Making a stand for memory and place

The role of social leaders in the defense of the territory in the Putumayo (Colombia) and the implications of the violence against them

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Mural in Mocoa, Putumayo. Photograph taken by Monica Gabell, 2021.

"Life is not the one we live. It is the one that we remember and how we remember it to tell it."

Gabriel García Márquez

Abstract:

Five years into the present peacebuilding cycle in Colombia, violence is increasing again. In the Putumayo department, social-ecological conflicts between the state, armed groups and local communities persist. Social leaders, often representing local communities, are targets of violent actions and represent an extremely vulnerable group. In the Putumayo, at least 67 social leaders defending human and indigenous rights, their community's territory and the environment have been murdered since 2016. Via an ethnographic study I inquire what the defense of the territory is, who these social leaders are, their role in the defense of the territory, and the implications of these social leaders being silenced. I find that social leaders play key roles in both the discourse and practice of defending the territory. The silencing of social leaders is interpreted as the production of oblivion and detachment. This erasure of local communities from time and space places them back into a position of invisibility and historical irrelevance, jeopardizing the goal of a stable and durable peace.

Keywords: Social leaders, territory, memory, human rights, environment, peacebuilding

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Contents

1 Introduction

In 2016, after a 50-year armed conflict, the Colombian government and the biggest insurgent guerrilla, FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), signed a peace agreement. This marked the beginning of the most recent peace-building cycle in Colombia. Implementation of the peace agreement has been slow and full of obstacles. A lack of political will from the national government elected in 2018, the stalling of rural reform plans, the consolidation of new armed groups, and the increase in industrial production of coca paste are a few examples (Open Democracy, 2021). Furthermore, while the peace agreement promotes new visions towards drug policy, the national government insists in old mechanisms such as forced eradication of illicit crops, both manually and via the aspersion of Monsanto-produced glyphosate. These mechanisms have a track record of deepening social conflict and ecological injustice (Open Democracy, 2021).

In the Putumayo department, violence is returning. Socio-ecological conflicts are becoming more acute. These conflicts can be understood as the consequence of ecological mal-distribution, economic inequality and political exclusion (Martinez-Alier & Naron, 2004; Temper, Walter, Rodriguez, Kothari, & Turhan, 2018). The Putumayo has been the scene of a conflict between armed groups – insurgent and counter-insurgent – interested in controlling strategic portions of land for narcotrafficking and military advantage. These territories are simultaneously claimed by historically marginalized communities (CNMH, 2015; Ramírez, 2001). The latter's struggles remain to this day. Moreover, local communities, extractive industries and state institutions are involved in processes of territorial reconfiguration where conditions of marginalization, exclusion, inequality, and injustice persist (CCJ, 2020). Different actors have different perspectives about the territory and its uses. While local communities who live from and are culturally attached to the places that they inhabit organize collectively in defense of the territory, external actors approach the territory from an instrumentalist perspective rendering the territory as empty, exploitable and an object of imposed forms of development (CNMH, 2015; Escobar, 2008; Sañudo et al., 2016).

Social and ecological impacts can be evidenced in the Putumayo. Deforestation has accelerated notoriously and forest areas previously controlled by FARC have been exposed to the interests of cattle ranching, coca planting and the government's neoliberal rural development agenda (Krause, 2020; Murillo-Sandoval, Van Dexter, Van Den Hoek, Wrathall, & Kennedy, 2020). Furthermore, the Putumayo is considered a part of the Colombian 'arc of deforestation' (Van Dexter & Visseren-Hamakers, 2020).

In parallel, local communities are threatened by new patterns of conflict and the associated risks in terms of the persistence of marginalization and dispossession. Social leaders often representing these communities are a particularly vulnerable group (CCJ, 2021). They play key roles in their communities' long-standing struggles for political recognition and social justice. In the Putumayo, social leaders have played a crucial role in collective action at least since the labor and coca growers' mobilizations that took place throughout the last third of the XX Century (Ramírez, 2001). They often are the voices and faces of collective struggles, increasing their visibility and exposure to risks (HRW, 2021). Social leaders defend human rights and the environment. They fight for the recognition and protection of their communities' collective rights and ways of life. They oppose the presence of armed groups and report their abuses. They also lead processes associated to the peace agreement such as the rural reform and crop substitution programs (IACHR, 2019). Many social leaders, when defining what they do, mention that they are defending the territory (Comisión de la Verdad, 2019).

Being a social leader is life-threatening at present and yet, social leaders count with little protection from the state. Since the peace agreement was signed, aggressions against social leaders steeply rose (Somos Defensores, 2019). Hundreds have been silenced since 2016 (Amnesty International, 2020; Comisión de la Verdad, 2019; Global Witness, 2020; HRW, 2021). At least 67 social leaders have been murdered in the Putumayo since the peace agreement was signed (Indepaz, 2021).

Type of aggression	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Threats	109	140	202	209	488	539	317	370	583	628	3585
Killings	32	49	69	78	55	63	80	106	155	124	811
Attempted killings	21	20	50	39	41	35	49	50	34	52	391
Total	162	209	321	326	584	637	476	526	772	804	4787

Table 1. Three main forms of aggressions against social leaders in Colombia between 2010-2019. Original table in Spanish made by Somos Defensores (2019, p. 104).

Moreover, while I conducted fieldwork, the national government announced that the recognition of social leaders, a job previously assigned to a set of institutions independent from the government, would be centralized. The office of the District Attorney (Fiscalía General de la Nación), known to be historically very close to the national government, was the institution chosen for that matter. Several sectors of society manifested their concerns about the risk that this decision implies: that the recognition of who will be counted or not as a social leader will take priority over the more acute

need to actually verify aggressions against social leaders and protect them (CINEP, 2021; Rojas Andrade, 2021).

1.1 Relevance and contribution

Although the main concern of sustainability science is the transition to sustainability, the literature on sustainability science focuses only to a small degree on the role of social movements and resistance (Temper et al., 2018). Further, the idea of transition itself its debated. Some consider that this notion offers mostly depoliticized, technocratic and managerial solutions to problems that are very political if one is explicit about the assumptions that underlie interventions in the name of transitions to sustainability (Olsson, Galaz, & Boonstra, 2014; Temper et al., 2018). Attempting to politicize matters in sustainability science, scholars find in transformations to sustainability, as opposed to transitions, an entry point for the study of emancipatory struggles in sustainability science (Stirling, 2015; Temper et al., 2018). Transitions are conceptualized as orderly, controlled change processes through the structures of "tightly disciplined knowledges, often emphasizing technological innovation" (Stirling, 2015, p. 54). The notion of transition would fall into the realm of weak answers to strong questions, to paraphrase Sousa Santos (2014). Transformations on the other hand are understood as diverse, unruly political alignments focused on social innovation, challenging power-knowledge structures, and "pursuing contending (even unknown) ends" (Stirling, 2015, p. 54). The transformations to sustainability imply addressing economic and ecological mal-distribution, social injustice and political exclusion. They involve transforming power relations by addressing economic inequality, exposure to pollution, access to environmental resources and nature, participation in political decision-making at various scales and recognizing alternative worldviews, knowledges and understandings of development (Temper et al., 2018).

Colombia is currently undergoing a peace-building cycle where territories that were victims of the most gruesome versions of the conflict are the protagonists. The Putumayo is one of these territories. The pathway to peace-building includes addressing issues of political recognition, economic inequality and ecological mal-distribution. Local communities in the Putumayo find in the present conjuncture an opportunity to emerge from historical silences (Cancimance López, 2015). In defense of the territory, they demand economic equality, environmental justice and the recognition of their worldviews, knowledges and understandings of development – self-determination. They demand peace as a transformative change to sustainability. Social leaders, however, are being silenced at epidemic rates via threats, murders and myriad other aggressions (Amnesty International, 2020; Global Witness, 2020; Somos Defensores, 2019; UNOHCHR, 2021). In this context, studying the

role of social leaders in the defense of the territory in the Putumayo and the implications of them being silenced is both timely and relevant for sustainability science. My research furthers the dialogue about transformations to sustainability, unruly politics, social innovations, environmental justice and challenges to power-knowledge structures. Such a dialogue is necessary to elucidate pathways to peace as transformations to sustainability.

1.2 Research aim and questions

What do communities in the Putumayo mean by defending the territory? Who are we talking about when we talk about social leaders and what do they do? What is their role in the defense of the territory? What are the implications of them being silenced? And to what extent can the peace agreement's stable and durable peace be built in this scenario? The defense of the territory and the experience of social leaders during the current peacebuilding cycle in the Putumayo certainly deserves special attention. This master's thesis stems out of my desire to seek answers to these relevant and timely questions. I propose to explore the relationship between the defense of the territory and social leaders in the context of the present peace cycle. Understanding the role of social leaders in the defense of the territory and the implications of them being silenced may provide key insights about what it takes to build a stable and sustainable peace that, in turn, may open pathways to protect and prevent further harm on social leaders, marginalized communities and the territory.

The overarching goal of my thesis is to produce knowledge that will contribute to peacebuilding in Colombia. In particular, I will analyze the extent to which current peacebuilding efforts are being compromised by the silencing of social leaders. Therefore, I propose the following two research questions that I argue are directly linked to this research objective. These are:

a)   What is the role of social leaders in the defense of the territory in the Putumayo?

b)   What are the implications of social leaders being silenced in the Putumayo?

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In what follows, I set the scene. The reader will be introduced to the Putumayo in space and time in Section 2. After contextualizing the reader with the Putumayo, I explain the theoretical framework of this dissertation in Section 3. Borrowing from political ecology and social movements scholarship, I approach the defense of the territory and the social leader conceptually. In Section 4 I will describe the methodology applied in this case for the collection of qualitative data. I present my findings about what the defense of the territory means, and who social leaders are and what they do in

Section 5. The findings are discussed in Section 6 with an emphasis on analyzing the role of social leaders in the defense of the territory and the implications of them being silenced. I argue that social leaders play a key role as both the voice and the face of the defense of the territory. Furthermore, I interpret the silencing of social leaders as a means to produce oblivion and detachment, thereby making local communities from the Putumayo, along with the historical and territorial dimensions of their struggles, invisible. In section 7, I conclude with a final reflection on memory, place and peace.

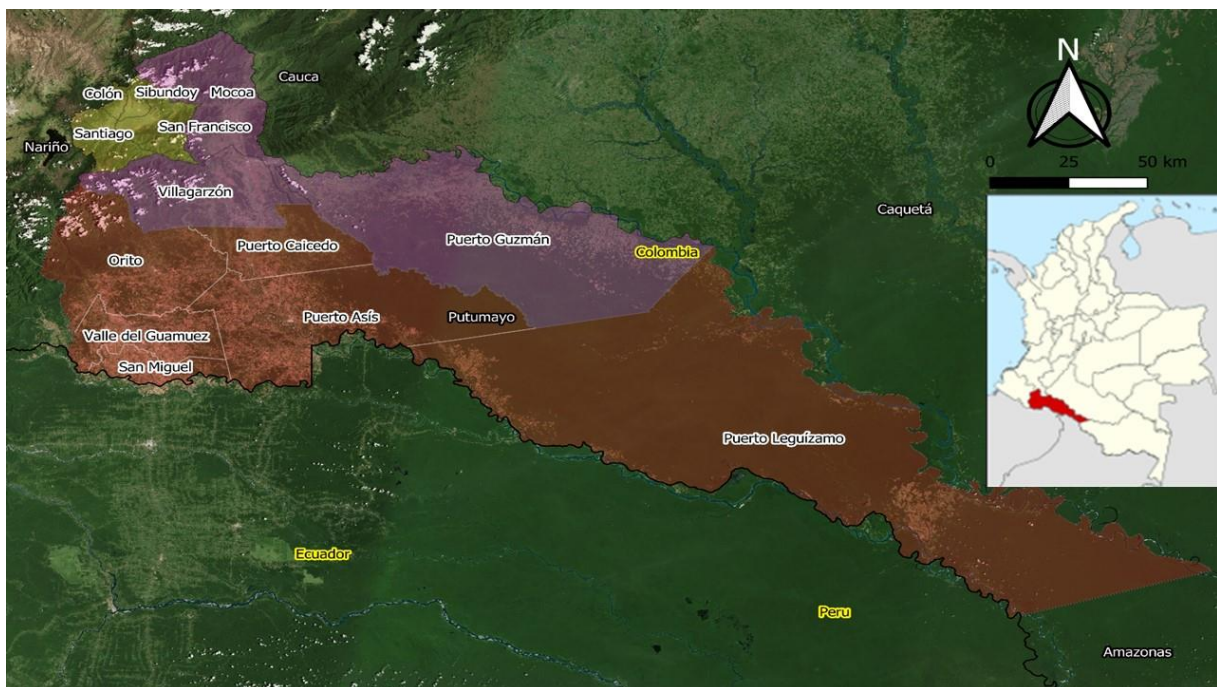## 2 Place and Time – The context of the Putumayo

Figure 1. The Putumayo department with its 13 municipalities divided into high (yellow), middle (purple) and low (red) Putumayo (Made by the author using QGIS)

2.1 Place

The Putumayo is located in the south-western end of Colombia, bordering Ecuador and Perú. Its condition as a frontier department is crucial to understand the strategic importance of the Putumayo for different actors. The Putumayo is divided into thirteen municipalities, with Mocoa as its administrative capital. Furthermore, there is a traditionally accepted way of dividing the Putumayo in three regions: the high, middle and low Putumayo (see Figure 1). At the north-western corner of the region, up in the Andes, is the high Putumayo. The municipalities of Mocoa, Villagarzón and Puerto Guzmán surround the high Putumayo municipalities, and are considered the middle Putumayo because at this point the Andean piedmont and the Amazonic plains meet. The rest of the department in the Amazonic plains is the low Putumayo.

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The Putumayo is an incredibly socio-ecologically diverse region. In the Putumayo, the Andes mountain range meets the Amazon rainforest. Dozens of rivers and a myriad streams flow down the mountain to the rainforest. High species diversity and endemism characterize this ecological corridor (Decaëns et al., 2018; Etter, McAlpine, Wilson, Phinn, & Possingham, 2006). Locals call it an Andean-Amazonic territory. According to the National System for Cultural Information (SINIC) there are two broadly defined ethnic groups in the Putumayo: Indigenous communities and colonos. However, it is important to highlight that this excludes afro-descendant communities who most certainly have collective or organizational presence throughout the Putumayo and are recognized as their own ethnic groups in Colombia (Tostón Sarmiento, 2020). Nonetheless, in my thesis I mostly focus on indigenous communities, colonos-campesinos and colonos-indigenous ethnic communities of the Putumayo.

There are at least fourteen recognized indigenous ethnic groups in the Putumayo, divided into 126 Cabildos with 39 Resguardos (SINIC, 2021). The Cabildos are a form of socio-political organization of indigenous communities (Consejo de Estado, 2000). The Resguardos are collective property titles that belong to indigenous communities according to articles 63 and 329 of the Colombian Constitution. In this dissertation, the Inga community, one of the fourteen indigenous ethnic groups in the Putumayo, and their recently constituted Resguardo Nukanchipa Alpa Amukunapa Wasi will be of relevance.

Colonos, according to the SINIC, are people who ventured into the Putumayo in search of fertile land, new commerce routes and other means of subsistence (SINIC, 2021). Colonos means colonizers in Spanish. I have decided to keep the word in the original Spanish to not associate the colono colonization in the Putumayo with colonization processes such as the Spanish conquest. To Ramírez (2001), the colonization processes that took place in the Putumayo, in which she identifies five distinct episodes, are associated with either extractive boom cycles (like rubber and oil), political turmoil elsewhere in the country and rural development policies. Such processes will be described in more detail in the next sub-section. The colonos, a term that includes both colonos-campesinos and colonos-indigenous (Cancimance López, 2015; Ramírez, 2001), will also be of particular relevance in this study.

2.2 Time

The history of the Putumayo since the late XIX Century has been characterized by several waves of colonization (Ramírez, 2001). These colonization waves are associated to the boom of cinchona, rubber and gold extraction (1890-1930), the era of political violence between liberals and

conservatives (1946-1962), the petroleum fever and rural development policies (1963-1976), the first coca boom (1977-1987), and the second coca and petroleum booms (1988-2001). Socio-ecological conflicts have been a trend throughout this history. The National Land Agency of Colombia (ANT) synthesizes this history of conflict by identifying territorial conflicts in the Putumayo due to i) various actors wishing to control the same geographical space, ii) difficulties in legalization of land, iii) unclear limits in already established areas, and iv) infrastructure and extractive projects that affect local communities negatively (CNMH, 2015). In the brief account that follows, I explain how these types of conflicts are difficult to separate from one another.

The cinchona, rubber and gold rush had a decisive impact on the ethnic composition of the territory, especially for indigenous groups (Ramírez, 2001). The conditions of slavery and the atrocities that they were subjected to by the rubber boom particularly have been well documented since the early XX Century (Hardenburg, 1909). In those cases were there where rebellions from indigenous peoples, the state and the Church conducted evangelization processes on them (Ramírez, 2001). Aside from the religious missions, two other events are identified in the literature: gold extraction – which for instance led to the founding of Orito in the low Putumayo, and the dissolution of Resguardos in the neighboring Nariño department in 1940 that contributed to the migration of indigenous groups native of Nariño (CNMH, 2015; Ramírez, 2001).

By the mid-XX Century, Colombia was in the middle of an era marked by political violence between the liberal and conservative political parties that ruled the country and even had their own rural armies (Ramírez, 2001). The Putumayo was not a scene of this violent context. Rather, it took place in the rural regions around the largest cities (Ramírez, 2001). Alternative social movements were repressed by both liberals and conservatives once either one was in power. Although accounts differ on the effect this had on migration, Ramírez (2001) affirms that this political violence against alternative movements led to massive migration of campesinos towards places like the Putumayo.

It wasn't until the 1960s that the colonization fronts consolidated in the Putumayo (CNMH, 2015). During this decade, the Texas Petroleum Company discovered oil in low Putumayo. Oil extraction in the municipality of Orito became a cluster of colonizations (CNMH, 2015; Ramírez, 2001). The standards of living of the specialized laborers were far better than those of non-specialized, which led to much informality in the settling of the latter (CNMH, 2015; Devia Acosta, 2004). Additionally, Texaco had ample influence over the state's armed forces to the point that they usurped the role of authority and expelled families (indigenous and colonos) from their territories, accumulating land in the process (CNMH, 2015). Moreover, the first rural development policies in the region began with colonization projects based on a narrative of the Putumayo as an empty place (Palacio, 2008;

Ramírez, 2001). Disputes between indigenous communities claiming ancestral territories and colonos demanding their rights to the territory date as far back as the 1970s (CNMH, 2015).

In the 1970s the oil boom busted. Civil society and union mobilizations demanding infrastructure increased, as did state repression against them (CNMH, 2015; Ramírez, 2001). Agricultural activities expanded during this decade too in the Putumayo (CNMH, 2015). But by the end of the decade the Medellín and Cali cartels had introduced the production of coca. Private armies, like Los Chaverras and Los Combos, protected the cartels' labs and shipments (CNMH, 2015). The Putumayo's position in relation to Perú and Ecuador, added to the meager presence of public institutions, a densely forested, fertile land and the crisis of the colonization policies fostered the ideal environment for the coca economy (CNMH, 2015; Ramírez, 2001). The impact of this economy was such that during the 1980s and 1990s it produced the largest immigration wave in the history of Putumayo, displacing a large portion of other agricultural activities (CNMH, 2015).

In the early 1980s, the FARC expanded their military presence throughout the country. Aside from predating legal economies, they began to appropriate a portion of the income from illicit ones (Echandía Castilla, 1999). The 32nd front of the FARC was created to control the guerrilla's activities in the Putumayo, thereby subordinating the cartels' private armies (CNMH, 2015). According to Ramírez (2001), the FARC received a lot of popular support, particularly in the Cali cartel's influence zone. This was due to two measures that were taken by the FARC according to the CNMH (2015). The first one was a tax on the production of coca paste, and the second measure was the prohibition of payment to workers with drugs.

The second coca boom would start in the 1990s with the introduction of Peruvian and Bolivian strains, after a plague effectively destroyed the coca monocultures (Ramírez, 2001). Also, the FARC attempted to take over the coca business from the cartels, who managed to repel the military offensive. At this point, according to the CNMH (2015), the cartels began using the anti-communist and counter-insurgency discourse. Their private armies turned from private security to paramilitary, counter-insurgence activities. Coca cultivation increased substantially during the 1990s in the Putumayo (CNMH, 2015). Social mobilizations in the mid-1990s led to the recognition of coca growers as distinct political subjects within civil society (Ramírez, 2001). By the end of the decade, interested in the coca business too, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) – a paramilitary army of national scale – made a military incursion into the Putumayo. This caused several massacres among civilians and the guerilla, selective assassinations, dispossessions and sexual violence in rural areas of the Putumayo (CNMH, 2012, 2015).

At the end of the twentieth century, almost half the coca produced in Colombia came from the Putumayo, making military intervention in this region prominent during the Plan Colombia (Messina & Delamater, 2006; Van Dexter & Visseren-Hamakers, 2020). The Plan Colombia was a counter-narcotic failure mostly due to its lack of results against narcotrafficking and huge negative impacts on small coca producers – composed mainly of campesino, indigenous and afrodescendant families (CNMH, 2015; WHDPC, 2020). In this context, a second boom of oil extraction started in the first decade of the XXI Century (CNMH, 2015). Patterns from the 1960s repeated themselves in the sense that the presence of the state, and in particular its armed forces, mainly obeys the security and public order needs of the extractive industry (CNMH, 2015).

Further, and I daresay more importantly for this thesis, entire communities were trapped within this storm. Many communities were forced to take sides and layers of stigmatization burdened locals. At the national level they were represented as collaborators of the so-called 'narco-terrorism' – as internal enemies of the state. At the local level they were represented as either 'guerrillos' (collaborators of insurgent armed groups) or 'paracos' (collaborators of counter-insurgent armed groups) (Fieldnotes, p. 54). Communities all over the region were subjected to the atrocities of the armed conflict. They were forced to stay when armed groups invaded their territory following the colloquial saying that 'those who owe nothing, fear nothing'. Local communities were forced to live afraid, in silence, invisible (Cancimance López, 2015). Presently, the Putumayo is one of the main regions of interest in the 2016 peace agreement. Seven of its thirteen municipalities were chosen as municipalities for the territorially focused development plans (PDETs) established by the peace agreement.

3 Theory

This theoretical framework informs both my data collection strategy and my subsequent analysis of what the defense of the territory is and who social leaders are. This effort will be supported by insights from political ecology and scholarship about social movements. These two fields intersect and complement each other in different ways. I highlight that political ecology complements the study of social movements in that it offers theoretical paths to analyze the territorial dimension of struggles and the role of leaders in a way that traditional social movements scholarship doesn't emphasize on its own (Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2020; Wolford & Keene, 2015). These paths come from research in political ecology on the material and symbolic dimensions of struggles associated to a place, and the influence of narratives on the relationship between power and resistance (Wolford & Keene, 2015).

3.1 Political ecology and social movements

Political ecology is an epistemologically plural discipline in which a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches are implemented to study socio-ecological relations (Bassett & Peimer, 2015; Tetreault, 2017). Robbins (2012, p. 3) argues that the objective of political ecology is to "unravel the forces at work in environmental access, management, and transformation". Similarly, Basset & Peimer (2015, p. 158) affirm that political ecologists "share a common interest in questions related to the politics of natural resource management, access, and control, environmental knowledge, and their interactive effects of livelihoods and environmental change dynamics". This is to say that political ecology is concerned with how power relations shape and are shaped by location within, access to and control over the environment (Wolford & Keene, 2015). As a result, in political ecology, questions about marginalization, contestation and resistance in relation to a place are central.

These three issues are "crucial for understanding the formation, organization and work of social movements" too (Wolford & Keene, 2015, p. 573). Traditional scholarship on the emergence and dynamics of social movements as a function of resource mobilization, political opportunities and framing methods has been criticized on several accounts. One such criticism comes from its (in)adequacy to explain present-day forms of collective action like environmental justice movements (Escobar, 2008). For example, by overemphasizing the cultural, economic and social dimension of conflicts, social movements scholarship has paid little attention to the territorial dimension of struggles and its influence on the emergence and dynamics of social movements (Blaser, 2013; Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2020). Beyond ideological convictions or detached interests as the source of mobilization, the territorial dimension of social movements brings to the fore the threat of death or elimination of a living sphere as a crucial factor from which social movement emanates (Misoczky & Böhm, 2015). The collective experience of marginalization or exclusion, added to the awareness of the death of the community is what philosopher Enrique Dussel (2013) describes as the ethics of liberation that permeates mobilization.

Wolford & Keene (2015) have shown that there are at least four substantial points of intersection between political ecology and social movements. I highlight these intersections as they are instrumental to conceptualize the defense of the territory and the social leader. To conceptualize the defense of the territory, I will rely on the first two points developed by them: Materiality and meaning, and the importance of place. The third and fourth points – narratives, and the relationship between mobilization and the state – will be instrumental for the conceptualization of the social

leaders. One important caveat that I wish to make is that I don't intend to prove whether a social movement in defense of the territory has emerged or is emerging in the Putumayo. These questions are beyond the scope of my thesis (and a very promising avenue for contemporary studies of political ecology and social movements). However, I do argue that collective action is an essential attribute of the defense of the territory.

3.2 The defense of the territory – Materiality, meaning and the importance of place

Political ecology's understanding of struggles to have both "objective and subjective conditions" opens pathways to analyze both "the grounded conditions of production and social reproduction as well as the ways in which people make sense of – or bring meaning to – their situations" (Wolford & Keene, 2015, p. 574). In this sense, material conditions (such as poverty, ecological mal-distribution or political exclusion) are given meaning to by actors with shared histories like those of marginalization and dispossession.

Moreover, Wolford & Keene (2015) speak of the importance of place in relation to the emergence and dynamics of social movement. Echoing this, in his study of Black Communities in the Colombian pacific, Escobar (2008) demonstrated that identity and place are in fact deeply connected. To him the territory is politically constructed through processes that shape identity and place. Actually, the importance of placed-based struggles to him lies in that it integrates, among other things, culture and environment (Harcourt & Escobar, 2002). Escobar's findings resonate with the Lefebvrian notion of the production of territory as a site, medium and outcome of state formation that includes the people that inhabit it (Ballvé, 2012). In this sense, movements and mobilizations are grounded: they have specific historical and geographical contexts (Wolford & Keene, 2015).

In the Putumayo, dispossessions by force have occurred throughout history. Land dispossession in the Putumayo linked to the armed conflict has been the result of disputes between armed groups and the state, for portions of land considered as strategic corridors or an object of sovereignty and development (CNMH, 2015). Further, Cancimance López (2015) mentions that marginalization of local communities also occurred in the Putumayo associated with the armed conflict as they were forced to stay and inhabit in the midst of violence. To him, this had a two-fold result that he links to silence and conviviality. In silence he found an everyday form of resistance deployed by communities with an appearance of non-resistance, ideal for survival in violent conditions. In conviviality he found an ethical commitment to working the land through which deep connections between people – particularly colonos – and place where drawn (Cancimance López, 2015). I contend that the defense of the territory in the Putumayo emerges from collective experiences of dispossession and

marginalization that in the past threatened the existence of communities in – or that effectively erased communities from – this place.

Additionally, in public narratives the Putumayo has been historically produced as an empty place (CNMH, 2015; Ramírez, 2001), as "*a 'wild' 'no-man's land' governed by 'laws of the jungle'*" (Van Dexter & Visseren-Hamakers, 2020, p. 329). For the state, this perspective legitimizes statecraft in the form of imposed development policies based on extractivism, agribusiness, and colonization (CNMH, 2015; Ramírez, 2001; Van Dexter & Visseren-Hamakers, 2020). To armed actors interested in narcotrafficking, it has legitimized a bloody, armed dispute over areas deemed as strategic corridors (CNMH, 2012, 2015). This notion of an empty place has made indigenous and colono communities, whose cultures and struggles are deeply territorial, invisible (CNMH, 2015). In the defense of the territory, these communities find an alternative way to produce the territory that is opposed to the historically dominant notion of the empty place. I contend that the defense of the territory produces the Putumayo as a territory where local communities who inhabit it are visible.

3.3 Social leaders – Narratives, power and resistance

Narratives frame contestation and provide "ideological space to reconsider power relations" (Wolford & Keene, 2015, p. 578). The notion of 'strategic essentialism' plays a key role here (Danius, Jonsson, & Spivak, 1993). Strategic essentialism refers to the political use of master labels, such as 'woman' – or 'territory' – to unify struggles while recognizing differences within (Wolford & Keene, 2015). Escobar (2008) similarly points out that from a position of mutual respect and difference, the coordination to defend the territory is set forth by communities in the Colombian Pacific. Wolford's research with social movement leaders in Brazil sheds light on how leaders "carefully manage the interplay between movement narratives and objectives and the diverse ideologies and experiences of movement members", and how they craft a "coherent movement narrative that emphasizes peasant unity and communalism, agricultural sustainability, horizontal governance and, importantly, opposition to the Brazilian state" (Wolford & Keene, 2015, pp. 579-580).

This highlights the relationship between the state and social mobilization, or between the workings of power and resistance (Li, 2005; Watts, 2004). To Wolford & Keene (2015, p. 575) political ecology speaks more "to informal political processes than to institutional actors such as national states…". This view offers a perspective of the state as a terrain of struggle where a plurality of interests collide, rather than as a monolithic entity (Wolford & Keene, 2015). Instead of a top-down structure, the state is formed by local interactions and power relations that make the boundaries between state and society hard to discern (Torres Bustamante, 2007). This perspective allows viewing public

intellectuals as situated between public discourse and dominant power, and offers a path to analyze their role as mediators between local communities and external agents (Ramírez, 2001).

That it is possible to find common experiences through which different communities in the Putumayo give meaning to historical material conditions doesn't mean that they all experienced them equally. Narratives and worldviews differ among ethnic groups in Colombia (Escobar, 2008). The struggles of native indigenous communities and of colonos, either campesinos or indigenous native to other parts, differ (CNMH, 2015). However, in the Putumayo, leaders are mediators between their communities and external, often powerful actors. Leaders are recognized as trustworthy knowledge producers and interpreters of social reality (Ramírez, 2001). Leaders craft and use narratives to unite common but different struggles for the sake of advancing political goals (Ramírez, 2001; Wolford & Keene, 2015). I argue that in this peace cycle avenues between the state and society, between power and resistance, opened. As a consequence a plurality of interests are now colliding and these power relations are often expressed in the increase of violence. As such, it is a scenario in which social leaders, as public intellectuals, can mediate with actors external to their communities and mobilize the latter to make them visible and advance the political goals associated with the defense of the territory.

4 Methodology

Ramírez (2001) points at the need to allow people to reveal and interpret their individual and collective experiences associated with a long history of socio-ecological conflict. Ethnographic research approaches, like the collection of stories and documentation of people's experiences, are an appropriate and important method for clarifying the discourses of the cultural, ecological and economic differences between communities (Escobar, 2000). Here, I see two methodological considerations implied. The first implication is the necessity for an ethnographic approach when people's experiences are at the core of the research. The second implication is the recognition that local inhabitants are subjects of research whose active participation and agency to tell their stories and explain themselves is at least as important to the research as the preparation and planning conducted by the researcher. While the first implication touches upon ethnography as a research method, the second one points directly towards considerations about the research subjects, the positionality of the researcher and the ethical reflections associated to ethnography.

4.1 Ethnography

My research is about how the present conjuncture affects the defense of the territory in the Putumayo, in particular through the eyes of social leaders. Their experiences defending the territory and, more broadly, their experience as social leaders, in their own words, is the data that I collected. As such, I deemed an ethnographic approach the most appropriate research method. Subjectivity and experience are central because they are the medium through which the present peace cycle and its effects are interpreted. Moreover, dialogue is the means through which this data is delivered to me and my interpretation the medium through which I will present it.

Bryman (2012) suggests that ethnography as a research method involves several aspects: The immersion, for an extended period of time, in a particular social setting; the regular observation of the members of this setting; engaging in conversations and conducting interviews; document collection about the social setting; developing an understanding of cultural particularities of this social setting; and the 'writing up' of an account of that setting.

There is an additional component to ethnographic work described by ethnographers as 'being there' (Watson, 1999). Bryman focuses too much on the social side of ethnography and too little on the sensitive act of being somewhere. The place where ethnographic work occurs may just be as important as the social setting (Gardner, 1999). I can see that it could be argued that the way a place is understood or constructed is implied by Bryman (2012) when he refers to the understanding of cultural particularities. However, explicitly addressing the researcher's experience of being in the place opens two paths for ethnographic research: understanding how people in a given social setting produce their place, and also constructing an own subjectivity about the place by the researcher that, at least in the case of this particular project, helps to empathize and even relate better with its inhabitants.

4.2 Research subjects

Madison (2012, p. 28) points out that in any ethnographic research the interviewee "is not an object, but a subject with agency, history and his or her own idiosyncratic command of a story". This poses a paradigmatic understanding about conducting ethnographic research. I take this to mean that even though the social scientific method exists to locate valid and reliable information, the actual dialogue, conversation or interview between a researcher and another person is drastically different to the interaction that a researcher has with a document, for instance. I know this sounds obvious but I consider that spelling out what this implies is crucial for the rationale of this research. That

there is not an object of research but a subject means that the experience of research is intersubjective. While scientific methods exist as a standard for the reliability and validity of information, the intersubjective element of social research has additional components than the need for verifiable facts and information (Madison, 2012). Explicitly addressing the intersubjectivity of ethnographic research reveals that the interaction between the researcher and the research subject is not just the extraction of information and facts. In fact, the interaction opens "complex realms of individual subjectivity, memory, yearnings, polemics and hope" that are "inseparable from shared and inherited expressions of communal strivings, social history, and political possibility" (Madison, 2012, p. 26).

The experience of the research subject, both individual and collective, and the researcher play a role and the ethnographic research is the result of opening this channel of intersubjective interaction. This had major implications in my choices regarding data collection. The most important one was my choice not to interview but to dialogue or listen to social leaders. Instead of a form with questions, I had two topics in mind: the defense of the territory and the experience as social leaders. Rather than scheduling interviews, I made invitations to dialogue and attended events as an invited observer. I am aware that this choice places a high standard on my fieldnotes since they are the main material produced. However, this scenario did not only provide a more informal space that allowed research subjects to speak more freely but also, this semi-structured design allowed them to develop their story and actively forge the dialogue.

4.3 Positionality

Coghlan & Brydon-Miller (2014, p. 627) describe positionality as "the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study". They argue that this position has an effect on how the research is conducted at every phase and what kind of knowledge is constructed. They identify two main positions that a researcher can have in relation to the study – internal and external – although they qualify these two positions turning them into a bigger set. Madison (2012) uses an outline of three positions or stances that a researcher may have in qualitative research: (i) ventriloquist – where the researcher attempts to be invisible, apolitical, and neutral, (ii) voices – where the researcher's position is vaguely present and their intention is to focus on the subaltern or counter-hegemonic voices, and (iii) activism – where the researcher's position is explicit, advocates in favor of marginalized sectors of society and seeks to propose alternatives. These are but two of many approaches that highlight the multi-dimensional character of positionality. While the internal/external outline focuses on whether the researcher belongs to the

social setting where the research takes place; the ventriloquist/voices/activism outline pays more attention to the researcher's intentions.

In many ways I consider myself external to the social setting of my research. Although I am Colombian by birth and speak Spanish, I grew up far away from the Putumayo, in Bogota. My accent in many cases was enough for people to realize that I am not from there. Furthermore, I had never been to the Putumayo before. More importantly, because my own construction of the place was influenced by its representation in media, the narrative in my mind about the Putumayo was foreign, external. Moreover, I had very little contacts there, and relatively limited knowledge about its history and present situation.

In some other ways, however, I found some dimensions where I was rather internal. The most important dimension relates to what I intend to contribute with this research. Although I am aware, and they were too, that I will benefit personally from the research, a key contemporary role of social science is to unthink modernity, to decolonize our minds. This is done by researching and sharing worldviews that do not fully conform with the assumptions of modernity – that it is a rupture in time producing a difference in space (a new era giving rise to 'the West'), and that it assigns society a historical path of development and progress (Ascione, 2016). I consider this of particular relevance when dealing with social groups resisting Western domination and that are threatened by oblivion due to the lack of written word about their histories and the current systematic aggressions against their leaders; those who are able to articulate these histories verbally. This point of view not only gained me access to certain social leaders, such as those from the Bloque San Juan communities, but also to their communities. I was allowed to visit them and be there with them. This condition of ally – which resonates in some regards with the voices and activism stances (Madison, 2012) and also reminds me of Ramirez's (2001) insight about leaders in the Putumayo who wish that the history of their struggles is written – was explicitly mentioned by one of the Bloque San Juan communities' social leaders (Fieldnotes, p. 44), and gave my research an internal dimension.

4.4 Ethical considerations

My handling of the notes, attempting to keep my own interpretations of what was happening at the minimum possible, is a major ethical consideration of this research but it is not the only one. I follow Bryman's (2012, p. 144) statement that what is or is not ethical is "by no means a clear-cut matter". For this reason, I chose to scan my notes every few days while conducting fieldwork and to make a final scan of the entire notes at the end to provide comparability across time and therefore a high degree of transparency to the process of taking notes.

Another major ethical implication is anonymity. Since the aggressions against social leaders are very real and I held dialogues with several leaders who had received threats against their lives, ensuring their anonymity is paramount. For this reason, I avoid using names throughout the text and when I do, I changed them and refer to them in gender-neutral language. Their names are written in my fieldnotes. To ensure anonymity in this case without jeopardizing the fieldnotes' integrity I proceeded to cross out their names digitally, after scanning them. I am aware that this may affect the credibility of my notes. However, I consider this issue to be less important than the protection of the anonymity and integrity of the social leaders. Furthermore, I am aware of the academic rigor required for this master's thesis and for this very reason I affirm that the content of my fieldnotes is nothing else but my notes from fieldwork in the Putumayo. I only took notes if I was previously allowed to do so by those I was dialoguing with or listening to.

Covid-19 was another ethical consideration. My travel from Lund to Mocoa involved the risk of me involuntarily infecting people along the way. In addition to the mandatory tests that I had to take for the international flight, I stopped for more than a week in Bogotá before heading to the Putumayo and took one more test before the final trip to be sure that during the international flight I wasn't infected. All of my tests, three in total, were negative for Covid-19.
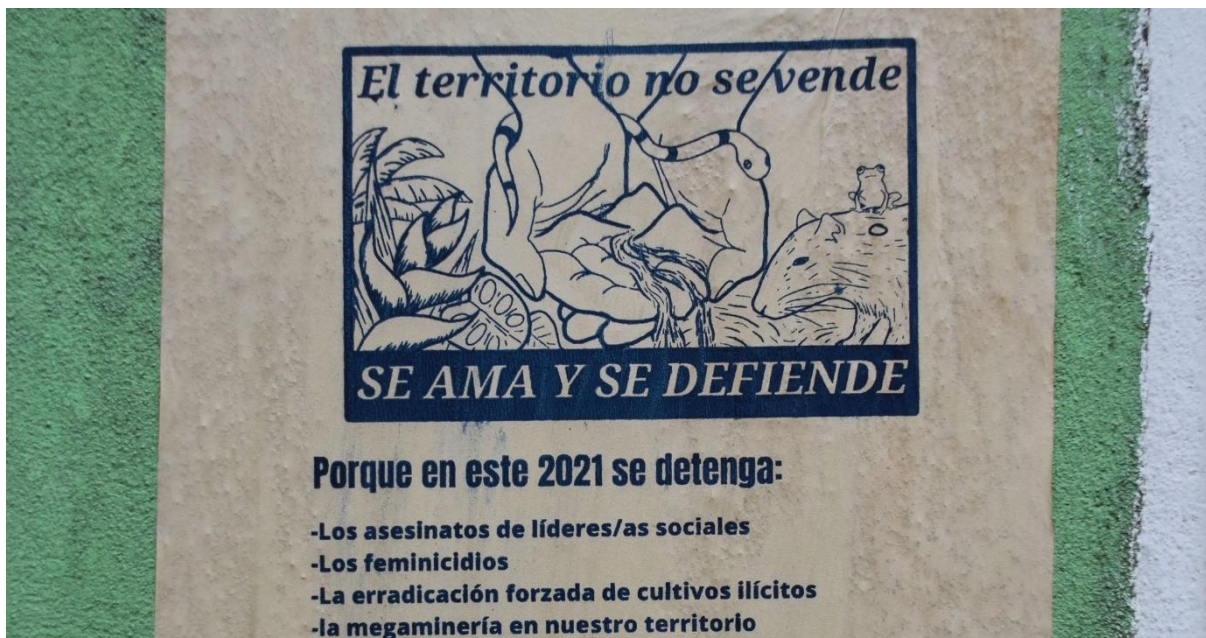
5 Findings

Figure 2. Defense of the territory wallpaper in Mocoa, Putumayo. Translation to English: The territory is not for sale; it is to be loved and defended. In 2021, we demand no more murders of social leaders, feminicides, forced eradication of illicit crops and mega-mining in our territory. Photograph taken by Monica Gabell in March, 2021.

I collected most of the data from two cases that I followed during my time in the Putumayo. The first one was the preparation for the Putumayo's Territorial Roundtable of Guarantees (the Roundtable), which is part of the National Process of Guarantees to protect human rights defenders and social leaders established in 2019 (UNDP, 2019). State institutions, social movements and organizations, and the international community gather in this process (UNDP, 2019). The objective is to dialogue, develop strategies and implement public policy, legislative and institutional measures that protect social leaders and human rights defenders (UNDP, 2019). More than thirty social leaders from the Putumayo attended, representing indigenous, campesinos and afro-descendant communities, among many others. The meeting was a preparation for the installation of the Roundtable. Government officials of the national, regional, and municipal level were invited to the installation. The international community was invited too. Almost every social leader intervened during the preparation meeting. As an observer of these interventions I was able to draw much material about local voices and struggles in defense of the territory, to partake in conversations with social leaders, and to schedule appointments for further dialogues with them.

The second case was the Nukanchipa Alpa Amukunapa Wasi/Bloque San Juan case, where two stories intersect. One is the story of the Inga indigenous community and the other is the story of the Bloque San Juan communities. Nativity, ancestry and cosmogony build the first story's narrative (Fieldnotes, p. 75, 76, 78). Work, life and presence are the building blocks of the second story's narrative (Fieldnotes, p. 40, 41, 44, 67). I had conversations with social leaders of both the Bloque San Juan and the Inga community. I also attended a meeting of the leaders of all the communities of the Bloque San Juan. Both the meaning of defending the territory and the role of social leaders were topics that I discussed with them.

What follows is the presentation of my findings. They are thematically organized. The first topic I will present is what the defense of the territory is in the Putumayo. In short, I found that the defense of the territory is a form of collective action based on a narrative that strategically unites different place-based struggles of communities with a shared history of marginalization and dispossession, with the aim of improving their material conditions such as fighting for access to land, the protection of the environment and human rights, and against poverty. Then, I will present my findings regarding who social leaders are and what they do. Here, I found that social leaders are interpreters of social reality, recognized and legitimated by their communities and social bases. Furthermore, they organize these communities towards specific political goals such as the recognition of their collective identities and the protection of human rights and the environment via a set of practices that are inseparably linked to defending the territory.

5.1 The defense of the territory

To defend the territory is to defend the cultures associated to, and a product of, the Putumayo's history. There are material and symbolic representations about the territory associated to its defense. The material dimension of the defense of the territory highlights issues of land restitution and ecological conservation. The symbolic dimension, on the other hand, underscores issues of recognition of collective identities that are deeply attached to a place, and of collective struggles of displacement, dispossession, detachment and reattachment.

5.1.1 Defense of the territory: Material dimensions

The territory in its material sense and the things that happen within it plays a very important role. The territory narrowly understood as land is defended as a means to strengthen land restitution and accelerate the processes of legalization and formalization of land tenancy (Fieldnotes, p. 25). Proving and documenting violent actions that take place in the territory was stated by several leaders as key to defend it too (Fieldnotes, p. 22, 23). Like Cecilia, a social leader that has been working in defense of the territory for decades in the Putumayo, said: "Ignoring the Putumayo is to ignore the Amazon and a third of Colombia" (Fieldnotes, p. 9).

Moreover, I found an inherent, albeit different, environmentalism in both the Ingas and the Bloque San Juan communities. While both communities prefigure ecologically sustainable practices to some extent, I found that they are skeptical of each other's "conservation theories" (Fieldnotes, p. 54, 75). So much so, that the Inga community leader hinted at the relationship between the Bloque San Juan communities and the extractive industry (Fieldnotes, p. 78), while the Bloque San Juan leaders hinted at the relationship between the Inga community and the extractive industry (Fieldnotes, p. 40, 53).

There are also material dimensions to the *defense* of the territory. For example, I found that in the case of the Nukanchipa Alpa Amukunapa Wasi/Bloque San Juan there have been instances where the Bloque San Juan communities have impeded the Inga's entrance to the territory (Fieldnotes, p. 53). They have also stood up to the Colombian army to impede forced eradication of illicit crops (Fieldnotes, p. 59).

5.1.2 Defense of the territory: Symbolic dimensions

The concept of territory has a meaning beyond its geographic connotation. While I was preparing for fieldwork, I had a zoom conversation with a worker from a national park in the municipality of Orito, Putumayo. They summarized the territory as the relationship between nature and culture, a

relationship that is economically and socially sustainable (Fieldnotes, p. 2). Rita, who works at a Dutch NGO focused on peace and conflict in Colombia also emphasized that the term territory involves social, cultural, historic, economic and migratory notions about place (Fieldnotes, p. 19). This was echoed by a social leader who stated that "potentializing" those things that belong to the Putumayo and "the Putumayan identity" is key to guarantee economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights, and the territory's own and autochthonous ways of life (Fieldnotes, p. 25).

In the Roundtable, the territory was spoken about as both a subject and an object in statements such as "the territory is what has been dispossessed" (Fieldnotes, p. 25). The meaning I give to this intervention, is that the dispossession of the territory involves a rupture between nature and culture, materiality and meaning. The same leader echoed themselves later on by highlighting the importance of de-stigmatizing "the talk about the territory" (Fieldnotes, p. 25). The idea of the dispossession of the territory as a key issue led several social leaders to mention the importance of historic memory in their interventions, in particular recovering and spreading it.

Although, as expected, there are different narratives about the defense of the territory. To indigenous communities that are native to the Amazon such as the Inga community, it is contradictory to concede their ancestral territory to other actors (Fieldnotes, p. 75). To them, because their Resguardo was legally constituted in this territory, these Inga lands, inhabited by all their cosmogony, are protected from colonization by outsiders and in its constitution the presence of other communities is not identified (Fieldnotes, p. 75). This means that they have the constitutional right (articles 63 and 329 of the Constitution) to be consulted about everything and anything that happens in the territory (Field work diary., p. 75, 76, 78).

In contrast, to the colonos the land is for those who are there, working it, living from it even when the territory was almost unlivable (Fieldnotes, p. 67). This is the story of communities developing a relationship with the territory surrounding them, and willing to sacrifice their lives for it before being dispossessed or displaced again (Fieldnotes, p. 68). This relationship results from loving the land because it means everything to them (Fieldnotes, p. 40, 41). It is a pre-requisite to assert freedom and cultural recognition (Fieldnotes, p. 44).

5.2 Social leaders

5.2.1 Who are we talking about?

Several dimensions were highlighted as important to understand who social leaders are. These came up during my conversations with them. An important caveat is that I don't offer a typology nor and

exhaustive list of conditions of possibility to determine who a social leader is. Figure 3 summarizes my findings:
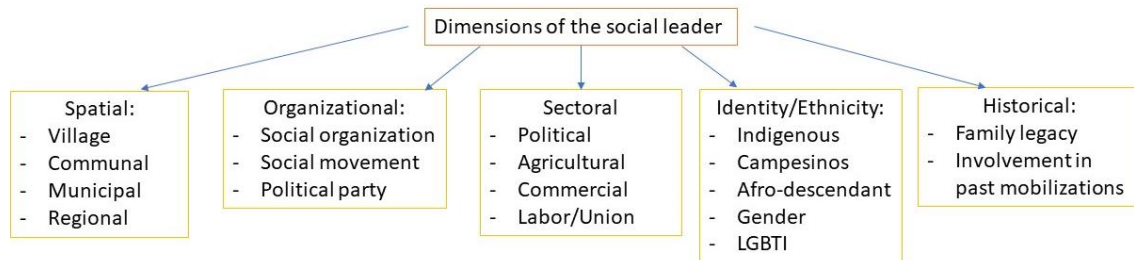

Figure 3. Dimensions of the social leader. Author's own creation based on field work diary notes, p. 2, 5, 7, 9, 19, 29, 30, 35, 40, 53.

Regardless of whether a social leader falls in one or several of these dimensions, or none, it was in terms of recognition where I found a widely accepted characterization of who a social leader is. During the final moments of the Roundtable, one of the moderators took the microphone and provided a description of who a social leader is. Immediately after, the audience including dozens of social leaders applauded and cheered. What the moderator said was:

"*It is those at the base who know who a social leader is!*" (Fieldnotes, p. 24).

Receiving legitimacy from social bases is above all what determines who a social leader is. The relationship between the social leader and a community or social base, regardless of whether it is because of their involvement in past mobilizations, or membership to a given organization or movement, or their spatial sphere of influence, is of the essence to determine who a social leader is.

5.2.2 What do they do?

I identified a set of practices that social leaders undertake from my observations and conversations with them. In short, social leaders organize their communities in order to:

(i)   Document and evidence risks, violent actions and human rights violations (Fieldnotes, p. 37).

(ii)   Institutionalize memory, history, and mediate between communities and external actors (Field work diary p. 1, 35, 26, 33).

(iii) Practice pedagogical resistance (Field work diary p. 42, 43).

(iv)   Promote reparation and empowerment of their communities (Fieldnotes, p. 9).

(v)   Mobilize through direct action (Fieldnotes, p. 22, 23, 25, 26, 40).

The documentation and visibilization of risks, violent actions and human rights violations is one of the most dangerous and effective activities social leaders practice. To Julia, a social leader and human rights defender that has received several threats to their life, documenting and denouncing human rights violations in the region is paramount. They explained to me how the discourse and the logic of war is so deeply entrenched in the practices of armed groups that, as a result, social leaders have been accused by several of these groups of being supporters of rival armed groups to the one they were denouncing (Fieldnotes, p. 37).

Institutionalizing memory, history and the protection of human rights involves, for instance, the desire that many social leaders expressed at the Roundtable to open a human rights observatory and to use art and culture as a tool to sensibilize the communities and recover historic memory (Fieldnotes, p. 26, 33). Most of the territory's history exists mainly as interpreted in the minds of those who have either lived it or been told about it. In fact, the lack of institutions that document and build historic memory like academia and museums makes the verbal tradition of conveying the territory's history all the more important. This tradition of conveying history, sometimes from one generation to the next in the same family, contributes to the legacy and recognition of a social leader (Fieldnotes, p. 1, 35). Furthermore, social constantly mediate between their communities and external actors such as public authorities or even armed groups; presenting their communities demands, problems and necessities to them (Fieldnotes, p. 49, 56, 57, 58)

Diego, one of the Bloque San Juan leaders, meant by pedagogical resistance several activities such as teaching about the value of life and to love the land, that the campesino lifestyle is nothing to be ashamed of and, in fact, it is the campesino economy and lifestyle that should be strengthened (Fieldnotes, p. 43). To them, pedagogical resistance implies guiding the community to take a stand to defend the territory, to prevent it from being sold (Fieldnotes, p. 42). Not selling the territory was a concept that I found to be quite common among social leaders. My interpretation is that the attitude against selling the territory refers more to not being a 'sell out' rather than being against the actual sale of the territory, since oftentimes the formality of land tenancy is not completely clear or, as in the case of collective land property rights, selling is not an option.

Promoting reparation and the empowerment of communities is another practice in which I found the involvement of social leaders key. A range of practices are included as reparation and empowerment. From handing out supplies for crafts to holding workshops on how to denounce human rights violations or the attempts of the extractive industry to enter the territory. According to Cecilia, who is strictly interested in the reparation and the empowerment of women, it is through these practices

of reparation and empowerment that women fight for their water sources, for their dialogues with the river and the rain cycles, and in defense of their life and their rights (Fieldnotes, p. 9).

As per direct action, during the Roundtable I was able to see that social leaders know they are backed by their communities. When the idea of direct action through full-blown protest was being discussed, many social leaders said they could summon their communities because they are always behind them (Fieldnotes, p. 24). I also found other forms of direct action worth mentioning, such as mobilization to physically impede the entrance of external actors. The event when the Bloque San Juan communities stood in the way of an oil company intending to conduct a seismic test in their territory is a famous example in the middle Putumayo (Fieldnotes, p. 53).

6 Discussion

In this section I discuss the relationship between the defense of the territory and the practices of social leaders. I begin the discussion by answering the first research question about the role of social leaders in the defense of the territory. I argue that social leaders play a key role both in the discursive and material dimensions of the defense of the territory. Discursively, they are central in the crafting of a narrative that unites struggles while recognizing differences within and recovering historic memory. Materially, they are central in exposing the (in)actions and interests of external actors, moving forward processes of land restitution and collective ownership, and evidencing the violent conditions to which many local communities and the environment are still subjected to in the Putumayo.

In the second part of the discussion I approach the crucial point of this dissertation which is the implications of the silencing of social leaders. Here, I interpret the silencing of social leaders as the production of oblivion and detachment that makes the historical and territorial dimension of collective struggles in the Putumayo invisible. Furthermore, this production of oblivion and detachment legitimizes previously known narratives of the Putumayo as an empty and unruly place, devoid of subjectivities, exploitable for its resources and lands, and a strategic corridor for narco-trafficking.

6.1 The role of social leaders in the defense of the territory

"*There is more than coca… We are not animals nor drug dealers… We must really fight for the territory; we must really make demands!*" Extract from the intervention of a campesina social leader in the Roundtable (Fieldnotes, p. 23)

Social leaders play a key role in the defense of the territory. The quote that marks the beginning of this subsection illustrates very well this role, with its symbolic and material dimensions. Highlighting that there is more than coca in the Putumayo and that its inhabitants are not animals nor drug dealers, they lift the veil on the paradox that while they are recognized in the realm of representation (i.e. represented as wild, unruly drug dealers – and therefore marginalized and stigmatized), they aren't recognized as political subjects, whose collective identity is inseparable from this shared experience of marginalization. Social leaders articulate common experiences according to a narrative of marginalization and dispossession with the aim of affirming their political subjectivity, their collective rights, that I contend is at the core of the emergence of collective action in defense of the territory.

Furthermore, this narrative opens discursive paths to produce the Putumayo in an alternative way. It can be produced as a territory: a place inhabited, with a history and a present of its own. The notion of territory includes people and place. The Putumayo as a territory is oppositional to narratives that exclude people such as those portraying it as a place whose value lies in the potential to "sustainably exploit" its natural resources as stated in the Colombian national development plan (DNP, 2019) or as a strategic corridor.

Social leaders indeed craft a narrative around the defense of the territory that unites common but different place-based struggles – in very much the sense that Spivek (Danius et al., 1993), Escobar (2008) and Wolford & Keene (2015) describe. To be sure, this strategic essentialism has its limits in guiding political action (Wolford & Keene, 2015). The narrative wielded by social leaders around the defense of the territory goes further than making local communities and the history of their struggles visible. It places local communities as political subjects despite the differences between them and whose recognition is an upfront challenge to the dominant representation of them as collaborators of armed actors and drug mafias. However, it does not eliminate the differences or tensions within the discursive alliance.

The emphasis on really fighting for the territory and making demands points towards the practical dimension of the social leaders' role in defending the territory. Articulating a subaltern narrative involves a set of practices for collective action in this case. The practices described in the previous section have a raison d'être. By denouncing violations against human rights and the degradation of the environment, as well as by attempting to institutionalize historic memory and mediating between their communities and external actors, social leaders are turning the lights of social reality on so that the authorities and international community may see (Gómez, 2021). Furthermore, they are:

i) Recovering historic memory of shared experiences of marginalization and dispossession.

ii) Surviving by promoting 'minimum rules' in the midst of violent conditions.

iii) Exposing the interests and actions (or inactions) of external actors, particularly the local and national governments as they fail to comply with the peace agreement's and constitutional mandates of prevention from and protection against violence, guaranteeing non-repetition of violent events, and investigation and administration of justice.

iv) Showing the return of violent conditions and the threat of further marginalization and dispossession, while delegitimizing armed actors.

Further, practices of pedagogical resistance, reparation and empowerment of communities, and direct action play a role in the production and reproduction of the Putumayo as a territory, one worth defending for local communities. Through pedagogical resistance social leaders do an invaluable work on the symbolic dimension of defending the territory. They are spelling out that the local communities' ways of life and knowing have immense value. This is so precisely because, as a result of their attachment to the places that they or their cosmogonies inhabit, they prefigure practices that are to a large extent ecologically sustainable. Furthermore, practices of pedagogical resistance are a great example of subaltern, grassroots environmental politics and local democracy.

In addition, fighting for the territory also involves mediating with state institutions to restitute land and to declare collective property rights or forms of tenancy over certain areas. This fight for the territory is more material than symbolic. Moreover, because different ethnic groups have different legal rights in terms of collective property, this aspect of the defense of the territory best exemplifies a challenge to the unity brought by the defense of the territory. Take the territorial conflict between Inga community and the Bloque San Juan communities. While the ANT declared a Resguardo in favor of the former over this area, the latter are legally contesting that declaration while simultaneously looking for alternatives to legally defend what they perceive as being their territory now. Furthermore, with the assistance of environmental institutions and NGOs, the Bloque San Juan leaders have explored different arrangements related to environmental conservation, such as declaring environmentally protected areas. But the fact that these areas may become public property is a big deterrent for them. Self-determination, not selling out, is virtually non-negotiable. In the most material sense of the defense of the territory, the strategic unity between subaltern groups with shared histories of marginalization is more difficult to achieve!

The legitimacy of social leaders allows them to mobilize their communities in forms of direct action. These include both full-blown protest, which doesn't occur often, and physically defending the territory by impeding the entrance of external actors. The Bloque San Juan communities are relatively well-known for the latter form of direct action. They have impeded the entrance of the extractive industry and the army to their territory in the past. Since the declaration of the Inga Resguardo, they have also impeded the Inga's entrance to the territory. Once again, on the material dimension of the defense of the territory unity between two groups on opposite ends who claim the same territory is harder to achieve even when they find some unity in discourse.

Notwithstanding, social leaders are crucial in the defense of the territory. They strategically articulate a narrative that unites place-based struggles while recognizing differences within. Further, they lead collective action via both everyday practices of resistance and direct action. Although collective action is also guided towards struggles between subaltern groups, the fact is that with these very same practices many local communities exercise self-determination, freedom and a very real defense of the territory. Social leaders are both the voice and the face of the defense of the territory. They craft discourse and lead action. They expose human rights violations and delegitimize armed groups' violent actions. They are essential for the creation of collective memory and the sense of attachment to the place their communities inhabit. Just like the activists in Escobar's (2008, p. 5) study in the Colombian Pacific, they are of "tremendous value for both understanding and action".

6.2 Implications of silencing social leaders

"*People remain strong and resist because they see us [social leaders] involved*" – Julia (Fieldnotes, p. 38).

I showed how the defense of the territory has a symbolic and material dimension. Symbolically, the defense of the territory is a strategic articulation of different place-based struggles within a common narrative emerging from collective memory. It then materializes into practices, mainly led by social leaders, that produce and reproduce the territory as a locally developed concept integrating different subaltern identities, their attachment to a place and their collective memory. If social leaders are in many instances the voice and the face of the territory, then what are the implications of them being silenced? Will people remain strong and resist while their leaders are silenced?

Silva Prada (2014) argues that territory and memory are produced collectively. Furthermore, he argues that processes seeking to consolidate the notion of territory, in its fully material and symbolic senses, find meaning in the past, in tradition, in the idea of continuity of struggles, in time (Silva

Prada, 2014). The defense of the territory has a strong reliance on time and place – memory and territory – the meaning of which can only be extracted through narration (Ricoeur, 2010). Crafting a narrative of a continuous collective struggle legitimizes current discourses and practices, and opens paths for future collective action (Silva Prada, 2014). As I have already shown, social leaders have a central role in the formation of the narrative of defending the territory.

Julia's quote implies a symbiotic relationship between the community and the social leader. On the one hand, the social leader's recognition is what legitimizes their position as such. On the other, the social leader's involvement in the defense of the territory and the rights of the community strengthens the community's collective will to defend the territory. As the voice and the face of a collective struggle to defend the territory, social leaders break historic silences and make their communities, and themselves, visible. Cancimance López (2015) interpreted those silences as everyday forms of resistance presupposing the existence of extremely violent conditions like the domination imposed by insurgent and counter-insurgent armies in the turn of the millennium (CNMH, 2015). In the historic record, the elimination of community leaders was instrumental for the imposition of these kind of regimes of domination over rural communities in the Putumayo (CNMH, 2012, 2015). In consequence, in the silencing of social leaders there is a threat that patterns of the past repeat themselves.

Memory and territory are interlinked. The defense of the territory in its discursive sense wields both concepts. It articulates collective memory by giving meaning to shared experiences of marginalization, dispossession and invisibilization as the sources of continuous collective struggles. It also produces the territory as a multi-dimensional concept that involves its physical and cultural properties. Social leaders craft this discourse which materializes collective memory and attachment and use it strategically to unite otherwise different collectivities so that they are recognized in common political struggles like building peace, protecting the environment and exercising self-determination and freedom. Without memory and attachment, the continuity of the struggles of local communities in the Putumayo, the territorial dimension of their struggles and the very possibilities of political recognition, freedom and self-determination of these local communities are made invisible; erased from time and space.

The fight for political recognition of local communities in the Putumayo has been long. From the rebellions of indigenous communities against enslavement and genocide, to the union movements after the first oil boom, to the historic mobilizations of the 1990s; this struggle has slowly made many invisible communities visible. Even with the setbacks of the turn of the millennium and the first decade of the 2000s were their recognition as political subjects turned into layers of stigma, many

local communities and social leaders continue the fierce labor of fighting for political recognition, the protection of human rights, the environment, and their worldviews. The 2016 peace agreement opened avenues for these collective struggles to continue. The silencing of social leaders since then is an effort to produce oblivion, to eliminate the continuity of this struggles and the histories of these communities.

The fight for political recognition also involves a territorial dimension. The Putumayo has never been an empty place. The Putumayo has been inhabited for centuries and the continuity of the struggles of subaltern groups since the arrival of the Spaniards in the 16th century is the main evidence. The cosmogony of indigenous communities native to this area inhabits this place, as well as their own ways of knowing and living. The worldviews of colonos, who also live from this land, protect its ecosystems and found in their attachment to this place the collective strength to overcome even the most violent and inhumane forms of domination also inhabit the Putumayo. The defense of the environment is also the defense of attachment to a place. Therefore, to silence social leaders is to produce detachment. But many communities are ready to die defending their territory (Fieldnotes, p. 59).

Oblivious and detached communities have no struggle, no history and no place (no second opportunity on earth). Places with no history, places that are not territories, are empty, exploitable, colonizable. Here, I argue, is the major implication of social leaders being silenced. They, as the voice and face of collective struggles that have historical and territorial dimensions, have a crucial role in the collective memory and the attachment of local communities to the Putumayo, and in the production of the Putumayo as a territory; with a history and inhabited by people, not an empty place. The silencing of social leaders is the production of oblivion and detachment, the emptying of places and contexts that so very well works for the continuation of imposed knowledges and practices based on the narrative of the Putumayo as an empty, exploitable territory, an object of imposed forms of development and a strategic corridor for narco-trafficking.

7 Conclusion

The systematicity with which social leaders are being silenced in Colombia is appalling. In the Putumayo, violence is not only present but increasing. Among the many forms of violence that occur, the aggressions, threats and assassinations of social leaders have particularly deep repercussions on the possibility of peace in this region. I showed that social leaders are central to the defense of the territory both discursively and materially. They craft a narrative that unites struggles while

recognizing differences and tensions within, expose the interests of public and private actors external to their communities, move forward land redistribution processes, and denounce human rights violations and environmental degradation in the Putumayo. Furthermore, I showed that the implications of the silencing of social leaders are dire. Their silencing is the production of oblivion and detachment. These are quintessential forms of violence. They imply the invisibility and historical irrelevance of many communities that have been subjugated by imposed forms of development and conflict. As long as oblivion and detachment continue to be produced in the Putumayo, peace will hardly be built there. Further, that social leaders are being systematically silenced in many corners of Colombia is to miss opportunities to build peace and strengthen democracy. To protect social leaders is to protect collective memory and attachment; to recognize the territory as an integral part of building peace. The implications of this systematic elimination of social leaders in Colombia begs further inquiring into whose interests does the production of oblivious and detached communities serve, the extent to which transformative pathways to peace, democracy and sustainability are thereby foreclosed, and the forms of resistance in defense of the territory that emerge in response.

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