

*To Heal or to Remember: Indian Memory of the Rubber Boom and Roger Casement's "Basket of Life"**

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Abstract: *This article focuses on the voice of the Muinane group coming to grips with painful memories at the end of the twentieth century. Indians nowadays refer to the memories of the rubber boom as belonging to what they call "Basket of Darkness." In contrast to that obscure basket of bad memories, they speak of a "Basket of Life," where the seeds of the future are placed, looking forward to the growing of new generations and leaving behind the dangerous memories of violence and sorcery of the past.*

The aim of this article is to reveal the condition of the most silenced and muted actor in the reports, narratives and testimonies of the Casa Arana period in the Putumayo region. The executed, mutilated, tortured, raped and exploited bodies of the Putumayo Indians have been documented in horrifying detail by Casement, Valcárcel, Hardenburg, Saldaña Roca and many others. Indians become truly a parenthesis in all those tales; they are not actual subjects but objects of compassion, fear or observation; noble savages for Casement, treacherous and savage for Robuchon, cannibals to be civilized for Casa Arana, and objects of ethnographic description for Robuchon and Whiffen. In any of these cases Indians do not have voice; Indians are the objects of disputes among Whites. I want to give visibility to the Indians' ways of dealing with memory and how they leave the past behind.

Indians nowadays refer to the memories of the rubber boom as belonging to what they call "Basket of Darkness". In contrast to that obscure basket of bad memories, they speak of a "Basket of life", where the seeds of the future are placed, looking forward to the growing of new generations and leaving behind the dangerous memories of violence and sorcery of the past. I explore below this powerful double image of Indians' memory. What does it reveal to the workings of memory and the representation of history? What is the truth to be sought in the past? Is the past to be remembered or healed?

I begin by approaching the Putumayo Indians, in the voice of the Muinane group coming to grips with a painful memory and in face of new changes and challenges at the end of the twentieth century.

Healing Rather than Remembering

On May 1993, a group of Muinane people were getting ready to set off to visit their ancient territories. They were the descendants of one of the peoples that were nearly exterminated by the Casa Arana and the Peruvian Amazon Company at the beginning of the twentieth century. The meager remnants of their formerly numerous population had resettled further north, beyond the edge of what had been their ancestral lands, which remained nearly uninhabited for many decades.

The impact of the rubber industry and the Casa Arana regime on the Putumayo Indians was enormous. The total Indian population was reduced to perhaps less than a tenth between 1900 and 1930, and the surviving ones were forcefully resettled on the Putumayo River and further south. A few managed to escape north or to hide in the forest. Their social, political and ceremonial organization was severely shattered, and their territory was depopulated, as the forest regrew in what had been a densely populated region. In 1908, Thomas Whiffen (1915) calculated 46,000 as the total population of the Putumayo Indians and 2,000 as the population of the Muinane tribe. By 1993, the Muinane census did not reach 150; these were the descendants of the barely 20 Muinane men and women who managed to survive the Casa Arana regime. These rough numbers just serve as an indication of the degree of the catastrophe these peoples endured.

In the 1980s, the Colombian government officially granted the indigenous groups of the region – Witoto, Bora, Muinane, Miraña, Ocaina, Nonuya and Andoque Indians, the descendants of the peoples who were Casa Arana's labor force – the legal property of the territories they now occupy as well as their ancestral lands in the hinterland. This huge expanse of land – about six million hectares – coincides with Julio Cesar Arana's rubber territories. This new Indian reserve was named *Resguardo Predio Putumayo*. The Muinane Council of Elders – formed by the chiefs of the four main clans – decided in the early 1990s that the re-appropriation of the ancestral territories was necessary to reassert their political autonomy, now formally recognized, and to work towards their social reconstruction.

The Muinane elders in 1993 were the children of those who had directly suffered the slavery and slaughter under the Casa Arana regime. They were born after the rubber boom had ceased and only the eldest ones had first-hand knowledge of the places where the ancient people used to live. They grew up looking away from those stories and those places, finding a way of life on the banks of the Caquetá River, trading timber and game with White people and sending their children to the Catholic boarding school. They grew old far from their land and from the horrifying stories their own parents told – however they were disturbingly connected to them.

The ancestral territory of the Muinane is located at the center of the *Resguardo Predio Putumayo*. This territory was known to the elders in words and memories, but they had not returned to it since their childhood. In the 1990s times had changed. They had their territories legally titled and a new generation, for whom these stories were distant, had grown up after them. Their children were intelligent and able, had gone to

school, and wanted to know. The banks of the Caquetá River, where they had lived for decades and where they had raised their children, was a foreign land where their ancestors used to go to get fish and stones, but not a place they used to live. The rocky outcrops which mark the Caquetá landscape are the lodges of mythological beings, carriers of evil powers. Further south is the “Land of Coolness,” the area where the places of the *malocas* (longhouses) of their forbears rested abandoned, the land that had been destroyed and ravaged, and from where they had been expelled and exiled. It was their *territory*, a word in English (or Spanish or Portuguese) that barely translates the meaning of the Muinane concept: it is not just a tract of land that can be mapped or legally titled; this *territory* is the inscription of life and memory on the land – and this life and this memory had remained amputated since the times of Casa Arana, and the events which Roger Casement and others denounced and publicized, but that for the Indians had remained unhealed.

The children of Casa Arana were now elders and they needed to recover that life and that memory they had been unwilling to face for decades. The necessary step was to revisit the territory and to face its memories. At that time, I did not fully grasp the meaning of the decision they took to go and visit the old places. They stated that *territory* was the basis of their education, their government, and their social and ritual organization, and that they needed to go there with their children to show them and retrieve the thread of their life.

And then, they started off their journey to the ancient land. The group was formed by three elders of three of the surviving clans (Pineapple, Worm and Drum), and nine boys, three of each clan. They headed first to the ancient territory of the Pineapple clan, and Chucho, its elder, led the group. On May 27th 1993, after five days of trekking into the uninhabited forest, they got to Manioc creek. It is a small stream, on the Cahuinari River basin, not far from where once stood the Casa Arana section of Matanzas, now covered by forest regrowth. It was in Matanzas where Roger Casement met the notorious Armando Normand: “. . . with a face truly the most repulsive I have ever seen, I think. It was perfectly devilish in its cruelty and evil. I felt as if I were being introduced to a serpent,” wrote Casement in his journal (Casement 256). The Muinane remember Normand as “Noroba”. Matanzas means literally “slaughters” or “massacres” and the atrocities that happened there are clearly documented in Casement’s report, and in both Hardenburg’s and Valcárcel’s books.

For the Muinane, the place of Matanzas is known as “Hill of the Wild Cacao Tree”. Chucho’s granduncle, who had the name of Jeevadeka (Flower of Parrot Pineapple), a chief of the Pineapple clan of the Muinane, lived there. The Muinane tell that Jeevadeka died under the hands of Noroba, who hung him from a pole by his ear piercings. The group camped a few hours away from the old, haunted site. At night, Chucho spoke and the youngsters recorded his speech on a tape recorder. In his speech, Chucho did not address his fellow elders or his sons and nephews; he addressed Jeevadeka. He spoke like this:

We have truly arrived to the place of the ordeals; we arrived to Manioc Creek, to the Hill of the Wild Cacao Creek (Matanzas). Your grandchildren have arrived for you to meet them; you do not have to see them, as if they were other people. Do not be upset, stay calm. Here are your grandchildren. We know nothing about those who killed you, about those who did all those things to you. You are the ones who know. Now we are a new generation, and here are those who were born after me, and I am guiding them. We came here to heal these children. Here is our chief Jeevadeka. We know nothing of what happened to you. So it is. If we knew, we could speak about that. You came to end your life here. I am showing it to your grandchildren. I am guiding them with my brother. So then, do not take us for strangers. We came here to heal ourselves. This is what we are telling you. That is it.

The next day, by noon, they arrived at the place where Matanzas once stood, now covered with forest. There, Chucho spoke again:

Here, grandfather Jeevadeka, you lived and you are. We are your grandchildren and we have arrived. Up to this place we have reached and we are stepping on this spot. Are you there?¹ We have arrived well, in good heart. Here we are; we are the bones of your bones. We are coming back, your grandchildren that were born after you. We mourn and remember you, who are here. Then, for that reason, I myself Kigaibo [Sour Pineapple], your grandson, have arrived, together with people of the Drum clan and the Worm clan. We are with these, our young people, for you to meet, and we come in good manner. We come to seek the good words that you have: the word of life, the word of coolness, the word of nurturing. You ought to give us those words. . . . We thought we were alone, but we are not alone, you are here. That is why we came, we have reached to you. This is what I am telling you.

I was very struck when I helped Chucho's brother, Jorge, to transcribe and translate these recordings upon their return from their trip. Chucho's address to Jeevadeka begins by avoiding any reference to violent events of the Casa Arana period: "We know nothing about those who killed you, about those who did all those things to you," he says. Chucho seeks to heal, not to remember, as if invoking the violence of those days may attract danger. He rather focuses straight away to the young people in the party, and takes care that Jeevadeka's wandering spirit will not mistake them for other people. Chucho is well aware that nowadays they all look very much like the Peruvians and Creoles who enslaved and murdered their ancestors. They now wear clothes and boots, carry *machetes* and shotguns, eat salt and "smell of onions," as they say.

Chucho's way of dealing with the past when addressing Jeevadeka in this point of the territory is profoundly historical precisely in the fact that he avoids remembering. Instead of looking *back* he looks forward; not to the dead but to the living – and he addresses Jeevadeka as if he were alive. He acknowledges the past of killings and slavery by avoiding its memory, and he acknowledges the changes that came about afterwards

by stating that no matter what they may look like, they are Jeevadeka's grandchildren who come to pay a visit. Chucho's generation had been unable, so far, to deal with any of this. None of them felt able to go to the old places and cope with the rage, sorcery and powers that were left scattered, unbound and unsolved. They felt ashamed and powerless, unable to reestablish a connection they were painfully aware was necessary to allow them to rebuild their life – after so many years.

That power they lacked in shamanism and magical force to deal with the troubling past, they found again, in an unexpected way, in the new generation. These young people, their own children, gave them meaning and strength to face it. Even though these boys have gone to school, have learnt to read and write in Spanish, and do not resemble much those ancient Indians, they are *alive* and they want to know. Instead of reminding them of the crimes committed against their forebears and claiming revenge for them, he rather chooses to forget. He leaves aside the memory of the ordeals and focuses his discourse on what gives life: "We come to seek the good words that you have: the word of life, the word of coolness, the word of nurturing. You ought to give us those words," he pleads Jeevadeka. It is by virtue of these youngsters that Jeevadeka is now alive: "we are the bones of your bones."

And, paradoxically, it is the artifacts of writing that the young people have learnt from the White people that allows them to close the circle of this operation of the memory. In contrast to the elders, who rely on the oral speech in the Muinane language as their way of recording and giving meaning to their journey, the young ones carry notebooks, pens and color pencils to keep a written record of it. Their notebooks are written in Spanish, and in contrast to the speeches of their parents which deal with spirits and masters of the places, the youngsters compose a very pragmatic and down to earth journal, carefully annotating times, distances, location of places, animals hunted, meals eaten, avoiding any reference to their parents' concerns. They happily trek through the forest with innocent eyes, filling their notebooks with their observations and, most notably, with colorful drawings of the places they visit. In their notebooks they make most succinct and uneventful notes of their elders' speech, as this one by Chucho's nephew about the night when he uttered the speech transcribed above: "For dinner, we ate a woolly monkey we had hunted, and after the conversation of the elders we went to sleep," he writes.

In Matanzas they found the remains of a longhouse or *maloca* and many objects, both Indian and non-Indian: pots, tools, weaponry, glass, etc., in a place which the young people titled "Matanzas' garbage dump." Further ahead, they found two large holes, where rubber patrons used to burn the people that they had killed. They made drawings of the holes in their notebooks. They knew those places existed, where dead people were dumped and burnt; vegetation has not regrown in those holes, and they are still clearly noticeable. In his journal, one of the young boys wrote:

We arrived at the place called Hill of Wild Cacao (Matanzas). We looked at the port, made drawings, and followed to the hill where once stood a *maloca*, and it looked beautiful and frightening. We found an old pot, and after making observations, continued along the hill and arrived at the garbage dump. We scratched the ground and found some projectiles of fire weapons. Following the hill, we found the holes where dead people were burnt. It looked dreadful to me. After that, we started back.

The youngsters' notebooks matter-of-fact record movements, views and events in a vivid present. Their parents' speeches, in contrast, are painfully aware of the dangers, and in their dealing with them they merge past and future in a timeless present of life.

The two modes of representation – spoken, by the elders, and written, by the young ones – nonetheless are remarkably complementary. When I would ask any of the elders about their journey, he would right away ask for his son's notebook and would exhibit the color drawings; with this in his hands, he would calmly and happily refer to the events of the trip. It is as if by being captured in writing and drawing, those facts would now be contained and manageable. On the other hand, the young ones could confidently devote these facts into writing and deftly design their drawings because they felt that any danger that could exist in their journey would be avoided and dodged by virtue of their elders' speech.

One of the reasons for the extreme precaution of these Indians to leave aside the memory of violence is because it was not only the violence of rubber barons against Indians, but also the violence amongst Indians themselves, which exacerbated a pre-existing condition of intertribal warfare.

We tend to represent the Indians as victims of the violent rubber barons. The dispute among Whites is whether those Indians were ferocious cannibals who had to be subjected by any means to become an industrious and civilized labor force, as Casa Arana alleged, or whether they were noble and pacific people enslaved and abused by “an association of vagabonds, the scum of Peru and Colombia,” as Casement claimed in his journal (Goodman 111). In both cases, Indians are represented as a single, unified subject. But, how was it from an Indian perspective?

Certain Indian tribes, and clans and lineages within tribes, profited from the alliance with rubber barons to wage warfare against other tribes and former enemies. Besides, young boys from several tribes were raised and trained to raid other groups and to act as executioners of the worst crimes. This exacerbation of internal warfare had more devastating and long-lasting effects than the violence of Whites against Indians. Whites or non-Indians would eventually leave the region, but the families and relatives of the murderers and the murdered would stay, and with those the memories of pending revenges.

This is one of the key reasons why a person like Chucho is quite circumspect about not bringing back the memory of those events, potentially very destructive on today's life. What these elders aim to do is the reconstruction of the social tissue that

was torn apart. That is what Chucho means when he asks Jeevadeka for the words of life. This journey to the past will allow the Muinane to erect new ceremonial houses (called *malocas* in local Spanish), which so far they had been unable to do. The contact with the territory and the healing of memory was a necessary step, because a ceremonial house implies the reconstruction and re-establishment of a network of ceremonial exchanges which is mapped onto pre-existing networks. This was a tricky issue as those former networks had been severely damaged.

This way of thinking, speaking and relating to memory is in no way a peculiarity of this group or of this elder. It is shared by all the descendants of the Putumayo Indians. What is at stake here is not the reconstruction of the truth of the events, or the demands of justice against the White people, but the reconstruction of society. This implies both particular modes of memory and historical consciousness and the construction of new forms of collective identity.

Basket of Darkness and Basket of Life

These forms of memory speak to the construction of new social and moral identities in the aftermath of the rubber boom. The rubber boom is a foundational event for these Indian groups today. Current native conceptualization does not directly address these episodes but rather seeks to deal with them, either through oblivion or secrecy.

What the literature calls “The Putumayo Indians” encompasses seven ethnolinguistic groups, which belong to the Witoto linguistic family (Witoto, Ocaina and Nonuya), the Bora linguistic family (Bora, Miraña and Muinane), plus a language isolate (Andoque). Although these peoples are linguistically differentiated and in the past waged warfare amongst themselves, they share a number of cultural traits and a common social and ceremonial organization. Today, they designate themselves under the general name of “People of the Center.” I do not know whether this self-designation existed from pre-contact times. My hypothesis is that this idiom is the result of a process of ideological construction of a new kind of moral community (see Echeverri 1997). This construction is in part a result of the disruption provoked by traumatic effects of the rubber period, which caused massive demographic loss, the extinction of entire tribes, clans and lineages, and the formation of new mixed communities increasingly dependent on market goods.

This ideology of one People linked by social and ritual exchanges constitutes the basis for a type of ceremonial and political discourse, which emphasizes the common traits of the different groups, putting aside ethnic differences and past conflicts. This ceremonial discourse, called *rafue* in the Witoto language, is based on “The philosophy of multiplication” and “The Word of tobacco and coca”. *Rafue* is a very elaborate and formalized form of discourse, of an abstract and ethical character. It is not the narration of mythology – which belongs to another form of discourse, as explained below – but

deals with the creative processes of life, the ethics of horticultural work, the production and food and the growth of population.

In contrast with this ritual and public discourse of *rafue*, which is instrumental in the construction of the ideology of a unified moral community (People of the Center), the conceptual guarding of ethnic differences is maintained in other modes of discourse. Ethnic difference brings about the memory of conflicts from the past – rivalry among clans and tribes, sorcery, cannibalism – and implies dealing with differences in mythological conceptions (territory, hierarchy among tribes and clans). This contrast between a unified moral community and the conceptual guarding of ethnic differences is dealt with in practice through the constitution of a pan-ethnic ethical and political discourse.

There is an increasingly explicit separation between “secret” versus “public” ritual discourse. Ritual discourse takes place in a special setting in the *maloca*, where men sit at night to chew coca leaves. This is the place for the discourse of *rafue*, where political and ritual exchanges are dealt with. Secret discourses, in contrast, are about mythology, sorcery, or certain historical episodes dealing with interethnic conflicts – including the violent events of the rubber boom.

Secret, ethnic discourse is closely linked to mythology. Mythology, for these groups, keeps the record of the events of cannibal, malignant, murderous, revengeful and raging beings who tried to destroy and pervert the true humanity. These stories are kept in what is called the Basket of darkness. These stories do not belong to the public, common discourse of *rafue*, but are kept and maintained by each ethnic group and clan as a defense and source of sorcery and evil power. The stories and events of the rubber boom are but one more layer in this plentiful basket. These baskets of darkness should be kept sealed, because they represent the danger of war – they are, as these people say, their “nuclear arsenals.”

In contrast to mythology and the Basket of Darkness, *rafue* belongs to the Basket of Life. This basket contains the ethics of the horticultural work, the raising of children, the production of food, the celebration of rituals. The most accomplished expression of this Basket is the Word of tobacco and coca, with which the elders used to care for and to nurture human life. Mythological narratives and violent historical memories – including those of the rubber boom – do not have a place in this Basket.

These two Baskets thus represent a moral organization of collective memory, and configure a form of historical consciousness. The Basket of Life refers to their history precisely for the fact of refraining to remember anything from the past; on the contrary asserting the maintenance and reproduction of life. The Basket of Darkness keeps secret the memories of dangerous past events. The terror of the rubber boom looms so dangerously that it fills that Basket to the rim. Those memories are not forgotten but kept sealed.

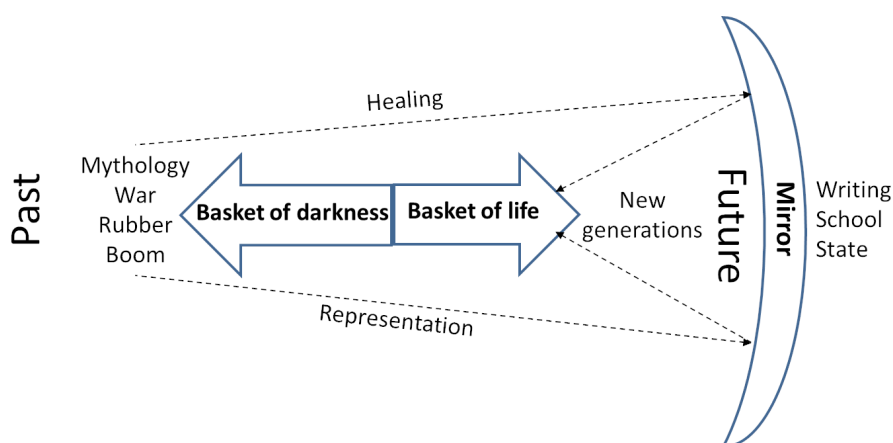
There is certainly an unresolved tension and an impending danger in this organization of memory, because there is always the risk that the contents of the Basket of Darkness be deployed, undermining the collective project of a moral community.

Separating what is secret (Basket of Darkness) from what is public (Basket of Life) has become a task in which the elders invest a remarkable amount of time and effort.

This allows us to better understand Chucho’s address to Jeevadeka in the haunted site of Matanzas. In such a dangerous place, he is avoiding the Basket of Darkness and he is pointing to the Basket of Life, through the use of two rhetorical devices: the request of the “good words” from Jeevadeka – that is, the Word of tobacco and coca – and his explicit references to the new generation.

It is as if these two modes of memory move in opposite directions. Mythology and historiographical narratives of violence point in the direction of the past; *rafue*, the Word of tobacco and coca, points in the direction of the future. The memories of the events of the rubber boom are thus left in an apparent oblivion: discarded in the public discourse, secret in the private discourse; and there seems to be no way to represent them or to think about them. This unresolved tension is solved by the new generation, which functions like a mirror – a reflective space that allows them to face the past in an indirect way. This reflective space is configured paradoxically by purely foreign devices: writing, schooling, use of the Spanish language, state recognition, and so forth. (See figure 1)

Figure 1. *The structure of memory*



At a micro-sociological scale, we saw how for the group of Muinane elders journeying with their sons and nephews, their young boys’ notebooks and drawings operated as a reflective space which allowed them to face the past. Now, we can perhaps also appreciate the same process in a larger sociological scale. In the 1980s, the ancestral territories of the People of the Center were legally recognized by the Colombian government. With this came a whole set of special rights: language recognition, bicultural education, territorial and political autonomy, etc. The new generation is now growing up in this new environment. It does not matter that they look similar to White people; the issue is that they are safe. They now may look to the past with new eyes and new devices of memory: recording, writing, photographs, books, and so forth. These legal

and formal devices – land titles, schooling, political organizations – operate as a reflective space for the whole project of a collective moral identity.

For these People of the Center, the rubber boom has been a difficult issue to deal with – either in oblivion or in secret. But the scars left on the bodies and the territory need to be read and interpreted. These marks also can turn into mirrors that allow new modes of healing and representing the past. The actual site of the headquarters of Casa Arana in La Chorrera may play that role. This is a remarkable story, which like all things Arana, is made up of deceit and twisted turns.

The headquarters of Arana as a mirror of memory

In 1994, the First Lady of Colombia gave Putumayo Indians the house of the headquarters of Casa Arana in Chorrera to run a secondary school. At that time, the house had been the property of a Colombian official bank, Caja de Crédito Agrario Industrial y Minero, which had rebuilt it back in 1986.² The house and surrounding areas, with a total of 800 hectares, had been excluded from the large territory of nearly six million hectares, whose legal title was only granted to the Putumayo Indians by the Colombian government in 1988.

Why was the house rebuilt by a Colombian official bank? And, why was it excluded from the legal title granted to the Indians – and precisely the actual house where the Peruvian Amazon Company had its ominous headquarters?

In 1922, Colombia and Peru signed a border treaty, which ceded Colombia the territories north of the Putumayo River, where Casa Arana had been operating. Arana, and the people of Loreto, vehemently opposed the treaty, which was finally ratified by the two countries in 1927. But Arana was indeed a clever man. In fact, a year before the treaty was signed, Arana secured the legal title to his possessions in Putumayo – nearly six million hectares – and he ensured that under the terms of the treaty he would receive compensation in cash from Colombia.

Arana intended to be paid £2,000,000, but the Colombian government found this amount extortionate. Finally, in 1939, the Banco Agrícola Hipotecario, a Colombian official bank, bought the rights of Arana in the Putumayo for US\$200,000, but only paid \$40,000 at that current time. In 1954, the Colombian government ordered the termination of the Banco Agrícola, and put the newly created Caja de Crédito Agrario Industrial y Minero (Caja Agraria) in charge of its liquidation. In 1964, Caja Agraria ratified the purchase made by Banco Agrícola back in 1939, and paid the heirs of Arana the remaining US\$160,000. In this manner Caja Agraria consolidated the full property of the old Arana possessions in Putumayo, which were called *Predio Putumayo* “The Putumayo Estate” (Colombia 1989).

Putumayo Indians were totally unaware of all these moves until, in 1985, Caja Agraria decided to make use of its property and designed a huge plan of development for the Predio Putumayo, with the investment of two million dollars in an 800-hectare

farm in La Chorrera. Caja Agraria erected its main premises on exactly the same spot where Casa Arana had stationed its headquarters and main rubber depot. The news came as a shock, but only a Colombian priest in Chorrera and a few of the schooled Indian teachers understood the meaning of it: Caja Agraria claimed property of the whole Indian Territory on the basis of having purchased it from the heirs of the company that had tortured and enslaved the Indians! “Those titles are stained with blood,” claimed the priest in numerous letters he sent to Colombian authorities. These Indians began a vehement protest against the presence of the Caja Agraria and its claims of ownership of the region. This movement among other things allowed the small group of Indian teachers with secondary schooling to establish the first indigenous political organization in this region, which was called Confederación Indígena del Amazonas Medio (COIDAM). The situation gained momentum the following year, 1986, when Virgilio Barco became President and helped cancel Caja Agraria’s plans, with additional pressure from international NGOs and human rights organizations. An agreement was reached in 1988: Caja Agraria would sell Predio Putumayo to the Instituto Colombiano de la Reforma Agraria (Incora), which had the attribution to land titles to Indian groups. Incora, in turn, speedily proceeded to constitute the land as a *Resguardo* (Reserve) on April 23 of 1988, in favor of the indigenous groups of the region. Caja Agraria’s two-million-dollar farm was excluded from the *resguardo* territory.

In 1993 the Presidency of Colombia acquired the old Casa Arana house from Caja Agraria to lodge a new Indian secondary school, and the Colombian First Lady travelled to Chorrera for its inauguration. *El Tiempo*, the largest Colombian newspaper, headlined the news: “Between 1900 and 1910 violence championed in Casa Arana. About 40,000 Indians were murdered. Today, after eight decades, the house and its bad memories will become an epicenter of education. Last December 21st, the Indians [...] erased the ghost of that genocide.”³

That was the same year the Muinane set off to visit the old places of the rubber boom. And if the “ghost” of that genocide has not actually been “erased,” it certainly provides a reflective space for the new generations to represent memory in new ways. It is remarkable that the notorious place, with its dungeons where Indians were kept chained, where dozens of Indians were burned in drunken feasts of horror, now becomes a place for the education of the new generation.

Furthermore, in May 2008, the Colombian Ministry of Culture declared the house as a *Bien de interés cultural del ámbito nacional*, and the Minister of Culture – Paula Moreno, a Black woman – traveled to Chorrera to announce the news. On that visit, a 48 year-old Bora Indian commented: “Casa Arana is like bereavement. The school covers that image we have of the past, and I want that [the government] support it because it gives us solace.”⁴ Afterwards a respected leader in local and governmental communities, Fany Kuiru, remarked: “We have our hopes placed here. Even though Chorrera does not receive many visitors, we want to refurbish the rooms to function as a hotel in Casa Arana. This may be the opportunity for Chorrera to become a tourist site” (Ministerio de Cultura 2008).⁵

The symbolic act had soothing and encouraging effects – mild ones in any case. For the Bora man, it is the education of children that brings solace, not the fact of the house being declared of “cultural interest” for the nation. For the woman leader, it is the hope that the house will attract tourists, and with them income for the people; much needed income for raising and educating the children – the house is thought as a patrimony *for the future*, not a memory of the past.

Declaring the rebuilt premises of Casa Arana as an object of public cultural interest for the nation is still an opaque mirror. The well-intentioned or politically convenient reasons of the Ministry of Culture in that declaration fall short of accomplishing a reappraisal of the events that building evokes – both for the Indians who suffered its direct impact and for the country, Colombia, that gave them its nationality and that was also accomplice and witness to those events.

Indians are still unable to deal with that. The bereavement is long-lasting. For Indian elders, like Chucho, that memory is not to be recalled in order to be able to live on, or is a source of evil power that should be kept in secrecy. The survivors of the catastrophe managed to rebuild a new society over the fragments and pieces of a former social order that was irretrievably lost. It is the philosophy of multiplication, the ethics of horticultural work and the Word of tobacco and coca which guides the moral agenda of this social project. Memory is thus subordinated to the imperative of life. Writing, schooling and the State provide an anchor that perhaps will allow new modes of memory in the younger generations. Even though we still do not hear voices from that generation that make sense of all that in new ways, those devices and institutions – utterly alien to the Indian world – do indeed provide a possibility of reflecting and seeing beyond the muted pain and raging revenge.

For Colombian nationals, these Indians and those regions are remote and unknown. Colombian people are quite unaware of the events of that time, as if it were news of things that happened elsewhere. Jose Eustasio Rivera’s *La Vorágine*, a novel in which he denounces the atrocities committed in the Amazonian jungles, was a success when it appeared in 1924. But Rivera himself bitterly complained that he had written the novel to denounce true facts, but in Colombia the people read and appreciated it simply as a wonderful novel, not as a testimony of a dramatic situation. There is a sort of disengagement in the common attitude of Colombians towards the events of the rubber boom in the Putumayo region – “It was the Peruvians who did all that,” they may say. When you read the reports and accusations of Colombian officers and rubber gatherers of that time, the most common complaints about Casa Arana is not so much that it killed Indians, but that it killed or threatened Colombians, or that it stole “their” Indians or rubber trees.

The rebuilt headquarters of Arana in Chorrera now lodge the young men and women descendants of the Indians that saw that same house as a place of exactions and fear. That house-turned-school also holds a library where the books, reports and documents written about that time begin to pile up: translations of Hardenburg’s book,

of Casement's report, new editions of Valcárcel, and what has been written by Colombian and Peruvian historians. Among the various sources, the name of Roger Casement stands as symbolizing a turning point, as a torch of truth and justice in the middle of the blackest night. Those young boys and girls do not fully understand what it means that he was Irish or why he was hung. No matter his background or circumstances, the sheer truth is that his voyage up to Putumayo one hundred years ago did make a difference.

This opaque mirror can perhaps be polished and perfected to be able to shine in full. Like Chucho, I myself do not see, do not understand when looking straight back – I just feel fear, pain and rage. I need to look forward into this new generation, and it is to them we owe truth and true justice. They are our actual true mirrors of memory.

Truth and Justice

Roger Casement was an outstanding personality, a man ahead of his time. He championed in the defense of human rights of the disenfranchised Congo Blacks and Putumayo Indians, and later he himself paid with his life in his own search for justice. Casement is a pioneer in the development of a notion of universal human rights, in which truth and justice are posed as common standards for everyone (as Mitchell 2008 clearly states in his review of Goodman's book).

Truth and justice is what Casement sought. But, then, we need to look at these two concepts in culturally relative terms – that is, what they mean for each of the actors involved in this drama. What truth and for whom? Who is the arbiter of justice?

The "truth" about the rubber boom for the Putumayo Indians is not contained in reports or documents, it is not established by judgment, it does not pertain to the logic of proofs and checks. The real truth of the rubber boom is written and verified on dismembered, tortured, raped, burned and discarded bodies. There is nothing to prove, nothing to allege. As the elder Chucho wisely said, "Of what happened to you, we know nothing." Indians' truth does not belong to a past of facts and accusations; their truth is the present and future of living bodies, of children to be born. To remember is no option. Years ago I attempted to collect memories and narratives about the rubber boom from older Indians; I was struck by what appeared to be total oblivion, an amnesia, a forgetfulness and secrecy. They were not interested at all in recalling or establishing facts. Once, I read excerpts of Peruvian Judge Carlos Valcárcel's book (2004 [1915]) to some Andoque elders, and I felt ashamed by the endless string of atrocities minutely documented by the judge. The elders suspended judgment on all, and were much more interested in recognizing the names of chiefs and clans and linking those to actual living people (as those names are, in a way, reborn in new generations). If you do insist in finding "the truth," then you will get to what we may call "justice" in the Indian way. But, in this void of true facts, how can we conceive of justice? It has nothing to do with the truth: justice is sorcery and revenge – if you are seeking to know it is because you are seeking revenge. It belongs to the basket of darkness.

Truth and justice – these two key concepts in Casement’s action – seem to be utterly absent and distorted in what we can identify as the Putumayo Indians’ cultural outlook on those events. Casement admired the Indians so much – “those poor, hunted, gentle beings up there in the forest” (Goodman 120) – but he knew them so little. He attributed the Indians he assumed as noble and passive to his moral standards and felt “more than sympathy” for them: “I would dearly love to arm them, to train them, and drill them to defend themselves against these ruffians,” he wrote in his journal (Casement 310).

In contrast, Casement attributed the lowest moral standards – in stark opposition to his own ones – to those “ruffians” and “scoundrels,” the Arana gang: from Arana himself all the way down to the chiefs of sections.

Everybody, including the Indians, agree in this qualification: Arana and his gang were bad and became worse with time. They were responsible for countless murders and abuse – that is *true* – to an overwhelming degree. The truth for Arana and his fellows – and in this he shares with the mestizo culture of the lowlands – is something that can be fabricated by means of books, photographs, films and propaganda; that can be bargained, bought and used as a currency. The truth is merchandise, as is justice – both are indeed quite material things. Casement knew that very well: that Arana and his gang fabricated truths, twisted facts and bribed judges and officers to reach Arana’s goals at any cost. This is a war of information and misinformation that the good guys apparently won – at least in the face of international public opinion. In Peru, and particularly in Loreto, Arana stood as an influential figure, even a hero, who had been the object of defamatory attacks by foreign interest.

How are we to understand the motives and reasons of these men and their cruelty? I turn here to Michael Taussig’s reading of the stories of the Putumayo rubber boom: “If terror thrives on the production of epistemic murk and metamorphosis, it nevertheless requires the hermeneutic violence that creates feeble fictions in the guise of realism, objectivity, and the like, flattening contradiction and systematizing chaos,” writes Taussig in his hallucinatory prose (132). Casement’s authoritarian realism or Hardenburg’s melodramatic tone, continues Taussig, were selected by the political culture as the true representations of what happened: “They were deemed truth, factual, reportage, nonfictional” (133), but, lashes out Taussig, “in their imaginative heart these critiques were complicit with what they opposed” (133). I do not mean to dismiss Casement’s and Hardenburg’s brave and selfless efforts against all odds. Taussig’s critique of the realist and melodramatic modes of representation – which may well encompass all of us – is perhaps ratified by the even more radical critique of Indians themselves in not talking at all or turning the memories of terror into secret sorcery – and not into public document or scholarly theses.

Even though Casa Arana produced its own counter representations, they were written by the higher officers of the company or by his close allies, like Carlos Rey de Castro. Section chiefs remain almost as muted as the Indians. The core relationship of

this story, that between the torturer and victim, inextricably bound, remain as objects of rejection or compassion, but not of communication. Both are alien for Casement: Indians in their cultural and linguistic alterity, section chiefs in their reputed animality and immorality – Casement wants to leave Matanzas as soon as possible, for instance, not to have to stand Normand’s closeness for too long. Casement’s sympathy for the Indians is matched by his utter disdain for the section chiefs, which he articulates in moral and racial terms – or in a collusion of race and morality, which leaves little room to understand these people, the true bad guys of the story. Casement’s racist comments abound in his journal: “cut-throat half-castes,” “Latin American scoundrels,” etc.

Final remark on Casement

Angus Mitchell (2010, 52) knowingly comments about the Casement’s Black Diaries: “A satisfactory resolution is maybe impossible because of the prioritising of politics over history.” But from a Latin American and Amerindian point of view this issue is irrelevant. We care about Casement’s legacy not because or despite of what may transpire of those suspicion-ridden Diaries. They indeed belong to the ever present Basket of Darkness. To be direct: we do not care about it. What we do care and treasure are Casement’s untiring efforts to defend human life and the rights of the disenfranchised – which fill up his long-lasting Basket of Life to the rim.

Notes

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- 1 “Are you there?” (*diika’i*) is the customary greeting in the Muinane language.
- 2 I wrote a piece about a set of photographs taken on the ruins of the ruins of Casa Arana in Chorrera in 1977 (see Echeverri 2009).
- 3 “De casa histórica a salón de clases,” *El Tiempo*, Bogotá, 29 XII 1993: “Entre 1900 y 1910 en la Casa Arana la violencia fue protagonista. Cerca de 40 mil indígenas fueron asesinados. Hoy, después de ocho décadas, la casona y sus malos recuerdos se transformaron en un enorme epicentro de educación. El pasado 21 de diciembre, indígenas de las veredas de Monochua, Aduche, Villa Azul, Peñas Rojas, Puerto Santander, Aracuara y La Chorrera (en donde está la Casa) borraron el fantasma de esos genocidios.”
- 4 “La Casa Arana, de lugar de muerte a sitio para la cultura indígena,” *El Tiempo*, Bogotá, 24 V 2008: “La Casa Arana es como un duelo. El colegio tapa esa imagen que tenemos del pasado y queremos que lo apoyen porque nos da un consuelo.”
- 5 “Aquí tenemos puestas nuestras esperanzas. A pesar de que a La Chorrera vienen pocos visitantes, queremos adecuar habitaciones que funcionen como hotel en la Casa Arana. Esta puede ser la oportunidad para que se interesen en La Chorrera como sitio turístico.”

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