

Buenaventura

**Thinking–feeling methodologies
of resistance and re–existence**



**Participatory Action Research
Semillero - Vol. 2**

Buenaventura

**Thinking–feeling methodologies
of resistance and re–existence**

Project: “Systematisation of Methodologies for Unarmed Civil Protection”

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Colectivo de Mujeres Piangueras
Cazotea
Jóvenes Comuna 3
Semillero Teatro por la Paz

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THINKING-FEELING

"Thinking-feeling" (*sentipensar* in Spanish) is a concept introduced by sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (1987; 2009) to describe a way of knowing and being that integrates both the mind and the heart, emphasizing a holistic approach where knowledge is constructed through the interplay of thinking, feeling and acting.

Echoing Fals Borda's own recollections of the origins of this concept, the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano wrote: "Such wise doctors of Ethics and Morals are the fisherfolk of the Colombian coast, who invented the word *sentipensante* to define the language that tells the truth" (Galeano 1989, 89, in Robles and Rappaport, 2018, pág. 608).

While "thinking-feeling" speaks of Fals Borda's interest and efforts to bridge the epistemological gap between the academy and the grass roots (Robles and Rappaport, 2018), it also has a political meaning. As Fals Borda (2009) put it, the "thinking-feeling" actor is a protagonist of history.

However, the historical nature of such action lies not only in the interconnectedness of reason and emotion in the individual process of knowing and acting. It also lies in the relationships that involve the collective act of asking a question about an issue that concerns everyone, as well as the co-production of action-oriented knowledge.

In other words, the "thinking-feeling" actor is not the isolated individual of modernity, but someone who recognizes their community roots and social ties, and acts with a sense of togetherness. Furthermore, the cases illustrated in this booklet speak of individuals whose connections extend not only to their communities but also to their land and *territory**.

In this sense, the methodologies we present here are expression of the epistemology of Afro-Colombian communities and their territorial struggle.

Paraphrasing Arturo Escobar (2014), these are the methodologies of those thinking-feeling with the Earth.

* In Spanish the term *territorio* has more resonance than its English cognate, as it communicates the sense of historical and cultural rootedness indigenous and rural communities feel for the land they have inhabited in many cases for thousands of years.

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1 INTRODUCTION

“We want to live in peace in the territory, not outside of it”
(Alexis Ocoró Bonilla)

This project, which systematises locally developed protection and care methodologies, is the result of participatory research practices involving different communities and organisations in southwestern Colombia over the past five years. From this epistemic and methodological exchange among local researchers, members of the communities and organizations, and external researchers, the PAR Platform emerged – a collaborative network committed with learning, practice, and training in participatory action research (PAR) topics and methodologies.

Regarding this systematisation initiative, three key antecedents should be highlighted: i) training of social leaders being conducted for over one decade by the Escuela Popular de Formación Política (Popular School of Political Education) of CORMEPAZ in collaboration with different academic institutions, like Universidad Claretiana, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, and Sheffield University; ii) the training process of local researchers who, within the context of the project Improbable Dialogues, 2019-2022¹, gave way to the creation of a PAR Semilleros (seedbeds) in CORMEPAZ; iii) the project “Community-based unarmed civil protection

strategies in south-western Colombia: local experiences and lessons learned”², 2022-2023, which permitted replicating and expanding the experience of the semilleros in Buenaventura, Caldon, and Lerma. This experience inspired the creation of the first volume of the series (Díaz-Arévalo et al., 2024).

When speaking of epistemic-methodological exchange, we refer not only to a dialogue about the content of the knowledge we inherited or produce (the what), but also to the whom, the why, the how, and the for what is that knowledge produced; meaning, the complex interplay between the positionality and aspirations of the collective subjects, the epistemological frameworks, the changing conditions of the context and the methodological strategies of the production of knowledge.

These exchanges have allowed us to: i) recognise the territorial, ancestral and collective nature of knowledge production processes carried out by ethnic communities, both Afro and Indigenous; ii) highlight the close relationship between knowledge production practices and strategies of resistance and re-existence in the face of the multiple forms of violence that threaten life and the territory; iii) appreciate and promote the use of their own practices through which communities rescue, produce, and communicate knowledge, wisdom, and traditions; iv) stimulate critical reflection about their own practices and experiences, as well as the dialogue with other academic and non-academic methodological traditions; and v) create the appropriate environment for the

process of systematising these methodologies to be respectful, participatory and reflective.

Our work has thus focused on three main tasks. First, we have facilitated dialogue among and with the protagonists of the stories shared in this booklet.

This approach ensures that the systematisation becomes both a process of amplifying their voices and a dialogue through which they can reflect on their experiences and the lessons they have learned.

Second, we have helped contextualise these practices, so that their territorial nature and collective identity are better understood, as well as their meanings, origins, and problems they seek to address.

Third, we have supported multimedia production of the systematisation, aiming to generate new dialogues about the role of communities as researchers of their own reality, as well as to motivate other grassroots organisations to retrieve and share their own methodologies for producing knowledge, taking action and passing on their wisdom from generation to generation.

This process has also involved remembering the struggles that commu-

1. Project coordinated by Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, CINEP, and Sheffield University in the United Kingdom, and it was funded by the Newton Fund and MINCIENCIAS.

2. Project funded by Red+ Creando Espacio Más Seguro (Creating Safer Space), which was in turn funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the United Kingdom through the Global Challenges Research Fund.

nities have endured in defence of their life, rights and territory; in this sense, this process of systematising their own methodologies has also sought to contribute to strengthening local organisations in their defence of their collective rights.

The four methodologies presented in this booklet are the outcome of organisational and community processes in which research, dialogue, art, and action are combined to protect life and generate safe spaces for local communities.

Such is the case of *comadreo*, a traditional and spontaneous practice from the Pacific region, which groups of women victims and survivors of the armed conflict in Colombia have turned into a strategy of resistance against silence, isolation, and impunity.

Second, we introduce *tertulias poéticas* (poetry gatherings), which aimed to foster protective environments during the COVID-19 pandemic and have since become a well-established knowledge production practice.

Heir to the rich oral tradition of Afro-Pacific culture, the *tertulias poéticas* have become, on the one hand, a methodology of poetic dialogue between scientific-technical knowledge and traditional knowledge about medicinal, aromatic, and condimentary plants in the region; on the other hand, a sort of laboratory for the recovery of knowledge and conservation of species.

Third, we highlight the efforts of a group of young people who, in response to the urban conflict affecting their city, have

turned to sociodrama as strategy of research, action, and training in civic culture – seeking to create safer spaces for their communities.

Finally, we present the case of the *semillero Teatro por la Vida* (Theatre for Life) and its play *Tocando la marea* (Touching the tide). *Semillero Teatro por la vida* has used dramaturgy as a strategy for dissemination, dialogue, and public engagement with the results of one of the most relevant research projects on the impacts of violence in Buenaventura.

Teatro por la Vida has become a methodology of “systematic return”, a PAR strategy created by Fals Borda (1987) which aims to facilitate a ‘chain of conversations’ (Rappaport, 2020) with local people about the research results, since this knowledge ultimately belongs to them.

Drawing on the cultural richness of the Pacific region, these methodologies have promoted people engagement and, through dialogue and artistic creation, contributed to the creation of transformative narratives of life and hope. In this sense, the methodologies compiled herein are an expression of individual talent, as well as of the collective cultural, spiritual, and artistic values of the Afro-Pacific region.

Here, the production of knowledge bears the thinking-feeling hallmark characteristic of knowledge produced through dialogue.

Before going further into the analysis of these methodologies, it is convenient to introduce their context of production and enunciation.



2 The repertoires of violence in Buenaventura

The city of Buenaventura, located in the department of Valle del Cauca, is Colombia's principal port and one of the most sophisticated in Latin America; 88.7% of its 370,000 inhabitants are of Afro-Pacific identity descent. Of that population, 90.4% inhabits the urban zone, while 9.6% is located in the municipality's vast rural zone (McGee and Flórez 2017, 30), where there are also small indigenous communities that make up 6% of the total population. Buenaventura is considered a city-territory because all of its land is collectively titled to Afro-Colombian communities through 42 Community Councils and 12 Indigenous reservations. These collective titles were granted by the Colombian State through Legislation 70 of 1993.

Besides its geopolitical and economic importance in the country and the region, Buenaventura is located in the heart of one of the zones with greatest biodiversity in the planet (Reardon, 2018). However, the reality of its people's lives is characterized by profound socioeconomic, epistemic, and cultural inequalities. According to the report by the Commission of Truth (2019), 80% of its inhabitants lives in poverty, the illiteracy rate is 17%, and over half of its inhabitants identify themselves as victims of the armed conflict (Jaramillo et al., 2019). As indicated by Ruiz Galván (2024),

the progressive legislation of 1993 granting collective land rights to Afro and Indigenous communities to develop their ethno-development plans was followed by a violent process of deterritorialisation of the communities that had inhabited both urban and rural territory for centuries.

In the early 1990s, the privatization of public companies such as Ferrocarriles (Railways), Telecom (Communications), and Acuavalle (Water), especially Puertos de Colombia (Port Operator) and the subsequent containerisation process led to the mass dismissal of thousands of dockworkers and port workers – principal source of income of the families in the port.

In addition, the port's expansion, the boom of legal and illegal mechanised mining, as well as disputes for control of smuggling and drug trafficking routes brought an "increase of the cycles of violence and the diversification of their repertoires and impacts on youth and women, indigenous and black communities located in both rural and urban areas" (Jaramillo et al., 2019: 113). Thus, after the dominance of various guerrilla groups in the region, Buenaventura experienced a bloody paramilitary takeover, during which 19 massacres were committed with a toll of 118 victims, thousands of targeted deaths, and over 36,000 displaced people (Ávila 2021:171).

Between 2005 and 2013, the demobilisation of the paramilitary Calima Bloc generated a reorganisation of armed groups into criminal organisations, which – in turn – brought along a degradation of the repertoires of violence.

During this period, disappearances and displacements increased, and a regime of terror and silence was imposed, the most nefarious symbol of which was the "chop houses"; houses in the neighbourhoods where people were tortured and dismembered. With this violence, 'silent for the national context, but absolutely deafening for the local society' (CNMH 2015, 16), Buenaventura's urban area was included in the map of the geographies of terror and fear (Oslender 2008; 2018), which armed groups had already imposed in vast areas of the Pacific region.

During the dialogue process between the Government and the FARC, 2012 - 2016, the rural area of Buenaventura was prioritised as territory of the Territorial Approach Development Plan (PDET, for the term in Spanish). Nevertheless, as already indicated, the municipality's vast rural area is inhabited by less than 10% of the population, so the programs to implement the agreement had little impact on the majority of the people of Buenaventura.

Therefore, while the country discussed the agreement with the FARC, the urban centre of Buenaventura was preparing an unprecedented civic strike, which the organisers called their "own peace process". As Ruiz Galván (2021) pointed out in an interview for the Commission of Truth, "given that the problems of Buenaventura are structural, structural solutions are needed".

The most recent transformations of the conflict have turned Buenaventura into a scenario of territorial disputes between organised and centralised criminality – which some call "criminal governance"

(Álvarez Durán 2021; Briceño-León and Avila 2023), but at the same time more rooted in the city's daily life, especially in the most popular sectors. The strategy no longer consists in mobilising external armed actors, but in recruiting youth from its communes, who are offered illegal life as a work alternative. The outcome has been a city divided by “invisible borders” and, during the last two years, an urban peace process that, despite its setbacks and obstacles, represents an unprecedented experience in the country's history of peacebuilding.

3 Thinking-feeling methodologies of resistance and re-existence



“Buenaventura is a territory of resistance,” comments Narcilo Rosero, a social leader. Referring to the history of social struggle dating back to the 1950s during times of Bishop Gerardo Valencia Cano, who promoted the first actions of resistance against social injustice in the territory, Rosero adds, “that is where the resistance virus comes from” (Interview, 2023).

In Buenaventura, in addition to countless civic demonstrations against violence and the development model, three major civic strikes have taken place: 1964, 1998, and 2017, with the last being the strike of strikes, as it has been called, forcing the government of President Santos to negotiate with the Civic Strike Committee an investment plan for the city (Jaramillo et al., 2023).

However, the methodologies addressed in this booklet do not focus on mobilisation or organised resistance against state neglect, local corruption, or the imposition of an extractive and violent economic model. Rather, they centre on more everyday forms of resistance – responses to the less visible effects of violence, impunity, and insecurity at different levels.

Expressed in everyday ways of being, existing, and feeling, these “re-existent practices”, as denominated by Adolfo Albán (2013), are rooted in a long tradition of contestation and subversion against colonial hegemonic structures, and are expressed through organisational forms of production, food traditions, rituals and aesthetics – offering paths to dignify and reinvent life (Albán, 2013, 455).

These are, then, organisational practices – indigenous and Afro-descendant – “that are by definition non-violent and are organised and mobilised by collectives and organisations aimed at undermining, challenging, subverting or circumventing from biographical frameworks, organizational trajectories, neighbourhood experiences the geographies violated and administered by various powerful actors in the territory” (Jaramillo et al., 2019, 118).

The methodologies presented in this booklet are practices of experiential knowledge –historically situated strategies arising from the experiences lived by their protagonists, from which life is reinvented, the right to inhabit the territory is affirmed, and the collective desire to live with dignity and in peace is expressed. As stated by Ruiz-Galván

(2024), what is at stake is not the land, which legally belongs to ethnic groups³, rather the control of the territory and its socioeconomic potential, upon which the practices of good living depend.

Of course, we're not starting from scratch. Other projects have systematised lessons learned regarding the craft of community-based participatory research in Buenaventura (Albán, A. 2023; Jaramillo and Parrado 2023; Díaz-Arévalo and Ruiz-Galván 2024); delved into the potential of life stories and other collective memory practices for the defence of life and territory (Parrado and Jaramillo 2020; Parrado et al., 2024); as well as analysed and celebrated the importance of specific practices, such as, for example, the Comadreo (Sánchez Contreras 2022).

Likewise, the bibliography and documentary and audio material on the potential of art, dance, and drama for peacebuilding in the Pacific is immeasurable. Thus, it should be noted that the specific feature of this systematisation exercise is to highlight the great potential of these methodologies for the practice of participatory action research and creation of safer spaces.

3. With Legislation 70 of 1993, five-million hectares (50% of all the low-lying lands of the Pacific) had been titled collectively to Afro-descendant communities; however, the truth is that thousands of communities have been forcefully displaced from their lands since the mid-1990s as a result of multiple and complex violent territorial and resource conflicts, transforming collective territories into «geographies of terror» or «landscapes of fear» (Oslender 2008; 2016).

In effect, despite their local, informal, and everyday nature, these methodologies, as well as chanting and muralism, among many others, are part of onto-political practices for the defence of life and the rights of those who inhabit the territory. As Caicedo Angulo (2021, p. 146) indicates, re-existence involves not only a determination to overcome all odds.

By strengthening “collective-action scenarios”, it also implies producing “autonomous inspirations” for the reconstruction of the local. The four studies that make up this booklet are examples of everyday life as a privileged setting for the production and transfer of knowledge, whose main effect is not “knowing more about something”, but the ability to transform, against all odds, sometimes imperceptibly, a reality of pain and conflict into one of hope, healing, and coexistence.





Comadreo



IAP

Investigación Acción
Participativa

Comadreo: A practice of Afro-Colombian women that protects, heals, and empowers

Comadreo is a traditional practice of the riverine communities of the Colombian Pacific region. It is heir to the oral tradition that has served as a device for cultural survival (Quiceno et al., 2017), as well as the recovery and transmission of the collective memory of the Afro-Colombian people (Oslender 2003). According to Grulli (2018), the oral tradition in Colombia's Pacific region has not only served to preserve ancestral legacies but also to construct meanings about the present and the future.

Before talking about comadreo, it is worth pointing out that the term “comadre” is widely known and used in the Hispanic American tradition and, depending on the context, may have different meanings; it is used to refer to a female neighbour or friend; to denote the relationship established between the godmother of a child's baptism and the parents; as well as the midwife (DRAE). In the 16th century, ‘comadre festivals’ were already being celebrated in some Hispanic American countries – an inheritance from the Asturian festivals of the same name, and these, from the Roman festivals called matronarias (Vacaflor Dorakis, 2000).



In the Colombian Pacific, the word *comadre* resonates with extended family traditions, with affectionate and mutually supportive relationships, as well as with the tasks of caring for life, raising children, and mourning and grieving rituals (Caicedo 2021). In a context marked by extractive economies, forced displacement and the violence of the armed conflict (Jaramillo et al., 2023), the word “*comadre*” acquires socio-economic and political connotations: “being *comadre*” has meant generating support networks to address harsh living conditions; to repair the social fabric and the damages caused to the territory; to provide therapeutic work for those wounded by violence, loss and disappearance of loved ones (interview Capilla de la Memoria, 2025). Briefly, being *comadre* has contributed to creating forms of “invisible resistance” (McGee, 2017) and re-existence (Jaramillo et al., 2019; Sánchez Contreras, 2022).

This introduction to *comadreo* does not seek to encompass the varied understandings of this practice in the vast and multi-ethnic Pacific region. On the contrary, our reflections are based on dialogues with two groups of women from Buenaventura (Colombia): the Colectivo de Mujeres Capilla de la Memoria (Women of the Chapel of Memory Collective) and the group of Piangueras (Artisan fisherwomen), who have generously agreed to share their experience, knowledge, and learning about *comadreo*.

We carried out this systematisation with profound respect because it is an experience arising from individual and collective pain and suffering. This text also recognises the silent and ceaseless work of these *comadres* in searching for their missing relatives and creating safer spaces for themselves and their communities. In this process, they have found reasons for hope, as well as a group of friends with whom they can cry, laugh, sign and heal wounds.



Collective of Women of the Chapel of Memory



“Women are the axis of the cultural survival of ethnic communities; they resist for those who left and never returned.” (Sánchez Contreras, 2022, 25).

“The pain of forced disappearance is unbearable; it is the most desperate kind of nostalgia.” (Mrs. Nubia, Chapel of Memory Collective, in Sánchez Contreras, 2022)

“Disappearance generates chronic damage that does not cease over time” (Sánchez Contreras, 2022, 29).

In 2006, three women, victims and survivors of the conflict in Colombia, met at the San Pedro parish in the Lleras neighbourhood to pray for their disappeared relatives. Their names are Clementina Benítez, Florencia Arrechea, and Sofia Escobar. The parish priest, Father Ricardo Londoño, accompanied them and began celebrating Monday masses for the disappeared.

“The Monday mass” gave way to other initiatives, such as the first march for the disappeared. Carrying only a candle and a rosary in their hands, these three women led a march that sought to keep the

memory of those missing alive and to visibilise the magnitude of a situation that hundreds of families suffered amidst the silence imposed by illegal groups like the paramilitaries of the Calima Bloc and the Manuel Cepeda Vargas Front urban guerrilla group⁴.

Supported by CORMEPAZ, the group of women, which grew in number and determination, began to recover photographs of assassinated and disappeared people and take them to the parish church. This photographic collection gave rise to a “monument space” that later acquired the name of the Chapel of Memory Gallery. Under the auspices of Father Adriel Ruiz, director of CORMEPAZ (formerly FUNDESCODES), the group of women has been organised since 2009 as the Women of the Chapel of Memory Collective (CMCM, for the term in Spanish).

Their goal was to confront the silence and impunity surrounding the crimes committed by those disputing the territory, and to establish a foundation to develop a community-based system to search for missing persons in the urban area. During the progression of the armed conflict in the District of Buenaventura, the CMCM began developing a process to build restorative historical memory. This included spiritual ceremonies, recovering photographs and personal belongings, reconstructing testimonies, documenting cases, and fostering coordination and mobilisation among organizations.

Soon thereafter, a dedicated space was built in CORMEPAZ for the Chapel of Memory —a safe space where the photographs and personal belongings of

those murdered and missing are permanently exhibited. For many, the Chapel of Memory became a sacred place where they could honour and symbolically bring to life the memory of their missing loved ones. Likewise, it served as a place to cope with their grief in the absence of a body to bury.



4. According to figures from the Single Registry of Victims (RUV, for the term in Spanish), the number of individuals reported missing amounted to 1,392 in 2022 (RUV 2022). Despite the magnitude of the phenomenon, forced disappearance was only sanctioned as a crime in 2000 through Legislation 589 (Ruiz Galván interview 17 March 2025).

The name “Chapel” reflects the ecclesial context in which the collective was formed, acknowledging the Church’s role as a space of liberation and support for social processes in the territory, a legacy inspired by the teachings of Bishop Gerardo Valencia Cano. Thereby, the Chapel is not only a place of memory that recalls the tragedies and damage caused by violence, but also a political process of common unity around the search for social transformations, as well as the hopes of women searching for their missing relatives.

The Collective later joined other memory initiatives in the city, including organisations such as Mothers for Life and Weaving Voices for the Disappeared. It also formed La Minga de la Memoria, a broader inter-organisational movement of memory, resistance, and the search for missing persons in and beyond Buenaventura, along with nine other organisations (Caicedo 2021).

One of La Minga’s strategies is the “sit-ins”; celebrated on the second Friday of every month, the sit-ins are takeovers of public spaces in which memorial altars are created, with photos, colourful fabrics, flowers, and other symbols “reminiscent of Catholic funerals and mortuary rituals” (Sánchez Contreras 2022). In the sit-ins, participants chant, pray, and even perform theatre plays.

At some point, a researcher noted that the customary “minute of silence” was not observed, to which one of the women responded: “not one minute of silence for our disappeared”.

Collective of Piangüera women

Piangüa (*Anadara tuberculosa* and *Anadara similis*) (Yepes Sevillano, 2013), “is a bivalve mollusc belonging to the Arcidae family and is distributed along the American Pacific coast, from Baja California to Punta Telégrafo, in Piura, Peru; it is produced in the form of a shell and is closely related to the red mangrove forests (*Rhizophoraspp*)” (Sinac-Acossa, 2018, in Biocultural Pacific Project, 2024). Thus, “piangüar” is a form of artisanal fishing in mangroves that, generally, is carried out by women. For this type of fishing, “long pants, boots for walking on the mud, and gloves are used to protect their hands from animals, like the rotting snake or blind snake, which measures up to 1.30 m and lives in the bottom of the mangrove; its venom is so strong that the bite causes infection to the point of rot, causing the hand to have to be cut off so that the venom does not spread and cause the person’s death” (Delgado et al., 2010).



The piangüera women is a collective of approximately 15 women who meet daily to carry out their principal economic activity: artisanal piangüa fishing. They have worked together for 25 years in the task of collecting the shells in the rooters; however, three months ago they also organised themselves as a collective of women working in the search for missing persons.

Given their fishing and harvesting activities in mangroves and estuaries, the piangüeras have privileged knowledge in identifying and recognising areas where the remains of missing persons could be

found; knowledge that not even the most sophisticated forensic equipment can replace.

Interacting with other collectives has enabled the group of piangüeras to recognise the value of their comadreo — the daily conversations and interactions with their long-standing colleagues in the trade. Although their themes and style of communication remain unchanged, they now seem to serve a renewed purpose: to foster a collective more conscious of the importance of creating and promoting safer conditions in a trade exposed to numerous risks and hazards.

In the case of the piangüera collective, the comadreo dynamic centers around the demands of their trade, supported by the use of digital media. Through phone calls and social media, they coordinate the day's work route and engage in discussions about safety conditions and practical aspects of their tasks:

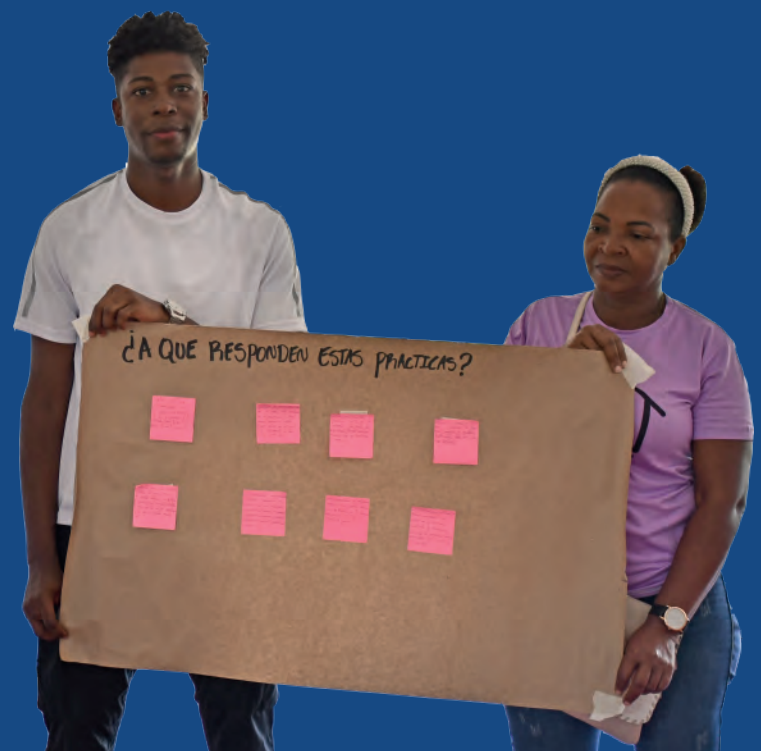
- The type of activity they will conduct (piangüar, fishing, or shrimping).
- The site to work in, as well as the organisation and payment for transportation (the boat).
- The food they will share (as an exercise of solidarity and selfcare).
- Discussion of survival strategies during seasons when fishing or piangüa are not a productive alternative.
- Assessment of the issue of safety and the determination of preventive and life-protection actions.

We chose to include this experience as part of the methodology for two key reasons.

First, because the group identifies with the rich verbal and non-verbal meanings embedded in a form of communication known as comadreo.

While it is still early to fully systematise the lessons drawn from their experience, their use of comadreo as a strategy to enhance their bonds and foster safer working conditions highlights its transformative potential.

Second, because their effort to give new purpose to their economic activity – by contributing to the search for missing persons – represents a shift from mere subsistence toward a form of resistance, embodying the idea of “reinventing everyday practices”.



How does comadreo protect life?



Comadreo consists in using a cultural and daily practice – spontaneous and informal dialogue – as a resistance and re-existence strategy.

“Comadreo by my ancestors dealt with cultural and manual topics, such as weaving and cooking” (Group conversation, 19/02/25).

As recalled by Mrs. Victoria, comadreo has always been a practice of solidarity during key moments of life, like the arrival or departure of a community member:

“When a neighbour gives birth, a

neighbour cooks, another washes. [...] When someone dies, we at the comadreo provide emotional support to those grieving”

Within a context of exacerbated violence, comadreo is redefined as a strategy to create community settings to safeguard life. Therein derives its potential as a practice of civil resistance and construction of the collective.

In contrast to the relational nature of the term “comadre” – as indicated at the beginning – the dictionary definition of “comadrear” has a negative connotation. The dictionary defines comadrear as “to

gossip, murmur, or chat, usually about unimportant things” (DRAE). There is no doubt that in the comadreo we are referring to, herein, there is also room for gossip and chatter about seemingly unimportant matters; however, comadreo, as a daily practice, sustained over time, and motivated by a purpose takes on dimensions ignored by dictionaries:

- First, comadreo has a political-ontological dimension: within the context of violence, social control, and ongoing degradation brought about by the armed conflict in Buenaventura, comadreo has become an affirmation of the collective subject – “we are not alone”– an organic expression of Ubuntu (I am because we are); of the notion of Uramba (a practice of union and solidarity). In the face of imposed silence and the unraveling of the social fabric, comadreo fosters meaningful encounters. These connections transcend simple conversation; rather, they are rooted in presence, compassion, empathy, and solidarity with the suffering of others. As stated by the comadres from the CMCM: “what happens to one, happens to all” – a principle that underpins a process of collective empowerment.

- The gender dimension, essential to comadreo, is not expressed in concepts but in the daily experiences of women who, from their own organisational practices, protect life. This local and everyday character of being, doing, and knowing refers us to the epistemological dimension of comadreo that, as indicated by Sánchez Contreras (2022, 97-98), bring it closer to feminist, decolonial, and subaltern epistemologies, but without

determining it.

- Comadreo is a space for resistance – one that weaves together spirituality, art, crafts, play into what Jaramillo et al., (2019) describe as ‘creative resistances.’ This resistance is not only directed at perpetrators of violence, but also the state, which has ignored the phenomenon and, in many cases, contributed directly to it. Resistance It is also resistance against impunity. In this sense, the women’s collectives searching for missing persons embody what Grulli (2018) calls “identities of resistance,” with their first act of defiance being the disruption of the entrenched law of fear, silence, and isolation.

- Comadreo has a therapeutic dimension. At a time when psychosocial support was not yet an alternative for these communities, comadreo became a space for reception, accompaniment, emotional support, and healing. “Comadreo has been our own psychologist, it’s inexpensive and effective” (Mrs. Victoria). Over the years, comadreo has allowed them to speak of the unspeakable: to put into words the deepest pains and sorrows; and cope with grieving processes. Thus, the CMCM has become a place where the participants have received companionship during the difficult process of grieving for their missing loved ones. This experience has revealed an essential component of comadreo: the ability to listen patiently and empathetically, enabling participants to express their pain without fear of judgment or misunderstanding.

- Comadreo is a school of ancestral wisdom. Comadreo conversations permit

the exchange of traditional knowledge on topics such as health practices, customs, childcare, and family traditions. These discussions are often accompanied by chants, stories, and other narrative forms. As an ancestral practice, comadreo nurtures emotional and social support, enhances interpersonal relationships, facilitates transmission of cultural knowledge, and promotes community cohesion.

Over two decades of struggling against oblivion, silence, and impunity, these women's collectives have emerged as key actors in the search for missing persons.

They have also become a life-affirming alternative for women affected by conflict – creating a space where comadreo is practiced as a form of personal and collective resistance and re-existence.

Comadreo is not an isolated or spontaneous act, but a sustained, everyday practice – intimate and unassuming – that serves as a communication method capable of transforming even the most harrowing and hopeless narratives into stories of life.





Poetry Gatherings



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POETRY GATHERINGS: bridging traditional and technical knowledge through poetry

This is my culture, this is my
region, where we fish, eat
crab and shrimp,
we play the bass drum,
marimba, and guasá,
there's always the cununo,
and there are folk singers
to adorn.

My region is beautiful,
gorgeously beautiful and
worthy of admiration,
Chocó, Valle, Cauca, and
Nariño.

Ecological wealth and
natural park,
it is biodiversity and where
it rains non-stop.

We ride canoes with paddles,
weeding, felling, and sowing
for crops.

In gastronomy, we prepare
tapao, sancocho, atollado⁵,
corn wrap and many more.

Ecological wealth and natural
park, it is biodiversity and
where it rains non-stop.

Alexis Ocoró Bonilla

5. Tapao is a traditional stew made with fish, green plantains, yuca, potatoes, and coconut milk from Colombia's Pacific region, especially among Afro-Colombian communities. A symbol of resistance, identity, and ancestral memory, Tapao comes from the Spanish word "tapado" (covered), which refers to the cooking method: ingredients are sealed and steamed under banana or bijao leaves.

Sancocho is a popular soup stew.

Atollao (or arroz atollado) is a creamy, savoury rice stew from Colombia's Pacific region that blends African, Indigenous, and Spanish culinary influences.



Alexis Ocoró Bonilla, also known as Alexis Orilla, is a poet, artist and agronomist, who graduated from Universidad del Pacífico. He tells us that the poetry gatherings were born from a combination of several factors and learnings. Alexis's love of poetry placed him at odds: either become a poet or an agronomist.

This dilemma was exacerbated by Alexis' successful participation in poetry contests and educational projects. "One day, I was teaching about banana suckering, which consists of removing the banana's offspring", recalls Alexis. "At the end of the session, I asked the participants to explain the procedure through four verses".

This simple but effective exercise also showed me the benefits of learning through the aesthetics and musicality of language; [...] in one word, of having fun while learning" (Alexis Ocoró Bonilla). I understood that I understood that the training I provided on agricultural matters had to incorporate artistic elements.

"The poetry gathering was born from my desire to bridge my technical expertise as an agricultural engineer with meaningful pedagogical strategies for community engagement – grounding scientific language in the lived realities of the people. [...] At university, we are trained to speak in technical terms. But if I mention *Bactris gasipaes* (the scientific name for peach palm), most people will not understand. That is why I have intentionally adapted my use of language – to make my work and teaching more accessible and effective for the communities I work with" (Alexis Ocoró

Bonilla). The gathering was then a bid to reconcile these two passions.

Alexis Orilla works together with his wife, Ester Gamboa, who is also an agronomist and graduated from Universidad del Pacífico. In 2023, they created CAZOTEA, a space that has become home and a reference for the Poetry gathering. The story of its creation, as we will tell you shortly, also reveals elements of the nature and purpose of the gathering itself.

What is poetry gatherings?

The poetry gathering, like the *comadreo* and "*palabreo*" (the art of speaking with rhythm, wit, and intention), is heir of the oral tradition of the Afro-Colombian communities from the Pacific region. With the *palabreo*, the poetry gathering shares several elements, such as the possibility of "telling the facts out loud, adding gestural elements, hyperbole and unusual comparisons" (Vanín, 2016).

This way, the poetry gathering is a narrative forms that transform the act of telling and sharing wisdom into an experience. In effect, elements such as voice effects, musical language and expressions specific to communities (slang)⁶, as well as gestures and body language, breathe life and drama into the story. In addition, this can evoke flavours, sounds, people, places, and common practices so the gathering connects with human and non-human relationships, and celebrates the connection among the

6. "Special language originally used for cryptic purposes by certain groups, sometimes spreading into general use; e.g., thug slang" (DRAE).

people with their community and with the territory.

In Western tradition, in-depth interviews, with their aura of privacy and promise of confidentiality, are considered the best way to obtain reliable and relevant information. In the poetry gathering, it is the contrary. Intimacy is a result of the spontaneous nature of the gathering.

Likewise, the memories and knowledge of the other participants are what awaken our memories and invite us to share our own experiences. The anonymity of the discussion has nothing to do with hiding the identity of the participants, but with something quite different: the recognition of being heirs to shared knowledge, of being part of a collective voice, of being because we are.

Given its aesthetic, ludic, communal, and informal nature, the gathering differs from other collective research strategies, such as focus groups and group interviews. In these, topics are predefined and participation is moderated by a facilitator.

Nevertheless, these are not the only differences. Due to its unique nature, the gathering, while helping to awaken, share, and preserve traditional knowledge and memories, also has the potential of transforming the anecdotes and lessons of everyday life into artistic expression. The gathering opens the door to the torrent of experiences.

CAZOTEA: From selling plants to poetry gatherings as a pedagogy of knowledge co-production

“During the COVID-19 pandemic”, recalls Ester, “I began to cultivate medicinal, aromatic, and condimentary plants on the terrace”. These were plants increasingly falling into disuse, and the purpose was to safeguard the ancestral heritage of the uses and knowledge related to these and other plants in the region.

“I just had a few,” continues Ester, “when, without thinking much, I put a sign on one of my social media profiles that said, ‘I sell plants’”.

“Two days later,” continues Alexis, “we got a message from a client who needed 200 plants”. “A month later,” adds Ester, “we got another order for 1,000 plants, which we were only able to fulfil with the help of our neighbours (bartering), who provided us with plants they also grew. “That’s how CAZOTEA began,” concludes Alexis.



As Alexis and Ester recall, among the things that boosted the project was the fact that customers came to pick up the plants and stayed and chatted with them for a while. Other visitors also enjoyed sharing their knowledge about the plants' uses and properties.

The back-and-forth interaction between Alexis and Ester, and the people who visited them, gave rise to the idea of creating an ecotourism tour that would allow visitors to come into contact with the plants.

These tours conclude with a poetry gathering. "The goal is to finish the tours in a space that allows the flow and exchange of ancestral knowledge about the plants", says Alexis. "From the beginning, the poetry gathering revealed itself as a unique space that would allow for the recovery of ancestral knowledge."

For said purpose, the mentidero "the lying room" was created — a place where the poetry gathering takes place. After experiencing aromas, tastes, and knowledge to break the ice, the mentidero invites participants to travel back in time, tell anecdotes and, in light of their memories, reflect upon the present and share their expectations about the future.

—Knowledge is not dead, it only sleeps.

—That is so. I shook it and it came back to life.

Why did they call it mentidero?

The name "mentidero —a gathering spot for lying purposely— seeks to provoke two complementary effects: first, it stimulates fantasy, creativity, and the ability to use fiction to not only narrate but also chant, recite, and perform traditional knowledge. It is important to remember that the gathering is, first and foremost, an artistic setting. Second, the word "mentidero" invites participation and active listening; that is, it encourages people to engage with the knowledge conveyed through fiction, myth, and legend. Thus, the purpose of the gathering is not to deliver previously prepared truths, but rather to foster a dynamic interaction between knowledge and art-based methodologies.

How do poetry gatherings protect and care?

Gathering informally is what our ancestors did around the bonfire on the riverbank. One of the differences between the poetry gathering and the ancestral art of traditional oral storytelling is that the story is not controlled by a single person – the storyteller – but rather it is a dialogue of knowledge and, in this sense, gathering is remembering a collective knowledge. Hence, as a pedagogical tool, in the gathering, no one has control over either the words or the topics. Let us explore some elements that characterize the informal gathering:

- The collective nature of the gathering does not mean that individual questions are excluded. On the contrary, the gathering always leads us to the

question: “who am I?” The difference is that the answer is given within the framework of the encounter: “if we search within ourselves, we will not have answers, but if we search through the encounter with the people around us, then it is possible that we will find answers to this and many other questions” (Alexis Ocoró). Indeed, when the knowledge produced in these gatherings is not just about plants, but also about ourselves, our community and our relationships with nature, it is called wisdom.

- “The gathering – tertulia, as we have promoted it,” states Alexis, “serves for intergenerational dialogue”. Alexis shares his experience organising gatherings in which an 80-year-old poet, a 60-year-old poetess, a 40-year-old or 20-year-old poet, young poets of 15 years of age, and a 7-year-old girl poet participated. “It’s been incredible to see all these generations talking.” “Rhythmic dialogue hasn’t disappeared among the younger generations,” Alexis assures. “Rap, hip hop, and even reggaeton are expressions of young people’s desires to communicate in verse.” Out of fear or shame, many young people write verses in secret. The poetry gathering contributes to maintaining alive and reclaiming this form of communication.

- Despite its profound meaning and its inclusion of research elements, the gathering is also fun. “That’s why it’s not boring,” says Alexis. “The gathering bears the colour of the conversation, of the informal encounter, and incorporates myths, legends, and fiction”. What is fun about movies is the fictional element – the lies we are told and are willing to believe. “In the gathering we also use

fiction and “lie” as narrative resource to tell truths,” states Ester. “This is the origin of the ‘real lying scenario”.

- The poetry gathering carried out in natural environments is a sensory experience. “The gathering seeks to expand the ability to hear, see and smell,” says Ester. Some people whose sense of smell had been affected by COVID-19 reported being able to smell some aromatic plants. “Although we have organised gatherings in enclosed venues,” comments Alexis, “The most conducive places for gatherings are those where nature is present: the sound of the river, the crickets, the crackling of the fire. Nature is not just the setting, but an actor in the gathering that also tells stories.” “That’s why, when we’ve held gatherings in closed settings, we bring plants, not just for decoration, but because it’s around them that the dialogue emerges.”

- An element that is no less important than the previous ones is the role art and aesthetics play in the poetry gathering. Art fulfils several functions. “First, it prepares us, it sensitizes us; it allows the message to sink in,” says Alexis. “Art is like a pressure cooker that softens us, prepares us for dialogue and encounter,” adds Ester. “Art in the gathering creates an atmosphere of recognition of others and the bonds that unite us”.

Poetry gatherings are also resistance

The poetry gathering has also served as a mechanism of political participation and resistance, given that there is no knowledge about our culture, traditions, and wisdom not affected by the dynamics of power in the territory. Thereby, the gathering is also resistance in various aspects:

- against the lack of interpersonal communication and loss of cultural identity that we fall into due to the use of social media and excessive consumption of digital content;
- against social fragmentation, loss of social ties and distrust among relatives and neighbours that have led to decades of violence in the territory.
- against the loss of traditional knowledge. When people and communities are displaced from their places, they are not only stripped of their territory, but also of their knowledge, practices, and customs.

“For these reasons,” state Alexis and Ester, “we are increasingly clear that the purpose of CAZOTEA, through the practice of the poetry gathering, must be to rescue, awaken, conserve and use traditional knowledge about medicinal, aromatic, and condimentary plants at risk of being lost forever. As stated in CAZOTEA “A practice not practiced is practically not a practice”.

Knowledge that has been lost, or is dormant, is not just abstract knowledge or ideas that have simply disappeared. It is the silent testimony of those who, due

to violence and conflict, are no longer with us and have irremediably taken with them their knowledge of medicine and cooking.

“Our knowledge about plants is not only about them, but also about us and our community. Thus, protecting the plants and the knowledge about them is also a way of protecting life and territory”.

Esta es mi cultura, esta es mi región,
en donde se pesca, se come jaiba y
camarón,
tocamos el bombo, marimba y el guasá,
no falta el cununo y hay cantadoras
para adornar.

Mi región es bella, hermosamente bella
y digna de admirar,
Chocó, Valle, Cauca y Nariño para
completar.
Riqueza ecológica y parque natural,
es biodiversa y donde llueve hasta no
parar.

Se anda en canoas con el canalete,
se hace rocería, tumba y socola para
sembrar.
En gastronomía se hace el tapao,
sancocho, atollado,
envuelto de choclo y muchos más
Riqueza ecológica y parque natural,
es biodiversidad y donde llueve hasta
no parar.

Alexis Ocoró Bonilla



Sociodrama



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Sociodrama as PAR approach to creating safer spaces

Sociodrama is perhaps one of the oldest forms of action research. The origin of action research is commonly associated with works by social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1946) in the United States during the mid-20th century and, in the Latin American tradition, with the active research works by Fals Borda during the 1970s (1971; 1972; 1977). However, during the 1920s there were interesting examples of action research, like that by Austrian-American psychiatrist and sociologist Jacob Levy Moreno (Rappaport 2020, 22).

Using drama and improvisation methods, Moreno sought to create a safe and controlled environment that helped his patients to relive their experiences and better understand their emotions. Regarding this technique, which Moreno called "psychodrama" and from which sociodrama later emerged, its author indicated that it was «an exploration of truth through dramatic methods» (Barone 2025).

Sociodrama as a method to better understand emotions and experiences found a fertile context in the Colombian Pacific region, where the scenic arts are an important part of the cultural heritage of the Afro-Colombian communities, and a tool to visibilise social, cultural, and political struggles. The role of dramaturgy in the cultural life of the Colombian Pacific has been in line with the tradition of popular theatre of Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal (1970), who contributed to developing a theatrical methodology with political, pedagogical, and transformative purposes in the 1970s: *The Theatre of the Oppressed*.

"One of the first things that caught my attention when I came to work in Buenaventura 20 years ago was that people liked sociodramas and representations. So, in religious ceremonies, we performed representations of biblical texts, which made it easy for people to participate more actively on reflecting on the biblical message and the reality they lived. Sociodrama was also used for formative work with youth, but the representations of the time were quite violent, given that these reflected faithfully the situation of the context. Those dramatizations were very heavy, but it was what it was" (interview with Adriel Ruiz Galván, 2025).

"However, therein was the potential and what had to be done was to accompany the community to move from the sociodrama that represents violence to the sociodrama that problematises these situations and helps understand how they have impacted life in the territory. From this process emerge sociodramas that address topics difficult to talk about, such as domestic violence, promiscuity, or the role of politicians" (Adriel Ruiz Galván, 2025).

Sociodrama, as well as the artistic productions that have stimulated

dialogue and research on local issues also have an intrinsic protective character. “The purpose of sociodrama and theatre”, as recalled by John Erick Caicedo, “is not only to tell stories, but about to create a safe space in which to do so. That’s why we tell stories collectively and through art, so that what we say doesn’t come back to haunt the artists”.

Sociodrama and the creation of safer spaces

The experience we present herein is an exercise in which three complementary activities converge: i) practice of participatory action research; ii) collective artistic creation; and iii) development of a citizen formation agenda created by young leaders from commune 3 of Buenaventura in the neighbourhoods Alfonso López Pumarejo and Alberto Lleras Camargo.

The experience took place within the context of the diploma course on Participatory Action Research (PAR diploma), organised by CORMEPAZ in 2023⁷. As part of the process, the participants, organised into work groups, had to identify a problem from their communes, investigate it using participatory methodologies, and propose solutions that involved the community.

Given the extension of the diploma course’s training process, it is not possible to gather here all the aspects of the research, so we will focus on those that led the group to opt for sociodrama as dissemination strategy of their investigation and how they have used it to generate safer spaces in their

commune:

On the process of action-oriented participatory research

Grounded in the “learning by doing” framework, the diploma course enabled participants to gain hands-on experience with various ethnographic and participatory research techniques.

Through participant observation and the field diary, the young participants analysed their own contexts, or what Clough et al. (2004) call ‘de-familiarisation’, which involves questioning one’s own context. This allowed them to recognise that there were situations that, despite having become normal, constituted problems. One of those situations was the recurrence of traffic accidents on the main neighbourhood roads.

“Road accidents were not the only problem identified,” the youth recall. There were others, like lack of drinking water service or security problems that required more structural solutions, but “through the research process, we recognised the high accident rate in the sector as a problem, as well as our capacity to act upon it”.

7. The School of Popular Political Training (EFPP, for the term in Spanish) is a political and popular formation initiative that seeks to Enhance the capacities of teachers who are part of educational institutions, community council leaders, and organisational processes within the Afro-urban movement. Since its creation in 2014, The EFPP has conducted diploma courses and training processes in partnership with institutions such as Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Universidad Claretiana, Sheffield University, among others.

Other research techniques, about which we will not delve into in this document, helped the young participants to identify the problem and the possible action routes. The group of young people tells us about this process:

- The interviews with the commune's elders (mayores and mayoras) helped us to understand the history of the context and of the problem, as well as to collect field data about a problem with respect to which there is no official data;
- The timeline helped us to better understand the leading role of collective action in neighbourhood founding and development;
- Focus groups with representatives from neighbourhoods and public administration helped us understand the technical, legal, and educational aspects of the problem;
- The participatory video placed us in contact with a tool that allows seeing a problem innovatively in the digital era, transmitting the message in direct and

simple manner.

"This research process revealed that the issue of traffic accidents causing injuries, deaths and property damage was not only due to a lack of signage, but primarily due to a lack of civic culture. We therefore decided that combining sociodrama with participatory video would be the best way to communicate our research findings and generate an impact in the community".

From road signals to the strategy of a civic culture training plan

"Many investigations end in reports nobody reads. We wanted," say the youth from the group, "for our investigation to have real impact on the community". Thus, sociodrama not only reflects the problem, but also proposes solutions:



The sociodrama created tells about an adolescent on his way to work. Before leaving the house, his mother begs him to drive carefully, given that many accidents have occurred due to the lack of road signals. Annoyed by his mother's recommendation, the young man begins his journey and a few blocks away he runs over a girl who was crossing the street. Overwhelmed by the accident, the young man and a group of friends went to the Board president, who proposed organising a technical meeting with the Transit Secretariat, the Mayor's Office, and the Ombudsman's Office to find a solution to the problem.

The sociodrama shows young people filing applications with different public entities and then participating in a roundtable with representatives from the institutions and experts to discuss solutions, as well as mechanisms to raise awareness and train in road safety for the commune's transport service providers: motorcycle taxi drivers, taxi drivers, and the community in general. The sociodrama ends with the Mayor's office invitation to a technical roundtable.



The story's creation and the script writing were done participatorily. According with the participatory video principles, all the group members participated in different aspects of the creation, production, and dissemination process.

"The filming was arduous," the group members recall, "because we wanted it to be realistic, to reflect well the characters, situations, and overall context". We had to repeat several scenes many times". "Sociodrama was a challenge for those who were bashful about acting".

"We did not anticipate how important the observation exercise would be, or how much we would learn from it", said the young participants. Observation allowed us to better understand how others act and relate to each other. As John Eric indicated, careful and respectful observation is essential to avoid caricaturing the context and the people

being represented. If we want to respectfully represent a *platonera*⁸, we should observe how she is, how she moves, how she sells fish, and how she relates to her environment.

Caricaturing the context or the people we represent can be funny; however, it limits the educational and pedagogical potential of sociodrama. This does not mean depriving sociodrama of humorous situations, which can help to make it more engaging.

Research impact

With support from CORMEPAZ, the sociodrama presented via participatory video reached several audiences: the community, which is now more sensitive to this problem; local organisations, have been coordinated to solve the problem.

8. Woman who sells fish, usually on a platter.

In effect, sociodrama permitted the creation of a technical roundtable with representatives from various levels of government to discuss the problem and proposed solutions.

The result of these discussions has been:

- To raise community awareness about the problem.
- To signal the most affected areas and school zones.
- To create zebra crossings and paint speed bumps, whose lack of visibility had also been a cause of accidents.
- To conduct training and awareness courses for motorcycle taxi drivers, taxi drivers, and transporters working in the neighbourhoods.
- To work together to design a civic culture training program that seeks to reach families in the neighbourhood and schools in the area.

As combined outcome of these actions, sociodrama has met the principal research objective, whose question was: how can we contribute to reduce the high rate of accidents in the sector?

Likewise, it has helped to increase the community's sense of belonging to the importance of traffic signals and their maintenance. Additionally, a process has begun in citizen culture training that is not imposed from outside, but rather it is born from the community itself and its desire to address a problem.

Lessons learned

- The research helped us to understand that we had a problem that we had not acknowledged as such. Also, to comprehend the reasons why actions had not been undertaken or why prior actions had turned out ineffective. This told us that the audience for our research should not be limited to community members, but that it was essential to involve local authorities and institutions in the search for comprehensive solutions to the problem.
- The fact that we used participatory video as a tool for dissemination and social appropriation of knowledge helped the authorities pay attention to our proposals.
- The process helped us place the human factor in the centre of the problem's analysis, and on the search for solutions.
- The research process permitted our gaining recognition from our own communities, given that they recognise us as youth committed with the neighbourhood's wellbeing and with the search for solutions.
- Although the issue of traffic accidents may be considered a minor issue amid all the problems affecting our community, addressing this problem has allowed us to help rebuild our community's social fabric damaged by violence and insecurity.
- Likewise, it has shown us that we can act upon community problems through PAR.

- Given that sociodrama has artistic elements, the community was motivated to participate spontaneously.

Thus, sociodrama, which can also include singing and dancing, is a practice that helps broaden understanding of a reality or problem, as the act of showing allows different understandings to emerge (Gamboa, 2025).

Therefore, it is important that sociodrama be followed by forum theatre, a technique that allows these understandings to dialogue with each other without excluding one another.

“Sociodrama is not only representation, but a mechanism of social participation, a tool that permits understanding the context and, at the same time, helps people who are experiencing a problem to ask questions and talk about that situation through artistic expression. (J. Murillo, Personal communication, 26/03/2025).

Sociodrama is considered an effective

form of communicating a message, not because it delivers a unique and well-defined message, but because it shows through artistic mediation and, in this way, sociodrama allows the community itself to produce the message or messages through dialogue.

“Sociodrama was the best tool we could choose” stated the group members from commune 3.





Theatre for life



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Theatre as a methodology of experiential knowledge: Touching the tide and Theatre for life seedbed

“Collective creation is our way of creating.
We create and construct with the knowledge of all.
Collective creation is also a way of decolonising knowledge,
art, and the narratives about the territory.”

(John Erick Caicedo)

Popular theatre is a thinking-feeling methodology par excellence, which invites convergence of the critical reading of reality, dialogue of knowledge understood as a forum of divergent voices, recovery of traditional knowledge, and imagination of a common purpose. Nevertheless, it is not merely a staging of critical content that appeals to the minds and emotions that makes popular theatre a tool of experiential knowledge. Its potential resides in the participatory process of analysis, reflection, and action that the theatre can generate.

In this section, we will analyse the case of Touching the Tide (Tocando la marea), a play that arose from the concern of a group of leaders in Buenaventura to ensure that the report of one of the most relevant investigations into two decades of systemic and structural violence in the territory reached the local community and the victims of the conflict.

In 2012, within the framework of the Minga for the Memory of Buenaventura (Minga por la Memoria de Buenaventura), a group of young leaders, headed by John Erick Caicedo, Héctor Fabio Micolta, and Óscar Javier Martínez, proposed to the National Centre for Historical Memory (CNMH) a different way of presenting to the community the report Buenaventura: a port without a community (2015). The group proposed to the CNMH a strategy for dissemination, dialogue, and reflection on the report that would appeal to the expressive forms of the Colombian Pacific: oral tradition, music, theatre, and dance.

Tocando la marea is the outcome of this process of “pedagogisation of the research process”, as they called it, which sought to make the report something alive, close, and comprehensible for the communities that had suffered (and continue to suffer) the impacts of the conflict.

Hence, to speak of Tocando la marea is to speak about the CNMH report. With its impressive collection of data and empirical evidence, Buenaventura: A Port without a Community documents the magnitude and complexity of the violent dynamics in the city, follows a critical, procedural and historical perspective, as well as reveals the set of economic, political and cultural practices that shaped Buenaventura as a geography of violence (CNMH 2015).

The process of creating the dramaturgy was coordinated by the CORMEPAZ Semillero Teatro por la vida (Theatre for Life seedbed) with participation from several organisations and social processes that make up the great Minga for Memory, such as the Afro-Colombian Pastoral Centre Corporation (CEPAC), Urban Memory, the Women of the Chapel of Memory, the San Pedro Apóstol Folklore Group, and support by Juana Salgado, a performing artist and victim of violence in Colombia.

As recalled by its creators, the most important thing has not only been the staging of a dramaturgy that accounts for the report, but the dialogues and reflections it has sparked and which have contributed to reaffirming the resistance against all forms of violence in the territory.

The following transcribes fragments of our conversation with John Eric Caicedo, director of the Semillero Teatro por la vida, who reflects upon the play after its presentation in May 2025 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the play's premiere on 02 June 2015¹⁰.

Methodology Systematisation Project [PSM, for the term in Spanish]: As an introduction, could you tell us about your early experiences doing theatre in Buenaventura?

John Erick Caicedo Angulo [JECA]: I could summarise my experience of theatre in three moments. In 2009, I started working as a theatre teacher at CORMEPAZ (then known as FUNDESCODES). We performed two plays and presented several other theatrical pieces, from which I learnt a fundamental

lesson: that art is a valuable tool for building peace in our country. The second moment was my encounter with popular communication through the Ubuntu¹¹ School of Popular Communication.

At Ubuntu, we learn to use different tools to tell our stories, such as theatre, music, painting, dance, poetry and, where possible, audio-visual, radio and journalistic production. We also practise the principle of collective creation. We started telling stories about victims, struggle, resistance, claiming rights, and defending territory.

The third moment took place in 2010 with the organisation of "Marcando Territorio", an inter-organisational project coordinating pedagogical activities in defence of the 'territories reclaimed from the sea'¹².

The aim was to use art to challenge the then ongoing plan to evict us from our territory. Significant impact was generated through mobilising actions that had a significant impact on young people. It was from this that the urban music group Marcando Territorio emerged¹³.

10. Interview edited by Juan Mario Díaz, project coordinator.

11. From the South African thought "I am, because we all are and we all are, because I am".

12. Neighbourhoods and streets built on the tides by filling in the land with sludge or trash. These are lands literally reclaimed from the sea.

13. Among the most notable songs are the following: "Marcando Territorio" and "Libertad". See the following links: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WJ-sLnFrhU> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMjFcmCC1ro>

PSM: Let us now talk about the Semillero Teatro por la vida

JECA: Semillero Teatro por la vida is an intergenerational, multidisciplinary group of over 25 artists. Our members include victims of the conflict, community mothers, and male and female social leaders. Some have completed or are pursuing higher education studies in subjects such as sociology, drama, music, dance, and agriculture.

After creating and staging the play *Tocando la marea* – an innovative approach to engaging people in discussion of the research report “Buenaventura, a Port without a Community” (2015), the group established itself as one of the most prominent in the Colombian Pacific region for memory-building through scenic arts. We toured several cities across the country performing the play.

PSM: How did you go about creating *Tocando la marea*?

JECA: I remember that, when we first invited people to join the production, around 80 individuals from various organisations arrived. We rejected nobody. We started working with all of them and ended up with a group of around 35.

While rehearsing the play, we constantly referred to the report, reading the stories, discussing the experiences and reviewing the data, figures and key moments in the history of the conflict.

From there, we began to weave a dramaturgy in which the stories from the report met the stories of those of us who

participated in the production. *Tocando la marea* recounts the report, but through the eyes and lived experiences of the artists. The work's title is the product of this fusion.

The story goes like this: Doña Florencia Arrechea, an elderly actress and victim of the conflict, told Juana Salgado, a professional dancer hired by the CNMH, that exploring the Buenaventura region was impossible without walking barefoot into the sea. So Doña Florencia took Juana to experience the tide for herself. We immediately knew that this had to be the name of the play.

PSM: Why was it important to pedagogise the CNMH report?

JECA: Simply writing the report was not enough. With its nearly 450 pages, the report is an important document for understanding the dynamics of dispossession, violence and resistance. However, this was not enough. It was necessary to present it to the community and engage people in discussion about it.

The question was: how? *Tocando la marea* was the answer. Created with the involvement of victims, local organisation representatives, and young people and children engaged in educational and artistic processes, *Tocando la marea* had two objectives: first, to move beyond statistics and recount the impact of the conflict from the victims' perspective; and second, to move beyond the impact of the conflict and recount life stories and community testimonies of resistance and resilience in the region. That is why we narrate with our bodies, we narrate collectively, and we narrate through art and music.

PSM: Tell us about this relationship between resistance, re-existence, and art.

JECA: In our work we rely on the premise of Flórez and McGee (2017), according to which, in contexts affected by armed conflict and violence, such as ours, “there is potential for citizen agency to drive positive change” (14). For us, theatre and art in general are vehicles for social transformation and tools for peacebuilding.

They are also a way to remember and recount the struggles we have waged in defence of life and territory. Similarly, theatre has provided a mutual learning process between artists and community members, helping us to understand our reality from many different perspectives. Given our context, we don't create theatre for entertainment purposes. Our art navigates the space between life and death, affirming our determination to live in peace and dignity in our territory.

PSM: Is this what the ethical and political approach of *Tocando la marea* refers to? Could you tell us about this aspect of the work?

JECA: Yes, *Tocando la Marea* invites us to explore the possibilities of the performing arts for critical reflection, collective action, and the repair of the social fabric. In line with the Theatre of the Oppressed proposed by Augusto Boal (1970), it seeks to transform viewers into “spectactors”, actively participating in the creation and resolution of scenes that reflect real injustices in their lives. Therefore, the work is structured as a wave of individual and collective memories that portray the pain, resistance, and hope of the communities

of Buenaventura regarding historical problems, like dispossession, forced disappearance, armed violence, structural racism, state abandonment, and the struggle for land and territory. The play combines monologues, choral scenes, live music and dance performances that evoke the past and speak to a contemporary audience. Consequently, the dialogues it enables are just as important as the stories it tells.

PSM: Could you expand on this point?

JECA: We create collectively because it would otherwise be very challenging to talk about violence in Buenaventura. We let the survivors, victims and women searching for missing relatives guide us, as they are the only ones who can tell us how they want their pain and suffering to be represented. However, the staging is neither the only thing nor the most important thing. The important thing comes after the staging: forum theatre. This strategy is essential for the work to remain relevant and fulfil its function of preserving collective memory.

PSM: Why the emphasis on enhancing the collective memory?

Memory is not just about the past; it is also about the present and the future. Our struggle is not only against the violent expansion of an extractive model of development in the region. We are also fighting against myths and narratives that seek to disempower Afro-descendants. As Walker (2012) states, these myths propose that the current oppression is the result of our male and female elders’ (mayores and mayoras’) inability to defend the territory.

Therefore, our commitment to collective memory involves retrieving the life stories of people who dedicated their existence to serving others. We call these exercises 'scenarios of collective construction'; that is, autonomous space of creation and social agency that inspire resistance and re-existence in the face of strategies of marginalisation and exploitation, such as rupturing community ties, silencing and individualising life (Caicedo, 2021, p. 143).

Popular theatre is therefore a refusal to conform to a violent, unjust and exclusionary social order. We encapsulate this idea in the phrase 'resisting is not enduring'. This is why we do not simply remember the past; we imagine a desirable and possible future. Theatre helps us to imagine, represent, and give shape to this future.

As Louidor and Jaramillo (2020) remind us, historical reconstruction and the imagination of the future are not opposing tasks, but complementary tools for responding to current struggles. This is why *Tocando la marea* remains relevant a decade after its premiere, as it portrays the tensions, conflicts, and dramas experienced by the port and its inhabitants.

PSM: In that regard, one last question: How has the *Semillero Teatro por la vida* contributed to creating safer spaces?

JECA: Theatre teaches us to tell stories in different ways. As well as language, theatre enables us to express ourselves through movement and music. This collective, artistic approach to storytelling is protective, reducing the risk of what we say being used against those of us who

exercise leadership in the territory. The pedagogical dimension of theatre is another protective element.

In a context such as ours, where young people are exposed to so much violence and are vulnerable to illegal groups, the theatre has provided an opportunity to develop artistic and personal skills. This is not due to the efforts of one person or another. What is truly educational is the process whereby some learn from others and learn to take care of one another.

Creating art collectively and for the community has another protective effect in that it fosters environments for being and being together, which brings us back to the starting point: Ubuntu.

More information about Tocando la marea:

<https://corpografias.com/semillero-de-teatro-por-la-vida/>

<https://centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/tocando-la-marea/>

https://www.academia.edu/88082562/Tocando_marea_una_iniciativa_de_memoria_hist%C3%B3rica_del_semillero_de_teatro_por_la_vida

<https://micrositios.centrodememoriahistorica.gov.co/Podcasts/?p=1752>

<https://museodememoria.gov.co/arte-y-cultura/tocando-la-marea/>



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Buenaventura

**Thinking–feeling methodologies
of resistance and re–existence**