

Uncovering the veil of immaterial cultural heritage towards and autonomous management of well-being as well as cultural and territorial preservation

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Abstract

The joint work for more than three decades with indigenous groups from the Orinoquia and Amazon regions of Colombia has led us to understand immaterial cultural heritage (ICH) both as a catalyst and a mean for building community well-being as well as contributing to cultural and territorial preservation, rather than as a result on itself. This ICH understanding has allowed us to envisage our role as an NGO as that of supporting and accompanying community-based processes that entail ICH as a way of improving people's well-being. In this paper, we focus on our experience with the Piaroa indigenous people- who inhabit the Mataven Forest in the Colombia Amazonia- to unpack our role as an NGO and ICH in three of the ways we enact it:

- 1) Supporting local ICH research: Topics include agroecological systems, traditional architecture, and handicrafts, all of which have direct and indirect relations with nutrition, gender, means of production, and health. Following an applied research approach, some of the ICH information gathered is refreshed or adapted by the Piaroa people so that it is useful and relevant according to the current context;
- 2) Building bridges: These are aimed to encourage a respectful interrelation and dialogue between the Piaroa and non-indigenous actors, institutions, and policy-makers related to ICH. These bridges have led to important processes of land rights recognition, formalization of Piaroa's own education systems, and implementation of health models that recognize indigenous' knowledge.
- 3) Accompanying the Piaroa's own education processes: Both in formal and informal settings, the Piaroa's education encourages the transmission of ICH elements, including the knowledge and skills needed to reproduce the Piaroa's ways of living, thinking, and relating with the ecosystems of the Mataven forests.

These are three of the elements that have allowed us to work with indigenous communities to uncover the veil of immaterial cultural heritage and together understand the practices, knowledge, and skill's systems that have served traditional groups for their survival, identifying those elements that might be important and valuable for today's context as well. From Etnollano Foundation, we have aimed for slow and long-term processes that prioritize listening, intending to understand the world from an indigenous perspective. Although we have achieved several outcomes, there are still many lessons to learn. We remain open to keep learning and sharing,

wanting to be part of a larger global movement committed to learning from those groups that have transmitted through generations ways of living that embrace responsible management of ecosystems, being conscious of their own well-being as well as of the global population's as a whole.

Keyword(s): Indigenous people, immaterial cultural heritage, well-being, cultural and territorial preservation, education

The joint work for more than three decades with indigenous groups from the Borinquen and Amazon regions of Colombia, has led us to understand immaterial cultural heritage (ICH) both as a catalyst and a mean for building community well-being as well as contributing to cultural and territorial preservation, rather than as a result on itself. This ICH understanding has allowed us to envisage our role as an NGO as that of supporting and accompanying community-based processes that entail ICH as a way of improving people's wellbeing. This role has been evident during the pandemic of COVID-19. In this paper we focus on our experience with the Piero indigenous people- who inhabit the Mateen Forest in the Colombian Amazonia- to unpack our role as an NGO and ICH in three of the ways we enact it: 1) Supporting local ICH research 2) Building bridges and 3) Accompanying the Piaroa's own education processes. These three ideas will be explored in the following paragraphs, presenting examples and evidence of the recent lived situations in the midst of the global pandemic. Besides these points, the paper presents some general reflections that have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the role that we can play as an NGO in future situations like this one, as well as the role during the post-pandemic context that will pose some challenges and opportunities as well.

1) Supporting local ICH research

The support of local immaterial cultural heritage research has become especially evident during the last year, with the beginning of the project "Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth" (*Sembrando Nuestros Saberes*), funded by the British Council and operated by Etnollano Foundation, which has demanded several methodological changes and adaptations for the COVID-19 pandemic context. This project includes three components: handicrafts, tourism and territorial management. Within territorial management, the need of supporting local research became imminent according to the context. In ally communities- La Urbana and Pueblo Nuevo-research about traditional food systems was of special interest for its people, due aiming to respond to a lack of local food due to a flood that affected the community and crops in the year(2018). Accordingly, two young indigenous leaders (a man and a women), started research around traditional seeds and recipes, as well as contemporary agro ecological techniques that can be combined with Piaroa's practices. Besides serving for their local nutrition and consumption, the results of this research process will serve the touristic process these communities are developing, since the local crops, traditional recipes and Piaroa view of food in relation to health, will be applied to the touristic products and services. Members of another Piaroa community- San Luis de Zama, decided to start researching about raw materials that can be used for the handicrafts they commercialize, due to a current lack and scarcity of such materials. Therefore, in both cases, the support to local research

related with ICH, is related with the possibility for these communities to improve their wellbeing. Following an applied research approach, some of the ICH information gathered is refreshed or adapted by the Piara people so that it is useful and relevant according to the current context.

However, these processes were challenged when the COVID-19 pandemic started since the British Council and Etnollano's teams could not continue travelling, and could not communicate with the local researchers and other members of the communities, since there is no internet or phone coverage in these areas. Therefore, we had to quickly develop new ways of communicating and identifying tasks that researchers could keep developing. These new methodologies and ways of working have allowed us to continue supporting local researchers from long distance due to the pandemic situation. Now that we have been able to do fieldwork again, we have restarted the work with the local researchers, aiming to have a more applied approach in this new phase of the project.

2) Building bridges

Another important role of Etnollano Foundation in relation to immaterial culture heritage, has been that of building bridges aimed to encourage a respectful interrelation and dialogue between the Piara and non-indigenous actors, institutions and policy-makers related with ICH. Since the beginning of its foundation, Etnollano has operated with a strong intercultural focus, aiming to encourage an exchange of knowledge, experiences, beliefs and experiences between different cultures with the aim of improving people's wellbeing. Such bridges have led to important processes of land rights recognition, formalization of Piara's own education systems and implementation of health models that recognize indigenous' knowledge. With a focus on developing intercultural processes, the metaphor of building bridges intends to identify 'the best of both worlds' as well as a 'two-way process' in which information and knowledge can flow in both directions. In the midst of the COVID-19 situation, one of the way in which bridges were established, was the relation between indigenous communities and the Secretariats of Health in order to find ways of preventing and taking care of the COVID. A second example of this was the application process and successful award of a prize focused on tourism activation, to which we applied from Etnollano as partners of the Piara communities of La Urbana and Pueblo Nuevo.

The role of Etnollano as and NGO throughout this process, was the one of supporting the application preparation, which included an arduous work in terms of writing, as well as suggesting the partnership with a private touristic company, aiming to build a bridge between the communities' interests and the tourism sector and market. The call for this prize was focused on Nature and Cultural Tourism bestowed by 'Colombia Riqueza Natural'- A USAID program focused on biodiversity conservation in Colombia- and *Colombia Productiva*, supported by the Colombian Ministry of Commerce and Industry and funded by USAID. During July 2020, some of the Piara leaders that have been interested in tourism contacted Etnollano Foundation, asking for support in the application process. After some days of joint work, the idea of a partnership between us, as well as a tourism private company, emerged as an innovative model.

Besides services and capability development, this process will include a strong component of immaterial cultural heritage, as the base needed for a Natural and Cultural Tourism. On one hand, the development of a Natural and Cultural Tourism Initiative, encourages the application of a traditional system of resource management that the Piaroa people have implemented throughout generations. This includes following in a strict way the ecological calendar to define touristic activities, respecting the ecosystem's cycles. Also, the development of an ecological calendar focused on local foods will be important to orient the food availability for tourists' consumption. Besides the strict application of the Piaroa natural resource management, Etnollano will be supporting the constant communication with external actors, including an environmental professional, a chef to explore innovative recipes that combine indigenous with non-indigenous ingredients and preparations, the School of Business Administration (EAN) and Riqueza Natural-that will be supporting the environmental aspect. The development of a business plan, for example, the implementation of the COVID-19 biosecurity protocols, brings the encounter between different logics and worlds. In this case, building bridges will be aimed to identify 'the best from both worlds' in order to enrich the touristic product that will be offered by the Piaroa people in the future.

On the other hand, the development of a Natural and Cultural Tourism Initiative will include a strong process of 'cultural interpretation', building bridges between the Piaroa people and the tourists. It implies an important process of identifying the elements of immaterial cultural heritage that the Piaroa people would be willing to share (As well as those elements that they would prefer to keep for themselves because of cultural protection). Once those elements have been identified, the Etnollano Foundation will be supporting the process of exploring ways in which such cultural aspects can be shared with tourists in a way that it is understandable and enjoyable from a non-indigenous perspective. This may include simple tools such as the signals used throughout the hotel and trails, sharing written and drawn information with tourists. It can also include digital tools such as recordings and videos. Besides the means and mechanisms, the information itself will be interpreted so that a non-indigenous person understands it. This might include translation to other languages, exemplification, and use of metaphors, amongst others. The Etnollano's team will be sharing methodologies so that such interpretation can be done by the same community, aiming to support community empowerment, while encouraging 'building bridges' between different worldviews, logics and cultural groups.

3) Accompanying the Piaroa's own education processes

The Etnollano Foundation has played an active role in accompanying the Piaroa's own, formal and informal education processes in different manners and although it has been able to continue supporting the informal processes during the pandemic, there are still some questions on how it can continue supporting the formal education during a situation as the current one. First, Etnollano has supported Piaroa's informal education through several of its projects and processes, including the encouragement of knowledge transmission related to material culture and handicraft production, as well as supporting the application of agro-ecological research results to the school.

Second, Etnollano has supported Piaroa's formal education in accompanying the development of their own education system and language strengthening processes. Both in formal and informal settings, the Piaroa's education encourages the transmission of ICH elements, including the knowledge and skills needed to reproduce the Piaroa's ways of living, thinking, relating and managing the Matavén rainforest. However, there is still the unanswered question on how we can continue supporting it during a context such as the one posed by COVID-19. The current process of satellite Internet installation- supported by the British Council-, has brought new hints on the possibilities that this connection might bring for education processes. This will allow us to continue supporting local researchers around their ICH topics and organize intercultural exchanges with other groups around ICH. Although the new connectivity might bring new opportunities for education, we are also aware of the risks and possible negative impacts that it might bring. Therefore, one of the roles of Etnollano will be to orient this process so that the community can make their own decisions about how to manage this and prevent that cultural processes are affected.

Another role that Etnollano has played in terms of education has been sharing information about the Piaroa people and their culture with non-indigenous people interested in supporting indigenous communities during the pandemic. During the month of June, 32 artists joined and started to develop the initiative 'Piel Indígena' with the aim of organizing an art auction and donating 70% of their sales to indigenous communities in risk of COVID-19. During the process of organizing the kit distribution proposal, we organized some informative calls/webinars with the artists in order to share information about the Piaroa culture. This served as an 'external' education process, in which people in the capital city of Bogotá were learning about the Piaroa people.

Also, when discussing which elements to include in the kits- it was important to understand the needs and interest of the communities, rather than sending a generic kit. The biosecurity kits included items such as masks, antiseptic alcohol, thermometer, surgical gloves, as well as an informative toolkit with information about COVID-19 prevention- with a cultural adaptation in terms of language and content. The 'voluntary isolation' kits, included items that aim to support communities avoid going to the urban areas, providing fishing hooks, a 'machete', soap and salt, amongst other elements. Rather than sending 'canned food' for example, these elements were thought to support the local systems of food production. Although the biosecurity kits that were delivered to the health community agents, included a COVID-19 toolkit, from Etnollano we identified several challenges in terms of education. Some of these are related with belief systems of the Piaroa people around health and specific ideas around COVID, for example when some people think it does not exist in indigenous communities, but that it is a sickness that affects only non-indigenous people. Therefore, when starting to do fieldwork again, it has been important not to impose biosecurity protocols, but rather look for ways to adapt the methodologies, starting by doing activities outdoors, rather than inside a room or a community space.

COVID- 19 Pandemic and Etnollano's reflections

This pandemic has brought new reflections within our team and the role we can play, specifically on how to support ICH processes focused on supporting the wellbeing of people and communities. It has also evidenced several aspects of the Piaroa people that we can learn from. First, we have envisioned how the indigenous groups strengthen their own governance systems and territorial control, deciding who comes in and out, how to manage the protocols- rather than those imposed by the government. When COVID-19 arrived to Colombia, some indigenous groups decided to close their territory and not accept anyone external to come in (Including people from the Secretary of Health). Second the importance of 'the collective'. The Piaroa people describe how once one member of their family gets affected by COVID-19, rather than isolating that person, they take care of him/or her, evidencing a strong sense of 'the collective' in their culture. Third, how they quickly activate the traditional medicine practices as well as their own food systems, avoiding the need to visit urban centers for food access. This might be related to the historical experiences of facing sicknesses that come from other cultures. Fourth, it was impressive to see how the Piaroa people quickly moved into their farms, specially their cropping areas. In the future, it would be important for Etnollano Foundation to understand how to quickly support traditional medicine.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are three elements that have allowed us to work with indigenous communities to uncover the veil of immaterial cultural heritage:

Supporting local ICH research; Building bridges and accompanying the Piaroa's own education processes. These have helped us to understand the practices, knowledge and skill's systems that have served traditional groups for their survival, identifying those elements that might be important and valuable for today's context as well.

From Etnollano Foundation, we have aimed for slow and long-term processes that prioritize listening, intending to understand the world from an indigenous perspective. Although we have achieved several outcomes, there are still many lessons to learn. We remain open to keep learning and sharing, wanting to be part of a larger global movement committed with learning from those groups that have transmitted through generations ways of living that embrace a responsible management of ecosystems, being conscious of their own well-being as well as of the global population's as a whole.

We would like to recognize and thank the Piaroa people, their work, organization and culture, as well as what they have shared with us. Their experiences, strength and strong organization keep inspiring our work every day.