



POINTS OF VIEW

SUMMARY:

In this interview C. provides an overview of indigenous culture and practises in working to support youth inside Colombia's civil war.

10. INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE

INDIGENOUS JUSTICE AND RESPONSE TO THE WAR IN COLOMBIA

Q. I wonder if we could begin with a description of the current situation (summer 2002)?

A. Yes. Now there is a big problem because the military and the paramilitary have been moving into the urban areas. Some young people are joining them. And because the FARC has been in the area for a long time and knows everyone, they know who is joining the paras. So some young people have been killed because of this. The FARC are mobile – they move around. This is an important area for them as it is a poppy producing area at certain altitudes.

Q. Do the young people volunteer or are they forced?

A. Mostly they are recruited forcibly by the FARC. The other guerrilla group – the ELN – killed the mayor of one of the indigenous towns so we demanded that they leave and not return, which they have respected. So now it is just the FARC who pay no respect to the demands of the indigenous groups. They are in our area constantly.

But some do volunteer. Young people who have managed to finish high school don't usually go with the FARC. They have enough other ideas in their head so they are not so easily impressed. But if they have no access to school after primary or the child is an orphan or has had problems with the local authorities, sometimes this will make them think of joining.

The paramilitary mostly takes boys. The FARC recruits both. With the paras the boys are usually put on the front lines. They don't last much longer than a couple months.

Q. Are there many people from the indigenous community in FARC?

A. Yes, quite a few. Between 1997 and 1999 the FARC actually formed a column of just indigenous people. There were about 25 – 30 of them, mostly youth who had been forcibly recruited. But our communities were against this and because of the attention from the media there was a fair bit of scandal about how the FARC was taking young people from the indigenous community. The FARC refused to release the youth but the column was disbanded.

Q. For the young people with the FARC, can they leave if they want to?

A. No. The indigenous boys and girls who end up in the FARC, if they try to desert and get caught, they are killed. There is no second chance.

Q. Do you know of any examples when they have been able to escape?

A. Yes, at my centre, there was one boy who was able to escape. That happened because his family and the community leaders did many rituals and used their powers to rescue this boy. They worked very hard. The spiritual leaders helped as well.



Workshop participant about to give a dance presentation, Colombia

Q. Is he in danger?

A. No, the community and the centre and the boy are protected by the spirit of the community.

Q. And the girls? Have any girls escaped?

A. Yes, a couple. But there are not many cases. If the FARC finds them again, they don't kill them, but they take them very far away so the community loses track of them, we don't know where they are.

Q. You have spoken about indigenous sense of justice. How does the community react to those who have been with the guerrilla, who maybe have volunteered but then escaped?

A. It is important to understand that we have our own sense of justice and application of justice. When a young person goes off to join an armed group he or she is doing this without the approval of the community. We try to convince them not to go.

But if they insist they are “desperados” – they no longer belong to the community. If they do decide to come back of their own volition and they want to belong to the community again, there must be rituals to restore the balance.

Q. What does this entail?

A. There is an individual process and a community process– the interior or spiritual process and the exterior or connection to the community.

For the interior, this is a process determined by the healer. It usually involves public whipping. The healer consults with the spirits to determine how many whippings are necessary, what level of punishment is needed to restore the harmony. They are whipped publicly. For the girls it is usually half the number of boys. For instance if a boy got 20 a girl would receive 10. Yes it is painful and there is blood, but it is necessary and they understand this.

Once the harmony has been re-established in the interior of the person, then there is the process of establishing harmony with the community. He or she must also make amends to the community. Both are important. This usually involves about two years of community service.

Q. Is this the same for boys and girls?

A. A little different for girls. For the girls who leave the FARC and come home to their families, the tendency is to send them to another place for their safety. A girl would probably work as a domestic somewhere for a year or so until it is safe to come back.

Q. The indigenous community is known for its resistance to the war. Can you tell me something about this?

A. Yes. We have had a strong resistance against the FARC. Whole communities do this together – mothers, fathers, grandparents, children. We work together. With a signal from a watcher all the families come into the town square to protect it against the invasion of the FARC. Even at night – everyone dressed in their night clothes. We have been successful a couple of times, we have forced them to leave.