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Laura Hoya Noel

Saint John Fisher College, lh02258@sjfc.edu

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The Forgotten Wayuu People

Abstract

This article focuses on the history of the Wayuu tribe and its relationship with the Spanish conquistadors and later the Colombian government. It reviews the history to understand why the tribe is ignored and disregarded by the Colombian government. The article tries to find a solution to the gap between non-Wayuu Colombians and the Wayuu community through the contact theory. It aims to connect these two groups to more interactions which would cause for tolerance to develop according to the contact theory.



The Forgotten Wayuu People

Laura Hoya Noel

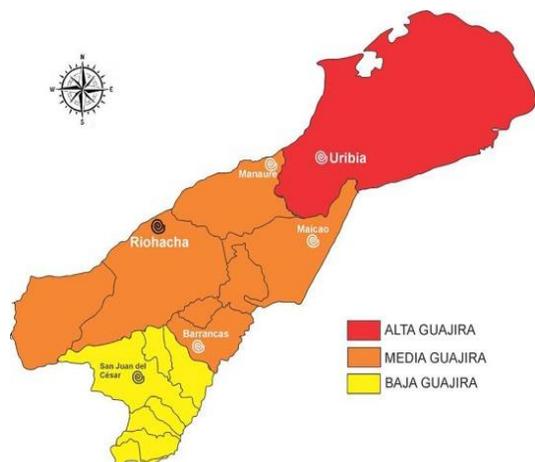
Abstract: This article focuses on the history of the Wayuu tribe and its relationship with the Spanish conquistadors and later the Colombian government. It reviews the history to understand why the tribe is ignored and disregarded by the Colombian government. The author tries to find a solution to the gap between non-Wayuu Colombians and the Wayuu community through the contact theory. They aim to connect these two groups to more interactions which would cause for tolerance to develop according to the contact theory.

The conflict discussed in this paper is the one between the Wayuu People of Colombia and the Colombian government. The

Wayuu, an Amerindian ethnic tribe, inhabits the arid Guajira Peninsula in the northernmost part of Colombia. The area's

geographical makeup is mostly desert, making living conditions especially cruel. I have chosen to write about this topic because my maternal grandmother is a Wayuu of the Epiyuu clan. The Wayuu are forgotten people who have managed to survive throughout the years but have faced harsh conditions in the last decade that have ultimately limited their ability to thrive. This paper recounts the history and culture of the Wayuu and discusses the conflict and neglect they have endured since the Spanish colonization and with the current Colombian government, the life they have created in order to survive, and how the present Venezuelan humanitarian crisis and COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the living conditions in the region. Finally, some recommendations consider the role of government support and the contact theory being implemented to improve the relations between the Wayuu and non-Wayuu Colombians.

Archeological records show that the first humans to arrive on La Guajira peninsula were Wayuus, indigenous people of the Arawak family 10,000 years ago. The Arawak family inhabited the Amazon rainforest. La Guajira has three parts, upper/*alta*, middle/*media*, and southern/*baja*



Guajira, as seen in this map. The Spaniards arrived in La Guajira in 1499. The Spaniards

referred to the Wayuu as ‘Guajiros,’ a term that was later used to identify all the indigenous people of the region. The Spaniards uncovered that there were supplies of pearls in the region between Riohacha and Cabo de la Vela. Spanish settlements were established to control pearl fishing and trading. In addition to the scarcity of freshwater, the Spaniards and Wayuu People were in a permanent state of war. At that time the Spanish Crown had instituted the *encomienda* system that allowed a *conquistador* to control all living conditions of indigenous people. The *conquistadors* abused their power and ended up taking total control of the land where the natives lived. The Spaniards also came to the New World with the mission to educate and convert the indigenous people to Catholicism, the way they carried out this mission was violent and abusive. It cost the lives of thousands of Wayuus. Catholic missionaries intended to convert the region; however, they were not successful at spreading Catholicism as quickly as it did in the rest of Colombia. Catholicism still influenced the Wayuu culture, many Wayuus believe in both their tribal traditions and in Catholic traditions.

The Guajira peninsula was a strategic territory for the Dutch, Spanish, French, and English colonizers because it was a gateway to the Caribbean, and it would attract a lot of trade. However, La Guajira was never fully conquered, due to its geographical isolation, extreme weather conditions making living untenable, and its limited resources. It was not until 1970 that natural gas and coal deposits were uncovered, were quickly capitalized, and continue to be nowadays. These companies have also hurt the development of the region leading to a decline in environmental health and an increase in human rights and land violations, which continue to happen today. Indigenous people have created movements to try to

remove the salt mine, natural gas, and coal industries in the peninsula, they've made identity-based claims that seek the state to allow them to capitalize. Unfortunately, these movements have failed.

The Wayuu culture has survived throughout all the years of hardship they have been forced to endure. Their culture is deeply rooted in their identity to their land. They value the land they live in and the region it is located in. Wayuu cosmology says that "the creation myth relates the story of Wayúu origins and concepts of community and its representation of fertility provides the basis for women's stature in Wayúu society. Since the Wayúu are descended from the female line, the culture is matriarchal in character. It is through the woman and her clan that society is structured, creating ties of matrilineal bondage. Social status is determined by the mother, and the children inherit her family surname" (Zapata). Women are the leaders of the house, therefore treated equally to men. Women are also the breadwinners; they support the economy by creating many artisanal backpacks, hammocks, nets, bags, and purses. Men often find work fishing, hunting, goat herding, or crafting musical instruments. Wayuu culture is passed down orally, stories are shared when there is a group gathered. Stories are also told during moments of grief. It is common for stories to be meant to make people laugh, it is meant to uplift the family at its time of suffering. Death is very important in Wayuu culture; it is believed that the dead goes to *Jeripa*, which is said to be located near Cabo de la Vela. The dead are buried with items that they used daily, a hammock or an item they often wore. Although their culture has managed to survive, times are getting harder, and they have no support from the Colombian government.

The major players in this conflict are the Wayuu community and the Colombian government. The Colombian government has failed the Wayuu community by not making sure that electricity and running drinkable water are accessible in La Guajira. The government has completely abandoned these people and treat them as if they are not part of Colombian society. The national government has continuously ignored and neglected the problems happening in La Guajira. When coal deposits were uncovered, El Cerrejon was founded as a multinational corporation. Thirty million tons are extracted per year and all the profits go straight to the company. Since the national government has practically abandoned the state, the company is free to act as they wish in the area. Before the mining activities started, there was an environmental impact study completed in 1983 that was supposed to examine the environmental, social, and archaeological impacts the mining activity would have on the area (Maida). The study failed to recognize the Wayuu people in the area and how they would be impacted. The Wayuu people were called 'unorganized' and 'insignificant' to the construction intended to happen. There are even reports of police being bribed by this company to seize Wayuu land so they could expand their mining. This has forced many Wayuu households to be displaced, they have moved to other regions in La Guajira and found it extremely difficult to survive. Although the company says to be committed to helping develop the area, they have only caused more problems for the Wayuu people. In a case in 2007, the Constitutional Colombian Court ruled that mining could not happen on indigenous land without prior negotiation with the owners of the land. This ruling, though, has been utterly ignored, proving again how the justice system has failed the Wayuu people. Another way in

which El Cerrejon has affected the Wayuu is by polluting the *Rancheria* River, which is the only source of freshwater left in La Guajira. Those in the region depend on the *Rancheria* River. Reports show that the coal company has dumped waste into the river which has caused it to be contaminated at high levels. People can no longer swim or drink from the river. This affected the health of the Wayuu people who already struggle to get water in their remote areas. The national and local governments have failed to do anything about the impacts El Cerrejon has had on the Wayuu community.

As the Colombian government continues to ignore the hardships in La Guajira and specifically the ones the Wayuu people face, they have been forced to fend on their own. The region lacks food, water, access to healthcare, education, and has extremely high poverty rates. The local government has been corrupt, and they mismanaged money intended to serve Wayuu women and children with food and healthcare. A Human Rights Watch report states that prosecutors in La Guajira found that the local government has stolen around \$900,000 USD. Corruption has greatly contributed to the high poverty and malnutrition rates as well. Wayuu settlements are built from scraps including metals, plastic, sticks, and other materials found. Roads are in bad conditions, some are so terrible that it is impossible to continue with a vehicle. Wayuu people must walk for hours to get to a well and collect water. Unfortunately, the wells are poorly maintained. All sixty Wayuu communities have reported struggling with having sufficient water sources in their communities, 96% of those living in rural areas in La Guajira lack reliable access to potable water. When there are drought seasons, sources of water are even more limited. Wayuu children often fall sick due to their poor diet. Unfortunately, not all families are able to

afford to take their child to a hospital when they fall sick, those who are able to go to the hospital often die on the way there because the trip is so long. The Wayuu live in remote areas so getting to a hospital could possibly take up to a whole day. The Human Rights Watch group based in Colombia says that 1 out of every 10 children under the age of five die in La Guajira from malnutrition.



Often, children die at home, so it may be that the rates are higher. The government has not placed any program to support those suffering from malnutrition. There is a disproportionate number of children dying of malnutrition in the region, specifically affecting Wayuu children. It is a crucial issue the Colombian government needs to act on immediately. Children who survive suffer from long-lasting consequences to their health and development. In 2017, the Constitutional Colombian Court ordered the national government to act on the situation, however, the Human Rights Watch group reports that no progress has been made in the area to address food and water security, affordable healthcare, or other basic necessities for the Wayuu people. Resources are extremely scarce in the region, it seems impossible that the Wayuu have been able to survive for this long.

In the past few years, conditions have worsened due to the humanitarian crisis under Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela. Many Wayuu members living in Venezuela have decided to move into Colombia. They have found that conditions are still harsh in La

Guajira. Although there are more resources and job opportunities, they are still not sufficient with the influx of migration to the



region. Many non-Wayuu Venezuelans have also crossed the border, causing the area to become extremely overpopulated. This has only worsened the situation, as there were already limited resources before the mass of migrants crossed. In January of 2020, a United Nations group based in Venezuela estimated that around 95,000 Venezuelans had crossed over into La Guajira. The government followed its pattern of ignoring issues in La Guajira and the state has done little about the migration crisis (Collins). Venezuelan children are also malnourished in Colombia due to the scarcity of food. Venezuelans have brought over measles and malaria into the region. In the rural regions, there are only three hospitals intended to serve a population of 900,000 people. Venezuelans are unable to seek public medical attention because they do not have a Colombian identification card. The Wayuu people of Colombia have tried to be welcoming to the Venezuelan Wayuu members; however, it is hard when they are now all competing for the limited resources. A leader of Parenstu, a settlement in *Alta Guajira* said, “They [Venezuelan Wayuu People] said, ‘We’re Wayuu, we’re from here like you. But this is not their land’” (Casey). The conflict between the two different Wayuu groups has caused violence. There has been assistance from NGOs that have brought medical equipment, nutrition

kits, and other assistance to the area, but this is not enough. The Colombian government paid little attention to the conflict happening nor the humanitarian crisis growing in the area.

When the 2019 novel coronavirus hit La Guajira, it possessed another threat to the Wayuu community. The virus has only magnified the crisis Wayuu people live through. La Guajira’s government had promised to deliver drinkable water, hand wash, and 30,000 hygiene kits in efforts to content COVID-19. However, with the weak health care system and high levels of water and food insecurity, the pandemic only made things worse. As COVID-19 cases rose and filled up the ICU in the region, the Colombian Ministry of Health sent 10 ICU beds to La Guajira but failed to send any financial support (Collins). Although the government did provide some food assistance, not all Wayuu communities received this help. Testing in La Guajira also proved to have obstacles, as the department does not have a testing laboratory. Transmission of the virus would spread quickly in the Wayuu communities considering the lack of resources they have to combat the disease. With lockdown measures in place, the Wayuu community found themselves even more restricted to food and water supplies. If COVID-19 didn’t kill them, the lack of food and water surely would. Also, the pandemic ended tourism in La Guajira which was the sector where most Wayuu people made money from. Only 10% of La Guajira has internet access, leaving thousands unable to transition their work or studies online. This is devastating for the educational developments of Wayuu children. Before COVID-19, their educational development access was already extremely limited due to a lack of funding. Many Wayuu children were forced to walk hours to get to school and due to their poverty, were oftentimes

limited to one meal a day, leading to them starving by the time they arrived. Schools would frequently report that children would pass out from hunger during class. Now with the pandemic, Wayuu children are falling behind in school due to a lack of technology resources. COVID-19 only made things worse for the Wayuu community who already suffered harsh living conditions. They continue to be resilient despite the extremely difficult way of life.

My recommendation would be for the national government to investigate the corruption allegations in La Guajira. Since the department has been mismanaged for decades, the national government needs to keep its eyes on the leadership in the department. With the help of NGOs who can also keep track of what is going on in the situation, there can be better management of the resources in the area. There must be an emphasis on giving back what has been stolen from the Wayuu people. In addition to this, the government must address the failing healthcare system, education system, job insecurity, food and water scarcity, and lack of internet access and electricity. It may seem like a lot, but these are basic needs the Wayuu people lack but desperately need. The Colombian government is responsible for providing for its citizens, and right now, it is failing miserably. The Wayuu people have been natives to the land long before anyone else and deserve to live an adequate life with access to resources. The Colombian government can do this by encouraging graduates to spend their year of service in La Guajira. This is already common for undergraduate students majoring in the healthcare field. These students are required to spend one-year post college in an area of great need. If the government encouraged students from all majors to do this there would be more support in developing La Guajira. Students who major in education can focus on the educational system in La

Guajira, those who are civil engineers can assist in urban and rural development, and so on. In a way, this is the contact theory. Non-Wayuu Colombians would be interacting with the Wayuu community. They would be able to engage with the Wayuu community and experience life in La Guajira. Hopefully, this would better the perceptions Colombians have of the Wayuu people and La Guajira. Students who work in the area could advocate for these communities in the future. It could help unite the Wayuu communities with Colombians and foster a beautiful relationship. The Wayuu could feel as if they are part of Colombian society. The government has attempted to help in the past, but results show no significant impact on the Wayuu people. Having young and eager students working in the area could speed the development in the area.

I believe that the contact theory would be the best solution for this conflict because it would allow Colombians to see for themselves the beauty within the forgotten people of La Guajira. The Wayuu have a beautiful culture that needs to be preserved, it is rare to see nations' actions on behalf of their indigenous population. Through contact theory, Colombians would contribute towards rebuilding La Guajira and the Wayuu communities. They can advocate for these communities which will hopefully grab attention from the local, national, and even international community. Pressure needs to be placed on the Colombian government to act quickly. Putting pressure on the government has worked in the past, the most recent example in Colombia would be *El Paro Nacional*, a national strike to protest the tax reform that was being passed. Colombians protested nationwide and pressured the Colombian government into withdrawing the reform. Contact theory worked in a study conducted by Salma Mousa in the Middle East. The

study consisted of Christian teams being invited to participate in a soccer league. Half of the Christian teams would receive additional Muslim players and the other half of the Christian teams got additional Christian players. The study focused on the behavior and attitude changes of the Christian players who had Muslim players. Overall, results showed that the theory had worked, the Christian players who played on Muslim teams indicated they would be okay with playing future seasons with Muslim players. This experiment allowed Christian players to have a different perspective on Muslims (Mousa). This example of the contact theory proves that it is possible to make advancements through groups of people, even if they are small ones. Hopefully, through my recommendation, there will be more positive advancements between the relationship of the people and

the social development of the Wayuu communities.

The Wayuu have proven to be resilient people; however, their circumstances have reached a point where they need all the help they can possibly get. Significant reforms are needed in La Guajira and especially a focus on the Wayuu people who have been neglected by their government for years. Outside organizations have provided significant assistance, but more substantial solutions to the region's shortage of basic needs are needed. They have been forgotten for too long and deserve to be treated as valuable members of Colombian society. It is essential for the integrity of the Wayuu for their rich and valuable culture to be preserved, they deserve to see their culture and people flourish.

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