

Documents & knowledge in the margins

— Part I —

Edgardo Civallero

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Cooking cassava

Documents and knowledge on the margins (01)

The Wenàiwika or Piapoco are about 3,000 individuals who live in the eastern plains of Colombia, between the Vichada and Guaviare rivers, along the Meta river, and in the middle of the dense network of streams or "caños" that crisscross the entire region.

In ancient times, the Wenàiwika were organized into subgroups or partialities that assumed the name of an animal, e.g. *cumanáica*, "deer". One of these partialities was called *cháse*, "toucan". In the tasty local Spanish, the nickname of this bird, not very vocal by nature, is "pía poco" ("the bird that chirps little"). And "piapoco" was the name given to the entire ethnic group in popular speech... and in the academic world. For their part, to call themselves they use the word that in their language simply means "people".

The Wenàiwika have preserved their traditional culture throughout the centuries. However, from 1920 onwards, certain acculturation began, especially through contact with mestizo Colombian settlers. Jealous of their culture, the Wenàiwika kept this acculturation under control, reducing it to the purchase or exchange of a few items (clothing, radios and batteries, machetes, matches, petroleum, aluminum pots and pans, medicines) and sometimes to functional literacy, which only took place among males.

Today, these people still maintain many of their original ways of life, customs, and traditions. Some of them are common to the rest of the original communities of the Orinoco and Amazon basin, and have even been adopted by the Creole communities living in the area.

One of these traditions is the yucca-based cuisine.

The Wenàiwika live in rectangular houses; several thick poles of *cuyubí* wood joined together by plank walls lined with adobe on the outside, and with a gabled roof of palm leaves. These dwellings have between one and three rooms, most of which serve as bedrooms: in them are hung the "chinchorros" or hammocks that serve as beds throughout tropical South America. The main room is the social area par excellence; there, on one of its walls, there is usually a wide shelf where drinking water and food are stored, out of the reach of children and domestic animals. And in one of its corners, there is a fire pit where food is prepared.

The basis of the Wenàiwika's diet is the *cáini*, the so-called "yuca brava" or "bitter cassava". The "yuca brava" is the bitter variety of cassava (*Manihot esculenta*). Grown in small family gardens, it is harvested and, since it decomposes very quickly when raw, it is processed. It is grated, and the whitish pulp obtained is shredded and left to ferment slightly overnight.

The next day a vital process takes place: the juicy pulp is compressed in the "sebucán" or *irica*, a huge press-filter that allows extracting all the juice from the cassava. This

juice is loaded with hydrocyanic acid (hydrogen cyanide, prussic acid), which is extremely poisonous but is deactivated by heat. While the fermentation process has removed some of the poison, careful pressing is required to extract the rest.

The toxic juice is cooked to prepare a drink known as "mingao" or *càaméri*, a Wenàiwika term meaning "bitter". The pulp is removed from the "sabucán" and passed through a sieve to obtain a kind of fine-textured, slightly moist flour. This flour is spread on the "budare" or *púali*, the king of the Wenàiwika domestic artifacts.

The "budare" is the central element of the house, not only for the Wenàiwika communities but for many others. It is a kind of circular clay plate that is heated from below and on which the classic "tortillas" are prepared. It is made with a special clay, gray in color, which is mixed with the ashes of the *cawia* tree. This pottery process can only be done by a woman.

The cassava flour is then placed on this hot plate until the layer is one centimeter thick. This is how the "torta de casabe" or *macàdu* is prepared, which can sometimes measure up to one meter in diameter, depending on the dimensions of the "budare". The cake is cooked on both sides, turning it with a wooden spatula (in the best crêpe style), and when it is removed, it is placed on a *cosiduma* mat (circular, woven with a single "moriche" palm leaf) or in a flat *ába* basket.

Thus, hot and moist, the *macàdu* can be consumed immediately. Those that are not eaten are thrown on the palm roof of the house, to dry in the sun, or left on the shelf.

The hardened and dried cake is called *dàalèeri*, and lasts for several days if not moistened.

The Wenàiwika obtain another product from the cassava: the "fariña" or *machúca*. This is obtained if, instead of preparing a tortilla with the flour that is poured into the "budare", it is toasted by stirring continuously. The final product is a very hard and dry cereal, which can be stored for months in plastic bags or in *mapíiri* baskets (made of cane woven in hexagonal patterns) lined with leaves. Or it can be used to make a hot drink called *chucúsi*.

Is this the Wenàiwika diet? Not at all. Good hunters and fishermen, they enjoy soups and roasts of fish or meat. In addition, they are subsistence farmers and gatherers, so they also eat green mangoes, palm nuts, sweet potatoes, sweet cassava, and other tubers. Finally, they raise pigs and chickens: with the fat of the former, they fry the eggs of the latter, alongside some bananas from their gardens. And, to settle these dishes, they make fermented beverages based on corn or sugarcane honey.

Despite such variety, their "bread" (to give a European equivalent) is the yucca cake, which has also become the staple food of many populations of the Colombian, Ecuadorian, Peruvian, Brazilian and Bolivian Amazon, the Venezuelan Orinoquia and the Paraguayan Chaco. And although the uses given to the appreciated tuber are many (it is fermented to brew beer, it is boiled to accompany meat as if it were potatoes, it is roasted...), its use on top of a hot "budare" is already a classic South American image.

An aroma, a sound, a color, an image, and, in short, a memory and knowledge that have become the (in)tangible heritage of an entire continent.

The heartbeat of the Mapu

Documents and knowledge on the margins (02)

It has been labeled as primitive, shamanic, ancestral... It has been used by many foreign "creators", without any respect, to give an "ethnic" touch to their jazz, classical, rock or New Age compositions... The music of the Mapuche people (from Mapudungu *mapu*, "land" and *che*, "people") has had a great diffusion. However, paradoxically, it is among the least known and least understood of the southern cone of the Americas.

Mapuche sounds and rhythms are centuries old. And they have resisted attacks and external influences as much as their creators, who withstood the onslaught of the Inca hosts, the Spanish troops, the Republican armies and the Pinochet's death brigades and are still there. Perhaps more dispossessed than at the beginning, but still standing, exhibiting a pride difficult to erase.

Their music is, unfailingly, associated to activities, ceremonies, rites and well determined moments. It is practically sacred. It accompanies dances of celebration and gratitude to the spirit of the heights, *Ngenechen*, or prayers for healing and cleansing, or intimate memories and wishes of love. But it also puts rhythm and melody to struggles, protests, claims, battles...

The beat of this music is marked by the *kultrún*, one of the two drums used by the Mapuche. It was said that this small membranophone summoned, called, opened the

doors to the invisible world of the spirits. With its sound one cursed and healed. The *kultrún* took possession of whatever its interpreter named: if the interpreter said "rain", the *kultrún* endowed that word with all its power.

And it rained.

Basically, it is a wooden kettledrum with a semi-spherical body, whose mouth is covered by a patch of peeled leather. It is used by the *machi*, the Mapuche (usually female) "shamans". The *machi* are the ones who invoke the ancient spirits, who pray for rain and good harvests, who heal with herbs and prayers. And they usually do so by striking their *kultrún*.

On its head, the drum wears a characteristic design, which may vary in some details but generally respects a fixed structure. The circular leather surface is cut by a cross, which marks the four parts into which the Mapuche divide the universe. The arms of the cross end in the feet of the *choike*, the Patagonian ostrich, an animal always present in the legends of this people. The center of the leather head (and of the universe) is usually marked by a circle, which represents the community to which the *machi* who owns the instrument belongs. And in each of the sections into which the drumhead is divided, two stars, the sun and the moon are placed: the ones determining the weather and the seasons.

Building a *kultrún* is not easy. In the old days, it had to be made by a craftsman who knew the *Mapuche* tradition, at the express request of the *machi*. The artisan had to

carve the body of the drum out of a piece of trunk of *foiye* or *triwe*, the sacred trees. These trunks had to be cut during the *püken*, the rainy season. Before chopping, it was necessary to ask permission from the *ngen-mawida*, the protective spirit of the forests. It was cut following the grain of the wood, to maintain the flow of the sap and not to interrupt the flow of life. Then a circular piece of *trülke* (lamb) hide had to be cut to boil, scraped with stones, softened and attached to the wooden body with strips of skin or braided horsehair. The *kultrún* had to be assembled, obligatorily, in the yard of the house of the *machi* who was going to play it. Before closing it, a series of objects were placed inside the drum, always in numbers of four or multiples thereof. Some small stones were placed to give it *newen* or power, some seeds for fertility, some cereal grains for abundance, some medicinal herbs for health, some white silver coins for prosperity, animal hair for good luck, some sacred earth... And then, the *machi* had to enclose inside the *kultrún* a puff of smoke, the superior energy of the fire, and her own voice. Thus she would put inside a part of herself, her power, her energy, and achieve a perfect attunement with her instrument. Sometimes she would shout *Akutún, akutún, ayuwi ta ñi piwke!* "Here I am, here I am, my heart is happy!" Other times she would say *Küme newen nieaymi:* "May it have good power". The *kultrún* was later consecrated in a ceremony called *ngillatún man kultrún*.

Today, the *kultrún* still sounds, as it did in the past. It resounds on both sides of the Andes, in the Patagonia of Argentina and Chile, in the hands of traditional music makers such as Beatriz Pichi Malén, Luisa Calcumil or the Aflai group. It resounds with each one of the *machi* who continue healing, thanking and remembering in all the Mapuche

communities. And it roars in all the demonstrations in which the Mapuche claim their lost and sullied rights: the right to land and water, air and life, food and school... Because the *kultrún*, the old people used to say, gives power to what is named.