

The Power of Colombian Ethnic Communities through Costume

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Abstract

Some twenty Colombian ethnic groups work textile using ancestral techniques. These fabrics and costumes constitute a peculiar expression system that informs us about social relations and the worldview of indigenous populations, in accordance with codes of strong symbolic, ritual and cosmogonic value. This system of communication was maintained after the conquest so it offers valuable material for the understanding of the symbolic universe and the experience in general of ethnic groups such as the Wayuu, Inga and Amazon.

Key words: textiles, fabric, costume, ethnic groups, semiotics

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Introduction

The biodiversity of the Colombian ethnic communities are intertwined with the life and culture of the people. Indigenous worldviews and traditions are full of references, symbols and meanings related to species and biological process. The territory has its mysteries and these are reflected in their outfits where the myths of each ethnic group create a narrative that connects the spaces with the life culture of its members. Some examples can be seen in the costumes of the groups from the Amazon, the Wayuu from La Guajira and the Inga from Putumayo, which not only protect and adorn their bodies, but also transmit their magic and power through different rituals.

For the indigenous communities, costume represents and communicates identity, as can be seen in the clothing of the Amazon community who use the bark of the trees (*Yanchama*), which they decorate with vegetable dyes, as well as palm and leaf fringes. The outfit is accompanied by wooden masks, necklaces and crowns adorned with feathers, which makes this costume impressively original, making it a luxurious and powerful outfit representing the spirits of nature.

Weaving skill has always accompanied the communities since the trades are seen as a form of learning and transmission of knowledge from which a large number of mythical stories arose that refer to this activity as a teaching of supernatural beings. This is true in

the case of the Wayuu people, where weaving features in their traditional myths, such as that of the Walekeru spider who taught the people how to weave.

Colombia has hosted communities with very different cultural practices such as those of the Inga community, who carry out different carnivals where dance, song and costume are the protagonists and loom techniques, color and cotton are the plot that narrates the development of the lifetime. A multi-ethnic and multicultural country like Colombia that is related to nature, culture and current society generates important knowledge for the world through the power of clothing.

To understand the rich symbology of the costumes of Colombian ethnic groups, semiotics will be used. As a science that studies the social and cultural phenomena of significance through the sign systems that manifest them, semiotics is the ideal tool to interpret the meaning of the colorful designs present in indigenous fabrics.

Of the 87 ethnic groups recognized by the Colombian State, according to the National Organization of indigenous people of Colombia (ONIC 2018), around 20 work textiles using very old techniques and a complex symbology in their designs, establishing their own code whose meaning is exclusive to these indigenous communities. Textiles were the main means of communication in the pre-Hispanic cultural context, used to transmit ideas, formalize social relations or establish political and religious positions within the American ethnic groups, both Colombian and the Andes in general. These textiles also offer important information about their particular cosmogonies, about how these populations conceptualized the universe and organized the elements that make it up.

Constituents of an authentic semiotic system, such codes of expression which are supported by the fabrics and other elements clothing comprises, come from the period before the Conquest, but survived through the centuries—after the period of colonization and independence—to the present. These are iconic-indicative signs of status, ethnicity, profession, sex or age according to the conventions of their people and their culture. In the indigenous cultural context, weaving is not only a human activity but also becomes an integral experience of life, a thought that interrelates the environment and nature, with the physical and spiritual needs of man, responding to a feeling and a basic reason for survival since it is useful not only to dress and protect oneself from the weather but also to dream and share with others. The conservation of indigenous fabrics and motifs throughout the centuries has allowed the transmission of that ancestral artisanal knowledge and of those symbolic-ritual codes that maintain their validity today.

The Guane

It is easy to find the connection between power and costume in the ethnic communities of our Country. That power is closely related to their spiritual realities, to their creation myths, and cosmogonies—such as among the Guane and the Amazon communities. In pre-Hispanic America, the Guane Community, located in the northeast of Colombia, on the Andes mountain chain, were one of the communities who were dressed in our territory, because one of the most important characteristics of the continent, was the diversity of peoples, and consequently, the diversity of costumes.

According to the description of one of the first chroniclers of America, Juan de Castellanos, when the Spaniards arrived in the region of Santander, they discovered people who were

dressed in cotton fabrics. They tied a knot on the left shoulder with the fabric and had two kinds of garment and two kinds of fabrics: one, was a white garment or perhaps a beige one, according to the natural color of the cotton, without any painted figure or symbol, which the common people wore. The other was a garment made with a white or beige fabric according to the cotton, painted with symbols that were linked to their cosmogony and to their main deities. It was worn only by the social leaders, the caciques, and the religious leaders, the priests. The symbols, were the representation of the Sun and the Moon, the two Divine principles, masculine and feminine, and the symbolic chain linked to each one of them. But it did not just represent the deities, it invoked the deities themselves, and this is why only the son of the Sun, the cacique, his family and the priests, could wear them.



Fig. 1. The Guane

The archaeological fabric, from which the founder of the Museum recollected the information, has on the left side, below, the different moments of the hummingbird or any bird abstraction. This little animal is the being that can get closest to the sun, and has this same meaning or symbolic power. The bird is the representation of the Sun, Sua, in the peoples of America. On the right side, above, is the eye of the jaguar, which is a very important symbol shared between different native groups. The undulating lines of the water are represented too. These elements belong to the symbolic chain of the Moon, Chía.

At the beginning it was the night. The light was inside something great, an omnipotent Being, who was called Chiminigagua. Inside this Being, the light began to shine, and he created two black birds, which threw fire from their beaks, and which illuminated everything. They created the Sun and the Moon and all the beauty of the Universe. The people did not pay homage to Chiminigagua, because they used to adore the Sun, as the most luminous being and the Moon, as his wife. In this myth, there are four levels:

1. An omnipotent Being
2. Two black birds. Remind the birds
3. The sun and the moon.
4. The human being, the plants, the nature etc.

The Amazon



Fig. 2. The Amazon

Among the community of the Amazon forest from Colombia, the creation myth of the Matapi talks about four levels of manifestation, or creation:

- An Omnipotent, abstract Being.
- Two abstract Beings, one feminine and one masculine.
- The level of the Spirits of Nature, the Divine forces of Nature.
- The level of animals, trees, plants, humans being.

During each year, the Matapi, like other groups of the Amazon forest, celebrate its ritual ceremonies. One of these, is the Dance of the Spirits. It is a ceremony wherein the whole community meets at the Maloca for two or three days to share with the spirits of Nature, with the purpose of having good harvests, good relations between the members of the community, good luck, and prosperity.

The ceremony is guided by the shaman, who sings original myths. It is through these songs that he can reach the upper levels, to invite the residents of the first, second and third levels, especially, the divinities of Nature. The shaman invites them one by one, and that's how the Dragonfly, the Butterfly, the Dolphin, the Anaconda, the River Fish, the Tiger, the Jaguar, all the animals arrive. This is why the ceremony is called the Dance of the Spirits. The clothes are masks that allow the divinities of the nature, to participate in the ceremony. The masks are the divinities themselves; in this way, the Spirits of Nature can dance, drink, and share in the Maloca with the community. The power of clothes make this possible.

The Wayuu



Fig. 3. The Wayuu

The Wayuu are a Caribbean ethnic group that lives in the Guajira Peninsula, between Colombia and Venezuela. Its current population is approximately half a million individuals. For the Wayuu, their textile products constitute a codified handicraft through which they express and represent their feelings, based on a complex system of codes that expresses their creativity, intelligence, wisdom or status. These figures are called *kanaas* or *kanasü*; they are stylized representations, geometric shapes of animals, flowers, stars or other objects present in their natural environment. They are the result of the abstract and geometric conception that this Caribbean ethnic group has of their daily world, in permanent contact with nature. A series of geometric compositions are repeated in sequence creating patterns along the edges, as well as the length and width of the pieces that we can see per example in the “mochila”, the typical Wayuu purse. The result is a unique aesthetic of plastic and chromatic richness.

Wayuu fabrics are made two ways, with the crochet hook or by weaving with a loom. The costume of the Wayuu women is the guajira blanket. The form of the neck can be square in “V” form and oval at the waist. It has two cords on the inside that are tied to the body, giving an arm shape at the front of the dress and totally loose at the back. Under the blankets a *wusi* is worn as a woman’s intimate garment that is tied with the *sirapa*. Previously, the use of the *sirapa* was essential to maintain a good posture and correctly develop the breasts and back. Today, it has been replaced by shorts or underwear, *waireñas* or the *mochilas* and necklaces. The typical costume of the man is the *guayuco* or loincloth, the *waireñas*, and a hat and shirt.

The Inga



Fig. 4. The Inga

The Inga live in the Sibundoy Valley, a place recognized for having great environmental contrasts in a small geographical area. It has a variety of climates that range from the paramos of the Central Andes to the Amazon foothills, which has influenced the customs of the communities that have lived there for several centuries. Such is the case of the Inga, for whom clothing has been a defining characteristic, and of the Kamentsa, another ethnic group that inhabits the region. According to the first chroniclers, these groups dressed in rustic fabrics, described as cotton blankets woven across the width and open on the sides. The women used smaller blankets that fell over their chests.

For this community, weaving was very important in expressing the social and gender differences of those who wore the clothing; it was also a way of expressing their relationship with nature and the feelings of those who wove them. This is why their costumes are so representative and colorful and of great importance in their traditional celebrations, where the mythical narratives of the Inga are appreciated through symbols, mixed with figures of nature with which there is an important relationship. In their costumes, the necklaces, coronoas and headdresses of bright colors that symbolize the rainbow and the birds stand out. They are made with wool, tassels and feathers. Among the crowns, two types can be established, the crown of Tsomiach and the crowns of Feathers. The "Tsomiach" crown is made up of an open hat covered with threads of all colors that surround it and in which a large number of ribbons made up of thinner bands or "Tsomiach" and with various motifs which are later placed hanging. These Tsomiach are placed in a folded manner in the middle part of the sash, leaving both ends hanging with a tassel finish that makes them more spectacular. This crown is used by women and men, its use being very representative in the figure of the Matachin, the character chosen to indicate the start of the party and who leads the parade. Its crown is special to the rest, being carefully elaborated with thin bands (of four pairs with a white background and edges of bright colors such as red, yellow, and pink; the number of bands that the crown wears can be up to sixty bands placed in pairs, each pair of the same color).

We can therefore conclude that the real power of the Colombian ethnic groups is that they conserve their culture and identity until today, and that our responsibility as a costume museum is to protect and work with them to maintain this important legacy.

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