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Patricia Rojas-Zambrano

University of San Francisco, cprojaszambrano@dons.usfca.edu

Susan Roberta Katz

University of San Francisco, katz@usfca.edu

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“Our Misak Identity Is the Spinal Cord of Our Education”: Oral History of Gerardo Tunubalá Velasco

Patricia Rojas-Zambrano* & Susan Roberta Katz**
University of San Francisco



Photo: Gerardo Tunubalá at Alcatraz Sunrise Ceremony, November 2022
Photo Credit: Patricia Rojas Zambrano

* **Patricia Rojas-Zambrano** is a doctoral candidate in the International and Multicultural Education program in the School of Education at University of San Francisco. She is Associate Professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies. Patricia is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and has spent 25 years working in community mental health and social justice issues. In addition to being a therapist, educator, and community advocate, Patricia is a mixed media artist. cprojaszambrano@dons.usfca.edu

** **Susan Roberta Katz** is Professor Emerita of International and Multicultural Education at the University of San Francisco, where in 2008 she co-founded the first graduate program in Human Rights Education in the U.S. With the support of a Fulbright fellowship in 2010, she conducted research on bilingual intercultural education among the Shuar Indigenous nationality in Ecuador. Extending this work, she has partnered with the Misak community of Colombia since 2017. katz@usfca.edu

Abstract

The Misak people of Colombia are respected worldwide for recovering their ancestral Land, revitalizing their native language and culture, and building an education system from pre-school to university centered in traditional values and worldviews. Through this oral history with Gerardo Tunubalá Velasco, Misak educational leader and co-founder of the Misak University, we learn about his efforts alongside his community to create and sustain an autonomous educational system that guarantees the rights and dignity of Indigenous peoples in Colombia and beyond. His story, grounded in a profound love and communion with Land, speaks of the importance of Land recovery for Indigenous peoples' sovereignty and resilience. The article opens with an introduction to Gerardo's ongoing participation in a human rights education class and closes with a reflection by co-author Patricia Rojas-Zambrano, who writes from her positionality as a non-Indigenous Colombian living in the United States today.

Keywords: Land recovery, decolonizing education, Indigenous languages, sovereignty, oral history

Introduction

The Misak people, one of 115 Indigenous communities in Colombia, are deeply respected worldwide for their accomplishments in revitalizing their native language and culture, most notably for building a system of education from pre-school to the university that represents their traditional values and worldview. After having recovered a large part of their ancestral Land in 1980, the Misak organized to make education a first priority under the slogan of “To Recover the Land Is To Recover Everything!” Situated in the country’s southwest region of Cauca (see map), the Misak have continued to play a leadership role in resisting domination, for example through dismantling statues of Spanish conquistadores in 2021,¹ as well as in

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-colombia-indigenous-statue-trfn/toppling-of-conquistador-statue-in-colombia-triggers-debate-over-history-legacy-idUSKBN2683GU>

strengthening the Indigenous movement, such as by hosting the first nationwide Summit of Indigenous Peoples of Colombia in Summer 2022.²

Given their central role in actively claiming their rights as Indigenous people, representatives from the Misak community have been invited since 2018 to participate as guest speakers in the graduate course, Human Rights Education: Pedagogy and Practice, taught by Professor Susan Roberta Katz at the University of San Francisco (USF). This course has consistently included a focus on Indigenous rights with the understanding that human rights education (HRE) needs to extend beyond the principles embedded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948). In particular, HRE must critically challenge settler-colonialism through serious examination of concepts missing in the UDHR but inherent in the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (2007), such as Land³ rights, self-determination, and cultural identity.

Through this lens, students in the HRE Pedagogy & Praxis course over the past years have engaged in dialogue with Gerardo Tunubalá and María Rosa Tombé, pioneers of the Misak educational model, and Mercedes Tunubalá, the first Indigenous woman mayor of the municipality of Silvia, located in Misak territory.⁴ Thanks to the generous support of the Miner Anderson Family Foundation, Gerardo was able to travel to the United States, first in April 2019 when he spoke in person to the HRE class at USF as well as participated in the Navajo Education Conference at Window Rock, Arizona. More recently in November 2022, he presented at a range of classes across the USF campus, attended Bay Area community events, and met with local Indigenous leaders. The highlight of his visit was going to the sunrise ceremony at Alcatraz on the Day of “Un-Thanksgiving” and being invited by the

² <https://www.iwgia.org/en/news/4909-indigenous-summit-in-colombia-unity-is-built-from-the-kitchen.html>

³ In alignment with Indigenous scholars like Styres (2019), the authors chose to capitalize “L” in Land to honor its centrality as a principle in Indigenous rights generally and Misak culture specifically. When referring to “lands” as physical spaces, we use lower case “l.” See Chapter 1 in L.T. Smith, E. Tuck, & K.W. Yang (Eds.), *Indigenous and decolonizing studies in education: Mapping the long view* (pp. 24-37). Routledge.

⁴ Silvia is the municipality in the heart of Misak territory.

International Indian Treaty Council to deliver a message of unity to the thousands of people there.

As background to the oral history below, Gerardo Tunubalá Velasco is one of the founders and coordinators of the Misak University and a high school social studies teacher in the territory of Guambía⁵ in Silvia, Cauca, Colombia. As an Indigenous Misak, he has worked for 20+ years to create and strengthen an authentic and autonomous educational system for his community. He studied History at the University of El Valle in Colombia and received his MA in Latin American Studies at the Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain. In addition to being a distinguished scholar, author, and researcher on social and cultural issues, Gerardo is also a documentary filmmaker and poet.

Co-authors of this article, Patricia Rojas-Zambrano, doctoral candidate in International & Multicultural Education (IME) at USF, and Susan Roberta Katz, Professor Emerita of IME, served as the coordinators and interpreters for Gerardo's visit in partnership with the USF Interfaith Nonviolence Initiative. Once Gerardo returned home to Colombia, they conducted this oral history with him as a way to share the Misak story with a global audience. As Gerardo says below, "... if you do not share what you know, there is no sense in learning."

Figure 1: Political Map of Colombia



⁵ Guambía is another term for Misak territory.

**“Thanks to the Education Provided by My Parents during
My Childhood, I Had a Childhood Grounded in the Land,
Learning to Sense and to Feel the Land”**

My name is Gerardo Tunubalá Velasco. In Guambía, the origins of our last names are related to the names of places in our territory, and Tunubalá means "peak of the mountain." I was born in Misak territory, historically the Land of the Pubenense⁶ peoples. As Indigenous peoples, we lost this Land in 1536 with the arrival of the Spanish conquistador Sebastián de Belalcázar.⁷ My territory was destroyed, broken up, and dismembered. But thanks to the resistance of our elders, we have been able to recover it to this day.

My father is Manuel Tunubalá, and my mother, Julia Velasco, is now 80. Thanks to the education provided by my parents during my childhood, I had a childhood grounded in the Land, learning to sense and feel the Land. I learned to speak Namuy Wam⁸ very well, thanks to my parents. I learned to speak Spanish at school. My education started at home, near the hearth, centered in my family. My parents were rigorous, demanding that we keep our traditions and our language as a form of resistance. Thanks to them, I am who I am today. We are a family of three siblings, and I have two sisters. One of my sisters, like me, works in education, and the other, the youngest sibling, is the mayor of Silvia, Cauca.

Before we recovered our Land in 1980, my parents took me to the volcano of Azufral.⁹ Only a few people have had a chance to see this place. It is very remote and difficult to access. We had to cross through a vast and challenging terrain and traverse on horseback or mules to get there. Even before 1980, we were traversing those mountains.

For the Misak people, it is imperative to keep our Land. For us, not having our Land means not having life. The Land is part of our identity and our traditions. Páramos, lagoons, and beautiful flora and fauna make up 80

⁶ Indigenous groups who inhabited the South West region of present-day Colombia for centuries.

⁷ Conquistador (conqueror) of regions of present-day Colombia and Ecuador.

⁸ Native tongue of the Misak people, which belongs to the Chibcha language family.

⁹ Semi-active volcano located in the South Western Andean mountains of Colombia known for its unique landscape, fauna and flora.

percent of our Land. Natural resources surround us, and to be Misak is to have a deep relationship with the Land. If the Land suffers, we feel it. This is what we mean by *sentipensar con el territorio*—to sense, feel, and think with the Land. We sense the beating of the Land and can feel its waters, its animals, all of its flora and fauna. Having contact with the Land and with all of nature is essential for us. For us, as Misak people, the spinal cord of our education—our identity—is to be able to dream with these beings, to dream with the Land, and to be in the Land, which is why it is so crucial for us to continue fighting to recover our Land.

This I How I Began My Education—Always Walking the Land

The education of Indigenous people in Colombia was turned over to missionaries at the start of the 20th century. The missionaries of Mother Laura, known as the Lauritas, were in control of our education. Their mission was to evangelize Indigenous peoples. Many were able to resist, but many could not. After the Lauritas, the Summer Institute of Linguistics¹⁰ from the United States also arrived. Their mission in all the places they visited was to evangelize by developing Indigenous pastors as religious leaders, translating the Bible into Indigenous languages, and ultimately changing Indigenous mentality. They managed to do this with many Indigenous groups, but many others resisted. The best way to resist was to center our efforts on education - to resignify the meaning of Indigenous education and develop our own.

First, they took our Land, then they divided it, and after came the missions to evangelize, and in some ways, they did manage to break us down. However, even if they took a lot from us, they could not take our spirituality. Thanks to our spirituality, we are resilient today. The first school I went to was called a *núcleo escolar* (school center); there were many throughout Colombia in rural areas. In Indigenous territories, these school centers were established to dominate Indigenous peoples.

My experience with schooling was first with the Laurita Sisters and later with educators sent by the government. With that group, we had our

¹⁰ An evangelical Christian non-profit organization whose main purpose has been to translate the Bible into Indigenous languages.

first Misak educators, thanks to the events of the 1980s¹¹ - one of the decades of most transcendence in our recent history. Because we were able to recover a lot of our lands, structural changes in our educational system began taking place too. Our slogan was: "To recover the Land is to recover everything."

When I first arrived at school, called the *nucleo escolar*, one of the teachers was my Aunt Bárbara Velasco. It was extraordinary to learn alongside her. She taught me Spanish, and I went through elementary school with her as my teacher; I took my first steps as a Spanish-speaking learner. Because Spanish is an imposed language, it is the language of our colonizers. However, we now know that to interact with other cultures, we need to learn to speak Spanish as it is for other Indigenous communities in other parts of the world. For example, Indigenous peoples in the United States must speak English too. So in Colombia, specifically, we had to learn to speak in Spanish too, which is why I speak it perfectly.

I have many memories as a kid with my Aunt Bárbara. We lived on a separate reservation called Manzanal, and since there were no roads at the time, we had to travel by horse or foot. During our travels, she would always encourage us to keep on studying and learning. Our trips would take about an hour, and we would walk and play with my cousins during the trip. This is how I began my education—always walking the Land.

“We Are Going to Recover Our Land”

I was about 10 years old when we first began recovering our lands in 1980. My parents took me to the Land recovery movements. It was about 3:00 in the morning, and all the meetings had to be held in hiding. Sometimes we would hold the meetings in the páramos because the leaders of the movement were carefully planning to avoid making any mistakes. At that time, the landowners, who are now the paramilitaries, would persecute and assassinate them. The Pájaros [paramilitary forces sponsored by the Conservative Party in Colombia during the times of violence in the 1950s and 1960s] would persecute and assassinate our Indigenous thinkers and leaders, not only Misak

¹¹ Refers to the recuperation of ancestral Land by the Misak people.

but Nasa¹² too. So these meetings had to be in secret to protect the leaders. I was never part of those meetings, but when the time came to recover the Land, my parents told me, "We are going to recover our Land," and that is how I got involved.

Where we are located today, Silvia is just a tiny part of what we could conserve. There are parts of the territory now in our hands, and we continue the struggle today because the Pubenense Confederation occupied all of what today is the Cauca región of present-day Colombia. Thankfully our elders were able to fight back, unlike the case of other groups like the Ohlones in California, who were dispossessed of their Land. Thanks to the fight of our elders, we are alive today. It is why we need to develop our thought and worldview in health and education for the survival of our people. The Land recovery started in 1980, and we are now in 2023, many decades later, and we continue to fight. We will continue fighting against multinational corporations which are the ones who want to keep our ancestral lands. Moreover, we will continue fighting for the sake of future generations.

“After We Recovered the Lands, We Decided to Implement Our Educational System, Called *Educación Propia*”

After we recovered the lands, we decided to implement our educational system, called *educación propia* (our own authentic form of education). To this day, it has worked out. We center elements of our Misak culture but consider interculturality one of its cornerstones. In Cauca, we are six Indigenous groups; in Colombia, 115, so we can't reject those Indigenous groups or the other groups of Afro-descendants and peasants. Our education must have in mind others' views and perspectives. We use the internet to accelerate our teaching and learning process. We are talking about generating national and international gatherings to dialogue with other Indigenous peoples and discuss Indigenous resistance. Misak education must be a global education. We live in a globalized world, and we must embrace technology.

¹² Indigenous community that lives near the Misak in the highlands of southwest Colombia in the district of Cauca.

Some of our educational practices are embodied. For example, all the teachers and students wear our traditional clothing to strengthen our identity. We also teach and speak the Namrik Namuy Wam¹³ and care for the Land. Today we have special projects to recover and cultivate our traditional medicinal plants close to our lagoons, focusing on our technologies and ancestral knowledge to improve the health of our Indigenous Misak people. We are developing particular practical projects, such as creating our teaching materials in Namuy Wam and Spanish. We are teaching English at the high school level, although we need to strengthen it more. We must be not just bilingual but trilingual, learning to speak English, too.

“I Knew this New Constitution Would Open Up New Possibilities for Political Participation for Indigenous People”

My years at Universidad del Valle¹⁴ began in 1991 during the time of the National Constituent Assembly,¹⁵ when in Colombia we began working towards changing the Nuñez Constitution¹⁶ (drafted in 1886). I began hearing about it but did not know what it was. So when I joined the university, I joined the political and social movements to change the constitution and create a new one. Several Indigenous leaders were elected and participated in the Constituent Assembly, which marked the beginning of Indigenous

¹³ Another term for the native tongue of the Misak people, which belongs to Chibcha language family.

¹⁴ One of Colombia's major public universities, located in the city of Cali in the district of Valle del Cauca, about 60 miles from Silvia.

¹⁵ The National Constituent Assembly of Colombia was conformed in February 1991 by 70 delegates elected by popular vote. It was charged with drafting a new constitution that would acknowledge cultural, ethnic and political diversity of the country, provide human rights guarantees, and grant larger political participation to its citizens. The change of constitution was promoted by several social movements, particularly the student movement, that demanded change after the brutal assassination of several presidential candidates in 1990 with the slogan, "We can still save Colombia."

¹⁶ Constitution under the rule of Conservative president Rafael Nuñez, which brought larger control and power to a centralized government and provided greater power to the Catholic Church. This constitution was largely unpopular, prompting social and civil unrest throughout Colombia's history until its replacement with the 1991 Constitution.

participation in Colombia. In the case of Cauca, Lorenzo Muelas¹⁷ became a senator after participating in the Constituent Assembly. He is very well-regarded in our community and Colombia. Likewise, Francisco Rojas Birry¹⁸ and Alfonso Peña,¹⁹ as well.

Lorenzo Muelas has stated that he regrets his participation in the Constituent Assembly because we could not accomplish what Indigenous peoples needed. For example, we were unable to claim our rights as Indigenous peoples to underground resources. The nation transfers resources to each Indigenous group in Colombia, but as Taita Lorenzo Muelas states, these resources have divided us, and we are now fighting over money. Also, many Indigenous peoples have used their political participation to align themselves with the traditional political parties, creating further divisions between us. We wanted to create a nationwide Indigenous movement, but we could not do that, as each tribe began organizing its own group, and then we became divided. Taita Lorenzo Muelas makes a very tough analysis of our present-day conditions, but this is the reality we live in Colombia. Instead of being united, divisions between us have created rifts.

Given I was in the first semester of my studies in Cali, I helped out by mobilizing people and organizing meetings. While I did not know exactly what they were trying to accomplish, I had a sense that this constitution would open up new possibilities for political participation for Indigenous people. There was a large group of people in solidarity with the Indigenous cause. Thanks to this, we became visible and now have recognition in the constitution to practice our own health systems, justice, and education. This is despite the State's systemic efforts to assimilate and make us invisible. Unfortunately, the different Indigenous groups could not take advantage of the new laws and regulations. We keep fighting for recognition, despite the fact that many of these recognitions have not materialized in real change for us. Now the struggle continues.

¹⁷ A Misak leader who participated in the Constituent Assembly of Colombia in 1991 and was a member of the Senate of Colombia from 1994 to 1998.

¹⁸ A Colombian politician from the Embera Indigenous community.

¹⁹ Nasa representative and ex-combatant of the Quintin Lame Movement, an Indigenous guerrilla group active from 1984-1991.

I began my career as an educator in 2004 and have continued up to this day. Before that, in 1999 I was appointed as Secretary of the Misak Cabildo (Town Council). I interrupted my studies in order to provide that service to my community, and in 2000 received my degree in History and a Certificate in Project Formulation. So, prior to starting as an educator, I conducted oral history research and supported project development in the community.

“For Us, as Misak People, the Spinal Cord of Our Education—Our Identity—Is To Be Able to Dream with These Beings, To Dream with the Land, and To Be in the Land, Which is Why it is so Crucial for Us to Continue Fighting to Recover Our Land”

Taita Avelino Dagua was another very special teacher who is considered one of our master historians. He is no longer with us; he has gone to another life. I first met Taita Avelino in 1982, when he was the governor of Guambía. Later on in 1999, as I was concluding my undergraduate studies, he helped me visualize how a Misak education could take shape in Guambía. At that point we started getting close; with him, I continued learning to walk the Land. Between 2000 and 2005, we began working on an oral history project with Misak elders that resulted in the book *The Voice of the Elders* (2005). In order to write this book, we walked the Land to recover oral history, systematize the Land, study the names of places and compare them with colonial documents written by the chroniclers of the time, or more recently, those who have written about archeology and "ethnohistory." I say "ethnohistory" in quotes on purpose.

Something very spiritual inspired me to become a teacher. When I had the opportunity to work with Shur Avelino and other leaders, I was forced to rethink my role and contribution for the following decades. This is why I did not think twice when I was asked to teach youth. I agreed to do it because I wanted to help and be part of it. I wanted to re-learn with the new generations. So from there on, I began learning that education is the spinal cord of our resistance as people. From that moment on, I became a teacher and will continue to be one.

With Taita Avelino, I learned to connect with ancestral beings and to read nature. There were several of us on the team. Between 2003 and 2005, we walked the Land, wrote, and learned alongside him. Thanks to him, today we are recovering memories from our ancestors. He used to tell us that if we do not recover our Land and our worldviews and cosmovision, the future generations will disappear as Misak people. This is a legacy that all the Misak teachers are working towards implementing, including the view that our education must be intercultural, a kind of education in which we can consider our own needs and knowledge and those external to us. We live in a modern world, and we accept modern-day education.

A beautiful story about Taita Avelino is that he would talk to us of Kallim Pishimisak,²⁰ our ancestral Misak spirit guide, and I would ask him: “How can I communicate with Kallim Pishimisak?” And he would say, “Kallim Pishimisak has a way of walking and arriving through dreams. In order to communicate with him, you have to perform several rituals; you have to learn about our spirituality and not let yourself be influenced by outside cultures.”

Moreover, precisely at that time, I had just returned from studying abroad at Universidad Autónoma in Madrid.²¹ It was challenging to face Taita Avelino speaking in such terms, searching for our Misak sensibilities. And not just Taita Avelino, but many Mamas as well. For us, as Misak people, the spinal cord of our education - our identity - is to be able to dream with these beings, to dream with the Land, and to be in the Land, which is why it is so crucial for us to continue fighting to recover our Land.

After Taita Avelino came another wise man, Taita Henry Tunubalá. In Guambía, there have been many wise men and women whom we follow as they give us directives of our Misak culture to keep our traditions and continue resisting. Because many Indigenous groups, particularly those of us living in the region of present-day Colombia, live between the fire of armed

²⁰ The Misak worldview is centered around the equilibrium between the protective beings PISHIMISAK (woman) and KALLIM (man), who are spirits that inhabit the Land.

²¹ The Autonomous University of Madrid, commonly known as simply la Autónoma, is a Spanish public university located in Madrid, Spain.

groups, we must survive in that context. In order to survive as people, we have had to resist on many fronts beyond education, such as economically, environmentally, and infrastructurally. In this sense, our Taitas—our elders—have left a significant legacy for future generations to follow this example left 500 years ago. It is hard, it is true; it is hard, but we have to continue resisting as Indigenous people.

As Indigenous Peoples, We Must Recover These Historical Sites To Communicate with Our Deities and Spirits

When I returned from my time in Spain, I began traveling across several countries in Latin America. Of note, I visited Machu Picchu, a very spiritual site. I visited Lake Titicaca in Bolivia, and in Mexico, I visited the pyramids of Teotihuacán. This impacted my spiritual education and changed me internally completely. In Colombia, I also visited ancestral places like San Agustín, the caves in Tierradentro, and other ancestral spiritually charged and energetic centers. In Misak territory, we have many of these centers in sacred lagoons. We traveled with a team of traditional medicine doctors performing ceremonies, which impacted my attitude toward focusing more on Indigenous education and resistance.

I witnessed so much wealth in Colombia and Central and South America in our ancestral cultures. The problem I saw was that these centers are dominated and controlled by private interests or governments and not by Indigenous peoples, which is very sad; yet we are still resisting. That is what I call resilience. As Indigenous peoples, we must recover these historical sites to communicate with our deities and spirits. Because for us, this is sacred, while for others, it is just a business. Unlike something Evo Morales did as president of Bolivia. He turned in these sites to the Indigenous people, these historical sites, so they could perform their rituals and manage them. Here in Colombia, San Agustín is controlled by the government, for example. In the case of the Misak, we do not let governmental institutions control our sites or our Land. Moreover, this is what other Indigenous peoples should be able to do.

“We Must Have the Land Back in Our Hands, that Land that Was Stolen 530 Years Ago”

To this day, 40 years after, we continue our struggle. Taita Avelino Dagua used to say we would have to wait for 50 or 100 years for significant changes to happen. I think a lot about him now that he is not with us. We are beginning 2023, and we are still fighting. This fight is not only for the Misak but for all Indigenous peoples in Colombia, and it must continue. For this, education is fundamental; today we talk about the Misak University, for example, because we need an education that reflects our worldview and Misak thought from elementary school to high school to the higher education level.

We must have the Land back in our hands, that Land that was stolen 530 years ago. Following our agricultural cycles was the best because our education was not only with books; we also worked the Land, planted, and learned to grow products specific to our climate. At the school where I teach, we have multiple parcels where we grow corn and sugar cane. Furthermore, we have a plant to process the sugar cane to make panela. They are in the páramos; so to learn about this specific Land, we must do research close to the Land and apply it to natural sciences, social sciences, and archeology. Having the Land in our hands has allowed us to envision and continue implementing it as we had planned.

One of Our Strengths as Misak Is that We Create Interdisciplinary Teams

I began working in 2001 as part of the Misak Education Committee. During that time, we conducted a diagnosis and evaluation of the Misak Education Plan and published a book called *Namuiwan Alá Marik: Working Together on Our Own Education*. We were a team of fascinating people. In 2002 and 2003, we developed the book I mentioned before, *The Voice of the Elders*. I collaborated on many books as part of the research team and as an author/writer; many of them are related to education in Guambía. In 2010 we worked on the educational fabric for the high school program, and parallel to that, I was part of the team that developed Misak University. I am a co-

founder of Misak University. After founding Misak University, I became the program coordinator as well as instructor in the program of Indigenous Law.

During my tenure as program coordinator, I developed many projects, including curricula planning and support so that academic content was woven within the Misak education framework. In this work I was also able to create opportunities for exchange and collaboration with other Indigenous universities such as the Ixil University of Guatemala, the Amawtay Wasi of Ecuador, and other efforts at the national level. We organized an event within the

Andean Parliament to make the Indigenous universities more visible. Likewise, I held many meetings locally to increase awareness of the importance of our university at a local level amongst other Misak and mestizos living in the region as well.

Thanks to the support of our Indigenous authorities who saw the value of having a Misak University, I was able to secure some funding to sponsor travel and accommodation for faculty who came to teach at the university. It was very little money, more symbolic than anything, because it was difficult for me to ask instructors with doctoral degrees to come and teach for free. Fortunately, they continue to support us. Given I had an expertise in project formulation, I was able to secure partnerships and funding to continue on working. Several of us worked together on that project at Misak University, and I have been an educator there as well. It has been a long process to gain governmental recognition for this university. However, we hope the newly elected government²² will give us the support we need to gain national recognition and financial resources to organize events and create the core faculty team.

While all this happens, I continue to collaborate with the leadership of the Misak University. I have been part of discussion teams with the government in favor of Indigenous education. I was also part of a program funded by the World Bank and the Ministry of Education to develop educational materials for Guambía. This project lasted two years. I am always working alongside many people in interdisciplinary teams. One of our strengths

²² The government of Gustavo Petro and Francia Márquez, elected in June 2022.

as Misak is that we create interdisciplinary teams. It may not be much, but I have been putting in my little grain of sand.

The success of our own educational model is that we have worked in interdisciplinary teams, and our elders - the Shures and Shuras - have always been supportive of this. Misak leaders not only give us their political support but have been helpful in providing financial resources. We have a Guambiano Life Plan²³ in which education is part of our political thought. This plan belongs to all of us as Misak people, and our elders support it. That is our success.

This Double Consciousness Is What Many Indigenous Peoples Struggle with Worldwide

Challenges faced in the next 50 to 100 years involve the new generation of Misak youth, who will carry this work forward. We are here only temporarily, so the new generations must take charge and continue resisting. To turn our resilience into resistance, innovate in education, and globalize our educational model without losing our identity. The challenge for the future generations of Misak is to be able to go abroad, whether to Harvard or Cambridge, to study and continue being Misak.

In these modern times, globalized times, it is challenging to be Indigenous in the global village. In Colombia, they demand that we stay Indigenous, while the remaining Colombians are not required to be Indigenous. In Colombia, we have a double condition: to be Indigenous and to be Colombian. So this double consciousness is what many Indigenous peoples struggle with worldwide. At this point, you can understand how complex, challenging, and essential is the role of education because our challenges are global now, for example, environmental issues. So the challenges ahead are not only for the Misak people. These are global challenges that we need to face not only as Indigenous peoples but together, worldwide.

²³ Since recovering rights to their Land, the Misak have developed the Guambiano Life Plan as a tool for self-determined development to ensure their gains would be preserved for future generations.

In Colombia, we have 115 Indigenous groups. According to some, there are 85, who like us, remain in resistance, organized, keeping their language and identity. The question is: What happened with the other groups? Some of them went extinct; some are on the brink of extinction. All this is due to the armed conflict. There are tribes where only one family remains, or only the mother and father speak the language. If they die, the whole culture will die. So, in that sense, in Colombia, in addition to being Colombian, we have to be Indigenous.

To be Misak, you must wear traditional attire and speak the language. The newer generations do not want to speak our language anymore, and we are also fighting against that as educators and Colombians. Speaking our language is vital as it helps us strengthen our law, reach positions of leadership within the government, and be elected as mayors all this to continue making visible our Indigenous knowledge. We do this because we are Colombian too. We supported the elected government because it proposed alternatives to our structural issues caused by racism, violence, and narcotrafficking. So as Colombians, we have the opportunity to provide our knowledge to help resolve the issues we face as a nation, and why not contribute to solving some of these same issues worldwide?

It Is Crucial at this Time for All Colombians To Reach Real Peace

Our struggle to recover the Land has also occurred amidst the armed conflict that impacted Colombia. This armed conflict,²⁴ which has lasted more than 60 years, is a war that is not ours, but we have had to live it. In Cauca, guerrillas and paramilitaries have tried to involve and dominate Indigenous peoples, creating a very complex situation. If we go out to block the roads and claim our rights, we are accused of being with guerrillas, and then

²⁴ This armed conflict, which began in 1964, is a low intensity war between the government of Colombia, far-left guerrilla groups such as FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), far-right paramilitary groups, and other crime syndicates, fighting each other to increase influence over Colombia's territory. Important contributors to this conflict have been multinational corporations accused of sponsoring the assassination of human rights defenders and the drug cartels.

Multiple peace processes and agreements have been attempted and reached over the years. The latest one was signed in September 2016.

paramilitary groups are sent to kill our leaders. In this past year of 2022, for example, 42 Indigenous leaders were assassinated.

It is crucial at this time for all Colombians to reach real peace. This would benefit us all, not just the Misak. In the middle of this armed conflict, we have been resisting, implementing policies, setting limits with the guerilla groups, and letting them know we are not with them. We have asked them to let us develop our own independent process. Because we have different ways of viewing life, different ways of getting involved in politics, different ways of developing our economy. Sometimes they agree, but then they kill our leaders. So the horizon is very complex. We hope that in 2023, with the new government of Gustavo Petro,²⁵ these new policies established by the new government will materialize in real change.

From Our Misak Perspective, To Speak of Human Rights Is More Theory than Practice

It is unfortunate to speak of human rights in Colombia. Anyone who speaks of human rights and fights for the right to defend life and freedom, universal principles, is assassinated. It is tough to speak in practical terms of human rights. From our Misak perspective, to speak of human rights is more theory than practice. We have all these rights and laws, but the truth is that the fundamental right to life is not respected. We ended this past year of 2022 with a total of 189 social leaders having been assassinated.²⁶ All this is due to the armed conflict. Reaching real peace that provides resources for education, Land reforms, environmental programs, and health is crucial. This peace process must manifest itself and have material outcomes in economic terms. Fighting against poverty in Colombia is very hard, making it fundamental to speak of peace in concrete ways, like compensating all the families impacted by the armed conflict. It is an arduous process, but Colombia has

²⁵ A long-time Leftist politician and former militant, Gustavo Petro, was elected president of Colombia in June 2022 and inaugurated in August 2022. He is the first progressive candidate to ever have made it to the presidency of Colombia, since others in the past were assassinated during their campaigns.

²⁶ <https://indepaz.org.co/lideres-sociales-defensores-de-dd-hh-y-firmantes-de-acuerdo-asesinados-en-2022/>

to go through it. A genuine peace process and respect for human rights starts with that.

“I Need To Learn So Much More about the Struggles of Indigenous People in the North”

My visit to the Bay Area in November 2022 yielded many exciting experiences. I had the chance to visit several universities, learn about other struggles, and share our educational process. I had the chance to meet with my relatives from the Ohlone group and other representatives from Indigenous groups such as the Purépecha, the Navajo, and the Lakota²⁷. The visit to Alcatraz for the Un-Thanksgiving Day Ceremony was potent. To be invited to share a message of resistance was a learning experience. I need to learn so much more about the struggles of Indigenous people in the North. I plan to continue sharing with them because we have many things in common, such as our fight for Land and our struggles to have our Indigenous education.

The meeting with Clarence Jones²⁸ was also mighty because I felt the presence of Martin Luther King. Learning about the struggles of African Americans made me realize that the issues they face are also similar to the issues we face in Colombia. Soon, I can return and continue sharing my message of hope, saying we exist and fight as Indigenous people. For next year, we envision new visits and other forms of participation using technology to connect us virtually. I also want the Indigenous peoples who I had a chance to meet during my visit to come visit us in Colombia and learn how we resist as they do.

²⁷ Indigenous peoples of the Americas: Purépecha of Michoacan, Mexico; Navajo of the southwestern United States; Lakota of the Great Sioux Nation of North & South Dakota of the United States.

²⁸ Clarence Jones was the speechwriter and counsel of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As co-director of the Institute of Nonviolence and Social Justice at USF, he was honored with a commemorative event on November 19, 2022, during Gerardo's visit.

“Walking, I Have Been Able to Understand Other Cultures, and I Have Learned More from Walking than at the University”

A well-known legend speaks of the condor and the eagle. In this legend, the condor and the eagle must come together to unite the North and the South, so the Americas become one. During my visit to the United States, we engaged in ceremonies. We were able to communicate with spiritual beings who told us this was not enough, encouraging us to bring in Central America through the quetzal, a beautiful bird from Guatemala. Later on, the hummingbird also made its appearance, calling us to unite Indigenous peoples from other continents too.

So today, we must bring together the eagle, the condor, the quetzal, and the hummingbird to unify all Indigenous peoples of the world. This is what I am speaking about when I refer to interculturality. Nowadays, we have common issues, such as environmental problems. The Misak are offering our ancestral knowledge to resolve some of them, such as how to conserve natural resources and "plant" water in currently deserted lands. These are Indigenous knowledges and technologies that we are offering to the world. Hopefully, scientists and Indigenous leaders worldwide can use this ancestral knowledge to serve humanity.

Thank you for this interview, your friendship, and for allowing me to visit the University of San Francisco and other spaces where I continue to walk. Walking, I have been able to understand other cultures, and I have learned more from walking than at the university. So, this is my learning that I share with my colleagues and others at Misak University. I have so much to share with them because if you do not share what you know, there is no sense in learning. I also want to write some more as well.

Poem by Gerardo Tunubalá

(Written during his stay in the Navajo Nation, 2019)

Resilencia

Siento correr por mis venas
El vuelo de los cóndores
El vuelo de las Águilas
Presentes en cada territorio
En cada palabra
En cada piel
Su vuelo de los colibríes
Son las voces de los ancestros
Que nos llaman a seguir en Resistencia

Como sentir en nuestros huesos
Los colores del arcoiris
Navegando eternamente
En cada cosmovision

Resilience

I feel running through my veins
The flight of the condors
The flight of the eagles
Present in each territory
In each word
In each skin
Are the voices of the ancestors
Their flight of the hummingbirds
Calling us to continue to be in Resistance

How we feel in our bones
The colors of the rainbow
Sailing for eternity
In each cosmovision

Closing Thoughts by Patricia Rojas-Zambrano

I have served as an interpreter in the Human Rights Education: Pedagogy & Praxis class for Gerardo Tunubalá and Rosa Tombé since 2020. Walking alongside them has been my greatest pleasure and honor to work and learn. With every turn of the word, I have been deepening my understanding of the Misak educational model and their experiences as Indigenous peoples living in Colombia today.

Although Gerardo and I share the same nationality, we have experienced significant events in Colombia's history from different realities and perspectives. I was born in Bogotá, the capital city of Colombia, in a middle-class family with unknown ties to our European, Indigenous and African ancestors. Like many Bogotá dwellers, my family has rural origins that go back centuries and moved from town to town, reaching the capital to escape economic hardship and the violence of the 1940s and 1950s. Most of my early educational experiences followed European-American models in which Indigenous knowledge was either referred to as backward or not included at all.

During my last year of high school in 1990, four presidential candidates across the political spectrum were assassinated²⁹. The shock of these murders added to years of living under the fear of car bombs, assaults, or kidnappings; we remained in a state of constant terror brought on by violent actors on the Left and the Right, as well as narcotraffickers and other violent groups. And the worst was yet to come.

Like Gerardo, I was a young university student in 1991 when the Constituent Assembly was elected, and I felt inspired by the student movement capable of such accomplishment. Looking back, these events marked a social and political awakening for me, with the university acting as a site of resistance that fostered *conocimiento propio* (our own knowledge). I was fortunate to find university professors who encouraged socially engaged

²⁹ José Antequera, Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa, Carlos Pizarro, and Luis Carlos Galán.

scholarship and promoted critical analysis of my country's social conditions and structural inequalities. During that time, I joined a youth-led program called Opción Colombia and had my first encounter with the Misak people at an Indigenous peoples' summit in 1995. It was then I learned that Indigenous people had to fight to protect their territory from the persistent attack of multinationals, politicians, and armed forces. Through my interactions, I also learned how to say a few words in Namuy Wam.

Working as an interpreter for Gerardo has given new meaning to what it is to *sentipensar con el territorio* - to feel deeply connected to Land and the value of education in order to protect and defend her beyond the material gains she can provide. Through Gerardo and visiting Misak territory, seated by the hearth high up in the mountains, I renewed my understanding of what embodiment means: to do things rooted in who we are, where we come from, and where our ancestors' dreams were first nourished and uncovered.

Colombia's armed conflict has had overt consequences, such as the loss of life, the destruction of infrastructure, and the humanitarian crisis caused by internal displacement. While the social conditions I was born into sheltered me from some of these consequences, I was still not protected from the dramatic loss of social relationships, our sense of community, and a promising future together. This extended war has threatened the bond between people and Land in many different ways. Like many Colombians, I was forced to leave my country, seeking safety and a better future. According to Human Rights Watch, 8.5 million Colombians have left since 1985.³⁰

Although it pains me to admit it, Gerardo is right; in Colombia, human rights exist primarily on paper, and violations remain in impunity, unpunished and unaddressed. Paradoxically, despite having signed the 2016 Peace Accords meant to end the armed conflict and address the structural causes of such a prolonged war, violence against human rights defenders has

³⁰ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/colombia#:~:text=the%20conflict%20differently,-,Internal%20Displacement%2C%20Reparations%2C%20and%20Land%20Restitution,since%201985%2C%20government%20figures%20show>

increased. However, as Colombians, we are not condemned to a violent existence.

It is essential to address the structural causes of violence and inequality in my country, as it is imperative to heal and unite in resistance to the call of violence. Great fortitude and resilience are required to stop normalizing the violence that has permeated our nation and to weave ourselves back together to reconstruct our social fabric. Undoubtedly, we all can learn so much from the Misak, who have leaned into grateful reciprocity with their Land, their spirits and ancestors for 530 years, as we continue to nurture this deep desire to work towards peace and find ways to address our collective trauma as a nation.



Colibri: Mixed-media painting by Patricia Rojas Zambrano