
Karrustulinda: a reflexive approach to the carnival of forgiveness

James León Parra-Monsalve, *Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios, Colombia*
Jonnathan Blake Pinto Caviedes, *Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios, Colombia*

ABSTRACT

As usual, every year, during the days before Ash Wednesday, the *Karrustulinda* is celebrated. This carnival integrates the indigenous people of Putumayo (Colombia) around forgiveness and gratitude to the *Pachamama* for her fertility. The Inga and Kamëntsá peoples sing in their languages, accompanied by percussion and wind instruments, while visiting the Mocoa *cabildos* and other institutions, where the festivity is concentrated. This photo-essay focuses on this secular tradition, in its 2020 version, from a walk-through moments and scenarios in which the also called Carnival of Forgiveness takes place.

KEYWORDS

Inga, Kamëntsá, carnival of forgiveness, cultural heritage, Putumayo, participant objectivation, visual culture, Colombia

BIO

James León Parra-Monsalve, Social Communicator and Journalist, M.Sc. in History, and Ph.D. in Development Planning. He has worked in print media, where he reaffirmed his passion for photography and, since 2004, has been working with organizations and communities in the Colombian Amazon region. During his master's research he traveled the Putumayo River, where he documented the history of the jaguar skin trade in the 20th century. Later, in his doctoral thesis, he analyzed the meanings of digital communication in Amazonian indigenous organizations in Peru, Bolivia and Brazil. He currently works as a researcher and professor in Graphic Communication at UNIMINUTO.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1592-0101>

Jonnathan Blake Pinto Caviedes, Bachelor of Fine Arts from Universidad Nacional de Colombia, with emphasis on History and Theory of Art and New Media. He holds a M.A. in Media from Universidad de Chile. His artistic creation and research are focused on the expression of the symbolic and the dreamlike, also with great interest in medieval alchemy and psychoanalysis; his work revolves around video art, installation and sound experimentation. He has made several exhibitions and projections in Colombia, Mexico, Chile, Argentina and France. He is currently the Coordinator of the Graphic Communication Technology program at UNIMINUTO.

<https://vimeo.com/jonnathanblake>

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jparramons1@uniminuto.edu
jonnathan.pinto@uniminuto.edu

Introduction

Posing is to respect oneself and demand respect.
Pierre Bourdieu

The *Karrustulinda* (Inga), *Bëtsknaté* (Kamëntsá) or Carnival of Forgiveness (English) is the most complete representation of the cultural syncretism achieved by the indigenous groups of the Putumayo region in Colombia. It is a festival celebrated especially by the Inga and Kamëntsá peoples during the Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. An occasion in which the own and the foreign, to use the already well-known approach of Bonfil Batalla (1997), are amalgamated in a territory and a history. During these two days, whose preparation begins in the previous months, families and *cabildos* (as the administrative structures of Colombia's indigenous territorial entities are known) visit and meet to recall their common past and make forgiveness the key motif of the carnival.

A festivity that indicates a change of era from contact, which summarizes the reading of an indigenous coexistence with the foreigner from the native point of view, which is at the same time the result and product of that encounter (Quiñones, 2019). It is necessary to emphasize here that the presence of one's own culture implies an autonomous response capacity, a space where initiative and creativity are made concrete, including the struggle in the symbolic terrain, to which people frequently resort when faced with disproportionate pressure (Bonfil, 1997). In this way, cultural practices reveal the power of response of those peoples who have known how to transform their social dynamics in the face of processes of colonization and evangelization. The contact does not represent the end, even though it demands a cultural reformulation that protects what is own and amalgamates with what is not, in order to exist and persist.

A history in which the academy traditionally elaborates discourses that are postulated from the scientific authority in which knowledge about the other is constructed. This also involves the collection of evidence with different techniques such as observation, participant observation, logs, interviews, focus groups, among others, which result in textual, sound, visual, audiovisual, digital records, validated as such by professionals in the scientific field. This perspective is already problematic, mainly from the critical and participatory approaches of social research, although it is not very widespread among state, business and industrial practices of knowledge production, which generally follow the positivist horizon of science.

In view of such a panorama, it is advisable to include interdisciplinary methods in the ethnographic exercise that aim to counteract the hegemonic vision about peoples and cultures. This is why it welcomes the call to transcend the work of documentary photography in order to seek narratives that make knowledge about subjects and peoples viable, beyond a product for observation; narratives that actively involve the subject, photographer and spectator, as the protagonists of the photographic act (Lopez, 2013). To think photography, outside the context of the technique itself, as a form of dialogical engagement (Dietrich, 2019) among those involved in the production of images for research purposes.

Indeed, an approach was followed in which visual supports are not only focused on describing, interpreting or illustrating a social reality, but on creating and imagining new exegeses of social experience through visual methods (Leon-Quijano, 2017). An approach that is nourished by the participating objectivation (Bourdieu, 2005) as a possibility of reflection on one's own academic practice in the social context. A practice that, in the case of photography benefits, as a technique and social case, from its consideration as an authentic reproducer of reality. As Bourdieu (2003) states, photography owes both to the social image of

the technical object that produces it and to its social case, the fact that it is commonly considered the most perfectly faithful reproduction of reality (Bourdieu, 2003).

This common perception about photography and the real is manifested in the act of posing or not for the camera, which can only be understood in relation to the symbolic system in which it is inscribed, that which defines for the people of countryside the behaviors, norms and convenient forms in the relationship with others (Bourdieu, 2003). Therefore, for those who capture photographs there is also a trajectory of experiences and institutional relations that are incorporated into the way of thinking about research with images.

In the carnival the researchers' cameras are confused with the cameras of the participants who also

record it, although their purposes are different. This type of festive gathering continues to be key to recording and sharing photographs. But, nowadays, they are intensified by abundance of devices that capture digital files of musicians, dancers, marchers, walkers, and so on. Considering this context, walking was also chosen as an ethnographic method for research. A method in which the eye and other senses act while the body is mobilized; where the visual knowledge cannot be separated from the work of the other senses (Marano, 2018). In this way, multiple visual registers were achieved in which it is evident to go with the carnival, to follow the steps that, at the same time, constitute a narrative about the meeting of cultures in the "Big Day", as the festivity is also known.

The photographic practice, as a ritual of solemnization and consecration of the group and the world, perfectly fulfills the deep intentions of the popular aesthetic of the celebration, of the communication with others, and of the communion with the world (Bourdieu, 2003). More specifically, in the case of this photo essay, it is also a resource for research and representation (Campos, 2011) that leads to a visual narrative about the *Karrustulinda*. Certainly, visual technologies are effective collaborators in the analysis of visible particularities, being something already common in anthropology and sociology, but that makes its way into psychology, cultural studies and communication sciences (Campos, 2011).

Thus, the research process integrated digital curatorial elements of the images collected during the fieldwork in February 2020. To this end, 100 pictures were shared, of which 20 of the best evaluated by the focus group are presented here. Then the sequence was organized, considering the movement of the carnival during the photographic accompaniment: home, *cabildo*, street. The pictures are followed by explanatory notes and diverse reflections on the photographic practice and the Carnival of Forgiveness context.

Finally, if, as highlighted in the epigraph, posing is to respect oneself and demand respect, it is up to ethnography to incorporate reflexive and collaborative paths on its research and representation resources. In the present case, it involves a visual research for the publication of significant photographs of the *Karrustulinda* 2020 in Mocoa, Putumayo. The images validated by the focus group were thus the base for a reflection on this respect and demand for respect from those who pose. In this way, the gaze of the positivist scientist is also questioned.

Home



PHOTO 1: At home each family prepares a great meal for the festival participants. This functions as the starting point of the carnival, is prepared by the women of the community and, like the practice of the celebration itself, is an immaterial custom of society that is only found in memory. The fact of preparing a great meal is a fundamental value, it is a kind of "putting oneself in the mode of" or at the disposition of others with the intention that through the taste for it - which is impossible to describe with words because it is a knowledge transmitted from generation to generation - it functions as a point of encounter and dialogue.



PHOTO 2: Part of the collective memory is manifested by preparation of specific meals in the communities involved. Here an example with the groundwork of a fermented banana (*Musa paradisiaca*) drink, called "anduche", typical of the region. In addition to the banana, which came to these lands via colonization, drinks are also prepared from *chontaduro* (*Bactris gasipaes*), *yuca* (*Manihot aipi*) and corn (*Zea mays*), typical regional fruits. The use of these vegetable varieties thus reinforces the human appreciation for their millenary domestication and the relationship of the carnival with the fertility of the *Pachamama*.



PHOTO 3: Once the groundworks have been made, the families visit each other and the *cabildos*, being received with music, dances, fermented drinks and lots of food. It is Monday and the *Karrustulinda* has just begun.



PHOTO 4: The carnival involves community members of all ages. The local schools prepare activities to be presented in each of the visits they make to the houses and *cabildos* in the area. It is an occasion par excellence for the knowledge of the indigenous cultural practices of the Inga and Kamëntsa peoples by other ethnic groups that inhabit the surrounding territories.



PHOTO 5: The communities are very interested in transmitting traditions to new generations through clothing and music, making them active participants in the carnival.

Cabildo



PHOTO 6: The *Taita* Miguel is one of the last traditional musicians of the area. The fact of transmitting a sonorous knowledge, as it can be the own language, the food, the games, the songs or the music, also makes part of the experience of the carnival, full of ephemeral and intangible manifestations that remain and last in the territory and the communities.

He is also an indigenous healer and traditional authority of the Inga Cabildo of Condagua, having been governor of his community for several years. For this reason, he represents a recognizable link between the world of the family and the world of the management of public affairs related to the *resguardo*, as the territorial space in which community life takes shape is known.



PHOTO 7: It's time to walk to the *cabildo* hall. The women of the Inga village dress up in their traditional headdresses and are gradually joined by family and friends. It is Monday afternoon, and the festival is taking on its true community dimension.



PHOTO 8: After the reception of the visitors in the houses, visits are made to the *cabildos* of the region where they also share dances, music, food and drink.

The Inga women play an essential role in the groundwork and celebration of *Karrustulinda*. In their different roles, as grandmothers, aunts, mothers, sisters, teachers or traditional authorities (governors, sheriffs, mayors, healers), they constitute a necessary link in the transmission of the language and culture of their people. Thanks to them, in good part, this indigenous culture survives despite the accentuated historical colonization of their ancestral lands, especially in Caquetá, Putumayo and Nariño, in the southwest of the current Colombian territory.



PHOTO 9: During the carnival the *cabildo* (political-administrative figure inherited from colonial times) hall becomes a true space of community meeting. There they share the food and drinks that every year accompany the festivities, both with locals and strangers. Fraternity is exalted during these days. People dance, sing and make the dry seeds of their necklaces sound, which imitate the sound of water gushing into the mountains. The party begins in the morning and lasts until late at night, when euphoria still reigns, and the effects of fermented drinks appear in the dancing bodies.

Street



PHOTO 10: It's carnival Tuesday. After the visit of the most remote *cabildos*, the communities make a complete tour of the city of Mocoa, capital of the department of Putumayo. The collective nature of this celebration is becoming more and more evident.



PHOTO 11: After the emergency caused by the flooding of the Sangoyaco stream in 2017 (which divided its flow into three parts and caused, according to a report by the Colombian Red Cross, the death of at least 1,400 people), the ties between the Inga and Kamentsá communities have been strengthened even further, mainly in cultural spaces and activities such as carnival. The carnival is a vital manifestation of a profane, traditional and popular celebration that exteriorizes contents and intentions to reinforce ancestral symbols, healing experiences and to strengthen ties between individuals of the community, being this celebration also a learning experience in a context of memory and freedom. So, the red-mask *Matachin*, an aged man, leads the indigenous people in the streets, recalling their common cultural past and the elder's significance for the continuity of this cultural manifestation.



PHOTO 12: Based on a participatory exercise of photographic appreciation by traditional indigenous authorities, members of their communities and other people close to this cultural manifestation, this picture was chosen as one of the most representative of the carnival spirit. The joy of the elders is the happiness of the indigenous collective that parades through the streets wearing their typical costumes and the colorful feather crowns of macaws, toucans and other birds of the Andean Amazon region. The feather crowns are a visual symbol of the shamans, who have knowledge of traditional medicine. Otherwise, it is a unique moment for the transmission of culture between generations. It is also the moment when locals and strangers converge in the public spaces of the city, next to cars, motorcycles, bicycles and passers-by who record the marching crowd through their cell phone cameras.



PHOTO 13: *Karrustulinda, Bëtsknaté*, Big Day or Carnival of Forgiveness, different denominations in the indigenous languages and in English, for a festivity that has been incorporated into the cultural heritage of Colombians. The local and regional institutions, as well as the non-indigenous inhabitants, recognize it as a reference of the indigenous traditions. In truth, it is difficult to separate there what is proper and what is not, because these carnivals, which also precede Christian Lent, contain an abundance of cosmovision elements from the people who keep this cultural exhibition alive.



PHOTO 14: Women in indigenous communities are the ones who are most committed to keeping the various traditions active, which comes from an obvious connection of being a woman who gives life, protects it, directs it and teaches it. Their fertility reminds the fertility of *Pachamama*, which is also a reason to be grateful for this season of carnival.



PHOTO 15: An important moment for the community is the visit to the church and the participation in the Eucharist, when they also perform songs accompanied by the instruments used during the carnival. Here it is evident that the church is also part of the places visited during the walk through the city. Thanks to these practices, the social ties historically established and that today are part of the syncretism of the indigenous celebration are understood.



PHOTO 16: After attending mass, the communities take over the urban public space. In Mocoa's main square they share and socialize among themselves, demonstrating the fact that the carnival invades the town and travels through almost everything. In their journey through the city, the marchers renew their intercultural relations. The Catholic Church continues to be an important actor in a region historically ruled by religious orders (Capuchins, Marists, Franciscans), in the face of the secular inability of the Colombian State to bring education and welfare to the until 1991 so-called "National Territories". Territories of that other Colombia, always forgotten by the Bogota's centralism.



PHOTO 17: The march advances on Tuesday along the streets of Mocoa, various settlements, hamlets and nearby paths, where grateful visits with songs, music and dances are made. Social ties continue to be renewed. Visits are made to other institutions that have provided valuable services to the communities, such as Corpoamazonia, an entity in charge of environmental management and sustainable development in the departments of Amazonas, Caquetá and Putumayo.



PHOTO 18: Diversity of perceptions about the indigenous festival can be manifested through the multiple semantic layers that the photographic image gives. The approach made from photography allows to make tangible what is intangible, deep and inherent to a specific community, and to give a fragment of it for the reading through a cultural look. The fact of mobilizing together with the Inga and Kamëntsa peoples, particularly in the city streets and in the institutions, also shows the community's willingness to communicate aspects of their cultural practices. Even if one does not become an intrinsic part of them, by reflecting and questioning about the position of the researchers in the celebration, moving away from a positivist perspective, from the pretension of establishing general and immutable truths, one walks towards a respectful encounter with the others.



PHOTO 19: The climax of *Bëtsknaté* for the Kamëntsa people comes when a rooster is sacrificed. The animal is hung from a wooden structure decorated with branches and flowers which is called "castle". Several participants compete until one of them manages to dismember the bird's head. Although this is a polysemic ritual, it is clear the symbolism associated with the colonizers, who introduced the animal species several centuries ago. It is therefore a practice of symbolic triumph over the culture of others, which momentarily transforms the history of the victors in this ritual context.

It must be said that the pictures of the dismembered animal were narrowly valued by the focal group as an object that visually denoted the carnival. In this way, the visual aspect of the sacrifice itself becomes secondary, being a rite and a moment that cannot be fully understood through the photographs.

Home (*Maloca*)



FIGURE 20: One cycle closes, and another begins. It is Ash Wednesday and the *Karrustulinda*, in its 2020 version, is over. The Inga and Kamëntsa peoples return to their daily tasks. In the malocas (large multipurpose community structures, made with regional materials) the renewal of fire gives an account of the new time. A time of reflection begins, a return to the issues that are indispensable for community life, which will be guided, as is tradition, by the shamanic visions of *yagé* or *ayahuasca*, the spiritual guide of these indigenous peoples.

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