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Abstract

This article highlights the role of the Quillasinga indigenous women in the recovery and transmission of their own knowledge, as practices of survival and cultural vindication of the Quillasinga¹ indigenous community in the Obonuco district of the municipality of Pasto (Nariño-Colombia). This visibility corresponds to the epistemological perspective adopted in the decolonial feminist debate, which posits the epistemic possibilities of female collectives based on the experiences of women as a place of resonance, interpellation and resistance against the culturally established mechanisms of oppression in bodies, territories and epistemes. Through autoethnography, the article proposes the recognition of a disruptive way of articulating a counter-hegemonic bet, appealing to the discourse and knowledge of the Quillasinga indigenous community, that has historically been invisible, highlighting the role of leadership played by women and their capacity for empowerment, in the search for better ways of organizing themselves as an indigenous collective to protect their rights, traditions and territory.

Keywords: Decolonial Feminism, Community and Indigenous Feminism, Community Organization, Own Knowledge

1 Introduction

From the perspective of feminist epistemologies, and specifically Latin American feminisms, we propose to review the decolonial, community and indigenous feminist epistemologies theoretical contributions in relation to the categories of gender, race, power and knowledge, in order to relate them to the realities and concrete experiences of indigenous women of the Quillasinga people. Therefore, it is important to review the above, in the light of the recognition and validation of “others” epistemological, theoretical and methodological perspectives in the construction of knowledge, which enable the relational exchange between the knowledge of communities and the knowledge of academia. In this sense, Carvalho (2019) proposes the relevance of the traditional teachers’ knowledge, or those knowledgeable, to decolonize the thinking and open up to plurality and epistemic, ethnic and racial inclusion in academic practice within higher education and research, through the inclusion of those who are knowledgeable of indigenous, Afro-Brazilian, cimarrones, urban folk and other traditional peoples’ cultures, as teachers in universities to teach regular subjects.

From these theoretical-methodological approaches it is possible to establish binding dialogues between scientific knowledge and one's own, localized and contextualized knowledge, which historically have been invisible or subordinated by the Western hegemonic logic. Nevertheless, the debate surrounding the questioning of modern sciences also involves questioning the demand for universality and neutrality of the knowledge produced within academia. Thus, there arises a need to enable the incorporation of non-hegemonic indigenous knowledge and wisdom in academia, contributing, in this way, to the openness towards other possible worlds, in the encounter with the culturally diverse Other, and giving rise to shifts of thought and multiple reflections, which not only come from traditional epistemic fields, but also from critical thinking produced from the margins, global souths and feminist critical thinking. Key elements are the theoretical contributions of decolonial, community and indigenous feminist epistemologies, to approach the knowledge and understanding of the counterhegemonic stakes led by indigenous women. In this sense, it is possible to enunciate different places of decoloniality, from the voices of women historically silenced by the logic of patriarchal power and Eurocentric thought.

In the particular case of the context of the Quillasinga indigenous community of Obonuco, the counter-hegemonic bet is instituted from the practice and strengthening of one's own knowledge, as a device for the construction of situated knowledge, with respect to the vindication of the indigenous and reconfiguration of the feminine in the face of patriarchy and hegemonic knowledge. This implies that the original peoples cannot be taken as objects of knowledge, but as subjects of knowledge. Hence, the approach of Carvalho (2019) is significant when he states that the processes of transmission of knowledge of traditional peoples are generally based on orality,

¹ Native people belonging to Nariño, one of the 32 departments of Colombia and which is located in the southwest of this country. The Quillasinga indigenous community has mainly settled in the municipality of Pasto, the capital of Nariño. The district or territorial division of Obonuco is formed by the partialities of Obonuco, Gualmatán and Jongovito. According to the population census (2022), carried out by the Colombian Ministry of the Interior, there are approximately 57 communes and 20 families in Gualmatán, 198 communes and 82 families in Jongovito, and 2,569 communes and 469 families in Obonuco. Its main economic activities include small-scale farming, handicrafts and the breeding of minor species.

listening and continuous daily practice, which enables the conception of the individual as an active subject of knowledge. Based on this theoretical approach, we propose the application of the basic category of otherness to the Latin American reality, where the otherness of knowledge emerges from a geopolitics of knowledge with global reach (Dussel, 1991).

In short, the bet for otherness proposed by Dussel aims to articulate a situational hermeneutics of otherness with the situation of the Other from the knowledge base, an otherness respectful of the other and committed to the recognition of the need to build a socially responsible knowledge. In accordance with the foregoing, the aim of the study is to highlight the role of indigenous Quillasinga women in the rescue and transmission of their own knowledge, as practices of survival and cultural vindication of the Quillasinga community of Obonuco. To achieve this, the autoethnographic method was used, as a methodological option of working in the territory, which transcends the personal narrative to anchor it to a context and a history, and which, for the purposes of this study, is configured in a bet to “(re)know ourselves and have a strategic point of view to focus on the re-construction of our experience as women and the re-appropriation of our territories (. . .)” (Marchese, 2020, pp. 292-293).

In this sense, an auto-ethnographic exercise was proposed based on the methodological paths that have been developed under the premise of “let oneself be affected” proposed by Favret-Saada (2012, p. 437), who argues that, in order to know and understand how people create and recreate the world they inhabit, it is necessary to transform oneself by the logic of the interlocutors, as a methodological tool of fieldwork and as a central dimension that goes through the research process. Although as a researcher I was part of this world and was affected by gestures, sensations, emotions, looks, dialogues of knowledge, feelings and thoughts —which give meaning to the events of everyday life — it is necessary to mention that I was, but inhabiting it from a particular place, assuming myself as a Colombian researcher, of mixed race with indigenous ancestral roots, who develops her research process of doctoral training in indigenous feminism, that is, from my place of inquiry as a woman who researches with other women. not to other women.

2 Decolonial Feminism

From the epistemologies of the South reference frame, the perspective of decolonial feminisms in Latin America is founded, which has, as its starting point, the recognition of the life experiences of the “Others” subordinated to the hegemonic Eurocentric feminism (Bidaseca, 2010). In the same vein, Bidaseca & Jingting (2020) enunciate the “Other” marginalized voices that express experiences in the context of Third World countries and experiences of colonialism and patriarchy. According to Bidaseca (2022, p. 44) “feminist epistemologies showed the strong idea that knowledge is incorporated, embodied, we can say, embedded”. This is how the discussion about patriarchy and its imposition on women's bodies, nature and feminized bodies emerges, which is configured into a possibility to use it as a tool of struggle, dispute and confrontation of the discourse of academia. In addition to the above, Carvalho (2019) proposes that the mechanisms of knowledge transmission of indigenous peoples integrate reason, emotion, intuition and sensation, as opposed to Eurocentric thinking that focuses on the function of thinking, which can be instituted as a bridge of knowledge.

And it is precisely the notion of feeling-thought from the interstice proposed by María Lugones, which underlies this category as a “modality of situational thinking of localized bodies” (Bidaseca, 2021b, p. 9), with the conviction to undo and unlearn the grammars of power in order to replace them with an “erotic poetics of relationship”. In a complementary way, Bidaseca, Aragão & Costa (2020) proposes the concept of ecofeminisms, to approach the body-territory interaction from the perspective of situated knowledge, and suggest that these are constructed as political collectives, creators of new knowledge and action strategies to advance the environmental struggles from a situated feminist perspective. Within the process of decolonizing the knowledge, we highlight the work of Argentine activists such as María Lugones (2021) and her valuable contributions to feminist struggles and searches from colonialism and gender, highlighting her metaphor of pilgrimages, which theorizes the poetics of feminist political coalitions from the South against multiple oppressions.

Also it is from these feminist epistemologies of the South that it is possible to rethink positions in relation to possible worlds that can be created in the knowledge-power relationship and build on this situated knowledge. Therefore, the current rise of women's empowerment has been instituted as a response to the power relations of the patriarchal order, and as a bet on the actions of the subjects, in the face of the structures that generate and maintain gender discrimination and social inequality (León, 1997). Therefore,

it is essential to adopt the contributions of community and indigenous feminism, which are instituted as new forms of social coexistence, based on the ancestral principles of the indigenous worldview to dismantle the capitalist economy (Gutiérrez, 2011).

3 Communitarian and Indigenous Feminism

Communitarian feminism is configured as an epistemic alternative that takes up the concept of community as a transforming political body, to get out of the hierarchical dichotomous relationship between men and women (Paredes, 2017). In this sense, the author considers it necessary to establish the horizon from which the struggle is situated, that is, an analysis that allows the recovery of the bodies, the stories and the proposals of the future (Paredes, 2013). According to Paredes (2015) and Cabnal (2010b), communitarian feminism rescues the body-territory metaphor of the indigenous feminist community women of Abya Yala. In this sense, it is possible to experience the body as a field of resistance, of the body and its powers. Hence, it is important to investigate the forms of resistance of women in the past, to enable political participation in the present with transformative potential (Paredes, 2006).

Related to the above, indigenous feminism is instituted in an epistemic bet that promotes the defense and recovery of the land-body territory (Cabnal, 2010a). From this category, the body is established in the first place of enunciation, the place to be healed, emancipated, liberated (Cabnal, 2010, as mentioned in Gargallo, 2012, p. 150). Together with the place of enunciation of the body, Lugones (2008) states that understanding the place of enunciation of gender in the original peoples denotes the importance and magnitude of gender in the disintegration of communal and egalitarian relations, of ritual thinking, of authority, the collective decision-making process, and of the economy. In this regard, this author argues that indigenous women resist the dichotomy and distortion of the concept of complementarity by the colony, but indigenous women also recognize that complementary duality is the most important use and custom. Nevertheless, they express their resistance to questioning such an important notion of origin, through the sense of empowerment they have built, in the face of gender inequalities in the community organization of their contexts.

4 Community Organization: Good Living Practices

Related to the above, Walsh (2009) proposes the approach of practices of survival and cultural vindication, implies the construction of knowledge from the various manifestations that institute these practices and the different ways in which they are constructed, highlighting the horizon proposed in the Manifesto for Good Living (2021), which affirms that there can be no good living without justice, which calls to listen to the voices of those who live in the territories, especially indigenous women who have historically been silenced by the logics of colonial power. Good Living is a historical concept of the ancestral wisdom of the original peoples, which denotes, organizes and builds a system of knowledge and systems of life, based on the common harmonious interaction between human beings and nature. This notion is part of the worldview and cosmology or philosophy of the indigenous peoples of Abya Yala.

Following this line of thought, the concept of Good Living — incorporated in the 2019 Obonuco village of Life Plan — is understood as “a multidimensional way of organizing and living life by local communities, taking into account their histories, identities, heterogeneities, autonomy, rights and collective commitments for social transformation” (Alcaldía Municipal de Pasto, 2019, p. 10, our translation). Based on this reference framework, the life plan (Alcaldía Municipal de Pasto, 2019) establishes the processes of community organization of the Quillasinga people of Obonuco. Consequently, through assemblies, cultural workshops, meetings and exchanges of knowledge, thoughts and words, tours of the territory, community pots, ecological days, cultural and sports events, among other collective spaces, the aim is to recover collective memories, social appropriation of knowledge, social cohesion, dialogue of knowledge and community empowerment.

From this context of enunciation, personal and collective empowerment has been configured, such as those spaces of encounter, recognition, dialogue and collective construction (Carmona, Goveia & Velásquez, 2017). In this regard, it is pertinent to approach the concept of empowerment from the perspective of Durston (2000), who conceives it as the process that develops or enhances the authority and decision-making ability of the group itself that is the protagonist of its empowerment, and not in a higher entity that confers power over others. That being so, the concept of the empowerment of indigenous Quillasinga women is based on a commitment to reclaim the ancestral legacy of indigenous women and to build a place for their enunciations in the collective arena. This calls for a broader view of inter-ethnic, intercultural and territorial feminisms, with the thought-provoking spaces for promoting and continuing the community processes that have been developed.

5 Mingas of Thought: Walking on the Minga

Thought mingas are collective spaces conducive to otherness, by allowing encounter, listening and negotiated communication with the Other, as well as being recognized as spaces for co-reflection, co-construction and discursive vindication, which enable the mobilization, empowerment and experiential interaction of the community. Thus, the thought mingas are established as the preferred setting for having a diversity of versions on a given topic of reflection and seeks to refresh thought, starting from the different experiences and capacities of those who participate in them (Guambia Indigenous Reserve, 2008). In the dynamics of the Quillasinga indigenous community of the Obonuco district, these spaces to mingle, that is, to reflect and share knowledge and experiences, have focused on the approach of their own knowledge, essentially related to fabric, oral, ancestral medicine and festivities, as a form of reorganization, resistance and struggle for the defense of the territory and the preservation of its cultural identity (Cabildo Obonuco from the People Quillasinga, s. f.).

6 Own Knowledge: Surviving the Quillasinga Thought

The frame of reference for practices of survival and cultural vindication is self-education, which is defined as a comprehensive teaching-learning process that is constructed and validated by each indigenous people, is concretized in their respective life plan and is promoted by the family nucleus, the educated and the elderly in general (Sistema de Educación Indígena Propio, 2013). In this regard, it should be noted that the Quillasinga indigenous community of Obonuco has created community spaces for self-education, which have been important in raising awareness of the role played by women in the practice of their own knowledge, such as arts and crafts workshops, cultural festivals and, in particular, thought mingas, which have been instituted as part of the community strategy for the recovery of cultural identity, aimed at teaching and learning about customs, indigenous thought and ancestral memory, among others. As a general characteristic of the community, it should be mentioned that there is an interest in rescuing its cultural identity and respect for the multicultural richness of this territory. In this way, this community has continued the process of recovering and strengthening its cultural identity through tissue, oral practice, ancestral medicine and traditional festivities, among other cultural elements.

6.1 Knitting: from the Guanga²

Bidaseca (2022, p. 35, our translation) states that:

Writing, cinema, singing and weaving as artistic manifestations are the reiteration of an action that allows us to heal from colonial trauma. The action materializes in the warp of social identity creating a new narrative (third space) that contradicts the Western narrative.

Thus, when referring to one's own knowledge, it is essential to emphasize the importance of the fabric in decolonization processes, especially in community processes. In this sense, the fabric evokes the ancestral memories transmitted by the male elders and female elders³ from generation to generation, highlighting the place that women occupy in this process, since this work is linked to their feelings and knowledge, for the transmission of this knowledge to men and women on equal terms, in accordance with the Andean principle of complementarity (Figure 1).

² Ancestral loom through which the elders weave clothing items, accessories, among others, according to needs and context. Woven fabrics can be made from sheep's wool or yarn.

³ Men and women who represent the pillars of the survival of culture, as they possess ancestral knowledge and transmit it through oral tradition.



Fig. 1: Weaving meeting of the leaders and elders of the Quillasinga of Obonuco. Taken during a Weaving meeting of the leaders and elders of the Quillasinga of Obonuco [Photograph]. Source: Rosero, 2023. Own elaboration.

Through the knitting using the guanga, the role of women leaders in collective meetings is highlighted, highlighting the role of Quillasinga women in the preservation of cultural identity as Quillasinga and the defense of the territory. Referring to this last aspect, Bidaseca et al. (2020) state that this process incorporates a number of non-human entities and forces of nature, with whom the indigenous peoples establish relations of exchange, communication and reciprocity. Hence the direct relationship between indigenous women and the guanga fabric, since the fabric draws on the memory of older women, who are responsible for transmitting this knowledge intergenerational. In addition, the guanga fabric symbolizes the empowerment of indigenous Quillasinga women, who are present in all organizational processes at the levels of administration, education, justice, culture and political participation, among others. In addition, it is an ancestral practice that also represents the social fabric, with women being responsible for sharing this knowledge in the community.

6.2 Orality: In the Footsteps of Taitas and Mamas⁴

Orality is creation from the word, it is a dynamic intersubjective process of symbolic production from the sensible. In the words of Morin (1986) he mobilizes his own symbolic imaginary, which allows the individual to create or recreate it from the concept of mythopoiesis or the capacity to create myths. From mythopoetic thought, symbols are woven to construct stories or narratives, being this the context from which the social fabric is constructed and the knowledge that is born of the territory is transmitted, through myths, legends, tales and stories. Hence, oral transmission is immersed in the fabric and practices of daily life, which enable the intergenerational transfer of knowledge in the territory, which necessarily implies the rescue and survival of the knowledge of the elders, that is, it is a strategy to preserve ancestral memory, disseminate one's own knowledge, keep the word, strengthen the generational bond, listen to the learned (Cabildo Obonuco del Pueblo de Quillasinga, s. f.). In the cultural process of rescuing historical memory, through the oral narration of the elders, the participation of women in the practices of their own knowledge becomes vitally important, since their role as caretaker of the family allows them to be in charge of the oral transmission of the ancestral inheritance in the tulpa⁵. In the same way, its place of enunciation as transmitter of knowledge, extends to collective spaces such as the mingas of knowledge, the community assemblies, the tours of the territory, the chagra⁶, among others (Figure 2).

⁴ Knowers who possess the knowledge of the power of nature and make use of it through the properties of medicinal plants. They're the community counselors.

⁵ Space of the home that is considered sacred to the original peoples. It is a stove composed of three rectangular stones fixed on the ground, which serves to cook food and create a space for sharing thoughts and words around the fire.

⁶ Space of land or home garden in which the older ones grow food, in different varieties and times. In addition, it is the place where the plants used in traditional medicine are grown. Orchard (Translator addition).



Fig. 2: Community meeting for the oral transmission of knowledge. Taken during a Community meeting for the oral transmission of knowledge [Photograph]. Source: Rosero, 2023. Own elaboration.

6.3 Ancestral Medicine: Harmonizing the Soul, Harmonizing the Body

Traditional medicine is an ancestral practice and the transmission of their own knowledge, widely recognized by the indigenous peoples, which is practiced by the taitas or greater experts through the use of medicinal plants, whose healing power comes from the good practices and good use made by the taitas. In this connection, indigenous women play an important role in this healing process through ancestral medicine, since they are the caretakers of medicinal plants and those responsible for transmitting their knowledge about plants to the communities (Cabildo Obonuco del Pueblo de Quillasinga, s. f.). There is a direct relationship between the land and traditional medicine, and women are given priority as caretakers of the land and contact with the land and medicinal plants. This is consistent with the approach of Agarwal (1991) when he states that the bond some women feel with nature stems from their gender responsibilities within the family economy, such as gardening, firewood gathering and other activities related to the territory (figura 3).



Fig. 3: Community meeting for the practice of ancestral medicine. Taken during a Community meeting for the practice of ancestral medicine [Photograph]. Source: Rosero, 2023. Own elaboration.

6.4 Traditional Festivities: Payment to Mother Earth, Mojigangas and Ancestral Heritage

The traditional festivities of the indigenous communities today correspond to a set of practices of religious and cultural syncretism, since originally these festivities were held as part of the indigenous uses, customs and worldview; however, with the Spanish conquest and the process of evangelization, these festivities were merged with the Patronal Festivals of San Juan, San Pedro and San Pablo (Cabildo Obonuco from the People Quillasinga & Walter Malte, 1846-1985). Within the process of cultural resistance, the Festival of Offering and Payment to Mother Earth stands out because it contains cultural elements of great symbolic importance in the worldview of this indigenous people, such as the mojigangas dance, which represents the connection between human beings and Mother Earth (Figure 4). Historically, this dance has been performed exclusively by men, who dress in women's costumes and masks to make payment to mother earth, symbolically fertilizing her through their dancing, to the rhythm of traditional music with their own instruments such as the quena (a flute made of wood), the bass bombo (a type of drum) and the drum (Cabildo Obonuco from People Quillasinga & Walter Malte, 1846-1985).



Fig. 4: Dance of the mojjangas at the Feast of the Offering and Payment to Mother Earth of the year 2023 in the Village of Obonuco. Taken during a Dance of the mojjangas at the Feast of the Offering and Payment to Mother Earth of the year 2023 in the Village of Obonuco [Photograph]. Source: Rosero, 2023. Own elaboration.

7 Concluding remarks

In reflecting on the importance of openness towards other theoretical, epistemological and epistemic perspectives that enable the recognition of cultural diversity, emphasis is placed on the theoretical contributions of the perspective of feminism, which is configured as a valid place of enunciation — where the decolonization of feminism emerges in order to decolonize academia — in contrast to which Lugones (2012) proposes the intersectionality of racism and patriarchy, in order to consider the marginalized experiences of women who have not been represented by the discourses of feminism or the anti-racism. And it is precisely from this perspective of decolonial feminism that the construction of situated knowledge is possible, being powerful the approach of Haraway (1991) in suggesting the permanent revision of the place where knowledge is produced and making the reading of reality and of women from themselves, as a fabric of central care to build knowledge. In this way, an epistemic bet is set up, by providing spaces for reflection from the academic stage — as a stage of resistance — and by enunciating different places of decoloniality, from the voices of the subjects of feminism who have historically been silenced in the face of capitalism, territorial ordering, racism, sexism and other manifestations and effects of colonialism and power.

In enunciating other places from which the situated knowledge can be built, it is essential to make visible and validate the own knowledge that is reproduced from the ancestral, traditional, every day, local, collective and the dialogue that may be established between this knowledge and academic-scientific knowledge, in order to generate a relationship of mutual enrichment that enables epistemic inclusion. An interconnection of knowledge that points towards an intercultural relationship inspired by cultural diversity, cultural identity and good living as a philosophy of life in the Andean traditions, assumed as the harmonious and balanced relationship between human beings and nature and materialized in the Quillasinga community of Obonuco, in its community organization for the defense of its rights, traditions and territory. From this frame of reference and in the context of enunciating the practices of survival and cultural vindication of the Quillasinga people, the leading role of indigenous women in their territory was revealed, given the leadership role and empowerment capacity of the Quillasinga indigenous women in the context of the rescue of their own knowledge and the recovery of ancestral memories. This encourages the promotion of collective action practices, linked to their languages, communication practices and worldviews, which take the form of counter-hegemonic bets or alternative ways of constructing epistemic and methodically the recognition of diversity in the settings of cultural expression of indigenous communities.

The practices of the Quillasinga indigenous women are not only associated with the rescue and transmission of knowledge in the family environment, but also emerge from collective spaces such as the thought mingas, where epistemic, ontological decoloniality and cultural resistance emerge as mechanisms for the dynamic intersection of knowledge, for cultural exchange and enrichment from a critical perspective. From this place, languages emerge to weave, resist, transform and transform the relations of oppression, domination, exploitation, subordination of the Other and the devices that have been established culturally to reproduce the logic of domination over bodies, territories and epistemes, which is still valid given the asymmetrical relations that are presented in the dynamism of power and knowledge in everyday life. This approach is congruent with the decolonial critique or questioning put forward by thinkers such as Carvalho and Dussel, in their bets on an epistemology that is configured in the order of political, academic, ethical, social and cultural praxis, which makes it possible to restore the conditions of responsibility or ethics of knowledge, starting from the applicability of otherness and the question of thought situated from history, politics, ethics, which contributes to tensioning the hegemonic race-gender-power-knowledge equation.

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