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# The politics of indigeneity: decolonizing historical memory and education in Colombia

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores how the Misak (Guambianos) from the Colombian southwest are revitalising their collective memory and militant politics in a nation that has historically prioritised its Spanish heritage. Through the analysis of twenty-month collaborative research conducted by three Misak University (MU) students and the article's author (a non-Indigenous Colombian affiliated with a university from the Global North), the article claims that political engagement results from this community's autonomous educational institutions and pedagogical practices. The MU is one of these Misak autonomous efforts engaging with non-traditional pedagogies, such as *caminar el territorio*, to promote a 'militant indigenous identity' committed to their cultural differentiation. These educational practices evolved from other methods for memory reproduction embraced by the Misak since colonial times. As the tearing down of the statues of Spanish conquistadores in 2020 shows, the Misak's educational efforts have cultivated a new indigenous generation that seeks to make a political and cultural impact beyond their territory.

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## Introduction

On 16 September 2020, during a national strike protesting Iván Duque's right-wing government (2018–2022), members of the *Movimiento de Autoridades Indígenas del Sur Occidente* (Indigenous Authorities of the Southwest, AISO), inspired by the global anti-statue movement, toppled a statue of the Spanish conquistador Sebastian de Belalcázar (1480–1551) on Tulcán Hill, Popayán's highest point. Popayán is the capital of the Department of Cauca, home to eight Indigenous cultures, including the Misak (previously known as Guambianos) (Bonilla 2012, 121–65). Tulcán Hill, often mistaken for a simple bluff, is a pre-colonial pyramid constructed by Misak ancestors, now hidden under a dense layer of earth and grass (Cubillos 1959, 217–357). In a public statement, Edgar Alberto Velasco Tumiña, a Misak who serves as AISO's general secretary, explains that AISO's actions aimed to challenge the conservative elite promotion of Belalcázar as a heroic civiliser, explorer, and the founder of Popayán, Cali, and Quito (Ecuador) (Buenahora Durán 2020, 108–45; Echeverri 1962). Velasco Tumiña further states that Belalcázar was a brutal criminal who engineered the destruction of the Pubenense Confederation, the

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territorial organisation that congregated Misak ancestors and other pre-Hispanic cultures (El Tiempo 2021). In sync with Velasco Tumiña's story are the chronicles of Pascual de Andagoya (1495–1548), another Spanish conquistador, who describes how Belalcázar's men wiped out entire populations through public carnages in which dogs mutilated and ate alive hundreds of native people (Rodríguez and Vicente 2005). A few days later, various Misak knocked down other statues, including another of Belalcázar in Cali and one of Gonzalo Jimenez de Quesada, founder of Colombia's capital, Bogotá, located in one of that city's main squares. As this article shows, many other young Misak shared Velasco Tumiña's political impetus and pride for being Misak. How has the Misak community been able to forge such 'militant Indigenous subjects', meaning Indigenous people are willing to embrace political actions to maintain and extol their cultural differences?

This article posits that the political activism of these young individuals stems from autonomous educational initiatives within the Misak community, fostering Misak pride across primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions, such as the Misak University (MU). The concept of territoriality, emphasising the link between life, memory, and territory, is central to developing pedagogies, such as *caminar el territorio* (walking the territory), aligned with the Misak's overall educational effort. For instance, through *caminando el territorio*, the Misak reflect on past events, solidify their pride in their history, and draw inspiration to confront contemporary challenges. I support this argument through an ethnographic description of a 20-month collaborative research project conducted by three Misak University (MU) students – Liliana Camayo and siblings Rosa Maria and John Montano – and myself, a Colombian researcher affiliated with a university from the Global North. This collaborative work exemplifies indigenous educational efforts proposing methods distinct from traditional literacy-based education to nurture individuals committed to preserving their cultural heritage.

The Misak educational project arose from an intercultural group comprised of *solidarios* (non-Misak activists and university professors), organic intellectual elders with *vivencias* (everyday life experiences as politically committed Indigenous subjects), and younger community members with higher education. Their educational proposal combined the participatory research approach promoted by the Colombian social scientist Orlando Fals Borda with Indigenous theories and practices based on territoriality (Rappaport 2005, 34). This mode of 'popular-indigenous' education has helped to counteract the disappearance of Misak's previously dominant identity and memory reproduction methods, which included endogamic ways of authority preservation in colonial times and the post-independence struggle to protect communal land titling.

We named the outcome of our collective efforts *Infografía de la Historia Misak* (Infographics of Misak History, IHM). Drawing inspiration from the methodology *mapas parlantes* (talkative maps), our work captures prominent historical moments and social challenges through drawings organised over two *caracoles* (spirals), one expanding and the other contracting, following the traditional Misak sense of history. The centre of this graphic narrative is the proclamation of the 1991 Constitution, which provided Indigenous people with special territorial autonomous rights. We collected information through oral history, primary and secondary sources, and methodologies promoted by Misak educational centres, such as *caminar el territorio* (walking the territory), listening to elders around the *nak kuk* (woodfire), and the *alík*, also known as *minga* (collective work)

(Vasco et al. 2015; 2018, 481).<sup>1</sup> Although Rosa Maria, John, and Liliana did not participate in the protests against Belalcázar and Jimenez de Quezada statues, they and many other Misak youth shared similar educational experiences, resulting in similar worldviews.

This article continues with the theoretical and historical contextualisation of the Misak autonomous pedagogy. This discussion includes three subsections on popular Indigenous education, the importance of the concept of 'territoriality', and the history of Misak University. The methods section describes my collaborative research experience with Misak students and the research process. The article continues with the results of our collaboration, which includes a summary of the IMH's 39 images and a detailed explanation of one of them (*terraje*), a discussion of the historical significance of this type of memory reproduction, and its conclusions.

## Theoretical and historical context

### *Popular indigenous education: the theoretical roots of the Misak Autonomous Program*

Like many Latin American educational grassroots initiatives, Misak University bears the imprint of the Catholic Church. In 1891, Pope Leo XII proclaimed the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, introducing the social Catholic doctrine aimed at counteracting the rise of liberal and communist secularism. The social Catholic doctrine promoted the advancement of education, housing, entertainment, and health programmes to sustain the Catholic paternalistic yet self-empowering relationship with popular social sectors, a tradition dating back to colonial times (Bastian 2007; Cortés 2019; Montero García 1983; Torres Carrillo 2016).

Influenced by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), progressive factions within the Latin American Catholic Church advanced the Church's social doctrine into Liberation Theology, fusing Marxist class-based politics into Christian theology. This militant theology inspired education projects addressing poverty and exclusion among peasants and the working class. Pablo Freire, a prominent Brazilian liberation pedagogue, advocated for literacy not just for the benefits of capitalist development but as a crucial tool to cultivate social consciousness regarding class liberation (Freire 1970; Torres Carrillo 2016, 125).

As Rappaport (2020, 9) discusses, Orlando Fals Borda, a Presbyterian sociologist, advocated for research practices inspired by Freire's popular participation, class consciousness, and social change from a historical materialist perspective in Colombia since the 1960s. Fals Borda, along with three other intellectuals, established a national network of research called 'La Rosca de Investigación Social' (The Circle of Social Action), which developed the politically engaged research methodology called 'Participatory Action Research' (PAR) (Lomeli and Rappaport 2018, 597–612). Among the founders of La Rosca was Victor Daniel Bonilla, an investigative journalist with prior experience as a *solidario* or an advocator of Indigenous rights (Caviedes 2002, 237–60).

As a *solidario*, Bonilla developed the 'mapas parlantes' (speaking maps) methodology to bridge the communication gap between Spanish-speaking activists and Indigenous language-speaking *comuneros* (community members who have not held positions of power). Bonilla recognised intercultural challenges within the movement when, during an assembly meeting at Pioyá, Cauca, a Nasa elder scolded him for not adequately

responding to the request to prevent the massive exodus of the youth to the cities (Encuentro sobre archivos de DDHH, oralidad, territorio y comunidades indígenas, Event Report 2014). Bonilla further confirmed these communication complexities when he presented the 'Historia Política de los Paeces' (Political History of the Paeces) at a community assembly 1971. This booklet, designed to politicise the Nasas' (previously known as Paeces) social grassroots, included descriptions of mostly forgotten heroic events (Bonilla 1977). These events encompassed the Nasa's 100-year war against Spanish invaders during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, their pursuit of administrative autonomy under Spanish colonial rule in the eighteenth century, and the struggle against territorial displacement after national independence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Bonilla 1977). Bonilla observed how the Nasa comuneros disregarded written texts but paid attention to two maps ('Indigenous Wars of Liberation, 1538–1623' and 'The Nation in Times of Juan Tama, 1700'), which he initially considered complementary. Recognising the potential of visual representation to foster collective historical consciousness among people who do not read and write but have a solid oral tradition, Bonilla and the Nasa leaders decided to transform the booklet's texts into seven *mapas parlantes*, depicting the relationship between historical events and territory. As the ethnographic discussion below illustrates, this visual tradition continues to be effective for exercises of memory reproduction among Indigenous communities.

Bonilla employed indigeneity as an instrument of political mobilisation, representing a divergent view within the 1960s Latin American social movement dominated by class-based political claims and strategies. This theoretical divergence became evident during the Barbados Symposium (1971 and 1977), an event sponsored by the ecumenical World Council Churches, where Bonilla and other indigenous activists discussed political actions to improve the lives of the Indigenous people. The Declaration of Barbados, the final event declaration, denounces various ethnocide processes of States, private sectors, and religious missions, aiming to dispossess indigenous people of their culture and territories and incorporate them into capitalist modes of production. The document also calls for the recognition and protection of indigenous cultures, languages, territories, and modes of organisation, the respect of their right to self-determination, the restitution of land and territories, an end to religious missionary practices that impose foreign values and morals, and the revision of anthropological theories that treat indigenous people as objects of study. Despite the Barbados' declaration, some Marxists, such as the Mexican anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, opposed the call for employing identity politics over class consciousness as a tool for political contestation to improve Indigenous people's lives (Bonfil Batalla et al. 1977).

Political divergences between Marxist and non-Marxist orientations on the 'Indigenous question' pushed *solidarios* like Bonilla to separate from the *colaboradores* (organisers with class-based political orientations), including those at La Rosca and the Regional Council of Indigenous People of Cauca (CRIC), the first Colombian Indigenous organisation founded in 1971 by the Nasas and the Misaks (Caviedes 2002). As a result, in 1975, Bonilla supported the Misaks' withdrawal from the Nasa-dominated CRIC and their self-declaration as '*autoridades indígenas en marcha*' (Indigenous authorities on the move). Institutionalised in 1980 as AISO, it became the foundation of the political party, the Indigenous Authorities of Colombia (AICO). A few years later, internal conflicts pushed Misak to leave AICO, but they continued leading AISO (Findji 1992). As part of this move

towards indigeneity, in 1980, the Misak (supported by Bonilla and other solidarios) proclaimed the political slogan, ‘Recuperar la Tierra Para Recuperarlo Todo’ (Recover the Land to Recover All), embracing territoriality as the base of their political struggle (Bonilla 2012).

### *Embracing territoriality for political contestation*

The concept of territoriality is crucial in understanding the Misak and many other Latin American Indigenous movements in the last 50 years. Bonilla elucidates territoriality by paraphrasing the words of an anonymous Arhuaco (a member of that Caribbean community), who declared at an assembly in 1976, ‘(I)and is the source of life (. . .). We live, work, enjoy, and suffer there. We defend it because it is the root of our traditions’ (Bonilla 2021, 133). In other words, the symbiotic relationship, or ‘relational ontology’, as the anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2015) terms it, between humans, the environment, spiritual beings, and time in a specific territory is what produces life.

Despite the increasing popularity of the ontological turn in recent years, some scholars have expressed scepticism about its political implications. For instance, the Colombian anthropologist Monica Espinosa Arango criticises the ontological approach for its perceived deficiency in understanding the political agendas of the Misaks, Nasas, and Pijaos (another Andean community). She argues that ontology’s emphasis on ‘radical alterity’ isolates Indigenous political grievances, disempowering their universal democratic potential (Espinosa Arango 2020). In contrast to Espinosa Arango, I find the ‘ontological turn’ practical for understanding the relationship between territoriality and political mobilisation. As my collective ethnographic experience describes below, ontology enables the perception of how the territory becomes a space where Indigenous people learn about their historical struggles, resistances, defeats, and victories. De la Cadena (2015) shows a similar trend among Indigenous people in the Peruvian Andes. In the Misak case, the symbiotic relationship between people, nature, space, and ‘earth beings’ – meaningful entities within a territory such as mountains – facilitates mythology’s (re)production, a fundamental feature of any culture (de la Cadena 2015). As illustrated by the references in the introduction regarding the mythical leader *Payan* and the Pubenense Confederation mentioned by the Misak protestors, mythological figures can inspire collective political actions, such as tearing down deep-rooted national symbols of colonial domination.

Nevertheless, I agree with Espinosa Arango (2020) that the ontological turn does not contribute to understanding the relationship of the Misak and Nasa (and probably the Pijao) with the rest of Colombian society. I argue that ontology obscures the role played by Indigenous communities like the Misak in the Colombian economy. As we documented through the IHM, the Misak have been producing various commodities for the global market since colonial times, including quinine (a medicine used to treat malaria in the nineteenth century), the opium poppy (partially eradicated in the 1990s), and trout at industrial scale. They have circulated these commodities through different non-capitalist and capitalist modes of production, including *repartimiento* (forced labour), *encomienda* (temporal agreements provided by the Spanish crown), *tributación* (taxes), *terraje* (a semi-slavery system explained further below), wage labour, family production, *minga* (collective work), and *trueque* (direct exchange). The radical alterity implied in ontology obscures

the consequences and possibilities of resistance resulting from the connection between Indigenous production and globalised markets.

To overcome this methodological constraint, I propose the semiotic process of hybridity called ‘codigofagia’, as proposed by the Ecuadorian Marxist philosopher Bolívar Echeverría (in Moser 2010). Echeverría argues that the universal character of capital drives the incorporation of everyone. Even supposedly isolated Amazonian communities are affected by the capitalist expansion seeking raw materials such as rubber, oil, gold, and rare minerals (Wilson and Bayón 2017, 55–65). However, some peoples and cultures develop different subsumptions or incorporations in the economic market. Processes of hybrid rational analysis, or codigofagia, allow Indigenous people to attribute novel significance to capital subsumption, resisting complete immersion in the logic of capital (Inclán 2020, 59–60). *Minga* represents an example of Misak’s embracement of modes of production that do not conform to capitalist methods of accumulation. This production practice has inspired other non-Indigenous movements to include the concept of minga – as a collective and non-hierarchical action – in their political repertoire (Obando and Cesar 2015, 82–100).

### *The Misak University*

Established in 2011, the unlicensed and self-sustained Misak University (MU) integrates territorial-based indigeneity with Freire’s collective action and horizontal organisation, offering a range of educational plans, including four-year study programmes, shorter-term certificates, and one-day courses. The MU’s academic plan is guided by four focal points – customary law, self-administration, self-economy, and socio-political organisation (Avila and Andrea Ayala 2017, 54). The MU is one of several Indigenous educational programmes created in Latin America in the past 20 years (Angarita-Ossa and Nilton Campo-Ángel 2015, 175–85; Aranda et al. 2012; Baronnet 2009; Galeano Lozano 2006; Padilla 2019; Rappaport 2005; Shenker 2012). However, not all respond to decoloniality or popular forms of organisation. As Mato explains, some of those programmes aim to increase the presence of Indigenous people in traditional universities, others promote intercultural education, and others privilege educational approaches of international agencies such as UNESCO (Mato 2016).

When I volunteered as an instructor for four months in 2015, the MU served over 100 Misaks in their twenties and thirties, with more women than men. The students were engaged in various everyday activities such as farming, cattle raising, and trout farming. The MU’s instructors included elders, traditional healers, young professionals, current authorities, members of different communities, external university professors, and volunteers with some teaching experience. While most MU students had no prior experience in higher education, a few had attended public universities in Popayán and Cali. Due to the student’s involvement in other labour and educational activities, classes were held from 8 am to 5 pm during weekends and often included *alík* (collective agriculture work).

Like other autonomous educational projects, the MU endures political, economic, and pedagogical difficulties. One notable pedagogical challenge I observed is its reliance on empirical methods, neglecting theoretical knowledge. The Misak students acquired valuable knowledge by reflecting upon their ‘vivencias’, listening to elders’ stories, walking their territory to analyse pictograms and other marks left from past events, and exploring

natural elements, such as mountains, lakes, weather patterns, agriculture practices, and architecture. However, learning opportunities for theoretical knowledge, such as mathematics, are scarce due to the lack of personnel and equipment to teach science-based courses, deficiencies in primary education, and historical exclusion from complex technical knowledge. Padilla (2017) documented a similar situation in his ethnographic study of the CRIC's Autonomous Indigenous Intercultural University (UAIIN), where Indigenous professors taught maths by encouraging students to observe the geometrical patterns of flowers and trees. This lack of theoretical skills hampers Indigenous students' access to STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), limiting individual and collective potential.

The second challenge I observed around MU was the lack of labour opportunities for those who emerged and specialised in Misak's traditional methodologies. The MU aims to educate comuneros to work at internal institutions that provide health, education, and justice services. The Misak *cabildo*, or internal indigenous government, receives state funding to administrate these services, making these internal institutions one of the few sources offering paid positions within the community. Job scarcity results in students encountering difficulties securing placements for MU's mandatory practical component, as those already employed are hesitant to contend with increasing competition.

## Methods

### *Collaborative research with Misak University students*

Upon arriving in Guambia to conduct my doctoral work in 2013, I met Liliana, Rosa Maria, and John. Driven by a misleading sense of academic superiority, I invited these third-year MU students to join me in my research, intending to expose them to more effective academic methods for inquiry. Soon, I realised that their *metodologías propias*, such as *caminar el territorio*, surpassed my 'structured interviews', 'focus groups', and rigorous note-taking in the Misak context. The effectiveness of their methods over mine led to more collaborative research planning. One resource these students wanted – and likely motivated their initial collaboration – was access to secondary sources. Due to high prices, limited circulation, lack of translation, and scholars' poor dissemination efforts, indigenous researchers often lack access to scholarly materials about their communities. This kind of 'egalitarian dialogue' between external researchers and indigenous people can also be found among CRIC researchers, who are willing to embrace the tensions and drawbacks of such work to enrich their *conocimiento propio* (traditional knowledge), seeking to foster militant indigeneity (Rappaport 2005, 7).

'Caminar el territorio' is one of Misak's pedagogical approaches used to fortify political commitment to indigeneity. The Comité de Historia, consisting of external scholars and internal leaders organised by the Misak *cabildo* to train the first generation of community teachers in the 1980s, conceptualised the Misak's view of history as a *caracol* (snail) moving forward in circular expansion and contraction cycles around the *nak kuk* (wood-fire) (Vasco et al. 2015, 3–9). This movement leaves traceable marks, enabling the analysis of past events to guide an unknown future (Dagua Hurtado, Aranda, and Guillermo Vasco 1993, 56; Vasco et al. 2015). MU students use *caminar el territorio* to sensuously experience – smell, listen, taste, touch, and view – 'earth beings', such as mountains, rivers,

vegetation, and other non-human elements (Pink 2015). 'Earth beings' serve as 'figures of memory' that transcend the 80–100 years of memory collected by one generation, solidifying the culture's 'absolute past of mythical ancient time' (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995). Rappaport (2004) notes a comparable process of collective memory reproduction among the Nasas, who employ mountains, valleys, and rivers to commemorate significant events, like the legal recognition of indigenous territories by the Spanish crown led by Juan Tama between 1682 and 1718.

Liliana, Rosa Maria, and John had already engaged as MU students in various *caminar el territorio* activities before our collaborative work. They visited sacred lakes, participated in mental, emotional, and spiritual health programmes at Mama Dominga, the Misaks' hospital, interned at three different elementary schools, and volunteered in the Misaks' Justice Program, which investigates and punishes crimes according to the Misak customary law (Rappaport 2005, 268–70). Rosa Maria and John had also participated in artistic activities organised by local authorities and evangelical churches. John became a devoted companion to Rosa Maria, who has osteogenesis imperfecta, an illness confining her to a wheelchair. Despite Rosa Maria's physical limitations, she possesses acute perception and artistic sensibility as a painter, enabling her to describe the Misak territory's borders, roads, mountains, rivers, and animals. Unlike the community's youths and elders who frequently participate in exploratory hikes through the hilly, rainy, and cold territory, Rosa Maria achieved her impressive knowledge by reading books, listening to other's descriptions, and drawing her visions and dreams – sources of wisdom and knowledge among Andean and Amazonian cultures (de la Cadena 2015; Kohn 2013; Vilaça 2016). Liliana also had enriching life experiences, including living for several months at a Catholic monastery, participating in technical training in health services in Popayán, working in low-skill jobs in Cali, and volunteering at World Vision and other evangelical organisations within the Misak territory.

The MU encourages students to present their research in more accessible forms than writing, recognising the significance of the oral tradition. Following this direction, we drew inspiration from Victor Daniel Bonilla's *mapas parlantes* for data collection methods and visual representation. Like Bonilla, our research aimed to reinvigorate Misak narratives challenging colonial legacies. Unlike Fals-Borda and the *colaboradores* in the 1970s, we did not conceive our work as a tool for fostering class-based political 'popular consciousness'. Our discomfort with the 'popular' method aligns with the perspectives of the Mexican anthropologist Rosalva Aida Hernández Castillo. After a failed PAR effort with Indigenous women in Chiapas, she became sceptical of research agendas promoting conscientization based on an assumed valid historical truth (Hernández et al. 2015, 86). Instead, she embraced 'dialogical anthropology', which avoids promoting infallibility, allowing the construction of less paternalistic research agendas through dialogue and negotiation (Tedlock 2003, 275–87). Like Hernández Castillo, we did not envision IHM as a tool for promoting structural change as PAR projects ambitiously intend. Nor did we claim that our work revealed irrefutable truths about Misak's history. Instead, our research responded to the local desire to discuss and create pedagogical material contributing to resolving historical issues affecting the Misak community. These issues include challenging racist dominant views on historical events that position indigeneity as an impediment to the nation's advancement and finding practical solutions to everyday problems such as malnutrition, pollution, and road traffic.

## The process

Liliana, Rosa Maria, John, and I initially agreed some ethical principles to minimise the chances of conflict between us and other community members. First, we decided to consult with community elders and authorities before circulating any information from our research. More than auto-censorship, this decision was driven by the need for data verification. Second, we agreed to prioritise using Nam-Trick, the Misak language, over Spanish for data collection and discussion. Third, we decided to participate collectively as much as possible (taking individual time constraints into consideration), for example – in all activities related to this research, including data collection in inaccessible places within the Misak territory and dissemination, including academic conferences away from the Misak community. Fourth, we decided that Rosa Maria, John, and Liliana would discuss sacred aspects of the Misak culture at public events, I would only participate in discussions about political and social situations. These four fundamental ethical principles helped to equalise potential uneven power relations, especially concerning any potential epistemological violence from my side over these three Indigenous students. Instead of an experience where I collected data for my personal or academic interests by exploiting the labour and knowledge of these students, we ended up having a rewarding personal experience where we all had the chance to learn from community members, travel to territories within the Misak territory infrequently accessible for non-Misak individuals, and participate in conferences in many Colombian cities, exposing all of us to new and enriching experiences.

After agreeing the ethical principles, we collected data from primary and secondary sources, such as yearly internal reports, alternative development plans (*planes de vida*), and academic publications. Combining that information with Liliana, Rosa Maria, and John's knowledge, we created a basic narrative drawing simple sketches. MU instructors and community leaders with proficiency in Spanish and Nam Trick, such as Barbara Muelas (linguistic and former Misak vice-governor), Liliana Pechené (lawyer and former Misak governor), Eduardo Almendra (founder and former coordinator of the community radio station) and Javier Calambas (historical Misak leader and founder of CRIC), helped to enrich our narrative. They contributed to discussions, verified image accuracy, and guided us in new directions. We also gathered valuable insights from Nam Trick-speaking elder *comuneros* like Javier Morales Almendra, Maria Elena Tombé, and Sebastina Guazá.

As observed by Rappaport (2005, 23–54) among the Nasas, we noted two discursive tendencies among those Misaks, distinguishing those exposed to Western education from those not. Individuals with formal university training, such as Barbara Muelas and Lilian Pechené, responded more directly to our inquiries. In contrast, elders without formal education, like Maria Elena Tombé and Sebastiana Guazá, followed a distinct pattern. They often began their narratives with childhood stories and gradually shifted to different topics. For example, when we asked Maria Elena and Sebastina in Namtrick about the social and cultural changes brought about by the construction of vehicular roads, their responses commenced with descriptions of unrelated childhood events – details about food, the healing qualities of crops, places frequented with their parents, and economic practices witnessed. They concluded their narratives by indirectly addressing our inquiries: 'We woke up before sunrise to take what we produced to the market at Silvia, but because of the lack of a road, we had to walk long hours barefoot'. When asked about the treatment by Silvia's merchants, Maria Elena and Sebastina similarly recounted events

from their childhood, responding indirectly: 'When we went to Silvia on Tuesdays (market days), many non-Indigenous merchants did not allow us to enter their businesses'. This back-and-forth and non-linear narrative style exemplifies the concept of *caracol*, or 'spiral motif' which characterises traditional Misak communication (Rappaport 2005, 153).

Despite their impressive ability to recall events and vast knowledge of agriculture, botany, and alternative medicine, the consequences of colonial racism became evident in the self-esteem of *comunero* elders. For instance, before our interview, Maria Elena and Sebastina asked: '¿Para qué nos quieren entrevistar si ustedes son educados y nosotras no sabemos nada (Why do educated people like you want to interview us if we do not know anything)?' The modesty of the elder *comuneros* contrasted with the confidence of historical leaders like Barbara Muelas and younger Misaks, including my research partners and AISO's general secretary, Edgar Alberto Velasco Tumiña. Institutions like the MU have instilled these young *comuneros* with knowledge, self-confidence, and a commitment to preserving the community's militant identity.

In addition to conducting interviews around the *nak kuk*, exploring local archives, and *caminado el territorio*, we participated in daily activities that exemplified Misak's commitment to non-capitalist forms of production integrated with the capitalist modes of circulation described earlier. MU's pedagogies aim to raise awareness among *comuneros* regarding the significance of these routines, often perceived as normal *vivencias*, as acts of resistance against the profit-driven logic of living. For instance, Rosa Maria and John's family once invited me to join a small *alík* (*minga*) to cultivate coriander in a small plot near their house. Upon my arrival at around 7am, John and Rosa's father, Nicolas, demonstrated how to use the shovel, and we started working with John and their mother, Maria Ines. Meanwhile, Rosa Maria sat beside us, conversing, cooking, and knitting.

We toiled for about five hours in the intense Andes highlands sun, clearing only a quarter of the dry, rocky terrain. My efforts proved more burdensome than helpful due to my lack of skills and continuous questions about whether I was removing the correct quantity of soil. At lunchtime, I asked Nicolas how long it would take to clear the entire land and plant the seeds. 'At least two more days if we work fast', he replied. Following cultivation, he explained that they needed to guard the plot continuously to prevent chickens and other animals from eating the seeds. The plants also required watering at least twice daily due to the intense heat and lack of rain. If everything went well, they planned to pick the coriander to sell in nearby towns like Silvia or Piendamó in approximately two months. Surprised at the required effort, I inquired about the expected earnings, to which Nicolas responded, 'Around 80–100 thousand pesos (US\$35). It could be even less, depending on coriander prices during those days'. Astonished, I asked him, 'All this work for that little money? Is it worth it?' He looked at me, laughed, and said, 'Of course, it is worth it! We are together! We are sharing, talking, and working on the land with the family and you! That is how life is! It is happiness!'

## Results

### *The final product*

The primary artist of the IHM images was Rosa Maria Montano. John, Liliana and I coloured Rosa Maria's images. We gathered the data represented through various methods, including consulting primary sources at local institutions, exploring the territory, participating in

*alík* (minga), interviewing comuneros around the *nak kuk*, receiving feedback from college-educated leaders like Mama Barbara Muelas and Mama Liliana Pechené, and engaging in discussions with other MU students. We selected the represented events using different criteria. For example, we focused on the most commented on topics – historical events and social problems – discussed by our collaborators in private and public spaces. Another motivation for topic selection was to diffuse significant historical events no longer discussed but widely documented in history books, such as the exploitation of the quinine tree in the 19th century.

After creating several sketches, we completed 39 images. Community members who saw the billboard pointed out grammatical errors in the Nam Trick. These mistakes sparked deliberation, promoting discussion, one of our main goals in undertaking this project. The first part, titled ‘the Era of Exclusion’ (Figure 1), represents the Misaks’ life before the 1991 Constitution:

- (1) Origen (Chu Kutrik Puikwan) illustrates the Misak myth of origin and the Ñimbe and Piendamó lakes, representing the ‘female’ and ‘male’ creation sources.
- (2) Sueños (Pielø) refers to the importance of dreams for understanding past events and guiding future actions.

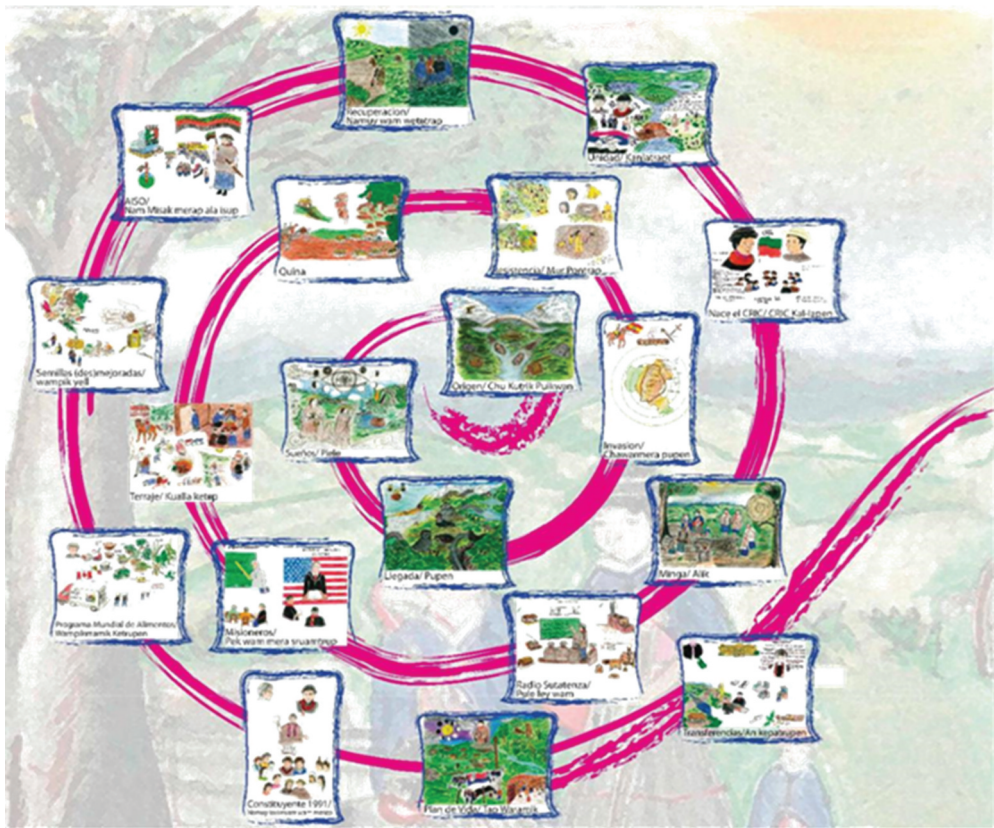


Figure 1. The first half of the IHM: ‘the era of exclusion’.

- (3) Llegada (Pupen) shows the geographical, architectural, and biological characteristics of the Confederación Pubenence, which unified several Guambiano-Coconuco communities, including Guampia (now Guambia). This graphic also illustrates the colonial pyramid described in the introduction.
- (4) Invasión (Chawarmera Pupen) shows the extension of the Confederación Pubenence before the Spanish conquest.
- (5) Resistencia (Mur Pontrap) depicts the social dynamics and modes of resistance derived from implementing repartimiento, encomienda and tributación.
- (6) Quina evokes the production of quinine from the endemic and now-extinct quina tree. This industry attracted mestizo settlers into Misak territory, resulting in another source of exploitation.
- (7) Terraje (Kualla Ketøp) (explained in detail below).
- (8) Misioneros (Pek Wam Mera Struamtrup) represents the intervention of the Catholic Church (legally responsible for the 'inculturation' of the Indigenous people from 1887 to 1991) and the arrival of the evangelical missionaries in Guambia in the 1930s.
- (9) Radio Sutatenza (Pule Ley Wam) shows the Misaks' participation in the developmental Catholic communication project, the ACPO Radio Sutatenza.
- (10) Minga (Alik) celebrates collaborative work.
- (11) Nace el CRIC (CRIC Kal-Lapen) shows the names of organisations that predated the CRIC, the locations where the CRIC's first three meetings took place, and the seven points that motivated its foundation.
- (12) Unidad (Kanlatrap) illustrates when the Misak authorities, who lived in the resguardo on the left side of the Piendamó River as comuneros, recognised as Misak those who lived as terrajeros on the right side of that river in 1980. This historical event facilitated the later process of territorial recovery.
- (13) Recuperación (Namuy Wam Wetøtrap) refers to the Misak recovery of the Hacienda las Mercedes at the beginning of the 1980s. This recovery became an iconic political action in the Misak quest for territorial autonomy.
- (14) AISO (Nam Misak Merap Ala Isup) depicts when Misaks left the CRIC and founded AISO.
- (15) Semillas (des) Mejoradas (Wampik Yell) criticises the modernist agricultural techniques and chemicals promoted by developmental programmes, which have negatively affected the productivity of the Misak territory.
- (16) Programa Mundial de Alimentos (Wampikmamik Ketrupen) discusses the adverse effects of the Canadian-sponsored World Food Program, which introduced foods such as white rice, granola oil, and canned sardines, which have lower nutritional value than the ones produced locally.
- (17) Asamblea Constituyente of 1991 (Namuy Isuiwuam Wam Merøp) shows the 1991 constitutionalist, Taita Lorenzo Muelas, holding the 1991 Constitution, surrounded by two of his advisors, Victor Daniel Bonilla and Taita Floro Tunubalá, and constituents from popular sectors.

The 'Era of Inclusion', IHM's second part, shows 22 political events, cultural practices, and some challenges endured by the Misaks after the proclamation of the 1991 Constitution (Figure 2). Two illustrations that belong to the second part are in Figure 1 for design purposes:

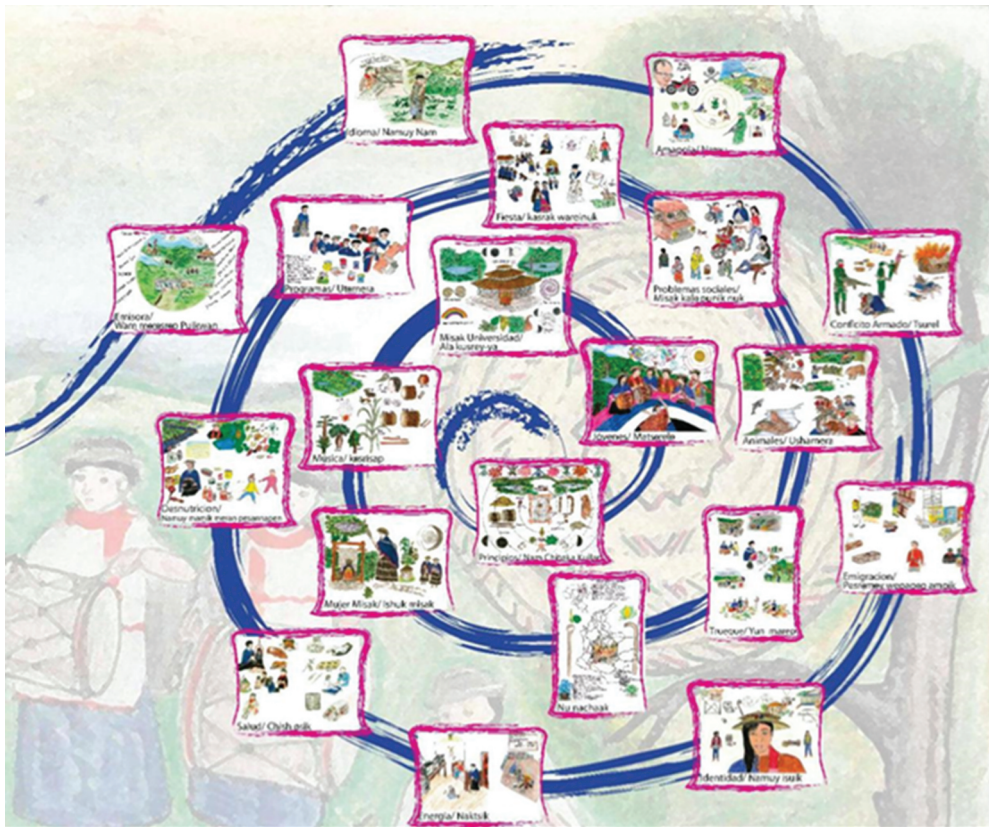


Figure 2. The second half of the IHM: ‘the era of inclusion’.

- (1) Plan de Vida (Tap Waramik) shows the philosophical principles of the Misak plan for ‘growth and permanence’ launched in 1994. This alternative plan to the state’s agenda proposes development based on the equilibrium between territory, nature, authority, and culture.
- (2) Transferencias (A Kepatrupen) is a critical representation of the bureaucratic challenges created by decentralising the administration of essential services, such as education and health, from state agencies to the Misak *cabildo*.
- (3) Emisora (Wam Mørøs Røp Puikwan) illustrates the community work and the people behind the Misak radio station, Guambia Stereo (now Namuy Wam).
- (4) Idioma (Namuy Wam) shows how the Misak conceived community radio stations as a political engagement and cultural enrichment vehicle.
- (5) Amapola (Narøu) portrays the adverse outcomes of the mass production of opium poppy in the 1990s and some of the plant’s uses in traditional medicine.
- (6) Conflicto Armado (Tsurell) illustrates the actions of armed actors against the Misak, including the assassination and displacement of comuneros, affecting many Misak territories outside Guambia.
- (7) Emigración (Pesrømøy Wepapøp Ampik) highlights the migration of the Misaks to Colombian urban areas, looking for education and job opportunities. This drawing

also shows how some immigrant Misaks abandon their culture and return their bodies to their territories after death.

- (8) *Identidad* (Namuy Isuik) depicts the tensions between modernity and tradition faced by the Misak youth.
- (9) *Energía* (Naktsik) shows some of the cultural changes brought about by introducing electricity in Misak households, including abandoning the tradition of speaking with the elders around the *nak kuk* and incurring debt to pay electricity bills.
- (10) *Salud* (Chish Øsik) compares traditional Misak healing practices with modern medicine.
- (11) *Desnutrición* (Namuy Mamik Meran Pesannapen) illustrates some of the causes of the current malnutrition crisis among the Misaks, including the reliance on agrochemicals, the replacement of locally produced foods with less nutritional external ones, and the high consumption of refined sugar.
- (12) *Programas* (Utømera) depicts the Misaks' reliance on polemical state aid programmes that foster dependency, such as *Familias en Acción*.
- (13) *Fiestas* (Kasrak Warereinuk) shows the different Misak festivities and celebrations, including the 'angelito' (a Remembrance Day for children who died at an early age), making offerings to the dead, and the celebration of the onset of puberty at a girl. It also shows adopted celebrations such as Christmas, New Year's Eve, and sweet-fifteen.
- (14) *Problemas Sociales* (Misak Kalø Punik Nuk) show some of the most significant social problems in the Misak territory, including uncontrolled vehicular traffic, alcoholism, drug consumption, and single parenthood.
- (15) *Animales* (Ushamera) illustrates the animals, some of them endangered, found in the Misak territory.
- (16) *Trueque* (Yun Marep) compares modern selling and traditional swapping, two exchange practices between the Misaks who live in territories with cold and hot weather.
- (17) *Territorio Misak* (Nunakchak) represents all 17 Misak settlements. Guambia, their largest territory, is 35 kilometres away from Cauca's capital, Popayán. The other 16 resguardos are in Cauca and other departments, including Huila, Caquetá, Putumayo, Valle del Cauca y Meta, and Bogotá and Cali. Since the early 2010s, the *Confederación Nunakchak* (Nunakchak Confederation) aimed to unify the governance of these territories.
- (18) *Mujer Misak* (Ishuk Misak) illustrates some symbols, plants, lakes, and tasks identified with Misak womanhood.
- (19) *Música* (Køsrisap) shows some of the traditional Misak musical instruments and the material used to make them.
- (20) *Misak Universidad* (Ala Kusrey-Ya) shows the main structure of Misak University and its four academic areas.
- (21) *Jóvenes* (Matsø Relø) is a homage to the vitality of the community's youth.
- (22) *Principios* (Nam Chitøka Kuilan) illustrates the community's philosophical principles and archaeological references.

I describe *Terraaje* (*Kualla Ketøp*) to provide a sense of the narratives in our oral presentations (Figure 3). From colonial times until the 1970s, the *terraaje* system operated as a semi-

feudal mode of production that obliged Indigenous people to work without economic remuneration. Mestizo exploiters employed violence to control the Misak, including murdering those who rebelled (number 1 in Figure 3), burning houses for displacement (number 2), and physical punishment (number 3). Abusers also induced the Misaks, including children, to drink alcohol to become more productive during the long, harsh working shifts (4). They forced the Misaks to support their political candidates in the context of the partisan violence between the Liberals and the Conservatives known as *La Violencia* (1946–53) (5). Despite their poverty, the Misak had to pay tribute to the Catholic Church (6). Despite these dark circumstances, the Misak organised clandestine political organisations against the *terraje* system in the 1960s and 1970s (7). This exploitative system affected the Misaks unevenly. While it barely touched those *comuneros* who lived 'freely' in the *resguardo* (8), *terrajeria* deeply affected those settled in the surrounding areas. For that reason, *terrajeros* became the most committed members of the CRIC, the first Colombian regional Indigenous organisation. Before the 1980s, the Misak *cabildo* authorities, controlled by the local Church and mestizo authorities, did not recognise those outside their territory as community members despite their shared cultural trends, vernacular language, and modes of dress. This situation changed in 1980 when the Misak authorities acknowledged those outside their *resguardo* as members of the same culture.

As exemplified by the description of *Terraje*, the MU students commanded sophisticated historical knowledge. The IHM's 39 illustrations narrate a Misak history marked by exploitation, suffering, and exclusion, but also cultural ancestry, spiritual richness, a spirit



Figure 3. Terraje.

of resistance, unity, adaptation, and hope. The core source of the IHM was Rosa Maria, John, and Liliana's 'historical consciousness', which, beyond reflecting on the past, indicates their current personal and collective interests and guidelines for the future (Funkenstein 1989, 5–26 and; Erll 2011, 8). The collective memory of these Misak students resulted from participating in autonomous institutions such as the Misak University, organised by an intercultural leadership invested in educating *commoners* equipped with knowledge and pride for their roots. As explained, this relatively new system of collective memory transmission maintains practices from previous memory reproduction modes, incorporates methods from formal education, and responds to specific historical needs in the era of cultural recognition and political inclusion'.

## Discussion

### *The MU: recreating a new form of memory reproduction*

The Misak University has facilitated the reproduction of collective memory, exemplified by exercises like the *Infografía de la Historia Misak*. This innovative memory reproduction differs from colonial and pre-1991 Constitution cultural preservation methods. Owensby (2011, 59–106) explains that Indigenous people could maintain traditions during colonial times due to legislation promoting 'fair governance' within Eurocentric colonial logic. In the Misak case, these laws provided collective land titling and facilitated semi-autonomous organisations, preserving the *cacique*, a pre-colonial inherited form of leadership (Schwarz 2018). Spanish colonial rule also integrated democratic practices into the communal organisation, including elected positions such as governors, mayors, and *alguaciles* (sheriffs) for local administrative procedures (Schwarz 2018, 76–8). According to Schwarz, Misaks maintained collective unity during Spanish rule through their autonomous organisation, endogamic power transmission methods, and colonial racial differentiation (Schwarz 2018, 42, 87, 90).

From Colombian independence in 1810 to the multicultural constitutional reforms in 1991, Misak endured the privatisation efforts of collective territories promoted, driven by liberal land reforms and extensive land dispossession by conservative landowners and mestizo peasants (Gutiérrez Ramos 2011). In response, the Misak made territorial recovery and preservation their primary objectives for political and cultural mobilisation (Schwarz 2018). Lorenzo Muelas Hurtado, a Misak leader and one of the three Indigenous representatives at the 1991 constitutional assembly, illustrates the co-constitutive relationship between collective memory and territorial preservation during these years in his memoir (Muelas Hurtado and Urdaneta Franco 2005). He recalls painful moments when 'whites' appropriated Misak territory, subjecting them to multiple humiliations, from *terraje* to starvation. Legendary Misak elders took various actions to protect territorial unity, including travelling barefoot and penniless to Quito and Bogotá to recover land titles and organising uprisings against land usurpers at the cost of their lives (Schwarz 2018, 88–95, 105, 108–09; Vasco et al. 2015, 227–33; and; Gutiérrez Ramos 2011). As depicted in IHM's *terraje*, Misak elders organised clandestine meetings to discuss mnemonic territorial references, festivities, music, and dances in their traditional language. Abercrombie (1998) identifies similar 'ritual actions' as the facilitators of collective memory preservation in the Bolivian Andes. According to Lorenzo Muelas, clandestine meetings were

fundamental to constituting the first Indigenous organisations and their subsequent participation in drafting the 1991 multicultural constitution (Muelas Hurtado and Urdaneta Franco 2005).

While violence and discrimination against Indigenous people persisted after the 1991 constitutional recognition, they have evolved from the explicit motivations that drove Lorenzo Muelas and others to action. The IHM illustrates how various actors have attempted to divert Misak youth from militant indigeneity in contemporary times. These actors encompass evangelical groups, the state, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), illegal armed groups, and Indigenous leaders endorsing individualism and docile identities. Depoliticised Indigenous individuals accept subaltern situations to access paternalistic State assistance programs such as *Familias en Acción* and temporary administrative positions. As numerous scholars have explained, formal universities have failed to address the cultural loss and depoliticisation experienced by Indigenous students due to a lack of administrative and pedagogical preparation, even within the context of intercultural education (Caicedo, Antonio, and Castillo Guzmán 2008; Mato 2016; Schmelkes 2009). Consequently, Indigenous universities have emerged as some of the few institutions effectively contributing to forging militant Indigenous subjectivities capable of preserving Indigenous memory and traditions.

## Conclusion

The case of Liliana, Rosa Maria, and John illustrates how the engagement of many young Misaks in a militant Indigenous identity has come as a result of institutionalised efforts by intercultural leadership, establishing institutions like the Misak University that combine the principles of popular education and indigeneity. These three Indigenous *comuneros* shared similar educational experiences with those who toppled the Belalcázar and Jimenez de Quesada statues. Misak grassroots educational efforts help community youth take pride in their cultural roots, motivating them to engage in political actions and preserving collective memory beyond the lifespan of movement founders. Misak youth exposed to these experiences can conceptualise community practices that challenge individualism, profit-seeking, and entrepreneurship valued by neoliberal economies. Promoting practices like *caminar el territorio* makes them aware of their history of territorial unity and cultural survival, preserves a militant collective memory, and enriches forms of autonomous governance. These educational efforts counteract initiatives moving young Indigenous people away from a robust Indigenous identity, including state developmental programmes and evangelical religious schools aligned with neoliberal labour and territorial exploitation.

This new generation of politically committed *comuneros* offers exciting opportunities for outside researchers to learn and contribute to grassroots memory invigoration. For Liliana, Rosa Maria, and John, this experience allowed them to employ the knowledge and research expertise acquired at the MU, opening new doors for personal growth and community participation. After the project's completion, Liliana started working for the *cabildo* in various political tasks, including an election position in the community's authority body in 2018. In 2017, authorities hired Rosa Maria for a paid job, making her the first wheelchair user to work for the *cabildo*. This experience exposed her to new professional opportunities, such as working as an accountant for local restaurants and

participating as a representative of the Misak people in national and international conventions on people with special needs. John began studying different technical courses while working the land with his family. In addition to all that I learned, my most important outcome from this experience was making friendships with people I continue to have frequent contact with. As (Hernández and Aída, 2015) observed, the IHM demonstrates that politically engaged collaborative research can lead to significant life changes for its participants, not just the structural changes advocated by PAR proponents.

## Note

1. The nak kuk is a symbolic figure that symbolises the community nucleus. It is the most crucial place of the nak chak (the kitchen), where elders exchange life experiences with the younger generations. Intergenerational family communication happens around the nak kuk, where young people meet elders to listen to stories about past vivencias while cooking and eating. The family, in turn, is the basic unit of Misak society and the symbol of the Andean parity thought (Diaz and Madeleine 2018).

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