Descolonizando Tiempo, Espacio y Conocimiento: El pueblo Kamëntšá en la encrucijada del patrimonio cultural

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English Summary

Decolonizing Time, Space and Knowledge. The Kamëntšá People at the Crossroads of Cultural Heritage.

PhD Dissertation jointly written by Jully Acuña Suarez and Marcelo Marques Miranda.

This thesis is focused on three aspects: 1) the development of a decolonial theoretical framework and collaborative research methodology with the Kamëntšá people, and the consequent reconstruction, revitalization and dignification of Kamëntšá knowledge and notions of time and space; 2) the history and colonization processes of the Kamëntšá people and ancestral lands, with a specific emphasis on the work of the Capuchin missionaries; 3) the concept of "cultural heritage" and the role of academic disciplines, government institutions and cultural policies in the perpetuation of colonialism through the appropriation, interpretation, control and resignification of the objects, monuments and cultures of Indigenous peoples.

Chapter 1 analyses the concepts of colonialism and decolonisation, as well as the development of a methodology centred on the respect for the Kamëntšá values, norms and ethics, particularly on matters of collaboration and on who benefits from research. The objective is to demonstrate that research should be based on ethical principles that respect the rights of Indigenous peoples and, in this particular case, the Kamëntšá worldview, language and spirituality, as well as fostering inclusion and empowerment of the community and building intercultural dialogue. The research has thus been developed in direct collaboration with a group of young Kamëntšá researchers, artists and educators (Ayentš Collective). It has allowed to revitalise and put into practice the Kamëntšá knowledge, rituals, community celebrations and language, and to recover narratives and spiritual processes totally unknown to young people and to rebuild the ancestral Kamëntšá calendar; while deconstructing colonial imaginaries and disrespectful assumptions about the Kamëntšá people.

Chapter 2 addresses the colonisation of the Kamëntšá people and territory, especially as developed by the Capuchin missionaries from the beginning of the 20th century, when they undertook a fierce evangelization campaign, imposed a theocratic government with the consent of the Colombian State, and launched a process of physical,

psychological, epistemic, and ontological violence against the Kamëntšá people. Their primary objective was the transformation and destruction of the Kamëntšá culture, worldview and religion to allow their insertion into "civilization" and to turn Kamëntšá people into "useful Colombian citizens". It was through the linguistic and anthropological knowledge obtained over decades that the Capuchins resignified and renamed the different elements of the Kamëntšá time-space, knowledge and spirituality that were harmonizable with Christianity, and tried to eliminate the rest. Furthermore, they laid the foundation for the transformation and exploitation of the Kamëntšá territory and its "natural resources". Today, this exploitation is being developed by governmental agencies and private companies, including through green-washing programs like REDD+.

Chapter 3 addresses the Kamëntšá knowledge, spirituality, community rituals and celebrations, and their relationship with the ancestral Kamëntšá calendar and territory. Moving away from the idea of the "myth", the Kamëntšá symbolic narratives are analysed as relational expressions of knowledge interconnected with spiritual, ethical, ritual and artistic practices. Here, the most significant Kamëntšá celebrations are resignified and reconstructed from a decolonial lens that demystifies and eliminates misconstructions and misinterpretations developed by anthropologists and missionaries. Kamëntšá communal celebrations and rituals are thus analysed in relation to the territory (fauna, flora, climatic phenomena) and time (calendar), and the Ancestors, particularly Uangetsmën, the primordial Kamëntšá Ancestor, a figure that had been widely forgotten or ignored due to its resignification by the missionaries as Jesus Christ.

Chapter 4 discusses the concept of cultural heritage (patrimonio) and how it is applied to strengthen Western notions of culture. Particularly in Colombia, such a concept operates today in a multicultural framework that perpetuates inequality and social injustices established with colonialism. By analysing the declaration of the Bëtsknaté, the most important Kamëntšá celebration, as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Colombia, it concludes that this has increased the intervention of the state and its experts in the Kamëntšá community, and it has generated further inequality and violence; it has fostered cultural loss due to the commodification of the celebration and has increased authoritarianism, sexism and racism. For these reasons, we refer to the cultural heritage of the Kamëntšá people as herencia in detriment of patrimonio to refer to knowledge, memories, spirituality, language and land, which have been created, developed,

maintained, cared for and transmitted from generation to generation since time immemorial by the Ancestors, and which are reflected or materialized in different artistic and narrative forms.

Chapter 5 discusses the archaeological investigations carried out in the Sibundoy Valley and how and why these have ignored the Kamëntšá people, their spirituality, history and language, and have focused solely on decontextualised material remains to reach problematic conclusions that today have had a profound impact on the Kamëntšá people, particularly about its origins and cultural and geographical affiliations. Furthermore, it analyses the misconceptions and misinterpretations regarding funerary practices and other rituals. This chapter also addresses the ethics of archaeological research and collaboration which nowadays are developed from a multicultural perspective and that, consequently continue a long academic tradition of appropriation of knowledge and use of Indigenous peoples as informants, and perpetuate inequality and marginalization of Indigenous peoples, worldviews, languages, and knowledge. By moving away from the denial of coevalness the chapter concludes with an analysis of the monuments, objects and funerary practices in Sibundoy Valley in relation to Kamëntšá spirituality, culture, ritual and ethics.

Chapter 6 analyses the fundamental role that art had in the inculturation process carried out by the Capuchin missionaries. This process sought to transform Indigenous cultures and introduce Christianity and the bible from "within", using the same artistic and symbolic elements of Indigenous peoples, but attributing a Christian meaning to them in order to demonstrate that they already had the "true faith". This chapter also addresses the role that colonial photography had in the dehumanization and control of Indigenous peoples and the social and psychological consequences of such images. Kamëntšá art is analysed from a relational point of view, that is in connection with the production and transmission of Kamëntšá knowledge. Furthermore, art was and is also fundamental in the process of cultural resilience of the Kamëntšá people. The collaborative work with Ayentš Collective uses artistic research and creative practices to recover and revitalise the Kamëntšá culture and language, to rename the Kamëntšá world, and to critique the colonial naturalised mindset.

Chapter 7 analyses how museums strengthen the colonial and racist vision of the Other developed by academic disciplines and national institutions. This imaginary limits the identity of Indigenous

peoples to essentialising categories that correspond to the expectation of the colonial gaze while dehumanizing and delegitimizing their different worldviews and cultures. In the case of the Sibundoy Museum, it restrains Kamëntšá identity to the past and to a colonial objectified idea of its celebrations and rituals. Furthermore, while recent collaborative practices in museums are important steps to dignify and recognise Indigenous peoples, in practice they bring few benefits as they are often developed from a multicultural perspective that most of all benefits museums, its experts and the institutions that sponsor such exhibitions. Consequently, museological practices are still fundamentally focused on the display of objects and continue to ignore the language and other fundamental aspects of the Kamëntšá identity as well as its coevality, and do little to dignify and empower the Kamëntšá people. Through our work with Ayentš Collective at the Sibundoy Museum, we aimed at rethinking such practices and transforming the museum. However, despite its successes, the willingness of the institution and the local government still leaves much to be desired when it comes to changing the narrative. The chapter concludes with the development of a decolonial curatorial practice centred on the Kamëntšá relational knowledge, ethics and values which is being developed at the Tsebionán Curatorial Centre, a research, educational and artistic centre established in collaboration with the Ayentš Collective and Kamëntšá elders to solidify and further the research, methodology and practices developed in this thesis.

The work concludes that decolonisation is a fundamental step in research and society at large. Although it has its challenges, the benefits largely outgrow them as it builds respect, intercultural dialogue, social justice and equality, and brings Indigenous knowledges and peoples to the forefront of research.