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A Colonial Frontier: Interethnic Interaction, Indigenous Agency, and the Formation of Colonial Society in the *Gobernación* of Popayán, 1540–1615

In September 2020, members of the Misak indigenous community tore down the statue of conquistador and founder of the city of Popayán, Sebastián de Belalcázar, in Morro del Tulcán, a hill just outside the city center. The Misak, also known as Guambianos, are one of the many indigenous nations in Colombia, and they inhabited the region where the city of Popayán is located at the time of the Spanish invasion in the 1530s.

Figure 1. Members of Misak indigenous nation topple the statue of Sebastián de Belalcázar in Morro del Tulcán, Popayán on 16 September 2020. Picture: Martha Peralta Epieyú.

The act was at least partly inspired by the Black Lives Matter -protests that spread from the United States across the globe in summer 2020, and included the toppling of statues of colonists, slave traders and the like. At the same time, it was mostly tied to local conflicts.

Since the signing of the peace treaty in 2016, hundreds of indigenous leaders and activists have been murdered in Colombia, major part of them in the departments of Cauca, Antioquía, Nariño and Valle del Cauca, all of which are located in the area that formed the colonial *gobernación* of Popayán, the region my study focuses on. Most of the murders are tied to disputes over land and natural resources between the indigenous communities and the various armed groups of the country, and practically all of them remain unsolved and unpunished.

Colombia has one of the highest levels of inequality in South America, and despite the peace treaty, it continues to be troubled by violence. The indigenous peoples suffer disproportionately of

poverty, forced displacements, mining projects, drug trafficking and deforestation among other things. Their communities are marginalized and they face many forms of discrimination.

But what do these conflicts have to do with my research on things that happened over 400 years ago? Plenty. The conflicts are obviously tied to modern realities, but their roots date back to the creation of the colonial society. It is no accident that the Misak tore down the statue of the man who led the conquering expedition to their lands. Still today, the indigenous communities in Colombia are fighting for their lands and their right of existence. The colonial processes I study in my dissertation continue to have real effects on their lives. Indeed, one might ask whether colonialism ever ended for the indigenous peoples of Colombia.

When I started to study colonial history of Popayán, I found that the source material concerning the indigenous peoples and their agency was rich, but there was an obvious problem. The documents were all written in Spanish by Spanish scribes and they followed the Spanish templates. Although they contain indigenous voices, these voices are always translated, mediated and blurred. Furthermore, while the documents contain plenty of ethnographic data, they were always written according to the needs of the colonial bureaucracy. They are part of the colonial empire building process.

Therefore, it is essential to engage in a decolonial reading of the documents, always questioning the categories and classifications embedded in them and treating them as sort of ethnographic scenarios trying to grasp the context in which the actions made sense to the people engaged in them. As a reader, I must attempt to counter the exotization and erasure of the native inherent in the documents while simultaneously questioning the self-evidences of the Spaniards. This cannot be done without reflecting my own position as a white European and my own prejudices. While trying to tease out indigenous agency in the documents where it is usually hidden, I have tried to avoid both romanticizing and victimizing the indigenous peoples.

But colonization is a cruel affair. As the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire puts it, it means "societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out". Césaire talks "about natural economies that have been disrupted—harmonious and viable economies adapted to the indigenous population—about food crops destroyed, malnutrition permanently introduced, agricultural development oriented solely toward the benefit of the metropolitan countries; about the looting of products, the looting of raw materials".[1]

These all hold true in the context of my study as well. The effects of the Spanish colonialism on the indigenous peoples of the *gobernación* of Popayán were devastating. Before the Spanish invasion, the region was home to dozens of different ethnic groups, all of which had their distinct cultures. Many of them were completely annihilated during the first decades of colonialism. Although the major killer were diseases, violence, hard labor, and disruption of cultural and social structures played a significant part. Meanwhile, other communities were forced to work in order to satisfy the endless demands of the Spaniards while their own cultures, religions, and institutions were undermined.

However, the sources reveal that colonialism did not mean mere desolation to the indigenous peoples. They always retained their agency. The indigenous peoples were not just passive victims; rather, they were independent agents who pursued their interests in a situation where their freedom was limited.

The indigenous peoples adapted, collaborated, and resisted in many ways, but their actions should not be seen simply as reactions to Spanish aspirations. Instead, communities and individuals

actively attempted to enhance their positions in the colonial reality. Their agency played an essential role in the making of the colonial society in Popayán.

While it is important to emphasize indigenous agency and the complexity of the colonial society, this should not divert attention from the violence and unequal power relations. As mentioned before, concentrating solely on indigenous agency carries a risk of romanticizing their survival. Many did not survive, and for many, colonialism meant seriously deteriorating living conditions and loss of significant part of their culture. Nevertheless, victimization does not do justice to them either.

Yet, the sources are full of cruel acts by the Spanish invaders. They were craving for gold, and used extreme punishments against natives, who were not willing or able to provide them as much as they wanted. The colonizers were beyond doubt ruthless men, and yes, they were almost all men. This was an age of aggressive masculinity, and the colonial context allowed the violent men to thrive.

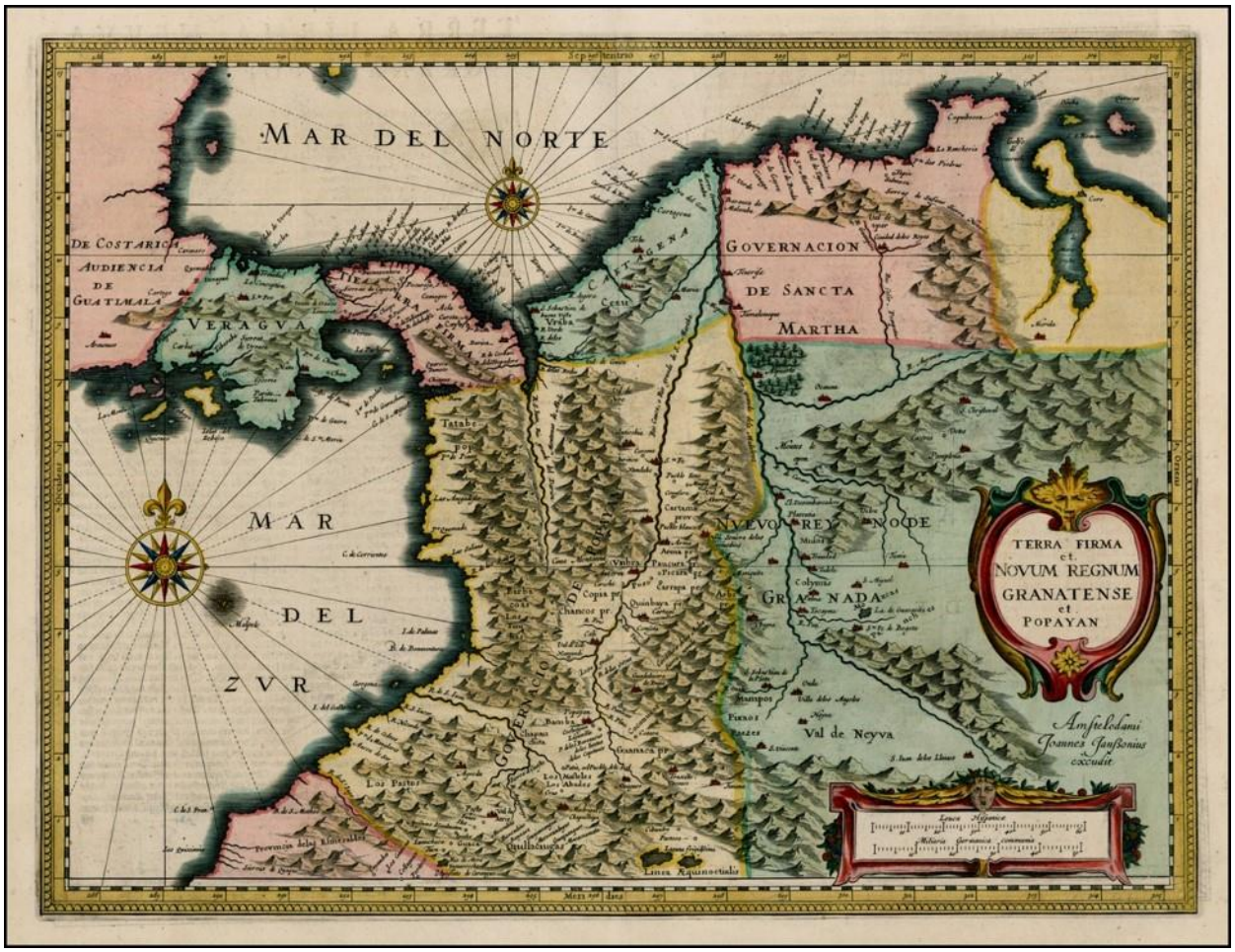

Figure 2. Terra Firma et Novum Regnum Granatense et Popayan, Joannes Janssonius, 1635.

But colonialism was not just about plunder. The conquistadors were immediately followed by the functionaries and the ecclesiasts. All of these groups had their own ideas of how the society should be built. The conquistadors dreamed of a feudal paradise, in which they could rule as independent lords under the protection of a faraway king, and get rich by the work of the indigenous peoples. And indeed, their leaders were awarded *encomiendas*, which meant they were entitled to tributes of a certain indigenous communities. They became *encomenderos*, who formed the local Spanish elite.

However, the Spanish Crown was looking for new vassals and new souls to be converted, and was not willing to hand the lands and its people over to the conquistadors. Instead, it wanted to retain

its jurisdiction, and also fill the royal coffins with the gold and silver brought from the colonies. Among other narratives, Spanish colonial history can be seen as a constant struggle for power between the crown and the leading colonists, which ended in a temporary consolidation of the royal authority before the administration was later creolized. The crown did not rule with power but by making itself available, by acting as an arbitrator in conflicts. Its control was imposed largely through legal system built in the colonies since the beginning.

But while the American continent was a new world for the Europeans, it certainly was not an empty world they could mold as they liked. Across what became Latin America, the indigenous peoples had their own ideas, which often clashed with those of the colonizers.

As an example, the indigenous peoples embraced the legal system and used it to enhance their position and to gain protection from the extreme demands of the Spanish *encomenderos*. For the colonial administration, native litigation was a way to channel the discontent of the indigenous peoples toward the legal system and prevent rebellions while for the indigenous communities it proved to be probably the most efficient way to look after their interests and protect their rights within the framework of the colonial system.

Popayán's location in the frontier meant that colonial courts were not used as frequently as in Mexico or Peru, but there are still many cases in the archives. They reveal a couple of things. First, that maltreatments against the indigenous peoples were recurrent, although most of them were never brought to court. Second, the conflicts rarely followed strict ethnic lines. Instead, they were more complicated cases rooted in local power dynamics, in which certain factions of local colonial elite and certain indigenous communities allied themselves against another group. At the same time, however, the conflicts were often about setting the boundaries of acceptable demands and of indigenous attempts to legitimize their resistance in the eyes of the colonial rule.

These cases give evidence of the complexity of the colonial society. It is necessary to move beyond the simple dichotomies in order to grasp the fluid and often messy local realities. The Spanish and indigenous societies interacted and intermingled in many ways, and there were always both tensions and alliances within, between, and across all the different ethnicities. The relationships between the Spaniards and the indigenous peoples were always uneasy and characterized by mutual distrust, but at the same time, both understood that they had to find ways to live together whether they liked it or not. These relationships shaped the distinct local colonial culture.

Popayán was a typical example of a contact zone, a concept coined by Mary Louise Pratt; that is, a space of colonial encounters, where different peoples and groups come into contact and establish ongoing relationships. Their encounters involve coercion, inequality, conflict, and asymmetrical power relations, but the concept of contact zone helps us to look beyond the simple ideas of domination and separateness. It emphasizes the dialectic, interactive, and improvisational character of these contacts, and the need of the various players to coexist and communicate.[2]

In this contact zone, Spanish hegemony was always fragile and contested. The colonists did not control the indigenous communities directly but rather through their own leaders, and the communities retained large part of their autonomy in their internal affairs in exchange of providing labor and tribute to the Spaniards. This made the local chiefs, or *caciques* as the Spaniards called them—a word loaned from the Taínos who inhabited the Caribbean Islands—indispensable mediators between the Spaniards and their communities. They became part of the elite of the local society, but at the same time, they remained attached to their communities acting as their representatives toward the colonizers. In the *gobernación* of Popayán the ties between the *caciques* and their communities probably remained stronger than in the Central Andes, where Spanish control was stronger.

Furthermore, significant part of the *gobernación* remained completely beyond Spanish control until late seventeenth century and even longer. Many indigenous nations not only resisted Spanish invasions but also forced them to be always on guard by attacking their settlements and roads. The Nasas, also known as Paeces, Pijaos, Yalcones and Barbacoas, among other groups, gained a reputation as fierce warriors causing constant fear among the colonizers. Popayán was practically a war zone throughout the time span of my study.

Colonialism is, in essence, structural violence based on exploitation and destruction of culture, but it is always contested by resistance of the colonized. Cultural survival is also a form of resistance. Although the Spanish invasion forced the indigenous societies to adapt and change, their transformation was carried out according to the needs of the societies themselves. While they were looking for ways to survive in the new situation, they created new cultural forms and gave new meanings to old ones. Colonialism was a unifying force reducing the diversity of the indigenous peoples, but each group and individual adapted in unique ways, and Popayán retained its cultural heterogeneity.

Indeed, the indigenous people of the former colonial *gobernación* of Popayán did survive and continue to survive. It is still among the most ethnically diverse regions of Colombia. The indigenous nations I have studied still form living cultures with strong identities. Therefore, it is important not to speak about them as if they were ancient and long-gone peoples. They are still engaged in struggles for their rights.

As we speak, indigenous peoples are taking part in nation-wide protests against new tax laws introduced by President Iván Duque, which are said to further widen the income disparity in the country. For example in Cali, a city also founded by Sebastián de Belalcázar and now the capital of the province of Valle del Cauca, the indigenous nations have gathered to a *minga social*, a collective action for the benefit of the community rooted in indigenous traditions, to defend life, territory, democracy, justice and peace, and to continue weaving together the thoughts, struggles and resistances of the indigenous, the Afrocolombians and the peasants. This is just one example of how the indigenous communities of the region draw inspiration from their long and strong tradition of resistance and survival.

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[1] Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, translated by Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 21–22.
[2] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2008), 8.