(Signed by participant, date)

Researcher’s signature:

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Introduction:

- The study and I
- Informed consent
- Opening questions.

As I have mentioned before, I am not from here, so could you tell me....

Demographic questions:

- What is your age and civil status?
- What is your level of education?
- What is your occupation?
- Do you have sons or daughters?

Theme: Identity and participation

1. How and why did you become engaged with the organisation Chiyangua? How long have you been enrolled in it?
2. What kind of tasks do you perform in the organization?
3. What does Chiyangua mean to you?
4. Could you tell me a bit about how you identify as a person? Are there certain groups or aspects that you feel are particularly important to your identity?
5. Since Chiyangua objective is to improve the participation and empowerment of black women, how has this perspective impacted your life?
6. would you say that participants in important for your sense of belonging? Why? Why not?

Theme: Ancestral knowledge and gender

7. In your opinion what is ancestral knowledge (AK) and what does it mean to you? Could you say something about what you think is not ancestral knowledge (AK)?
8. Do women have a particular role within ancestral knowledge? Would you say it is different from men's role? How?
9. Would you say that there are ancestral practices that particularly benefit women? If so, which?
10. Could you tell me a little bit about how men and women transmit ancestral knowledge to other generations? Are there differences between women and men? And between rural/ urban women?

11. Do you think men could do ancestral practices women do? If yes why, if not why?
12. How does the organization engage with men? why?
13. Are there any ancestral practices that you consider should be changed? If yes which, and if not why?

Theme: Chiyangua and Development

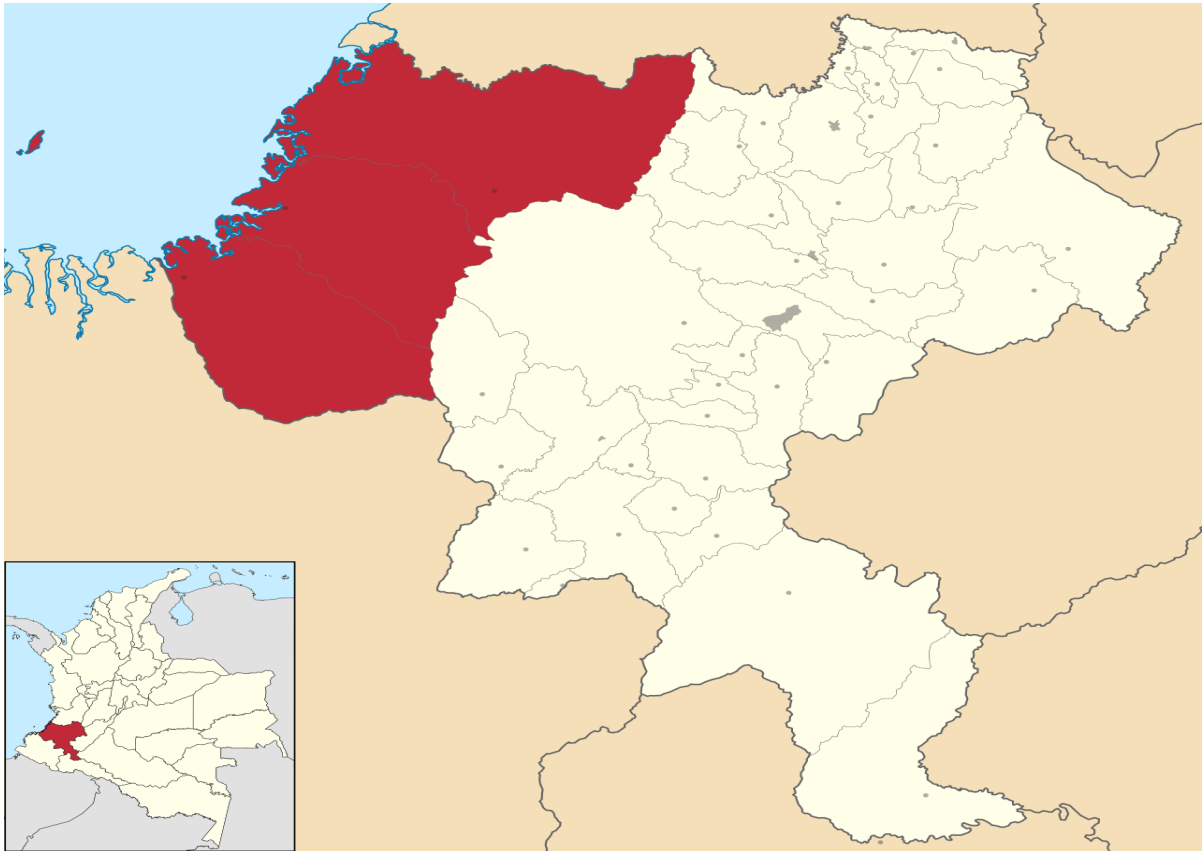
14. What do you think about when you hear the term development? Would you say it is a positive or negative term, or both?
15. Is development important to you? In what way?
16. Is development important to Chiyangua? In what way?
17. Would you say that ancestral knowledge plays a role in the development of your community? In what way

Theme: Ancestral and development perspectives

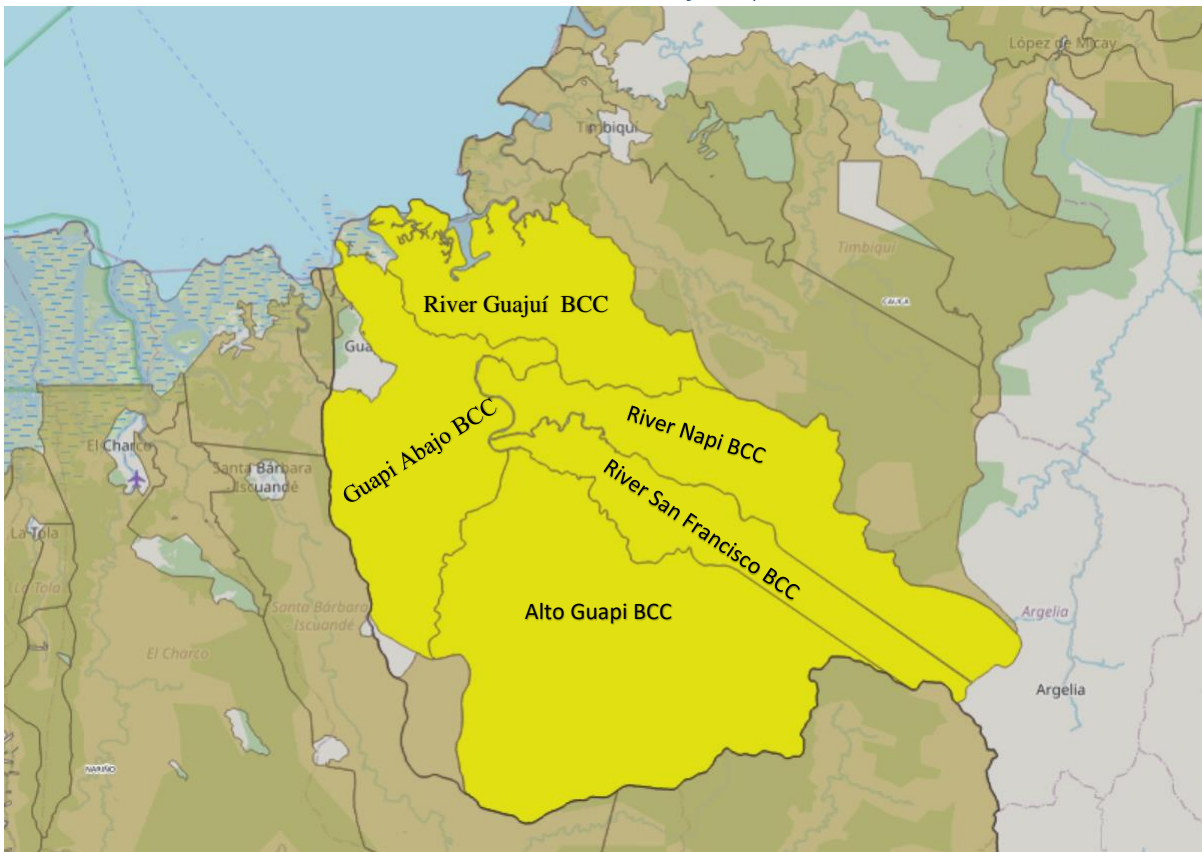
18. As you may know international development organisations like USAID, OIM, UN, FOKUS support the work of Chiyangua, what do you think these organizations mean to Fundación Chiyangua?
19. Can you say something about the relationship between Fundación Chiyangua and these organizations?
20. Could you say something about the role Chiyangua plays in your local community? What is the most important contributions from women in Fundación Chiyangua to the community?
21. Do you think that the rest of Colombia and maybe the rest of the world could learn something from Chiyangua and your community?
22. Anything you would like to mention or ask?

Appendix D: Maps.

The subregion Pacific Coast of Cauca



The collective territories and Black Communities Councils of Guapi.



Appendix E: Field images.

Image 1. *Azotea* crops (raised gardens) in Joanico, rural Guapi.



Image 2. *Piangüeras* from Quiroga's organisation *Construyendo Sueños*



Image 3. Communal house in Joanico. A typical stilt house from the Pacific Region.



Image 4. A postal card stating “Women, for a live free of violence”, hanging on the wall of a family’s house from the Quiroga community.



Image 5 and 6. Buckets to filter rainwater.



Image 7. Fundación Chiyangua's boat.

