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A pluriverse case study of indigenous resistance among the Nasa people in northeast Cauca, Abya Yala

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Abstract

Against a backdrop of social and political crises, the indigenous Nasa peoples from north and eastern Cauca engage in a strategy of resistance, which I argue is blossoming into an example of the pluriverse. Pluriversal politics revolve around the imperative and the options for alternatives to development which transform global hegemonic systems. Through a reflexive and attempted decolonial methodology, I document in the form of a case study the ways in which the Nasa forms of resistance might constitute a transformative initiative. This term is used by post-development thinkers to analyse instances of decolonial options and the pluriverse in practice. I learnt of three key strategies of resistance: an indigenous educational revolution, community activism against globalised representations of capital, and an advancement of food autonomy. Their experience and efforts contribute to the growing mosaic of alternatives across the world, from which other movements and people can gain inspiration and knowledge from.

Word Count: 14679

Acknowledgements

This thesis is a piece of collective knowledge, combining the thoughts, experiences, and values of the human and non-human beings I interacted with as well as the people around me in daily life. It is yours as much as it is mine.

I have a deep appreciation for the Nasa people I have met who so generously shared with me.

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List of Acronyms

ACIN — Association of Indigenous Cabildos of Northern Cauca

AGRONASA — The Nasa Çxhãçxha Association of Territorial Ancestral Authorities

CRIC — Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca

FARC — Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

ONIC — National Indigenous Organisation of Colombia

PEBI — Programme of Intercultural Bilingual Education

SEIP — Indigenous Owned Educational System

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Figure 1 - A tul *community garden (Stragyte, 2024).*

Above, in Figure 1, is a *Tul*. In their function as a food and medicinal herb garden, they symbolise many things; their spiral structure for instance is a representation of the path from life to death. For me, they symbolise three things: the idea of passing knowledge across generations; of stewardship and protection of the land; and of the importance of healthy food. These are the three key themes of my research, which I am eager to share.

Tul is a Nasayuwe word, the ancestral language of the Nasa people. The Nasa are the second largest indigenous group in what is known as Colombia, with an estimated population of around 200,000 as of the 2018 census, mostly in the region of Cauca (DANE, 2018). The nation state of Colombia is referred to throughout this essay, in the context of its settler colonial origins and the continuation of this reality of settlers operating control over and occupying the land of indigenous peoples (Veracini, 2010). And this context is inextricably linked to race and racism: as Gott (2007, p. 273) writes, “the white settlers of Latin America were unique in oppressing two

different groups within their territory: they seized the land of the indigenous peoples, and they appropriated the labour of the black slaves that they had imported”. This legacy continues today in myriad forms and constitutes a fundamental pillar of the Latin American nation state (Rosemblatt, Appelbaum and Macpherson, 2003; Da Silva, 2007; Back and Solomos, 2020).

Abya Yala is used in the title of this thesis, which means ‘mature land’ in the language of the Guna peoples from northern Colombia and Panama — a term which has been adopted by various indigenous movements, such as by the Consejo Regional Indígena Del Cauca (Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca – CRIC), one of the largest and most active indigenous organisations in Colombia. It is used to refer to the Americas and the wider place indigenous people inhabit, often being preferred over the nation state they are in (Porto-Gonçalves, 2011; CEPAL, 2018). Abya Yala underpins how there are indigenous geographical continuities that transcend the borders of nation states. Its usage not only ingrains peoples’ connectedness with the land as opposed to the colonial states, but also makes clear we are discussing a geography in which Indigenous communities engage in a continual struggle for sovereignty and resistance on a daily basis (Calderón Harker, 2023).

This struggle has been ongoing for over 500 years, from the time of Spanish conquest and colony status, to the emergent state of Colombia. Aníbal Quijano (2001) writes on the concept of *colonialidad* or ‘coloniality ’, which is a condition in which nominally independent, formally colonial societies retain or assume the characteristics of colonialism. This is particularly evidenced by the agricultural frontiers of Colombia, wherein we are seeing a programme of indigenous displacement resulting in violence and dispossession to make way for ‘economically valuable’ cattle and plantations (Ioris, 2022). It’s also seen in the discourse of indigenous people as not temporally concurrent with the concept of Colombia. As I walked around the famed Gold Museum in Bogotá, the vocabulary used around indigeneity was all past tense (the Emberá *used* to have gold for this purpose) when in reality, these indigenous peoples are very much around today. In “most narratives of global politics and practices of global development, the ‘indigenous’ is a thing of the past and exists in the present only as a relic” (Robbie and Olivia, 2018, p. 20). In a country where substantial lands are autonomously governed by indigenous

peoples, still the imagination of Colombia is that of a land *previously* inhabited by them.

Figure 2 – Department of Cauca, highlighted in red, in what is known as Colombia (TUBS, 2011).

Cauca, seen in Figure 2, has largely been the hotbed for indigenous mobilisation and organisation in the region, with Findji (2018, p. 156) outlining that in Colombia the “main indigenous force to rise up—serving as the center for the others—was that of the Cauca region”. The northernmost areas of Cauca are familiar with militancy and violence, and home to various political groups, as well as a significant presence of mestiz@s. However Tierradentro, slightly southeast separated by the peaks of the Central Cordillera of the Andes mountains, can be considered less of a hotbed of politics and more traditionalist, with for instance Nasayuwe being more commonly spoken in this area (Rappaport, 2005). Many Nasa people live on land designated as *resguardos* (Montero, 2022); a word which directly translates to English as reservation, but can more appropriately be thought of as an indigenous territory. These lands are enshrined in Colombian law based on colonial demarcations, but represent a fraction of actual indigenous ancestral lands (Gómez Isa, 2014). Indigenous organisations like CRIC acknowledge the “long colonial tradition in which land ownership continues to be a sign of social prestige, status and power. Land in Colombia is in the hands of the upper class, politicians and lately drug traffickers and paramilitaries” (CRIC, ACIN and ONIC, 2005).

Throughout this research I refer to and use concepts and ideas which do not immediately derive from the context in which I am researching (whether that be from Nasa thought or Colombia as a whole). Employing Fanon’s (1961) approach to identity and nationalism — in that maintaining an essentialist importance of the nation or ethnicity is a perpetuation of colonial ways of thinking — I attempt to emphasise shared experiences of oppression throughout the world and solidarity

across geography, race and class. It is not to say however that different identities I interact with, for instance women, are as Mohanty (1984, p. 337) puts it an “already constituted coherent group with identical interests and desires”. I use the terms global North and global South not so much as terms of geography, and certainly not to denote ‘developed/undeveloped’, but in the sense McEwan (2019, p. 17) uses the terminology, as a metaphorical distinction which “implies an interconnected world and a global context in which to consider inequality and poverty”. She herself is drawing on Dirlik’s (1994, p. 351) ideation of the terms wherein “North connotes the path-ways of transnational capital, and South, the marginalized populations of the world, regardless of their location”.

One might say this thesis has an ethnographic spirit, as I don’t attempt to erase my voice from the work which is common in anthropology pieces. This is not such a piece, but the centring of my voice (whether it be through personal pronouns or interpretive authority), is indicative of my epistemological and ontological approach which will be explored further in the methodology. However it is worth stating early that I attempt to follow a relational approach (West et al., 2020) to the researching and writing of this piece, understanding that my role as a student researcher is not separate or isolated from the context I am operating in, and that the interconnectedness of beings, people and nature informs my descriptions. I also do not hide the fact that this is, as what Denzin and Lincoln (2011) indeed call all qualitative research, an interpretive work — my writings are a product of my own personalised understanding based on my experiences, values and knowledge.

1.2 Purpose and Research Question

This thesis aims to explore the strategies of resistance the Nasa people employ in the face of the various challenges of modernity which they face. Modernity can be understood as the globalised systems of injustice which are relevant to our time, such as capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and ecological collapse, underpinned by a dominant humanist worldview originating from the European Renaissance period (Mignolo, 2011). In doing so, I want to analyse these strategies alongside a consideration of the pluriverse, to come to an understanding of how might the Nasa experience fold into the mosaic of alternatives to development. Using a case study methodology and multiple forms of qualitative data collection, I attempt to arrive at

ideas on the ways in which Nasa people engage in resistance and how they align with the concept of transformative alternatives.

To do this I will seek to answer the following research questions:

To what extent are the strategies of resistance by the Nasa people a representation of the pluriverse in practice, of a transformative initiative?

How do resistance strategies used by indigenous people in northeast Cauca seek to transform the structural roots of global injustice, question the core assumptions of the development discourse, and envelop a more relational form of ethics?

To address these, I undertake a relational approach to a literature review in **Chapter 2**, leading into a theoretical framework in **Chapter 3** which brings forth the pluriverse and the parameters in which the case study data will be compared to. **Chapter 4** contains my qualitative methodological approach. The case findings are presented in **Chapter 5**, divided between the 3 main strategies I analysed, before **Chapter 6** concludes with remarks on the thesis as a whole.

2. Literature Review

I have attempted as much as possible to have a relational approach to this section, inspired by the writings of Lauren Tynan and Michelle Bishop, writing from their experiences as young researchers whilst being a trawlwulwuy woman from tebrakunna country in northeast lutruwita/Tasmania and a Gamilaroi woman, having grown up on Dharawal Country, Australia. To them, the "relational literature review process shifts the purpose of a literature review, not to extract data, establish a territory or find the gaps, but as an obligation to extend your relations, and therefore your work, for future generations." (Tynan and Bishop, 2023, p. 506). I am no indigenous researcher, nor do I have enough experience being surrounded by indigenous ways of thinking and knowing, instead having been trained in western academic institutions — so this approach comes less fluently, and also with more risk of doing it injustice. This is why I say I've *attempted*, as opposed to *used* a relational or a decolonial approach.

My entire research process has been shaped by an appreciation for the knowledge publicly available by and about indigenous peoples, and so primarily I wish for this to be stated clearly, as a thank you to the academics and their partners in this section for their role in harbouring knowledge. Missing in this section is a discussion on my "research gap", the idea being instead this thesis simply *adds*, as the justification for my work is that no one else has had the opportunity to write it down yet, and that even if they had my perspective would still be worthwhile to build onto it.

2.1 Resistance

It is worth situating this study first within the wider discussion on resistance. The conceptualisation of resistance is a fairly recent endeavour, having previously been simply understood as binary in the sense of response to power, or "domination versus resistance" (Ortner, 1995, p. 174). However, increasingly resistance is being understood as an "umbrella concept that contains forms of everyday, serial and organized resistance" (Lilja, 2022, p. 202). Often wrapped into social and political movements across the world, in their correspondent scholarly fields there has been a proliferation of research on different historical and current movements which resist power, domination and injustice across the world (Vinthagen, 2015).

Particular focus should be given to the forces in which people are increasingly mobilising against. In Latin America and Colombia there has been a powerful and popular feminist movement, resisting against record-femicides in the region and macho-patriarchal relations (Lerma, 2010; de Souza and Rodrigues Selis, 2022). The Black Lives Matter movement was a response to the institutional racism of western societies (Lebron, 2023). And the anti-imperial movements against the Israeli-government's genocidal occupation of Palestine, whether it be everyday resistance by Palestinians or protest movements across the world, has been widespread and vigorous (Darweish, 2023; Luerdi, Fitria and Karisma, 2024). These examples indicate how far and wide resistance movements against modernity are.

2.2 Indigenous resistance in Abya-Yala

These varying instances of resistance improve our understanding of indigenous resistance within the wider experiences across the world. We see many similarities in what forms of power are being pushed up against.

The struggles against colonialism link closely with Latin American feminisms. Segato (2014) speaks of the interconnectedness between colonial states and patriarchy with both presupposed on the control and sovereignty of both territory and women's bodies. We can also see throughlines between the forms of resistance and agency of black individuals and communities in contesting dominant narratives and reclaiming their own epistemologies in the face of western colonial racism (Mbembe, 2017).

Experiences of western colonialism and imperialism are by no means homogenous, however briefly reviewing academic work done in Abya Yala as a whole speaks to the solidarity shared between these varying movements. For as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017, p. 6) writes from the Nishnaabeg territory, along the north shore of Chi'Niibish, or Lake Ontario: "it is not happenstance or luck that Indigenous peoples and our lands still exist after centuries of attack", but a result of a "centuries-old legacy of resistance, persistence, and profound love that ties our struggle to other Indigenous peoples in the Americas and throughout the world." Via the logics and legal backing of the "Doctrine of Discovery", European powers and settler colonial states have historically and contemporaneously dispossessed, marginalised, and used violence to control indigenous people in Abya Yala (Miller, 2019). However, throughout 500 years of resistance considerable knowledge and stories have been

collected which show the power of indigenous groups to fight back against colonial processes (Hill, 2009; Gombay and Palomino-Schalscha, 2018). Indigenous resistance movements in Latin America have utilised a variety of strategies to advance their goals, including direct action, legal advocacy, cultural revitalization, and participation in electoral politics (Jackson and Warren, 2005).

2.3 Resistance of the Nasa People

Nasa resistance generally is by no means an unstudied topic (Penagos, 2022), with plentiful amounts of writing out there by Nasa and non-Nasa academics, journalists and NGOs. Meanwhile Nasa organisations and institutions document first-hand their varying forms of resistance in likely the most absolute form, excerpts of which will be explored in the analysis.

Joanne Rappaport (2005), a U.S anthropologist (currently working with indigenous organisations in Caldono, Cauca to document a history of their institutions), has spent time in Cauca learning from and collaborating with so-called ‘indigenous intellectuals’ from CRIC, which has resulted in discussions on the ideas of interculturism and the utopian project CRIC has been working towards. They looked at the way in which during the 1990s CRIC educators utilised interculturalism as a central discourse, affording “ways of critically absorbing ideas and practices from the dominant society, including the technology of literacy, pedagogical methodology, the analytical insights of linguistics, and theories of ethnicity from anthropology and society” (Rappaport, 2005, p. 5). Other works, cited elsewhere in this thesis, show a long collaborative relationship between Nasa communities and Rappaport. Arturo Escobar, a key figure in postdevelopment, himself associated with the nearby Universidad del Valle, Cali, wrote a chapter of his book *Pluriversal Politics* occupied with a discourse analysis on the language of statements by Nasa peoples, particularly of a statement published by the Association of Indigenous Cabildos of Northern Cauca (ACIN), titled *Libertad para la Madre Tierra*, or *The Liberation of Mother Earth* (Escobar, 2020). Escobar (ibid, pp. 63-64) came to delineate a “Mother Earth liberation discursive formation”, which establishes an episteme (in the Foucauldian sense, the *a priori,* unconscious knowledge) radically different from the dominant heteropatriarchal capitalist colonial modernity, underlining that “Nasa thought hails from long before modernity began, and it aims far past it”.

2.4 Food Autonomy

A facet of resistance by Nasa people comes in the form of its collective work to improve and protect food autonomy. Food, after all, is "at the centre of all societies" and reflects a variety of relations and power dynamics between different actors and forces (Wald, 2015, p. 109). Much of the research done on food autonomy in the context of indigenous groups and the Nasa is done by the incredibly knowledgeable Cuidar Research Group, composed of Nasa people, professors and students from the Universidad Surcolombiana, led non-hierarchically by Juan Camilo Calderón Farfán. I sat down with the group to discuss their research and to ask for their guidance, of which informed my own research in many meaningful and intangible ways, for which I am very grateful for. The Nasa people they work with are from Huila, a department adjacent to Cauca, which saw an influx of Nasa moving there after the 1994 earthquake displaced many communities (López Silva, 2012).

Food autonomy as a term is preferred to food sovereignty by Nasa organisations and observers as it better applies to the indigenous context by linking with autonomy and agency in general, in combination with the feeling that food sovereignty relates more to the markedly different peasant movements (Calderón Farfán et al., 2020). According to CRIC (2024b), *autonomía alimentaria,* food autonomy, is "a strategy of resistance of indigenous peoples" with the aim to "strengthen the nutritional aspects of the community, through the recovery of its own diet, nutrition education, food preparation, support for the diversification of the family garden with traditional seeds and the exchange of products". For Singh et al. (2017, p. 248), food autonomy "entails an ability to make decisions about food production that are not only guided by the market but also related to the sense of well-being, dignity, and identity of local people". Its core departure from food sovereignty (itself an alternative paradigm to food security (Patel, 2009)), understood as "the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems" (La Via Campesina, 2007), is not so much in ideology but in practice. In Colombia for instance, Morales González (2012) writes that food sovereignty has fell victim to co-optation by governments and capitalist forces by operationalising the idea on the scale of the nation state, hence food autonomy emerging to reflect the scale of the community or indigenous group.

Substantial theorising on food autonomy and Nasa has been done by the aforementioned Cuidar Research Group: in Figure 3 we can see the various and complex meaning behind food autonomy for Nasa people, including the importance of non-dependence on external forces, as well as how it is closely tied to identity and

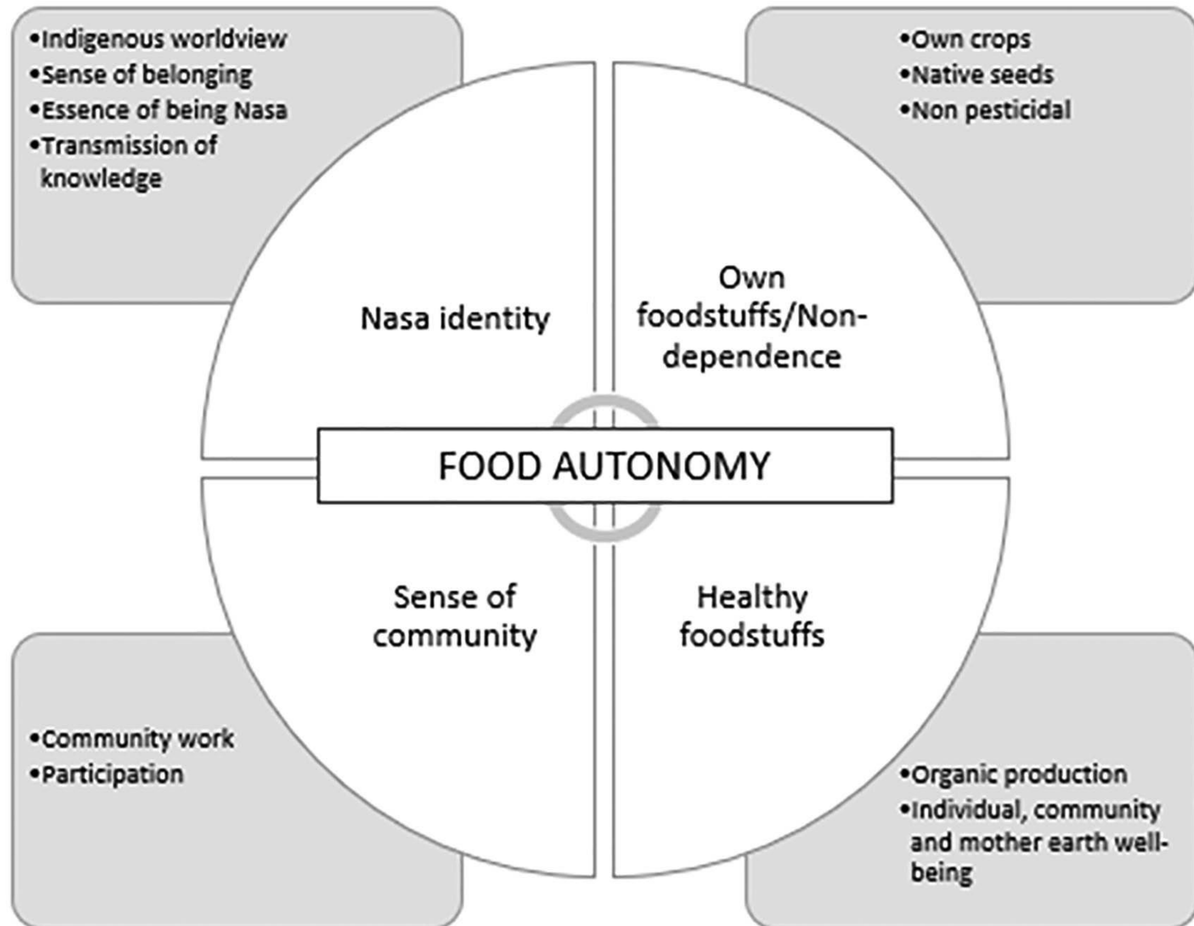

Figure 3 - The meanings of food autonomy for Nasa people (Calderón Farfán, Dussán Chaux and Arias Torres, 2021, p. 53).

belonging. Over the past decade food autonomy has become an important topic of debate and work for Nasa leaders and organisations (Barragán-Varela and Ardila Luna, 2022), particularly in the face of worsening food autonomy conditions due to neoliberal and globalised market forces becoming increasingly present in Nasa territories (Chaux, Bravo and Calderón Farfán, 2024). Food autonomy is considered to be a key strategy for health outcomes for Nasa people, by improving access and consumption of healthy food, as well as a strategic response to the issues faced in modernity (Calderón Farfán, Rosero Medina and Arias Torres, 2022; Calderon Farfan et al., 2023). The experience of COVID-19 among some Nasa groups in Huila

gives particular credence to the debate — as *resguardos* isolated themselves during the pandemic, food and consumer products were completely paused, resulting in communities relying on solely localised food production, showing the resiliency of these communities and their food production capacity (Calderón Farfán et al., 2023).

3. Theoretical Framework

In building a framework to understand the case study of Nasa resistance, this section outlines Pluriversal politics, or the pluriverse, in its full genealogy and applications in order to arrive at an approach to analysing the data, which seeks to position the Nasa actors as protagonists.

Demaria and Kothari (2022, p. 60) argue that a new moment is occurring in the social sciences on the conceptualisation of development, following on from the modernization theory of the post-war period, the dependency theory critiques in the 70s and the 2000s rebrand of sustainable development: "a focus on a pluriverse of alternatives to development". In this embryonic paradigm, a growing number of academics are turning away from neoliberal developmentalism to instead learn from and analyse radically different ways of living.

3.1 Post-development

If, hyperbolically, Marxian economics is the critique of capitalism and socialism is the answer, post-development is the critique of development and the pluriverse is the response. There is a strong tradition in the social sciences of critique and questioning of core development assumptions, which is a discourse that has emanated from and serves to reproduce Western epistemologies (Rist, 2014). Post-development gained traction in the 1990s for its post-structuralist critique of development, through the voices of academics such as Arturo Escobar (1995) and Wolfgang Sachs (1997). This critique situates development as a project which has led to, in its pursuit of western conceptions of progress based on their own capitalist models, a "diverse range of rich and vibrant traditions were reduced to being worth, literally, nothing" (Escobar, 2017, p. 6). Development's discourses and practices led the a dominant worldview of the global South having come to be "seen as 'underdeveloped' since the early post-World War II period and treated as such thereafter"(Escobar, 2015, p. 454), making way for decades of elite-led policies which "struggle to emulate the North's economic template, and all at enormous ecological and social cost" (Kothari et al., 2019, p. xxii).

Post-development represents not only an imperative to think beyond the paradigms of development, but also the merging with a postcolonial perspective, that being the endeavour to critically examine the legacies and effects of colonialism and

imperialism on societies and cultures in the global South (Loomba, 2005). Development marginalises non-Western ways of knowing, social relations, law and science, reminiscent and consistent with colonial projects of previous centuries, by prioritising the implementation (for better or worse) of various institutions such as anthropocentrism, private property, representative democracy and economic growth, which eminently derive from the global North (Kothari et al., 2019). In so doing, this marginalisation legitimises violence and dispossession of peoples not conforming to these dominant discourses.

Development's "ideas of progress and development justify colonialism and coloniality" and as such is an "important axes in the defense of the death project", a term which Suárez-Krabbe (2016, p. 3) in part derived from Nasa people's ideas. ACIN have wrote in a communique:

> The conquerors brought with them their death project to these lands. They came with the urge to steal the wealth and to exploit us in order to accumulate [wealth]. The death project is the disease of egoism that turns into hatred, war, lies, propaganda, confusion, corruption and bad governments (cited in Suárez-Krabbe, 2016, p. 3).

Development has also played a significant role in reproducing racial capitalism and coloniality in myriad ways: one example being the neoliberal economic policies promoted by its institutions which exacerbate racial inequalities by dismantling social welfare programs, privatizing public services, and deregulating markets (Bhattacharyya, 2018). Murrey and Daley (2023, p. 204) substantiate the argument to abolish development through documenting its intrinsic link to Eurocentrism, racial logics and coloniality, whilst also outlining the need to "move towards different (and many) futures)".

3.2 The Pluriverse

Formulated first as decolonial options (Mignolo and Escobar, 2010), with the premise of moving beyond critiques of coloniality to a study of politically orientated action, the pluriverse has become an established idea of which decolonial, postcolonial, feminist and radical practitioners and scholars are gravitating towards to explore and study alternatives to sustainable development (Kothari et al., 2019). The etymological meaning of the word pluriverse serves as good starting point for

understanding its deeper premise. Pluriverse is the antonym of universe, where the 'uni' (unitary, one) is replaced with 'pluri' (many, multiple, abundance). It is inspired by the quote from the founding statement of the Zapatistas from Chiapas, Mexico on working to build "un mundo donde quepan todos los mundos", a world where many worlds fit. The premise is that "historical and existing initiatives, practices, and worldviews that diverge from dominant development discourses like the SDGs provide diverse, complex, and rich empirical examples from which to learn" (Kaul et al., 2022, p. 1150).

As a theory the pluriverse is less drawn to a single definition, but is better understood by its many related concepts, drawing heavily on feminisms, postcolonial theory and decolonial methodologies, degrowth, as well as the literature in which it is producing. Alternatives to development often encase ecological equilibrium, social well-being and justice, direct deep democracy, economic democratisation, and ontological plurality, among much more (Kothari et al., 2019). Kaul et al. (2022) bring attention to the term alternatives to *sustainable* development: this emphasises the recent project of sustainable development as an empty agenda, one that has appropriated sustainability principles to fit neoliberal discourses such as economic growth, despite the two being inherently opposed (Hickel, 2020). The pluriverse underlines "the need and the options for alternatives to destabilize the hegemonic model" (Schöneberg et al., 2022, p. 1232).

3.3 Analytical Framework

Demaria and Kothari (2017) spurned this turn by articulating what exactly scholars should be seeking in what is called "transformative initiatives" (or transformative alternatives), which served as the foundation of two important collections of case studies on the pluriverse: Kothari et al's (2019) *Pluriverse: A Post-development Dictionary* and the special feature of the journal *Sustainability Science* edited by Shivani Kaul, Bengi Akbulut, Federico Demaria and Julien-François Gerber, *Alternatives to Sustainable Development: What can we Learn from the Pluriverse in Practice?*. Demaria and Kothari (2017, p. 2595-2596) defined three key features of transformative initiatives:

1. Seeks to transform the structural roots of global injustice along political, economic, social, cultural and ecological axes.

2. Questions the core assumptions of the development discourse (i.e. growth, the centrality of markets and economy, universality, modernity and its binaries).
3. Encompasses a radically different and more relational set of ethics and values to those underpinning the current dominant world system.

This serves as a framework for understanding and analysing potential transformative initiatives; this thesis seeks to establish whether the Nasa resistance strategies constitute pluriversal politics by using these three key features. Figure 4 can be used as an additional way of understanding the possibilities of this analysis, as it shows what values Kothari et al. (2019) envisage in societies of the pluriverse. Hence, by looking at the values of the Nasa resistance strategies and aligning them with these, we can come to an understanding of the pluriversal nature of the case study.

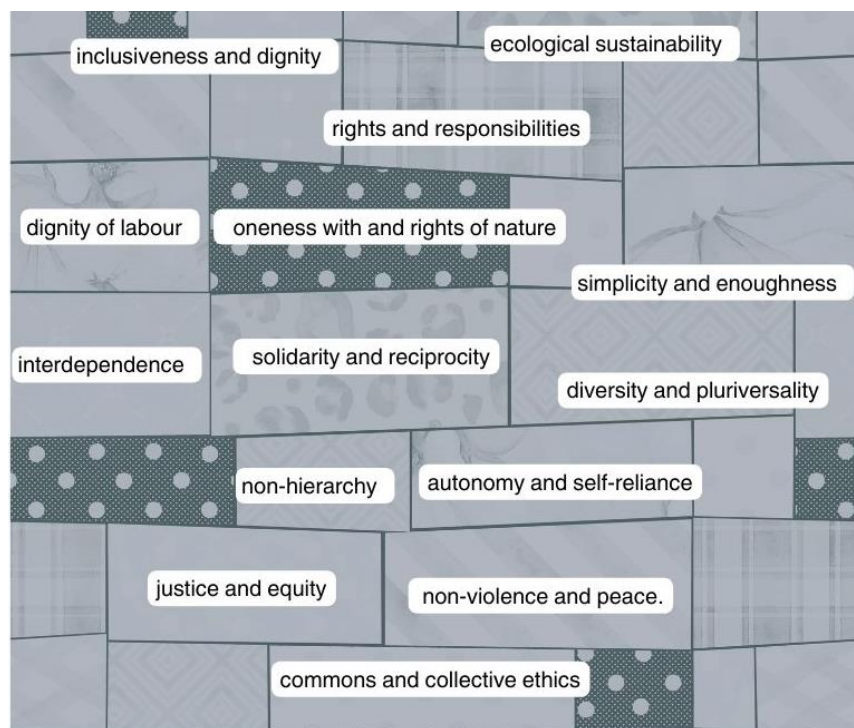

Figure 4 - Non-exhaustive values encompassed in the tapestry of alternatives, adapted (albeit unattractively) from Kothari et al. (2019).

These initiatives make up the mosaic of alternatives to sustainable to development, they make up the pluriverse. Literature and scholarly activity in this field focuses on "territorial, community, and network initiatives that intend to move methodologically beyond discourse analysis with a situated and empirical analysis of how pluriversal practices might flourish as well as generate tensions" (Kaul et al., 2022, p. 1149). However, is resistance, closely linked to survival, too much of a departure from an 'alternative'? Schöneberg et al. (2022, p. 1232) argues no, as

transformative alternatives “can also arise from necessity—why should a survival strategy not be the embryonic form of a new society?”. Despite the motivation for the resistance strategies by the Nasa people, it is still appropriate to view them in the frame of alternatives for what they might achieve beyond goals of survival in the face of oppressive forces.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021, p. 1) reflects on the history of research as a dirty word, as intrinsically colonial: “the ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world’s colonized peoples”. From the colonial regime-backed scientific racism (Saini, 2019), to the legacy of northward flows of knowledge production and appropriation of the global South (Bhambra, 2014; Radcliffe, 2017; Mignolo, 2021), it was therefore imperative for me to be aware of the ways in which my research might perpetuate colonial research practices, and to take steps towards a decolonial research project.

Tuck and Yang (2012) warn of the empty discourse which is increasingly trending in social sciences on decolonisation. They assert “decolonization is not a metaphor”, meaning for something to be ‘decolonial’ it must actively be working towards “Indigenous sovereignty and futurity” (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 35). Similarly, for Smith (2021, p. 282) it is not enough for research on indigenous topics to be neutral or passive: due to the history of erasure of indigenous ways of knowing and extractive research practices it must “‘talk back to’ or ‘talk up to’ power”. In other words, it should link to activism, and be part of the struggle with which is inherent to the context.

Given my academic training and socialisation in Europe, and my representing this through my identity, despite concerted effort unconscious problematic or colonial processes might have unknowingly emerged in the research process. With this in mind, my work to follow a decolonial methodology is along two strains: ontological pluralism and solidarity. My ontological approach challenges dominant (and the dominance of) Western paradigms that privilege certain ways of knowing while marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems, such as exceptionalism (present in development modernisation theories (Escobar, 1995)) and humanism/anthropocentrism (implicit in most non-ecological or non-indigenous theorems). Throughout the data collection and analysis, I respect and engage with the plurality of worldviews and ontologies that exist, such as the Nasa cosmology.

In addition, I view this thesis as a part of the struggle in which I am simultaneously documenting. By detailing and interacting with the forms of Nasa resistance, this thesis seeks to give value and strength to the Nasa call for autonomy, liberation and sovereignty. I engage with this topic as a supporter, an ally, in solidarity with the people I have spoken with, and I hope that was indeed clear to them. In each interview I made transparent a purpose of this research is for the wider global community, who are engaged in similar transformative initiatives, to be able to learn and be inspired by the Nasa people's experience. In doing so I affirmed my belief that their efforts are just, worthwhile and something to be proud of.

The broad design of my research process is a qualitative case study methodology — an approach which promotes a deeper effort to understand the complexities of the sociopolitical research focus of Nasa resistance, as qualitative research methods are preferable when phenomena are not readily quantifiable or when researchers seek to grasp the subjective perspectives of individuals (Patton, 2015).

Drawing on the principles of qualitative inquiry, my research aligns with a constructivist/interpretivist epistemology, recognizing the importance of subjective interpretations in understanding my data and how the knowledge I am using in this thesis is a result of a process which was "actively constructed by the researcher and participant" (Leavy, 2014, p. 83). This methodology therefore implicitly emphasises the meanings individuals attribute to their social world and the significance of context in shaping these meanings.

I also draw on a reflexive methodological approach, which allows for a critical examination of the research process itself. This lens is crucial for acknowledging and scrutinizing the underlying assumptions, values, and actions of myself and others which shape the research. For Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018, p. 9), reflexive research has a duality in that the approach must remain sceptical of the reality being constructed by the researcher, whilst also recognising that this reality can still "provide an important basis for a generation of knowledge", that "opens up rather than closes" opportunities for understanding rather than asserting truths. What this translates to practically in my research process is a commitment to understanding how my interpretation of the data may be fallible and different to other realities, but it is still useful and important to use and discuss in this thesis as a foundation for further learning on the topic of Nasa resistance.

4.1.1 Case Study Methodology

Case study appeared to me the most appropriate approach to the research methodology of my thesis. For Creswell and Poth (2023, p. 153), case study methodology is a "qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) … through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information". It was clear to me from the beginning that to answer my research question, a case would have to be formulated in order to understand whether the bounded system of Nasa resistance constituted a pluriversal transformative initiative — a concept which lends itself to case study methodologies evidenced particularly by the *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary,* a book filled with cases which ultimately constitute a tapestry of transformative alternatives (Kothari et al., 2019). Those cases like my own can be seen as "intrinsic" case studies, in that the "focus is on the case itself" because they represent an "unusual or unique situation" (Creswell and Poth, 2023, p. 157), the unique situation being the transformative potential of the resistance strategies that have been studied.

As formerly alluded to, case studies engage with multiple types of data. This improves the "confidence in the value of the data", in what Mills, Durepos and Wiebe (2010, p. 801) refer to as "triangulation", as the research is less reliant on a single type or source of data which might be problematic. Not only does a case study methodology offer robustness, but also flexibility (Yin, 2018). Throughout the research process I was able to adapt which data sources I would include and analyse, as I was exposed to new ones, or sources I previously expected to rely upon became less useful. For instance, on travelling back from my data collection stay, I unexpectedly encountered a museum which had a section on Nasa history, including instances of acts of resistance. This proved to be a valuable data point which added to the other forms of data I collected — if I had been committed to relying solely on interviews, I might not have taken it so seriously or in as much detail and I would not included it in my data.

4.1.2 Case selection

The journey of happening upon this case is a long winded one, beginning in Thailand where I was working on agroecological transition policy in the region, which eagerly led me to Colombia hoping to learn from the mature agroecological movement present there (León-Sicard, De Prager and Acevedo Osorio, 2017). Upon spending

some time in Bogotá, I became interested in various indigenous food systems of different peoples in Colombia. It was only upon meeting a mutual friend who was Nasa, that I decided I was able and it was appropriate to narrow the case down to this group. I was invited to their home in Nasa territory in Cauca to explore and carry out research on food autonomy.

As the research process progressed, I began to understand and learn of the wider struggle of the Nasa people against the various threats of modernity, with their food system being just one of them. Speaking to Nasa activists and politicians inspired me to widen my scope to all forms of resistance, which led me to the final case selection as I felt that the context related to the pluriverse and that it would be beneficial to look at it through this lens. It may be so I was influenced by others to look at the wider struggle; after all, as Hammett, Twyman and Graham (2015, p. 48) writes, research participants should be thought of as "people (and institutions) that have agency and power (in various ways – hidden, visible) over your research". However I am confident in the path the research took, and the case I believe was a natural choice based on the experiences I had.

4.1.3 Data Types

Semi-structured interviews constitute a large component of my research data as they provide a dynamic platform for engaging with participants and eliciting rich qualitative data (Haenssgen, 2019). My approach combined the allowance of open-ended inquiries and free discussion with the guidance of a predefined interview framework, affording participants the freedom to express their perspectives and the ability to guide the direction of the conversation — while ensuring some core topics such as oppression and resistance strategies which I wished to discuss were included.

Archival data was central to my thesis as there is a plethora of information from indigenous organisations available online, from news bulletins to statements. For Patton (2015, p. 563), archives are invaluable "not only because of what can be learned directly from them but also as a stimulus for paths of inquiry". This certainly proved true for my own research process, as various leads came from reading and exploring the past as documented by organisations like CRIC, whether it be a person involved in a protest or an idea behind a community gathering. Legal documents are also related to this data type, which give insight to the judicial or government systems and discourse surrounding the case. One thing to consider is the way in

which I access these archives, predominantly through the internet: and how this differs from traditional forms of archive. Featherstone (2006, p. 596) writes of how the digital archive “presents new conceptual problems about the identity, distinctiveness and boundaries of the datum and the document”. To transcend this issue, it is worth considering Foucault’s (1972) reconceptualization of archive as archaeology, thereby treating the archival data less as absolute, distinct and bounded knowledge and more as a platform from which discourses and ideas can be traced.

Another data type I employed was observations, which entails the recording and interpretation of phenomena as they naturally occur within real-world contexts (Bryman, 2016). I was only in the Nasa community in Cauca for a short period, but I somewhat perceived the lived experiences of the participants, and the observations I had serve as a means to access tacit knowledge and unspoken nuances which may elude the other data collection methods. Through observations, I seek not to assert authority or authenticity but rather to co-create meaning and understanding in collaboration with the Nasa community.

With the assistance of my colleague who came on the data collection trip as a photographer, this thesis also utilises visual data. As Silverman (2022, p. 58) remarks, the importance of visual data lies in the insight into what the researcher experienced, particularly the “cues” that weren’t necessarily verbal. By incorporating visual data into my research, I aim to look behind linguistics and discourse to tap into the emotive and sensory aspects of the case. To protect the anonymity of the participants, I have not used any photos of persons. This in itself posed a challenge, as rich data was to be found in the actions and expressions of the people around, but I am also grateful for the push to look to the material world, whether that be the natural landscape or the built environment which themselves have a lot of meaning.

4.2 Research Procedures

4.2.1 Data Collection

In total 29 people were interviewed during my research, 15 of which were with people from the *resguardo* which I visited in Cauca (henceforth called the research trip), and the other 14 being with what can be described as key figures, experts and activists related to Nasa resistance. Informed oral consent was gained from all participants before commencing the interviews. The latter interviews were either in-

person or via video call, and with the majority in Spanish. In the research trip the interviews were in-person and conducted in Spanish and Nasayuwe, all with the support and involvement of a friend who lives in the community. She was fundamental to the data collection (and research in general) by assisting with attaining informed consent from community members, identifying people to interview, and translating from Nasayuwe to Spanish.

I am a native English speaker and my command of Spanish is not fluent, so during the research trip I was joined by a colleague who could translate important points in the interview that I missed, allowing for me to ask extra questions as is the case in semi-structured interviews. Interviews would often be done in groups, a technique which is in response to an overreliance on individual interviews in the social sciences (Nunkoosing, 2005), and therefore attempts to make participants more comfortable by being surrounded by friends and family. This was particularly important as my colleagues and I made up four people, three women and one man (three outsiders and one fellow community member), which might have been an overwhelming ratio for one participant.

I used what's known as "snowball sampling" (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981, p. 141), whereby I utilised a chain of referrals from participants and collaborators. This was also combined with convenience sampling, in which I interviewed people who were accessible to me during the data collection, particularly during the research trip when it would sometimes be a case of seeing who was physically present in the village during that day. The combination of the two proved a suitable way to gain data for my project as a more structured approach might have been too imposing on the community. The approach I took felt more organic, and in terms of demographics proved varied enough.

One of my colleagues on the research trip came as a dedicated photographer, whose photos are attributed as "Stragyte, 2024" in this thesis. Her aim was to capture visual data of the research themes, doing so with a digital camera. The process was a combined effort in terms of the decision making on what to photograph — on occasion I would request specific pictures of things I was seeing and wanted recorded, other times she would take pictures of what she felt were relevant and important.

For observation data collection, this was done over the 4-day period in which I travelled to and was in the Nasa community. We stayed in a family's home during this time, eating, talking and playing with people in the *resguardo*. Throughout this time I took physical field notes on what I was seeing and my impressions, thoughts and feelings surrounding the research trip. I also recorded conversations I was having with my colleagues on our initial impressions and early-stage analysis using a digital recording device. After the research trip both these were transcribed digitally.

My approach to collecting archival data was unstructured, in the sense I did not do a systematic review of the archives which were available to me. Instead, I used a combination of searches using key terms, and referrals to find appropriate data. For the former, this would include searching using an organisation's web page's internal search function for terms I was interested in as well as browsing the historical news feeds for relevant headlines. In the case of referrals, this means either another piece of data or source refers to it which leads me to go and seek it out, or a person points me toward the document.

4.2.2 Empirical Data Weaknesses

My restrictive language skills may have inhibited my ability to engage with the data and pick up on subtle linguistic cues during the interviews, and my capacity to guide the direction of interviews to interesting areas of discussion. Additionally, I conducted some interviews by myself — for these I recorded and translated anything I couldn't quite grasp in real time, although they might have benefited from a translator present to help guide the conversation more smoothly.

At times there would be not just one but two layers of language barrier: when participants would speak in Nasayuwe which would then be translated to Spanish, then English for my data. Factors such as this influence the type of analysis I can do with the data: for instance my ability to conduct discourse analysis, an approach which emphasises "the constitutive function of language" (Leavy, 2014, p. 151), is limited when such depth and meaning behind the translations may have been lost or misconstrued.

Additionally, a demographic in which I felt was lacking in my interview population was elders, or older people. This is due to two main factors. Firstly, some elders I had the opportunity to interview during the research trip preferred to speak in Nasayuwe,

and the process of translating from Nasayuwe to Spanish may have led to misgivings about the interview. One instance comes to mind in which a Nasayuwe-speaking participant began a group interview, then excused herself midway to engage in another activity nearby: my perception being she no longer wanted to be part of the discussion, as she later returned when the more formal sit-down conversation moved outside to look at a community garden. I won't assume as to what her motivations were, but the situation may have been indicative of other elders who declined or showed no interest in participating in the interviews. Secondly, my Nasa colleague who supported us to find people to interview preferred to ask younger and middle-aged people who she was better acquainted with. Thus the perspective of elders is not overtly present in the data; however given the influence of this group it is likely the case that their views are tacitly included through their younger generations.

4.2.3 Analytical Procedures

In conducting the analysis for this thesis, I utilised thematic coding of the case study data with the aid of NVivo software. Thematic coding involves systematically identifying and categorizing patterns, themes, and concepts within the data (Hesse-Biber, 2010). NVivo provided support in this process by facilitating efficient organization, management, and analysis of the various data points.

The approach to analysing the data stems from the three features of a transformative initiative (Demaria and Kothari, 2017):

1. Seeks to transform the structural roots of global injustice along political, economic, social, cultural and ecological axes.
2. Questions the core assumptions of the development discourse (i.e. growth, the centrality of markets and economy, universality, modernity and its binaries).
3. Encompasses a radically different and more relational set of ethics and values to those underpinning the current dominant world system.

Through the coding process, I attempted to discern where these three features might be present in the data. Whilst doing so, recurring themes and patterns emerged, allowing for in-depth exploration and interpretation of the research questions.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

I spoke earlier of my efforts to produce a decolonial work, prioritising that discussion elsewhere because I see it as fundamental to the research design as opposed to an ethical concern. Instead in this section I seek out nuances and issues of positionality to consider in this thesis.

4.3.1 Ethics

The risk with fieldwork, as Fabian (2014) claims, is as a practice it seeks to freeze the culture being studied in a particular moment, denying its dynamism and agency, and in so doing has historically portrayed non-Western cultures as timeless and static, perpetuating colonial attitudes of superiority. This links to an issue identified in early post-development literature which has a romanticised, paternalistic image of traditional subsistence communities (Ziai, 2017). As a response to this, I drew on sceptical post-development, which "is critical towards cultural traditions, abstains from articulating desirable models of society and employs a dynamic, constructivist concept of culture" leading to a "radical democratic position" (Ziai, 2017, p. 2549).

It can sometimes be the case that indigenous communities are the subjects of too many research projects, which Tuck and Yang (2014, p. 811) speak about as being "simultaneously hyper-surveilled and invisibilized/made invisible by the state, by police, and by social science research". As I tentatively stepped deeper into my research process, it became apparent to me the issues and people I was interacting with were not over-researched, at least in the past few decades.

From a serious threat of violence, the Nasa people, especially outspoken vocal activists, are in danger from actors who seek to silence and oppress them. To ensure their participation in this research does not elevate the risk they face, I have absolutely anonymised all personal data and exact locations from this study. What's more, to assure the thesis itself does not promote conflict or violence for whatever reason, a translated copy has been provided to participants for their approval. Any online publication of this thesis will be based on their collective agreement to do so.

4.3.2 Positionality

When conducting research Bilgen, Nasir and Schöneberg (2021, p. 519) write that who is researching, and "how, why, where, and when must be constantly questioned". Two parts of my identity affect my research significantly: my gender as

a man and my white skin colour, for these can be assumed the moment you meet me, and the connotations of this positionality therefore happen immediately. This may have influenced people in various meaningful ways, for instance by making people feel uncomfortable with my presence during the research trip. My approach to easing this influence was to maintain a relatively low profile, be respectful of boundaries and ensure I was an amicable guest in the *resguardo*.

My being an outsider might be understood through a positivist stance, that I can view the context through an objective, unbridled and neutral lens. This however would be misguided: despite being an outsider my presence there was by no means separate from the data, but instead is constitutively relevant to the data I collected, whether that be due to the changes in behaviour of people or the influence of my identity on what people disclosed. With that being said, as Darling (2014, p. 212) notes, “context and positionality are always shifting beneath our feet as research develops, relationships grow and recede and the lives of those we work with move on around us”. One might hope that as my colleagues and I engendered some level of trust with the community, the issues of positionality might have ebbed slightly as we realise as humans, we are not so different.

4.3.3 Reciprocity

One form my attempts to remove colonial research practices took was by striving to ensure my research was not an extractive process, wherein *I* gain exclusively from the experience. I pursued the idea of reciprocity, which seeks to promote a mutual exchange in research (von Vacano, 2019), wherein I give back in some way for peoples’ time and energy to support this thesis. This materialised thanks to my colleague who was taking photos; for those that wanted, and indeed it was every participant, we took high quality portraits of themselves and their families. We then sorted and edited the photos, before sending them back via download links in WhatsApp. I hope that we were able to capture a time and moment that will be appreciated in years to come and that the photos will be valued.

Additionally, I wanted to participate in the agenda of enshrining knowledge and passing it on to different generations. I spent time creating and editing Wikipedia pages, (a project which Erik Olin Wright (2010) notably calls a ‘real utopia’ due to its non-capitalist principles of open cooperative knowledge distribution) on the subjects

I was researching. Some pages that are extensive on Spanish Wikipedia were not so on the English site, so predominantly I was bridging the gap between the two.

5. Findings

5.1 Indigenous Education Movement

Over the past 20 years, an educational revolution has blossomed in the indigenous territories of Cauca. Beginning with agreements with the national government allowing for the hiring of indigenous teachers at traditional educational establishments, there now exist fully indigenous run schools and curriculums. The struggle for educational autonomy is indicative of the wider movement among the Nasa people to control their own futures. In this section I refer often to 'indigenous X' as opposed to 'Nasa X', because the educational movement has largely been led by CRIC who represent or constitute all indigenous groups in Cauca through a collaborative mandate. Although Nasa people make up the vast majority of actors within the movement and the receivers of the education, it is worth noting the plurality here.

5.1.1 Self-Education

Conventional education across the world can largely be understood as conservative in nature: it often preserves (Westernised) traditional institutions and values, homogenises non-dominant ways of knowing and promotes academic excellence above all other outcomes (Clemitshaw, 2013; Regmi, 2022). In Colombia, the legacy of education among indigenous peoples is of the church's influential role in running education services. Bonilla Morales (2021) documents the ways in which the religious imperative of the education system has historically conflicted with different indigenous identities in Colombia, the strict doctrine of Christianity being at odds with the plural realities of the societies they operate in. And as Smith (2021, pp. 278-279) writes, "the attack on traditional ways of knowing was often carried out in the name of progress and access to literacy, medical health and economic development".

According to one person I spoke with, the educational directive of the church in Nasa communities was evangelical in nature. This is seen in many other places in the global South with education being used as a tool by religious institutions to promote religious adoption (Chidester, 2014), in part due to a colonial project of 'civilising' populations to conform to Spanish norms and values (Fuentes, 1992). The church ran the education system in tandem with the state, with Spanish language being at

the core of the curriculum. This has led to a generation of Nasa people whose most fluent language is Spanish and speak little Nasayuwe.

In 1978 the Colombian Ministry of Education issued Decree 1142, which recognised indigenous populations had the right to design their own curriculum and be educated in their own language. However, this did not immediately translate to a practice of indigenous-administered education systems: various bureaucratic and legal barriers were in place which prevented indigenous people to run schools (Mejía, 2006). Meanwhile indigenous organisations, such as CRIC, set out to design an educational programme for indigenous peoples. The ideal became known as the Sistema Educativo Indígena Propio (Indigenous owned educational system — SEIP), or more simply referred to as *Educación Propia* (a term I uneasily translate to Self-Education, which risks losing some of its meaning of independence and ownership by indigenous people).

I interviewed someone who was involved in the early stages of designing the indigenous education system with CRIC, who recalled that many fellow Nasa people did not believe that indigenous people themselves had the capacity to manage and run their own education. "Right, we used to say, 'Are we capable of that? The church already knows how to handle that, what we will do is mess it up'". This calls to mind Fanon's (1961 [2001]) concept of colonisation of the mind: centuries of racist colonial experience generate a structure of dehumanisation, or what Pual Gilroy (2004) calls being 'infrahuman', that permeates into the views of colonised peoples to the extent they believe they *are* indeed inferior. Through the educational revolution we are seeing not only a process of regaining control of an education system, but a process of re-existence, of evicting the colonial ideas of self-worth and developmentalist conceptions of progress, to arrive at the idea that indigenous knowledge and way of living was valuable all along.

Momentum was gained in 2015 when Decree 1075 set out concrete guidelines on the contracting of the administration of educational services with the *cabildos* (the traditional indigenous authorities of *resguardos*) and indigenous organisations. In 2019 a guidance document on the Decree made the bureaucracy needed for indigenous peoples to assume control of educational services far more accessible and feasible. The government document outlines that indigenous traditional authorities and indigenous organisations are eligible to take over the running of educational

services so long as the educational establishment serves a majority indigenous population, or if they can demonstrate that the establishment offers insufficient education services (Ministero de Educación Nacional, 2019). This can be seen as the turning point in the legal journey, and is directly due to the efforts of indigenous peoples' and organisations' mobilisation, activism and involvement in the state processes such as through consultations, lobbying and democratic procedures. The judicial successes are a pivotal step in a journey towards building and implementing the SEIP at the national level.

It has also led to the establishment of an indigenous university in Cauca, recognised and supported by the Ministry of National Education, called the Universidad Autónoma Indígena Intercultural (Intercultural Indigenous Autonomous University). The university operates on the idea that education is an "integral, progressive and permanent process throughout the life cycle, in which the family, spiritual authority, community, cultural and political authorities are involved" (UAIIN-CRIC, 2024). This indicates a relational approach to higher education, emphasising learning from and in tandem with the people around you, and a continual lifelong learning journey. This is in deep contrast to the neoliberal models of higher education found elsewhere in the world and in Colombia, which erode teacher-student relationships by fostering a consumer-service provider dealing instead, having commodified the learning process into products to be sold (Galindo, Gómez and Rodríguez, 2015; Busch, 2017). In a missive on a large meeting of various indigenous authorities, CRIC asserted that "Self-education is an ancestral right, Indigenous peoples do not conceive it as a service, as the country and society consider it." — displaying the way in which they are reframing education in a distinctly different way from its capitalist conceptions.

5.1.2 Programme of Intercultural Bilingual Education (PEBI)

In order to advance the concept of Self-Education, indigenous peoples through CRIC developed the *Programa de Educación Bilingüe Intercultural* (Programme of Intercultural Bilingual Education — PEBI: notice the Nasayuwe influence in the original). The broad purpose of the PEBI is a curriculum designed from an indigenous perspective, allowing for the learning of indigenous languages such as Nasayuwe, as well as giving space to teach culturally appropriate values and learnings. The principles of the programme are identical to that of CRIC's: Unity,

Land, Culture and Autonomy. Exploring what exactly is meant by these four principles offers great insight in how the educational programme contributes to resistance and ultimately pluriversal transformation.

Through educating for unity, the PEBI seeks to “redefine relationships in conditions of equity, where difference and the recognition of diversity take a complementary path of encounter for mutual enrichment between cultures” (PEBI-CRIC, 2023). Recognition and celebration of difference is reminiscent of the pluriversal concept of convivialism, which 64 authors in the *Convivialist Manifesto* understand as the philosophy of living together (Caillé et al., 2014). According to one CRIC educator, the “school space” is “seen as a continuity of the family space”, akin to elders passing down knowledge. For these values, of plurality, of equality, to be so central to the principles of an education curriculum, indicates just how radical and progressive the programme aims to be.

I interviewed a Nasa person who has previously worked in indigenous authorities, who remarked how in the newly formed CRIC schools, “one of the main lines of academic work is precisely to ensure that children acquire the knowledge and skills to work with the land in harmony with it”. Relating to the PEBI principle of land, this

Figure 5 - Tul *of a CRIC school (Stragyte, 2024).*

means “knowing it, caring for it, respecting it, defending it and protecting it” (PEBI-CRIC, 2023). Among myriad other things, this fosters an axiology in children which centres the value of ecological balance inherent in so many indigenous philosophies. Figure 5 shows a *Tul*, a kind of Nasa garden, in a newly-formed CRIC school I visited. The teachers explained the way in which students were taught about the different plants, their spiritual, social and ecological importance, and how to care for the land. I asked if other schools also have this, and indeed it is part of the PEBI curriculum, showing both metaphorically and practically how the Self-Education process is taking root.

PEBI include the principle of culture in their curriculum, outlining how it is “the material and spiritual expression of peoples that is transmitted from generation to generation, and in this sense, it allows for the understanding and interpretation of the world and the origin of life”. At a time when many indigenous cultures are being erased, consumed by the western hegemonic discourses and ontologies (Smith, 2021), this educational movement stands as an inspiring beacon of resistance to these seemingly overwhelming globalising trends. During the research trip I spoke with a child who was attending a CRIC-ran school, asking why I saw other students returning home with a wooden staff. She enthusiastically explained to me the tradition of the *chonta,* an ancestral cane with a deep meaning of protection and strength, and that students would rotate in the responsibility of *Kiwe Thegnas*, or the indigenous guard, the concept of which will be explored in the next section. To see a young child so passionate about a tradition is a testament to the power and importance of education aside from teaching academic skills — to inspire a new generation, to continue and renew culture, to maintain the existence of a people.

Figure 6 - The interior of a CRIC school (Stragyte, 2024).

In the *resguardo* I visited, a CRIC school was operating there which had only begun 2 years prior. In Figure 6 you can see the beautiful handcrafts which students are taught how to make. The practice of weaving has deep meanings and a purpose beyond material function as they serve to represent the Nasa cosmology and discern creation stories and Nasa history. From what I could ascertain the consensus on the new education model was being positively received by the community. Across Cauca these schools are expanding and consolidating, and are an incredible emblem of the autonomy of indigenous people in the region. This concept is being taught, too: the principle of autonomy in the PEBI refers to both the right for indigenous people to control their own education system, and also that the broader ideas of self-determination and political organisation are part of the learnings for students.

The individual who helped design the early model recalled how sceptics pejoratively branded the early CRIC schools as revolutionary, that they were out to train rebels. He laughs at the idea, but says that in reality they very much were revolutionary: "Effectively we were revolutionizing, because the word revolutionary means to change: changes in the paradigms". The programme set out to uproot and completely transform the way education was being done in indigenous territories. CRIC runs

training events for facilitators of this education programme, about which they say "each facilitator will be a seed that allows the methodological path for the SEIP to continue taking root in each territory to guarantee the fundamental right to indigenous education". As the activist Nelson Mandela famously claimed, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world". In collaboration with other indigenous groups, the Nasa people embarked on a project to protect their existence through the 'weapon' of education, the fruits of which will be known in years to come.

5.2 Indigenous Activism

Serious active resistance and struggle are very much tangible and visible processes in Cauca for the indigenous people living there, with a strong tradition and legacy (Bonilla, 2014). In a museum in Tierradentro, east Cauca, an exhibition writes of historical moments for the Nasa people, among them tales of resistance: "1910-1916, Manuel Quintin Lame leads an uprising of indigenous groups from Cauca against ranchers and landowners from Popayán because of the ill-treatment and exploitation to which they were subjected". In recent times, northern Cauca has been the region in which action has had to be taken to combat oppressive forces. However, the Nasa response is led by a profoundly pluriversal philosophy — for as they themselves put it, it is "coming together for another possible and necessary world" which is "the strategy that has sustained us" (CRIC, ACIN and ONIC, 2005).

5.2.1 Kiwe Thegnas

Figure 7 - Kiwe Thegna on duty with their child (Wallis, 2019a).

Nasa *resguardos* all through Cauca have a network of indigenous guards, known as *Kiwe Thegnas* in Nasayuwe (which directly translates to caretakers of the land). The network, which began in May 2001, is designed to surveil and monitor potential sources of conflict and issue in indigenous territories. Figure 7 shows a defender communicating with others nearby, whilst caring for their child. According to CRIC (2024a), the guard was "conceived as its own ancestral body and as an instrument of resistance, unity and autonomy in defense of the territory and the life plan of indigenous communities. It is not a police structure, but a humanitarian and civil resistance mechanism." The guard aims to foster a "a culture of peace" in a region heavily influenced by conflict, violence, and war. The *chonta*, or cane, shown in Figure 8 is carried by the guard as wells as *cabildos*, the indigenous authorities, and is a powerful symbol of this nonviolent strategy, as it represents an unthreatening but still powerful tool of protection. In terms of humanitarian work, the guard searches for missing or kidnapped people, administers first aid, and protects marches and public gatherings.

Figure 8 - A Nasa chonta, or cane (Campo, 2019).

In terms of resistance, they serve a very important role in ensuring Nasa people feel less intimidated by actors who seek to threaten and initiate violence due to myriad reasons (i.e. to silence advocacy of Nasa autonomy, or extortion). Their communication system allows warnings of risk of bombings, or of potential violence from external forces, such as paramilitaries. I had conversations with Nasa people about a strategy Kiwe Thegnas deploy called 'active neutrality', which serves to deescalate situations of potential conflicts in a peaceful and nonviolent way when armed invaders arrive to indigenous territories and villages. When this occurs, the guards mobilise nearby community members to rapidly converge on the village or place which is being threatened by the external actor. They do not initiate violence in any way, and instead avoid it by outnumbering the intruders and giving them a choice: leave, or commit a massacre of hundreds or thousands of unarmed civilians. This strategy has been incredibly successful according to some members, with instances of violence very low.

It is important to understand the actors seeking to causes issues in indigenous territories to come to appreciate the ways in which this form of resistance is a response to global injustice. In the wake of the 2016 peace accord which disbanded the political and military organisation of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of

Colombia (FARC), the region of north Cauca has experienced a power vacuum which has attracted the activities of armed groups seeking to control the coca-producing and trafficking routes of the area (Ayuso and Boding Hansen, 2018). Criminal gangs and narcotraffickers seek to extort Nasa people or displace them, leading to multiple deaths and injuries in the past decade. The narcotics drug trade has harshly brushed up against the lives of indigenous people across the region, an illicit industry that is deeply global in nature.

O'Connor (2009, p. 106) argues the economic control of cocaine is situated in "the broader context of Colombian capitalist accumulation", with narco-capitalist able to exert power in society through the wealth gained through the drug trade. The cocaine industry transcends borders and is intricately linked to global hierarchies, with the drug being consumed in the global North at the sacrifice of people in the global South. Much like other forms of capitalist exploitation (Wright, 1999; Wright, 2011), individuals at the bottom of the value chain, in this case the Nasa people, are subject to violence, with increased risks for women. Violence forms the basis of control in the region — however the indigenous guard seek to subvert this logic, attacking the idea that violence is the just tool of power, and that Nasa people are subservient to the emblem of globalised violent capital.

5.2.2 Liberation of Mother Earth

Linked to the Kiwe Thegnas (many guards participate and lead activities in it) is the radical campaign in the north of Cauca known as the Liberation Process of Mother Earth, which has been in full effect since 2014. Supported by the three major indigenous organisations in the area, ACIN, CRIC and the National Indigenous Organisation of Colombia (ONIC), it was founded on the explicit notion of responding to structures of oppression: boldly written on the Liberation Process of Mother Earth *Who are we?* section of the website is "We are communities of the Nasa people of the north of Cauca, Colombia, which since 2005 have risen before the capitalist power that enslaves Mother Earth". Capitalist processes of land-grabbing, overexploitation of land and workers, and pollution are intimately linked with the colonial experience, according to the document serving as the mandate for the campaign, which states:

> We know that the structures and relations of the societies in which we live, and which have been imposed on these lands and against our peoples since

> the arrival of the conquerors, are the result of the desire to exploit life and to extract wealth in order to accumulate capital without limit or rest (CRIC, ACIN and ONIC, 2005).

In a text widely read and understood as the core ideology of the movement, referred to earlier due to Arturo Escobar's analysis of it, *Freedom and Joy with Mother Earth* additionally adds to the reasoning behind the campaign, stating how in the region:

> Almost all of the forest and animals were eliminated to make way for extensive sugar cane plantations. An ecocide. For this ecosystem to recover its health, it must once again be populated by plants and animals. They are the ones who long most for Uma Kiwe's freedom (Proceso de Liberación de la Madre Tierra, 2016).

The discourse is clear-eyed on the forces which must be challenged, so what practice is deployed to do so?

The primary activity can be described as land reappropriation. The activists' strategy is to target ancestral lands that have been dispossessed, but which are now in the name of varying powerful, national and foreign landowners who are "chained to the global financial system" (Proceso de Liberación de la Madre Tierra, 2015). One example is the targeting of the vast plantation owned by Carlos Ardila Lülle, a billionaire from holdings in the sugar, bottling and media industries. Unsustainable farming is rife in the region (Quintero-Angel and Ospina-Salazar, 2023), characterising the approach to the land of the capitalist owners: extraction and profit at the expense of the natural environment. Groups of Nasa activists then clear the monoculture plantations in a form of *minga*, clearing the crops, whether it be sugar cane or illicit crops such as coca and poppy. Activism often centres around the concept of *minga*, a form of collective work which can refer simply to a gathering to repair a home, or with more political connections akin to a mobilisation or organisation action; in all cases, *mingas* are emblematic of the demilitarised and community-driven indigenous fight for autonomy in Colombia (Sánchez Montenegro, 2015; Torres Molano, 2023).

The final step in the action is to "sow to give joy back to the Earth" (Proceso de Liberación de la Madre Tierra, 2016), through regenerative planting of traditional native plants like cassava and maize, symbolising both a restoration of ecological

principles and the new possession and custodianship of the land in the hands of the Nasa people. We are told to “pretend that these farms are called Planet Earth” (Proceso de Liberación de la Madre Tierra, 2015) — they indicate a wider idea of liberation, of freeing *Uma Kiwe*, Mother Earth, of the destructive structures which grip it.

Sometimes referred to in western journalism as civil disobedience (Wallis, 2019b), the *mingas* have led to clashes with paramilitaries, private security forces and the police, at a great cost of human life with numerous activist deaths, including children (OHCHR, 2022). But the courage and bravery of the Nasa people continues, for as the Nasa-Misak feminist activist Vilma Almendra (2017, p. 25) puts it: “Minga, an agenda that in every age finds a way to resist and persevere until it is forever rid of the criminal coloniser, of conquest”.

5.2.3 Role of Women

Women are very much involved in the organisation and mobilisation of the Liberation Process, and female leadership is not uncommon. In her working with the organisation Rappaport (2013) noted a strong presence of women’s voices in ACIN. This Nasa tradition stretches back all the way to La Gaitana, a figure of legendary status in the region, known for leading a coalition of actors to uprise against unjust conditions and treatments of indigenous people by the Spanish colonisers in the 1500s (Bonilla, 2014). Matallana Peláez (2012) writes that she is invariably linked to the indigenous struggles for land, and acts as a symbol of resistance and strength against the invader. The centralisation of a woman in the imagination of resistance speaks to their place in the movement.

Daigle (2023) and Yazzie and Baldy (2018) write on the ways indigenous resistance movements rely on care work, particularly carried out by indigenous women, to advance towards and shape futurities. CRIC and ACIN do not shy away from this reality, demonstrated by this statement by CRIC on March 8th:

> We commemorate "International Women's Day", redefining and recognising the struggles of the women who came before us in the search for our rights, and also those women who daily make essential contributions in the family, the community and the organisational process of the indigenous movement.

The role of women in upholding and maintaining the strategies of resistance through care work is central to understand, and by visibilising this reality the movement can have a better understanding of its linkages to patriarchal systems. However, it is not sufficient to only acknowledge these realities, but seek to transform them — of which I was not able to clearly discern during my exposure to the movement.

5.2.4 Rejection of Development

Cauca is often regarded as a place with great potential for (the normative conception of) development, due to its natural resources, with Nasa indigenous territories highly coveted for their substantial natural resource reserves such as minerals (Arbeláez-Ruiz, 2022). The Liberation Process campaign inherently rejects this notion of development. Protecting nature is at the core of their ideology, that it should never come at the expense of abstract ideas of progress. In a statement they characterise their impression of public opinion towards them and their struggle: “They have land and they don't work it, they oppose progress”. Almendra (2017, p. 27) reflects on this: “They quantify and measure in results which, according to them, are concrete evidence of progress. They deceive themselves and deceive us”. This links to Tania Li’s (2007) idea of rendering technical, in which development agendas are occupied with creating technical fixes to the way they problematise issues, with the reality of people in the global South being far different from the conceptions of international development actors.

The reappropriation of lands is in response to the poor environmental effects of the control of land-grabbers in Cauca. Biodiversity and conservation is a driving tenet of land reclamation, through seeking to bring back life to the degraded ancestral territory: they are “entering them not as a revenge but as a gesture of love” (Proceso de Liberación de la Madre Tierra, 2016). It shows they cannot trust advancing global capital (Ioris, 2022) to take care of *Ume Kiwe,* thereby challenging the notion that ideas such as foreign or even capital investment are necessary to improve their lives.

The Liberation Process inherently challenges the notion of absolute private property. Matallana-Peláez (2020, p. 76) argues that it is due to “a philosophical standpoint that allows the Nasa to challenge Colombian land property laws as well as the Western mind frame these laws are embedded into”. The activism simultaneously contradicts the idea that simply by having a deed you have stewardship over a territory, as well as the Western capitalist ideology which backs that up.

5.3 Food autonomy

Nasa leaders and communities I spoke with have noticed a worrying trend of decreasing food autonomy due to increased access to globalised food products and lost traditions. The COVID-19 pandemic began a process of introspection on the quite radically different food habits many Nasa people have as opposed to just 25 years ago. One person I spoke with on the research trip said: "During the pandemic there was like a bit of a shift in awareness about food autonomy, like at that time it wasn't possible to travel to the village". In 2020, the *cabildos* organised a quarantine for the indigenous communities, which meant all of a sudden the ease of buying imported products was gone, and people were forced to rely on internal food production in the *resguardos*. A family I talked with recalled providing much of the community with beans that they had grown, commenting most other families no longer engaged in food growing.

Additionally, I had many comments on the food preferences of children and young people today, who are far more likely to want to eat ultra-processed foodstuffs like candy, and Western foods such as pasta. Not all changing habits might be viewed negatively though — the widespread usage of rice over maize as a staple is in particular a key change. This has had significant implications for women in households, as maize food products such as tortillas and soup take a long time to prepare (people discussed with us how women often spent multiple hours just in the preparation of maize dishes). Hence, switching to rice has greatly reduced time needed to cook meals and has led to a reduction in the care work time of some women.

However, in general the changing food trends are seen as an issue by the Nasa people, and so various organisations, elders and community leaders are taking action to improve this situation. This is done through placing an emphasis on traditional methods whilst also attempting more innovative methods to ensure autonomy of healthy food practices.

5.3.1 Traditional Methods

The *Tul* plays a role in food autonomy by promoting the consumption of healthy and affordable food by directly growing it for the household. It also has a symbolisation of what can be called Buen Vivir, or *Wët Wët Fxi'zenxi*. The Nasa have a term similar in

meaning and usage to Buen Vivir, the widely used term across Abya Yala and stemming from Andean philosophies, which alludes to an approach to living that prioritises collective well-being and ecological balance (Lang, 2022). *Wët Wët Fxi'zenxi,* for Quinto Sánchez (2020), incorporates these values whilst adding a distinct one: resistance. Accordingly, the survival of Nasa people rests not only on "a relationship of reciprocity, relationality and respect with Mother Earth and the other beings that inhabit her", but also on the "long struggle of resistance" and "processes of opposition to the Eurocentric system" (Quinto Sánchez, 2020, p. 5). The *Tul* is an embodiment of a rejection of an encroachment of dominant food systems, which is defined by ecological destruction and imported monopolised ultra-processed foodstuffs (Monbiot, 2022; Awuh and Agyekum, 2024). It prioritises ecological balance, an understanding of the natural processes which support it, as well as spiritual purposes serving to decentre human beings.

As mentioned before CRIC schools are utilising *Tuls*, but not only as an educational tool, but as part of a long-term strategy to improve food autonomy. This is from a conversation with a teacher, on teaching using the Tul:

> This includes the entire process of planting, maintenance, preparation, harvesting, and care. An important academic strategy has been developed through the Tul. So, yes, this is a fundamental strategy in schools for resistance, but also for food autonomy and to keep alive the knowledge of our elders.

By teaching children and young people how to grow and maintain a *Tul*, a skill which has been lost by some families in recent generations, serves to reignite an impetus to improve the food autonomy of the Nasa people.

Another method the Nasa use is seed exchange. This entails the safe storage and harbouring of resilient native seeds such as maize, cassava and beans, in order to be lent to people who wish to grow their own food. After harvest, the seeds are returned for other people in the community to use. This constitutes an ethic of the collective, distinct from the capitalist tendency towards individualism (Klein, 2008), which promotes bonds amongst the community which can serve other social capital purposes too.

5.3.2 Innovative and Adaptable Responses

La Asociación de Autoridades Ancestrales Territoriales Nasa Çxhãçxha (The Nasa Çxhãçxha Association of Territorial Ancestral Authorities) operate an organisational arm called AGRONASA. This was founded on the concept of explicitly improving food autonomy, in doing so by facilitating trade between different Nasa villages at fair prices (i.e. a village in the north of Cauca grows rice, and AGRONASA buys and sells the rice to villages in Tierradentro). They do this to combat the issue of the local economy being unjust "due to profits being retained by intermediaries who sell products generated in the region. These intermediaries then use the profits to purchase goods not produced locally, which they later sell to us, resulting in them capturing all the added value". AGRONASA negates free market logics: by controlling and ensuring fair prices they reduce profits for businesses higher in the value chain, whilst ensuring producers and consumers are less exploited. The organisation displays a fascinating way to maintain the responsible trade of goods whilst minimising the harsh externalities of neoliberal capitalism.

Figure 9 - An orange tree emerging through the canopy (Stragyte, 2024).

On a morning of my research trip, an elder from the family which my colleagues and I stayed with took us to the back of their home, through some coffee plants to an orange tree, pictured in Figure 9. She nimbly glided up the tree collecting the fruit,

why we looked in awe at the athleticism of someone three times our age. Her family harvests and sells coffee from this plot of land, but it serves a far greater purpose than coffee cultivation for retail. Coffee plants are very well suited to growing agroecologically, which refers to the idea of integrating ecological principles into agricultural practice, which seeks to promote the interactions between plants, animals, humans, and nature (Holt-Giménez and Altieri, 2013; Altieri, 2018). Coffee can coexist with various other species and allows for a good amount of biodiversity which Figure 10 demonstrates well. Different villages have a renewed interest in using their land for cultivation, particularly on coffee. Whilst not every grower does so using sustainable, agroecological methods, it was clear the practice of growing coffee to sell forms a strategy for food autonomy in two ways: by improving economic independence through providing financial freedom to control the purchase of healthy food, and secondly by coffee cultivation going hand in hand with agroecological food growing.

Figure 10 - A coffee tree amongst a backdrop of biodiverse forestry (Stragyte, 2024).

What I saw was coffee being cultivated using indigenous ethics of care for *Uma Kiwe,* for Mother Earth — a form of production incredibly different from monoculture coffee growing elsewhere in the world (Hicks, 2018). The rise in unhealthy food habits may be down to the fact of their affordability — ultra-processed food is

notoriously cheap, produced on very large economies scales for transnational consumption (Martin, 2022) — which combined with various other factors of globalisation (changing employment trends, increased use and purchase of technology, increased mobility) means that increasing purchasing power can directly influence the type of food you buy and eat. Thereby this process of raising income through responsible agroecological coffee cultivation achieves those separate needs without being at the expense of nature. Additionally, coffee plants thrive with various foods such as beans, maize and cassava. This strategy therefore promotes and allows for the growing of healthy food in an ecological way whilst still meeting modern needs.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Implications

The Nasa processes of resistance align with what Carcelen-Estrada (2017, p. 103) refers to as “continental patterns of indigenous solidarity”, in that they are not an isolated case of resistance but part of a wider practice of re-existence in the face of colonial modernity. My exploration of the different strategies is placed within this wider movement and discussion, and might be useful to inform research on similar conceptions but within different contexts.

The findings of this case indicate that the topics I was researching were not static, nor were they shrinking in depth, activities or importance. They are situated within a time of hope in Abya Yala, in what Findji (2018, p. 152) understands as a “twenty-year revival of the indigenous movement in Colombia and at the threshold of the five hundred years after the Spanish conquest”, and that many indigenous people in Colombia feel that this is “the beginning of a new era for American societies”. That is to say, the Nasa struggle has far to go, but also a potential with which further transformation can occur. I particularly feel that the fairly new endeavour of the PEBI curriculum has the potential for study from a vast array of disciplines, from critical pedagogy to progressive law and policy. Further research and support on the Nasa experience would uncover many more lessons and points of interest for other movements across the world.

6.2 Final Remarks

This thesis set out to explore and learn from the Nasa strategies of resistance, and to understand what extent they constitute a form of pluriversal politics.

Through the inspiring PEBI indigenous curriculum, an educational revolution many years in the making is starting to take hold in many Nasa territories. The epistemology, ontology and axiology of the newly forming CRIC-ran schools envelop a radically different set of ethics than conventional educational programmes do. They emphasise logics of equality, plurality and conviviality among a diversity of peoples; the importance of caring for and protecting nature; an approach in which indigenous cultures are given value to; and an assertion of the right of autonomy from colonial control.

Nasa people take an activist stance against the global forms of oppression they face, manifested through both the indigenous guard and the Liberation Process of Mother Earth. Kiwe Thegnas protect indigenous people from the expressions of coloniality in Cauca via violence and displacement. The radical Liberation Process campaign focusses on land reappropriation from global capital, which has devastated the ecological balance of the territories. Women play a crucial role in these movements, continuing a long tradition of female leadership in Nasa indigenous resistance. Nasa activism pushes up against various notions of development, particularly in the form of rejecting the idea of 'progress' in preference for maintaining ecological balance and a protection of *Ume Kiwe*.

A realisation of diminishing access and control over healthy food amongst Nasa people has led to a resurgence and attention to traditional methods of food autonomy, such as the growing of *Tuls* as food gardens. The developing Nasa approach to food autonomy challenges the assumption that entering into and participating in global markets as a key premise of modernisation and development is desirable. Through the organisational body AGRONASA the Nasa people are choosing to subvert free market logics, or via agroecological practice enter into these markets on their own terms of ecological balance as opposed to solely profit motives.

Through these findings the research question has been thoroughly explored, and I encourage you to consider the Nasa experience of resistance as an alternative to sustainable development. From the consistent rejection of dominant development discourse and narratives, to the active targeting of representations of transnational capital and the global injustice they represent, the indigenous communities in Cauca are an inspirational case of the power of a movement and people led by a love for one another and the planet we inhabit.

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