

GENOCIDE AND ECOCIDE IN FOUR COLOMBIAN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES: THE EROSION OF A WAY OF LIFE AND MEMORY

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Generally, the traditional Indigenous ways of 'knowing and seeing' the natural world lead to more protective behaviours than the dominating economic approach that represents the interests of the global North. Indigenous ways of living and remembering are however, currently threatened with erosion by several global dynamics. While many of the most powerful forces involved in the extinguishment of Indigenous peoples and their cultures are visible and direct forms of violence, there are also structural, systemic and invisible factors at play. In this article, based on original primary data collected within communities of four Colombian Indigenous peoples, we identify the four main silent dynamics producing the extinction of Indigenous cultures in Colombia. We refer to the operation of these forces as a form of genocide and connect them to the simultaneous occurrence of an ecocide.

Key Words: ecocide, genocide, green criminology, Indigenous criminology, silent silencing

Introduction

There is an association between the environmental ontologies of Colombian Indigenous peoples and their protective behaviours towards nature (Goyes *et al.* 2021). These ways of knowing, and seeing, the world can be characterized as two propositions: first, that *human* wellbeing is dependent on the existence and actions of non-human animals and spirits of the jungle; and, second, that *nature* as a whole is sacred. Nevertheless, both Indigenous *relationships with nature* and *Indigenous representations of nature* are in danger of being damaged or lost for various reasons. This is a tragedy in many ways, not least because there is much that the fast world of growth-based economies could learn from the pace and philosophy of life of Indigenous communities but this opportunity is being bypassed as the imperative of growth pushes territorial expansionism, exploitation and consumerism into Indigenous country and culture. This process raises questions related to rights, harm and justice.

In this article, we explore some of the main social dynamics that are threatening the survival of the culture and ways of life of Colombian Indigenous peoples. Additionally,

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by arguing that such cultural genocide¹ (Lemkin 2008 [1944]; Short 2010) facilitates ecocide, we seek to position the erosion of Indigenous ontologies that value ‘nature’ as a ‘green crime’. In the first section following this introduction, we provide an overview of the ways in which criminology has dealt with Indigenous issues. We highlight here that although there is a growing body of research exploring the legal yet harmful forms of violence against Indigenous peoples, there remains a need for solid theoretical foundations for, and the inclusion of Indigenous voices into, Indigenous criminology. In the second section, we engage with the theoretical and conceptual framework of this study. Here, we review the analytical power of the categories of ecocide and genocide in the analysis of the violence Indigenous peoples’ experience. In the third section, we present the methodological design of this study, explaining how we adapted the peer researcher methodology to the exploration of Indigenous issues. In the fourth part, we introduce the context of the four Indigenous peoples that participated in this project. We describe the diverse forms of, and variations in, the violence that Colombian Indigenous communities have experienced since colonization. In the fifth part, we present our findings in terms of the concept of ‘silent’ but systemic violence, by which we refer to the forms of legally sanctioned, socially invisible but structurally-powerful dynamics that are leading to the erosion of Indigenous ways of life and memory. In the sixth part, we engage in a discussion of how genocide and ecocide are connected and why this matters.

Background: Criminology and Indigenous issues

Most of the criminological studies that focus on Indigenous peoples are concerned with exploring the interactions these communities have had with official criminal justice systems, but these are constrained by the existing legal definitions of crime. Several themes mark these studies: (1) Factors involved in Indigenous youth offending (Goldsmith and Halsey 2013), (2) factors that increase the risk of Indigenous incarceration (Martel *et al.* 2011), (3) the sentencing process for Indigenous perpetrators (Anthony and Longman 2017), (4) the experience of Indigenous inmates in state prisons (Rynne and Cassematis 2015), including the challenges of parenting for incarcerated Indigenous fathers (Dennison *et al.* 2014), (5) how race and ethnicity affect parole (Silverstein 2005), (6) the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in the criminal justice system (Douglas and Fitzgerald 2018) and (7) recidivism of Indigenous people (Broadhurst *et al.* 1988). And finally, there is important scholarship that goes beyond the interactions of Indigenous peoples with the criminal justice system and explores issues like the victimization of Indigenous women (Dugan and Apel 2003) but which still depends on the existing legal definitions of crime.

Nevertheless, during the past two decades, criminologists have begun to critique the approach to Indigenous issues that is limited to legal considerations and frameworks. Their main point of contention is that criminologists have neglected other phenomena and histories that negatively impact the lives of Indigenous communities, despite (or

¹Arguably the term ‘ethnocide’ might also be relevant and applicable here but has some conceptual limitations when compared to the original conception of ‘genocide’ as formulated by Lemkin – even if this is not the version accepted into international law; ethnocide may also be understood as a less serious crime. We are grateful to one of our referees for observations on these points.

perhaps because of) the legality of what has happened. [Martin \(2014\)](#) has noted the lack of an overall engagement with Indigenous issues on the part of criminologists. Similarly, [Cunneen and Rowe \(2014\)](#) assert that while there exists a growing criminological interest in Indigenous methodologies, little effort has been made in developing the necessary theoretical and applied frameworks of Indigenous criminologies that are attuned to the needs and realities of Indigenous communities. These critiques notwithstanding, criminological engagements with Indigenous issues beyond the framework of state justice systems do exist, although they are few and far between. For instance, for more than two decades now, scholars have been exploring Indigenous justice systems as an *alternative* form of justice for the broader society (e.g. [Blagg 1997](#); [Braithwaite 2002](#)) although such initiatives have also been subject to criticism for potentially exaggerating, misunderstanding and misrepresenting Indigenous justice systems ([Tauri 2016](#)).

Recently, the criminological fields of green criminology (e.g. [Brisman and South 2020](#)), state crime ([Green and Ward 2004](#)), human rights ([Short 2016](#)) and the crimes of the powerful ([Whyte 2009](#)) have begun to pay attention to the experiences and realities of Indigenous peoples beyond their involvement in criminal justice systems and apply a harm perspective, that includes events that are legal but nonetheless destructive. For example, various green criminological contributions have been equally focused on the environment/Indigenous people and the state/corporations, [Boekhout van Solinge \(2010\)](#) analysed the harms inflicted on the inhabitants of the Amazon rainforest—Indigenous groups being prominent among them—resulting from deforestation and timber trafficking that ultimately benefit corporate supply chains. [Lynch et al. \(2018\)](#) used a political economy approach to demonstrate that the victimization of Indigenous peoples is a ‘normal’ outcome of the capitalist treadmill. Similarly, [White \(2013\)](#) has demonstrated that practices of resource extraction always victimize Indigenous peoples, an assertion confirmed and detailed by other green criminologists. [Crook et al. \(2018\)](#) show the impact of the parallel trajectories of genocide and ecocide on Indigenous peoples, arguing that both are processes of rights denial, injustice and exploitation. [Heydon \(2019\)](#), using the concept of procedural environmental injustice, addresses the collusion of international corporations and the Canadian government in successfully removing the protections that the law offers First Nations in Canada.

[Moloney and Chambliss \(2014\)](#) presented a synthesis of the fields of state crime and green criminology in an analysis of the ‘big bison slaughter’ in the American West. According to these authors, ‘the bison slaughter represents a state crime of omission due to its socially harmful or injurious consequences for dozens of indigenous American Indian tribal groups’ (p. 325). Using the same convergence of green and state criminologies, [Cleary \(2014\)](#) studied the strategies used by corporations to lay claim to the land of Indigenous communities in Australia. [Porter \(2017\)](#) looked at the mechanisms through which official knowledge is imposed on Indigenous knowledge and [Andrae et al. \(2017\)](#) contributed one of the few criminological studies that uses an insider perspective to explore how the New Zealand social welfare system exacerbates the abandonment and abuse of Maori. Relatedly, [Comack \(2018\)](#) conceptualized the structural dynamics impacting Indigenous peoples in Canada as an instance of a crime of the powerful, in that the colonial government dispossessed the former from their lands, pushing them into poverty and social exclusion (see also [Samson 2003](#)).

This brief overview reveals four major shortcomings in the criminological exploration of Indigenous issues: (1) As already stated, most studies are focused on Indigenous

interactions with official criminal justice systems, thereby neglecting other issues pertinent to Indigenous communities, (2) many rely on legal definitions of crime, thus ignoring legal but harmful activities, (3) the majority are written *about* Indigenous issues and, at best, speak *on behalf of* Indigenous communities but in general do not involve and include indigenous co-researchers and (4) studies connecting issues of genocide and ecocide (e.g. Crook *et al.* 2018) have generally been theoretical in nature rather than informed by original data collection. In response to the three first points, Goyes (2019) has been an advocate of the development of a southern green criminology—as an approach that relies heavily on the knowledge and experiences of Indigenous peoples and that considers environmental harms in the global south from a southern vantage point. Using the southern green criminological framework, Goyes and South (2019) studied the ecological disempowerment of the Tagaeri and Taromenane who inhabit the Yasuní Region in Ecuador. They found that both conservation and development projects, the former allegedly using environmentally sound policies, can disenfranchise Indigenous peoples. In this article, we intend to address the four shortcomings of earlier studies by using original data collection, gathered in alignment with Indigenous worldviews and methods by Indigenous co-researchers, to explore the significance of structurally imposed, legal harms that can be argued to constitute forms of genocide. In the next section, we explain the central analytical categories we use in this study.

Theory: Genocide and Ecocide

In defining who Indigenous peoples are and how rights might be attributed, Samson and Short (2005: 170) noted that the United Nation's discussion of Indigenous people's rights in the 1980s took as a starting point the widely cited definition of Indigenous peoples proposed by Jose Martinez Cobo (1987), special rapporteur of the sub-commission of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations. For Cobo, Indigenous peoples are those descended from the 'original inhabitants of regions colonized or invaded by what became a dominant population' (Samson and Short 2005: 170). Importantly this cultural continuity is threatened by the process of genocide and ecocide. According to Raphael Lemkin (2008 [1944]: 79) genocide can involve two processes: the 'destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group' and 'the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor'. The latter may be imposed on a subjugated population or 'upon the territory alone, after removal of the population and the colonization of the area by the oppressor's own nationals'. Importantly, the destruction of 'ways of living and thinking' (Friedemann 1975, p. 16), and of *cultural symbols*—is central to Lemkin's conception of genocide.

Concepts like these have increasingly been recognized as central to Green Criminology (Higgins *et al.* 2013; Short 2016) but of course have a longer history and wider application. Lemkin's (2008) original definition of genocide as the annihilation of a group did not suggest that this was necessarily achieved solely by means of physical extermination, but could also follow from the destruction of their social patterns and culture, and replacement by those of their oppressor (see further in Moses 2010; Goyes 2019). Rather than being a highly visibly form of violence this is a process that is systemic and *silently silences* Indigenous cultures in a way that, as Mathiesen (2017:

340–341, 2004) explains, is structural rather than being based on ‘the use of physical means of power’: it is part of everyday life, its limits are difficult to ascertain, ‘it is not noisy in nature’ and ‘it is dynamic in character’. There are, as Ruggiero (2020: 4) points out, various ways of classifying forms of violence that result in domination or degradation but *systemic* violence is ‘implicit in the ordinary functioning of economic and political systems’ and can be traced to the forces that shape the distribution of power and resources (see also Galtung 1969; Loadenthal 2019: 6).

The concept of genocide is therefore an important analytical tool in the understanding of the logics of colonialism suffered by Indigenous peoples, as it does not rely exclusively on visible, direct, physical violence and incorporates silent threats to the survival of Indigenous communities. Indeed, when the logic of colonialism is most successful it displaces entirely the social system, cultural framework and spiritual beliefs of the colonized.

These processes of cultural displacement or destruction are particularly significant in relation to the value of human memory as the repository of history and the oral transmission of cosmology and tradition. Applying the concept of genocide therefore contributes to a deeper and more nuanced comprehension of the contribution of colonialism and neo-colonialism to the dynamics of crime, harm, marginalization and social conflict, currently experienced by Indigenous peoples around the world (Cunneen and Tauri 2017). Indeed, as Tauri (2016: 50) puts it, ‘No successful colonial enterprise could flourish after the initial phases of contact and conquest without developing sophisticated processes designed both to mediate the influx of settlers and to expedite the colonialist domination of resource extraction’. Hence, as we discuss further below, it was the ‘introduction of key institutions of European customs, culture and knowledge – namely religion (Christianity), education, civil and criminal law and the evolving institutions of crime control’ that became the essential mechanisms for the ‘subjugation of Indigenous populations’.

The extinction of a people and a culture are central to the crime of genocide but as has been recognized in various international, authoritative discussions a further method of genocide is based upon ecological destruction. The over-exploitation of land, water and wildlife (Goyes *et al.* 2017), and the desecration of connections between people, their cultures and their lands (Samson 2003; Short 2016), can all have ecocidal and genocidal consequences for vulnerable Indigenous peoples who are materially and spiritually dependent upon endangered environments (Dunlap, 2018: 8). Recognition of this has led to calls for the formalization of a crime of ecocide under the Rome Statute, the treaty that established the International Criminal Court (ICC) that entered into operation on 1 July 2002 and that at present is concerned only with the four Crimes against Peace identified as genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of aggression. In this respect, ecocide has been referred to as ‘the missing fifth Crime against Peace’ (Higgins *et al.*, 2013; Crook and Short, 2014: 308).

Methods

This study is an empirical exploration of the silent dynamics that produce the erosion of the ways of life and memory of the Barí, Nasa, Ticuna and Uitoto Indigenous Peoples. These groups have been selected for the study here on the basis of two criteria.

First, the technique of maximum variation sampling to find ‘the full range of extremes in the population’ (Adams and Lawrence 2019). As elaborated below, the Barí Peoples remained isolated until 1975, successfully rejecting any kind of external interference until then. Their culture is therefore less influenced by Western values. The Nasa Peoples were less successful in resisting and rejecting the many intrusions they have faced since the Spanish invasion but despite various forms of cultural interference, the Nasa have managed to protect many of their traditions and values. Finally, toward the other end of our ‘range’, the Ticuna and the Uitoto have had frequent contacts with colonizers and due to threats to their survival, over time they accepted coercion into subordinating their traditional values and embracing various imposed Western practices and beliefs. These four Peoples give us a full range of communities in states of isolation, resistance, domination and subject to degrees of cultural genocide. Secondly, we adopted a convenience sampling approach to recruit ‘volunteers or others who are readily available and willing to participate’ (Adams and Lawrence 2019, p. 123), in our case, as researchers.

The core theme of this and related projects² is Indigenous peoples' representations of nature and their relationship with protective or destructive environmental behaviours. For present purposes, to explore this relationship, we draw on primary and secondary data from four different sources. Primary data include 37 interviews with the ‘elders’ of the four communities, as well as participatory observation of actual practices regarding everyday relationships with the elements of nature. These observations took place over periods of between four days and one week. The four Indigenous peoples included in our study have political authority systems that rely on ‘elders’ or ‘knowledgeable grandfathers’. Communities assign those labels to individuals in acknowledgement of their life trajectories and their contributions to the community. Note however that although there are clear links with age, the title ‘elder’ does not *exclusively* depend on this. By gathering interviews of between 7 and 10 elders per Indigenous People, we were able to secure representative and authoritative accounts of the dynamics of those groups.

The project design draws upon ‘peer research methodology’ an underused research method that attempts to (1) empower vulnerable groups, (2) enhance the understanding of an issue and (3) gain deeper access to the information required considering that (usually) interviewees are more willing to discuss sensitive or insider knowledge with peer researchers than with academic researchers (Lushey and Munro 2015). The methodology therefore relies on ‘peers’ of the researched communities who gathered the primary data. However, as there is a limit to how much peer researchers can accomplish (e.g. because they are not ‘salaried full-time academic researchers’, Lushey and Munro 2015, p. 534), we combined the peer methodology with secondary data gathering. This relied on (1) the texts ‘outsiders’ have written about the culture of the Barí, Nasa, Ticuna and Uitoto communities, and (2) audios of the Indigenous ‘mingas’—yearly meetings of Colombian indigenous communities that are held to remind the government of its promises and in which representatives of several Colombian communities debate the

²This article is part of an ongoing set of projects funded by the Global Challenge Research Fund of the United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council. The first part of the project consisted of mapping the cultural representations of nature in the cosmologies of four Colombian Indigenous Peoples (see Goyes *et al.* (2021)). This article is the outcome of the second stage that explores the social dynamics that threaten the existence of those Indigenous representations and indeed the communities themselves. A third phase is a study of Indigenous communities and health justice in the context of the Covid pandemic. The fourth phase will investigate the gendered effects of mining in Indigenous territories.

Indigenous cosmovision. Our use of a peer research methodology, by which we seek to gain a deep understanding about the lives and experiences of Indigenous communities, follows the mandates of Indigenous methodologies, understood as ‘guided by tribal epistemologies’ (Kovach 2009, p. 30) and that ‘privilege Indigenous knowledges’ operating as ‘localized within a specific tribal group’ (p. 176).

The project methodology complied with Colombian legal requirements concerning research ethics (Resolution 0843 of 1993) and we obtained informed consent from all interviewees, explaining the purpose of the project, obtaining consent first orally, in Spanish or in the Indigenous language when required, and also providing printed information materials and time for participants to read them. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the peer researchers. The Indigenous peer-researchers are co-authors of this article, first, to highlight their key role in the process of knowledge production; second, to confront the generalized academic practice of writing *about* Indigenous issues and, at best, speak *on behalf of* Indigenous people but in general not involving and including Indigenous co-researchers; third, because of their role in the processes of data gathering and coding.

Context

The four Peoples included in this study have suffered various kinds of colonial violence since the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in America, continuing to today. Indigenous peoples were decimated by the transmitted diseases brought to the Americas by Europeans, a process that was also ecocidal in that ‘the resultant collapse of farming in the Americas was so significant that it may have even cooled the global climate’ (Koch *et al.* 2019). The Bari experienced this loss of life and land following invasion by the Spanish army, the efforts of Catholic missions to ‘pacify’ them and then fierce and systematic attacks by Venezuelan ranchers attempting to seize land (Beckerman and Lizarralde 2013, p. xiii). Recent decades have brought further significant threats to the Barí way of life: first coming from U.S. petroleum companies, who took over large tracts of Barí land in the 1910s, then, from the 1940s, large landowners and the ‘*pájaros*’ (conservative Colombian illegal armed groups, predecessors of the current paramilitaries), the latter profiting from killing Barí people to enable other landowners and merchants to take their land. By the 1960s, the intensification of attacks by predatory ranchers alongside the disease epidemics brought by Western invaders, reduced the Barí population to $\frac{1}{4}$ of its original size. Approximately, half of the population died either because of epidemic disease or by poisoning at the hand of hitmen presumably hired by ranchers³ (Beckerman and Lizarralde 2013).

Most of the same forces—Spanish colonizers, illegal armed groups and mining entrepreneurs—have threatened the existence of the Nasa. Arriving in 1533, the Spanish found around 10,000 Nasa inhabitants, cultivating corn, cassava and coca, and a permanent cultural contest followed as the invaders used the influence of the new religion of Catholicism, conversion and priests, as well as a system of Resguardos (colonial

³Beckerman and Lizarralde (2013, p. 80) describe that in 1961 ‘three heavily armed men in a helicopter landed at the largest Barí longhouse, Karibaigdakaira, and treated the Barí, jubilant at the promise of peace, to a sweet drink later described as ‘like red milk [...]. An hour or two after the men left, people began dying [...] Between fifty and one hundred Barí were killed this way in the first week of peaceful contact’.

reservations) to dominate the Nasa. While the Nasa resisted the cultural imposition of religion and the authority of the priests, the Resguardos were more successfully implemented as an administrative system for the collection of taxes to be paid to the Spanish crown. The Nasa have remained tied to recurrent forms of exchange with external society through participation in civil wars and internal armed conflicts, as a result of unwanted but imposed mining activities within their territories (Rappaport 2005) and associated with coca and marijuana production. Regarding the latter, Zellers (2018, p. ii) argues that the Nasa ‘involvement in drug trade has contributed to the accelerated transition of Indigenous agricultural communities from a primarily subsistence-based economy to a cash-based economy that is dependent on the circulation of global economies’. This is a transformation that, combined with drug control policies, has ‘helped to undermine the political autonomy of Indigenous communities’.

The Ticuna have had a similar trajectory. The Spaniards had made first contact with them by the 1690's and in this period the familiar consequence of exposure to disease brought by the Europeans led to high mortality (Capriles *et al.* 2019). Witnessing the murders of the Aparia and Omagua Peoples during the XVI and XVII centuries at the hands of the invaders, led the Ticuna to move to the Amazon riverside in search of safety. In the 1850's when the rubber boom arrived in the Amazon, the ‘debt’ system⁴ was introduced by colonizers and rendered the Ticuna strongly dependent on income from projects and on goods originating from outside the community. This has left an important scar on their way of life and relationship with nature, as the principal way to obtain Western goods has become via ‘the commercialisation of fauna (live animals or their furs), timber trading and the extraction of fish’ (Capriles *et al.* 2019, p. 20). By the 1750's the Ticuna numbered around 700 (Riaño Umbarila 2003) and many of them were gathered in Catholic settlements that the Spanish built as a ‘civilizing’ measure, subsequently remaining there to try to avoid slave traffickers. The influence of the Catholic religion and priests had many consequences, transforming the Ticuna into sedentary people, making them dependent on certain forms of transaction in order to obtain steel tools and forcing them to cease using Malokas (large cabins) as communal dwellings in favour of family houses—with the justification that this was to avoid promiscuity. In the decades of the 20th century, they also became subject to exploitation related to different kinds of war: from 1932 when the Colombian and Peruvian states used them as soldiers in a war between these two countries, and from the beginning of the cocaine boom, with drug lords building laboratories to process cocaine and airstrips for their small planes within Ticuna territories.

In under 50 years, the Uitoto population was reduced to around 40,000 by a form of capitalist genocide resulting from the operation of the Casa Arana rubber factory between 1885 and 1932 (Santamaría, 2017). The workers of the Casa Arana used the Uitoto as slaves, forcing them to collect rubber for them. This slavery encompassed abusive practices such as killing Indigenous people for entertainment or as punishment for

⁴The debt system consists of lending money or other goods to Indigenous people who commit to pay back with their work—such as poaching, but the ever-increasing rate of interest makes it almost impossible to pay back the debt (Revenga 2006). This practice dates back to colonization and the demands of Portuguese and Spanish merchants and traffickers who forced Indigenous people to take part in the ‘extraction’ of animal wildlife (fish, and live mammals and their skins) and timber (Riaño Umbarila 2003). This system is still in place and operated by non-Indigenous Colombian and Peruvian merchants leaving the Indigenous participants in this arrangement ‘no other benefit than the possibility of buying some kilos of sugar, rice or oil’ (Riaño Umbarila 2003, p. 65).

not collecting enough rubber, and applying physical punishments such as mutilation, burning them alive or rape (Ramírez Mejía *et al.* 2012). In 1921, following the discovery of the atrocities taking place at the Casa Arana, the governments of the United States of America and the United Kingdom made a formal request to the Colombian and Peruvian governments to close the factory. For as long as the enterprise remained profitable however, the atrocities taking place there were denied or covered up (Ramírez Mejía *et al.* 2012) but, over time, economic viability declined as the exploitable labour force fell in number and as South-Asian countries provided competition, selling rubber at lower prices (Velez-Ocampo *et al.* 2016).

More recently, all four of these Indigenous peoples have been victims of two inter-related phenomena: (1) the Colombian internal armed conflict, and (2) the murders of environmental activists, most of whom are Indigenous. The National Centre for Historical Memory and the Colombian Indigenous Organisation, indicate that the Colombian internal armed conflict,⁵ beyond being a continuation of five centuries of violence against Indigenous Peoples, was an exacerbation of the physical and cultural genocidal practices in the country (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica and Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia 2019). Fuelled by the internal armed conflict, the period between 1997 and 2004 was the peak of physical attacks against Indigenous individuals in Colombia. During those years 4,632 Indigenous persons were the target of direct violence, out of which 1,069 were Nasa, 58 Uitoto, 37 Ticuna, and 19 Barí. From the overall number of victims, 49% were victims of murder because they opposed the expansion of extractive activities and paramilitary control, 23% received threats, 12% died during massacres and 11% were victims of forced disappearances (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica and Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia 2019). All the actors involved in the Colombian internal armed conflict perpetrated crimes against Indigenous communities. The paramilitaries were responsible for 33% of the crimes, state forces for 31%, the guerrillas for 28% and the perpetrator of 8% of cases remains unknown (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica and Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia 2019). The main motives behind the attacks against Indigenous communities that can be identified as associated with the internal armed conflict, are territorial dispute and the aim to achieve social control through terror. For example, one of our interviewees told us that because they 'live on the hills', diverse 'armed groups have been intimidating and attacking us'. All our Uitoto participants, and most Ticuna, included in some part of their stories accounts of how they or their relatives had been victimized by some actor: the Colombian guerrillas, the transnational corporations, or the Peruvian army. 'Those Peruvians killed all the people of my community, they took our timber, they took our women, then they killed the children, burnt them with gasoline, then they killed them all, nobody was left' (Interview with a female Ticuna elder).

Although, the Colombian government signed a peace agreement with the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (paramilitaries) in 2003, and in 2016 with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (guerrillas), the structures of the paramilitary forces and their links with the military remain intact (Goyes and South 2017). This has meant that the dynamics of territorial dispute between Indigenous communities and large land tenants who can still draw upon paramilitary support also remain intact.

⁵For details about the conflict, its actors and its relationship with environmental conflicts see Goyes (2015).

As a consequence, Colombia has been for the past decade and up to today, among the top-three countries with the most homicides of environmental defenders worldwide. In 2018 alone, 24 such homicides were registered in Colombia, making it the country with the second highest number of cases after the Philippines. While there is no exact information about the ethnic affiliation of the victims, [Global Witness \(2015\)](#) estimates that 40% of all environmental defenders are Indigenous.

This brief summary of the history of suffering of our sample of Colombian Indigenous communities shows how they, alongside most Indigenous peoples across the world, have been victimized, repeatedly, in the past and today, by processes of colonization and neo-colonization. They share a position lacking political power and autonomy within modern nation-states, and their populations have been reduced to small sizes, possibly, in some cases, reaching levels from which it will be hard to recover (Cf. [Coates 2004](#)). In the next section, we present our findings regarding the current forms of ‘silent’ Indigenous victimization.

Findings: The Silent Silencing of Indigenous Environmental Ontologies

Indigenous environmental ontologies are those representations of the natural environment that deal with its form and reality, and that offer guidance on ways of living with and relating to nature ([Goyes et al. 2021](#)). The combination of several social dynamics has been undermining Colombian Indigenous environmental ontologies and eroding corresponding ways of life. Clearly, the atrocities committed by armed groups (the army, guerrillas, paramilitaries, hitmen, mercenaries, etc.) throughout history—as described above—are terrible and powerful contributors to the genocide of Indigenous peoples, and the disappearance of their cosmologies. Nevertheless, violent direct action is just a part of the violence that has victimized Indigenous communities and produced the erosion of their ways of life ([Galtung 1969](#); [Samson 2003](#); [Crook et al. 2018](#); [de Carvalho et al. 2021](#)). Many of the dynamics producing the genocide of Indigenous communities and the silencing of Indigenous environmental ontologies are invisible.

Most of the Barí, Nasa, Ticuna and Uitoto elders concurred that in their communities many members were being attracted to lifestyles and aspirations that are not part of their traditions, with effects that are diminishing the strength and vitality of their cultures. The influences and dynamics that for our interviewees produce this erosion of their ways of life and the importance of cultural memory fall, roughly, into four inter-related categories: (1) governmental intervention, (2) the contents and operations of the educational system, (3) the intervention of well-intentioned outsiders and (4) the impact of technology.

Governmental intervention:

respondents representing all four Indigenous Peoples participating in this research identified governmental policies and practices as a source of disturbance of their Indigenous practices. This has partly occurred through a process of incorporation. [Rappaport \(2003: 315\)](#), e.g. describes how ‘Since the 1991 constitution, the state ... recognized cabildos as entities entitled to receive and administer *transferencias*, or tax funds, for public works, leading to a curious melding of ethnic identity within the

framework of the nation ... [as] ... the cabildo has increasingly taken on state functions'. This fits with the concept of neoliberal multiculturalism proposed by Hale (2005), referring to the governmental use of the discourse of intercultural equality combined with neoliberal economic practices, to further the reach of the State and its imposition of its hierarchies, institutions, logic and procedures. The idea of neoliberal multiculturalism also connects to the role that a *compradora bourgeoisie* plays in the cultural genocide of Indigenous ways of living and memory. As Mol (2016, 2017) described, fractions of Colombian rural communities in favour of modernization play an important role as an internal force in the erosion of their cultures.

A coordinator of the Indigenous guard⁶ asserted in an interview with the peer-researchers, that the State is a tool of the economic system and, consequently, most governmental policies have the goal of imposing the capitalist system on Indigenous territories, which he felt has created conflict and difficulties for Indigenous communities. A central institution in this respect is the official justice system and its clash with Indigenous justice systems. In 1991, Colombia ratified the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention of the International Labour Organisation (1989). This Convention mandates states to respect Indigenous customs and institutions, including justice systems. As a consequence, article 246 of the Colombian Political Constitution (1991) establishes that Indigenous communities can administer justice in their territories according to their own laws and procedures, '*as long as they do not contradict the national Constitution and laws*'. This decision was later ratified by the Colombian Constitutional Court in 1996 when reaching the conclusion that any kind of decision within Indigenous territories must be taken by their own authorities, i.e. elders, and follow traditional law (Rodríguez 2015). Such formal recognition and granting of autonomy to Indigenous justice systems was nonetheless perceived by our respondents as token and a manoeuvre to make them voluntarily accept the official national justice system and thus increase the reach and power of its institutions. This fits with the ideas of incorporation and neoliberal multiculturalism and is mainly achieved by exploiting interpretation of the sentence that Indigenous justice 'cannot contradict the national Constitution and laws'. A 'captain'⁷ of a Cabildo reported during an interview that the state fails to respect and indeed undermines the legal dispositions that exist and should be honoured in defence of Indigenous communities. He explained that despite the existence of a set of normative understandings and expectations—see above—'whenever a substantial problem appears, the ordinary national justice system interferes, disrespecting our Special Indigenous jurisdiction'. This point is substantiated by a long line of jurisprudential rulings of the Colombian Constitutional court regarding instances in which the ordinary justice system has violated the right to the application of Indigenous justice. For example, Rodríguez (2015) compiled over 40 Constitutional Court decisions dating from 1994, which should serve to protect the Indigenous justice systems. Additionally, our participants reported that actors who are not directly involved in the administration of the justice system but nevertheless are involved in implementing legal norms,

⁶The Indigenous guard is self-defined as an 'autonomous ancestral organisation with the goal of resisting, creating unity and autonomy in the defence of land and the life plan of Indigenous communities. It is not a policing structure, but a humanitarian mechanism and a way of civil resistance'. <https://www.cric-colombia.org/portal/proyecto-politico/defensa-vida-ddhh-cric/guardia-indigena/>

⁷A Cabildo is an Indigenous community council. The captain is the leader of the council.

such as the Ministry of Environment, are intervening in Indigenous territories with a serious disregard of previous promises of autonomy.

Another example of the detrimental effects of governmental intervention is the functioning of several funding programs established by the Colombian government to support the ‘development’ of Indigenous communities, some of which are based on donations and on loans. Representative of the latter is the Quality Superior Education Access (ACCES, for its Spanish Acronym) program of the Colombian Institute of Educational Credit and Technical Studies Abroad (ICETEX for its acronym in Spanish). This program is intended to help Indigenous people access universities but charges 3.66% interest on the loans. The latest report from the program indicates that ‘between 2010 and 2012, the effective demand for the program increased by over 100%’ while also warning that although the program was contributing to the ‘improvement of the quality of life of these populations, it can also become a source of disintegration of the culture and cosmovision’ (García Anaya 2013, p. 58). A Barí elder explained the challenges that such schemes generate, saying that the Barí people accepted ‘the invitation to have a dialogue with the broader society’ which was offered by representatives of the Colombian government who said ‘we will then lend you money to study’—but that subsequently, they have had to ‘find money to repay the debt, but in the jungle there is no economy, so then the Barí are obliged to kill the animals to sell them and pay the debt—i.e. the trap into which the Barí have fallen’. The irony that governmental funding of development projects has culturally and environmentally detrimental consequences for Indigenous communities is not restricted to the area of education but, as Goyes (2018) documents, happens broadly in agricultural initiatives.

The contents and effects of the educational system:

Peswewardy (2005, p. 143) argues that ‘historically, the notion of education for Indigenous Peoples has been, for the most part, a curriculum designed to deculturize ... and to disconnect Indigenous Peoples from a tribal perspective and worldview’. Whether intended or not, most educational programs in the universities attended by representatives of the four communities that participated in this study do not promote but rather contribute to the erosion of Indigenous cultures. The intervention of the educational system simultaneously produces both acculturation—the spontaneous acquisition of cultural patterns of other cultures (Friedemann 1975)—, and deculturation—forcing a group to stop practicing their own cultural and social traditions and protecting their identity (Friedemann 1975). The experiences of young interviewees in this project coincide with Friedemann's analysis, describing the education they receive as ‘standard for everyone’ with teachers reacting ‘with sarcasm and scorn to our background’.

Regarding acculturation, a Uitoto elder who participated in a focus group stated that ‘when the youngsters go to study, they change and do not want to listen to the elders any more, they do not want to produce mambe,⁸ consume mambe or even sit at the mambeadero [place where the community consumes mambe together]’. A Ticuna elder expressed similar concerns, saying that ‘all our discussions about our culture happen at

⁸Coca powder that is obtained after a roasting, grinding, and sifting process out of coca leaves and ashes, which has healing and nutritional properties, in addition to the sacred power that is granted to it by the Colombian Indigenous people’ (Patiño et al., 2020, p. 397).

the mambadero', consequently, the unwillingness of the youngsters to join in means that they 'do not listen to the elders and their stories, ... stories that come from centuries back'. Following a pattern of cultural change that can be clearly traced to the beginning of the colonization of the Americas during the XV century, the current close relationship between education and religion in Colombia is also an important acculturation driver. As one of the elders suggested, 'the imposition of Catholicism is creating a harsh change on our mindset and our ways of being' in which traditionally 'the spirits of our ancestors and the spirits of nature play an important role' by commanding them to 'honour the water, the air, the sun, the rain, and the soil that keeps us alive'.

As well as eroding the pillars of belief systems, the traditional means of communication are also under threat. A Nasa elder observed that because the official educational system forces students to communicate in Spanish, the Nasa language is disappearing and 'every People that loses its language tends to disappear'. Indeed, although Nasa Yuwe grammar and vocabulary have been recorded and systematized by scholars, community elders are sceptical about the value of transforming an oral language into written form, arguing such a process would transform and erode their culture (Ávila Martínez 2011). According to the elders, in order to keep oral knowledge alive it must be put into practice, while knowledge stored in books can be ignored. Consequently, they have been implementing their own education system. As the traditional doctor of a community explained, they are trying to recover forms of education which 'do not take place within four walls but come from the Tulpa [stove]'. This educational system does not ignore Western scientific developments but does try to combine subjects such as mathematics and biology with the teaching of their traditional cosmology.

The intervention of well-intentioned outsiders:

Friedemann (1975) points out that the genocide of Indigenous groups in Colombia has followed not only from ill-intended physical actions but also as a result of the intervention of well-intended outsiders promoting a program of education or salvation to help the Indigenous become more 'civilized' and adopt the norms of Northern or Western societies. The application of such practices however is conducive to the slow but sure erosion and eventual destruction of Indigenous representations of their cosmologies and ways of life because it forces Indigenous people into an image of what outsiders think 'Indigenous peoples' should be. A related example would be the concept of aboriginalization—by means of which 'the accommodation towards Indigenous values' in criminal courts is 'a technique of contemporary colonialism' (Cunneen and Tauri 2017, p. 124). If education is well-meaning in aiming to rectify the neglect of the history of Indigenous peoples and their heritage, it can nonetheless be unhelpful when romanticizing or over-compensating. As one Barí elder mentioned, 'today the Barí are learning to say Pacha Mama, to complain that the Spaniards took the gold from us, and to talk about the powerful Caciques'⁹ – but, as he points out, the Barí 'had never said Pacha Mama, or had gold or Caciques'. This concern then lies with the effects of

⁹Fernández de Recas (1961) explains that the term 'Caciques' was first used in the XVI century by the Spanish colonizers to choose among the Indigenous those they wanted to act as leaders of a community. With time, some Indigenous Peoples appropriated the term to designate their internally elected leaders. For instance, the Nasa hold the Cacica Gaitana as a symbol of resistance (Rappaport 1998).

outsiders who want to ‘empower’ the Barí by *imposing* narratives.¹⁰ Consequently, as a Nasa traditional doctor explained, the community is now very careful about ‘what they want help with, what sort of help that is, and what the consequences might be’.

The intervention of technology

García Hierro and Surrallés (2005, p. 9) warn that ‘indigenous territorial space’ is now being overlaid by ‘other spaces in which alternative identities and symbolic ties have been built’ and ‘in the midst of this confusion, indigenous peoples run the risk of losing control over their spatial decisions and turning their titled territories into “object-spaces” ready to be exploited by other agents with whom they interact’. The process of superimposition of spaces, identities and cultures described by García Hierro and Surrallés is a manifestation of threats toward the sustainability and integrity of a way of life and can be illustrated by the arrival of digital spaces, consumer identities and external influences on what is culturally valuable. So, e.g. in an interview exploring these changes, a Nasa elder mentioned that ‘the incursion of the mass media in our territory produces the result that the children and youngsters begin comparing themselves to Western stereotypes’. These Indigenous communities are in a weak socioeconomic position, falling into the groups of the ‘have-nots’ of the ‘global digital divide’ (Aas 2013, p. 16), so the invasion and attraction of Northern/Western cultural consumption is making ‘some people prefer to eat less to buy clothes and technological equipment’ (interview). The elders are noticing that many youngsters are ‘focusing on misusing technology and that this weakens the chains of transmission of traditional knowledge’ which normally emphasize the importance of human memory and oral ‘passing on’ of stories.

The four broad areas identified as problematic and described above, cut across the breadth of Indigenous life, are sites of connection to internal and external sources of influence and are shaped by changing patterns of accommodation and resistance. In this respect of course, it is important to emphasize that the communities themselves retain agency in determining how such forces play out for the preservation or erosion of their cultures. For instance, a community leader explained that in many instances well-intentioned outsiders are ‘allies’ who can contribute much to Indigenous communities because they may be able to offer knowledge that is not well-known in the communities. Likewise, they have been able to use technology in their favour to swiftly ‘inform or get informed about anything happening with Indigenous communities’ and in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, broadcast directly from remote regions to publicize the tragedy they are experiencing and thus hopefully attract assistance.

Discussion and Conclusion

Memory and the continuity of culture are crucial to Indigenous life and are at the heart of the crimes of ethnocide, genocide and ecocide. This point was central to Lemkin’s

¹⁰Admittedly, the research project of which this article is product can potentially have similar consequences. From the beginning we reflected on and discussed ways to prevent the ‘aboriginalization’ of the peer researchers and participants of the project. For our reflections we used the literature existent on the topic (Kovach 2009; Smith 2012; Archibald *et al.* 2019; deSouza 2020), but mainly the exchanges we had with members of the four Peoples that participated in the research.

original discussion of genocidal intent and as Lorenzano (2009: 251) observes, once ‘social fabrics have unravelled with profound losses in human and civil rights’, this may leave ‘memory’ to serve as ‘one of the only remaining spaces of resistance’. The destruction of Indigenous environmental ontologies that contribute to the protection of nature is not only a crime against human rights and the treasury of memory and history but also a green crime. This occurs as a connection to nature and tradition is replaced by a connection to consumerism and commodification. The time and space for reflection on the structures, rituals and meaning of activities in everyday life is being foreshortened. For example, the elders report that they regret that the Barí youngsters currently consume more animals than before ‘because they think it is meat, they eat animals thinking that it is *only* meat’. They also regret that young people have forgotten the instruction of the god creator of life [Sabaseba] instruction to be in permanent contact with the spirits of the jungle [Ichigbrin]. Activities based on tradition (memories, stories, rites of passage) regarding what it means to grow up, to be part of a community and to be in touch with the surrounding eco-system to which young people would once dedicate most of their time are increasingly neglected or disregarded and replaced by a concern to earn money by working either in exploitative activities such as mining or in low status, unqualified positions in urban centres. If payments have to be made to repay education loans, to obtain useful equipment for farming, or to buy electronic and other goods, these will not be provided by traditional activities—as explained above by one of the elders who acknowledged the need to find money to repay debts but pointed out that ‘in the jungle there is no economy’.

The reasons for the transition that is occurring are understandable but the outcomes are predictable and will include destabilization of the traditional social framework of these communities, incorporation into exploitative economic relations and dependencies and the marginalization of claims to rights and autonomy. The threats to the survival of Indigenous communities most certainly include conflict and destruction of their lands (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica and Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia (2019)) but also take the form of genocidal and silent forms of new colonialism represented by forms of intervention and incorporation.

Funding

This article is part of an ongoing set of projects funded by the Global Challenge Research Fund of the United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council.

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