



The concept of cultural heritage to defend a territory from extractivism. Petroglyphs in Támesis, Antioquia (Colombia).

Sara Ortega Ramírez

ABSTRACT

A study case in a village in Colombia illustrates the contemporary tension between local lifestyle and global/transnational models. Hundreds of petroglyphs, probably made in prehispanic times, started to be widely valued by the local community when large-scale mining companies were attempting to enter into their lands. These petroglyphs have been resignified since then as Cultural heritage, a term coined officially by UNESCO, and adopted and enriched by the local community in order to strengthen their own fight defending their territory against the large-scale mining and other economic activities such as monoculture farming.

The process of local resistance is an ongoing process. The community have been working together since then and they have gained relevant achievements in terms of political participation and self-determination for governance linking the cultural, historical, social and environmental issues. In other terms, thanks to the risks they have had to face they have been developing their own economic and social alternatives for living as a way of social resistance.

This case, even if it is a sign of people's agency concerning their sovereignty and autonomy as a political group, it is also an expression of the geopolitics of colonialism that still operates even in the so-called postcolonial times, being the extractivist economy one of its main mechanisms.

KEYWORDS:

globality-locality, territorial autonomy, social agency, extractivism, rock art, petroglyphs, cultural heritage, social mobilization, identitarian symbols.

CONTEXT

Támesis is a village located in the Southwest region of the department of Antioquia, in Colombia (South America). In this village there is a large concentration of ancient rock art probably dating back to pre-Hispanic times (Gómez 2015) (See figure 1). This rock art is part of the archaeological heritage of the nation as the national public policy establishes and as it will be expressed in this paper, they have been playing a sociopolitical role in the last decades.

Although there is not yet solid information about these objects as archaeological objects¹, examining the relationship between them and the local community results revealing in terms of understanding what is going on currently in terms of socio-political-economic aspects in the village within the wider contemporary global scenario.

1 This means, considering these objects as material culture which can give information about how either disappeared human groups or groups which do not inhabit that territory anymore lived in past times.



PHOTO N.1. Petroglyphs in Tamesis, Colombia. (From left to right, top to bottom) 1. Inside the school. 2. Detail of the engraving. 3. Open air petroglyphs. Source: Ortega and Gómez 2015.

In 2016 the *Universidad de Antioquia* (Medellin, Colombia) was called to carry on some workshops about rock art among the young community in this village. Alba Nelly Gómez García, anthropologist and archaeologist of this university who has been working with the archaeological processes of the region including the petroglyphs, was contacted for being the head of the project and some other projects which followed this one. The study case presented here has been analyzed thanks to these projects which were organized by statal entities.

The projects were focused on these objects as cultural heritage. The use of the concept “cultural heritage”, coined by UNESCO in mid-20th century, has implied not only a range of national laws and international guides which seek to protect and promote what is considered cultural heritage, but it has also had a great impact within the daily life of the communities where the cultural heritage is recognized. This is why the term is used and analyzed here as a polyvalent concept -constructed, transformed and used by the people-, and not just merely as a label which refers to a concrete object or experience.

During the first approaches to Tamesis in 2016 it was notorious that these objects were being highly valued by the current population as symbols of and for their identity. In the facades of their houses and all around the public space there are paintings alluding to the ancient engravings (see figure 2). They are also used in the names and images of many local brands of food and services (e.g. the name of the local newspa-



per is *The Petroglyph*) and they have been also used as a tourist attraction lately. People talk about them with love and respect.

After noticing this, the question was raised, how and when did the petroglyphs become so popular? During the development of the mentioned projects it was seen that the petroglyphs were playing a key role in the local attachment to the territory amidst an economic and political crossroads. The petroglyphs, even if no one knows exactly who, when and why they were made, have been used lately as an identitarian symbol by the majority of the population. A historical account was needed to understand how did this happen.

The petroglyphs were therefore approached from an anthropological perspective, deciphering how and why the local people started to esteem this rock art and how do they incorporate it in their cotidianity and finally how do these objects are today such significant elements within their current political and social processes.

THE METHODOLOGY

The methodology was guided by the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR)² and it was done under an anthropological perspective being ethnography the main method. As it was mentioned above, the reflections exposed in this article were built along diverse processes carried on in the village between 2016 and 2020, although the social phenomena considered here is still an ongoing process³.

The main objective of the research was to analyze the relationship between local people and petroglyphs, including the oral tradition of the regional past, examining the presence or absence of the petroglyphs within it and understanding how people articulate these notions and objects in their contemporanean life.

The first step during the fieldwork was to talk and observe among the diverse inhabitants their current perceptions and discourses around these objects. Three groups of people were identified during the first stage of fieldwork: a) general population (those who are not part of any social or political movement, usually people older than 40 years old), b) schoolchildren (between 9 to 17 years old) and c) social leaders (political-environmental-cultural-artistic leaders). Semi-structured inter-

2 PAR is a qualitative research methodology proposed initially by the Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (2010). This method emphasizes on the compromise in the transformation of some social situations assumed by the social researchers. This perspective implies that there is no vertical relation between researchers and the community where the research is constructed. Instead of that this method proposes a more horizontal relationship, stressing collectivity and collaboration among the parts as a co-working process with the objective of change in the benefit of the communities.

3 To follow the main social mobilization in the village and in the wider region (Southwest of Antioquia) one can consult the organization COA (*Cinturón Occidental Ambiental*) www.coaterritoriosagrado.org (link active to 31. 7. 2022). They are the head of a series of strategies concerning the development of plans for self government, economic practices and popular education. It is a notorious example of popular resistance and social agency.

views and conversations were carried on among the group of social leaders. Workshops and surveys were made with the schoolchildren as well as with the general population. Were there diverse assessments among the different kinds of people or there was a consensus towards the petroglyphs?

As concepts and their popular use cannot be assumed as monolithic items, tracking the historical use of this term was going to be useful in understanding the relationship of the people with their past, the objects of the past and their current social context. That was how historicizing and locating the use of the concept of *cultural heritage* given to the engravings became a significant objective during the fieldwork. Following this purpose it was made a deep consultation in local archives of newspapers and media, supplemented and contrasted with the historical accounts, conversations and interviews with the people, specially among the group of social leaders. A notable change in the perception, assessment and popularity of the petroglyphs along the last decades was clear in all their oral accounts and in the records of the local archives too.

Although the interviews, conversations and surveys were centered in their current perception and esteem towards these objects, there were also questions concerning their knowledge and feelings about the past of the region to understand how its materiality (past objects) and the oral tradition function together in order to imagine the past of the region. Questions like *Who were the first inhabitants of the village?* and *Who realized the engravings in the rocks?* were made in order to analyze how they associate (if they did it) the rock art with the people who inhabited the region in the past. An important distinction was found between the different groups of population. The academic discourse has had a great influence among social leaders and it contrasts with the discourse of the general population and schoolchildren who do not include it in their speech.

A historical remark must be made in order to understand the last observation. The human groups who inhabited the region at the arrival of the Spaniards in the 15th century disappeared in a great extent and some of them were dispersed during the process of conquest. In the late 19th century the current village was formally founded by white or *mestizo* families who were seeking free lands to settle down. This is mostly the main historical account that everyone considers as the beginning of their local history. During the first half of the 20th century indigenous families, from *Emberá* ethnicity, were displaced from their original territories, and also settled down in the region. Currently the *Pueblo Emberá* live within the statal limits of the municipality having their own territory called *resguardo*. Even if they are not exactly part of the same ethnic group who inhabited the territory during pre-Hispanic times, they have been associated with the petroglyphs by the general population and they have been trying to consider themselves as the legitimate owners or spokesmen of their meaning. This has led to some debates within the scholars about confirming or denying their legitimate and authenticate link with this rock art, posing a wider question which can be treated in a future research. How does the role of authority upon the meaning of the petroglyphs, or any other cultural heritage element, function within the diverse actors inside the community?

Finally, not only the identification of key actors and the classification of the inhabitants was relevant in terms of methodology, but also the identification of key





spaces in the village was essential for achieving useful insights. Two social spaces were transcendental: The House Of Culture (*Casa de la cultura*) and the schools. The former is the place where almost all the cultural and artistic events happen. There is an archaeological room with some references to the petroglyphs. The later space was important in terms to analyze how the scholar institutions treat and convey the matter of the past of the region and the petroglyphs to the new generations and how do the latter perceive it.

THE CHANGE IN THE WAY OF NAMING, FROM “INDIGENOUS DRAWINGS” TO “PETROGLYPHS”

Concerning the objective of tracking back in time the change in the perception and assessment of the people towards the petroglyphs, the difference between generations was clear. The main change started to happen around the 90s of the 20th century due to a combination of internal and external factors. The social esteem towards the petroglyphs increased in a considerable way since then.

About their notion of the past of the territory and the people who inhabited it, main differences were also found between the three social groups identified. Among the first group, general population, it was common to find some amazement with the question as they are not used to this kind of questions. Among the second group, schoolchildren above 14 years old, it was seen that they are more familiar with the historical and academic accounts. Almost all of them drew natives when they were asked to draw how they imagined the remote past of the region, acknowledging somehow that the first inhabitants were not the ones who founded the village in the late 19th century⁴. They recognize that there were indigenous people before, nevertheless they do not have many data about them and their imagination follow more the stereotypical representation of a single kind of indigenous people (wearing *taparrabos*, with bow and arrow and living in armony with nature. A romanticized image).

About the third group of people, social leaders, they have more archaeological and historical data and this is connected with the legitimacy of scholar data among our societies. Some authors have stressed the importance of knowledge and representations of the past as political and social cohesion tool (Friedman 1994, Hernando 2009, Sahlins 1985). Approaching to the way that local communities assess and interact with their ancient material culture can be a mechanism for understanding their current problems and challenges.

One general conclusion was that the interest in the ancient past of the territory is not something common and popular but it can be considered as a luxury among a small circle of people (in this case among the social leaders). This stance is always linked to the use of scholar-scientific discourse (written discourse) which has nowa-

4 The different results between the general population and the schoolchildren can suggest that including the indigenous groups within the local history can be more factible to appear by the technique of drawing than by the oral accounts.

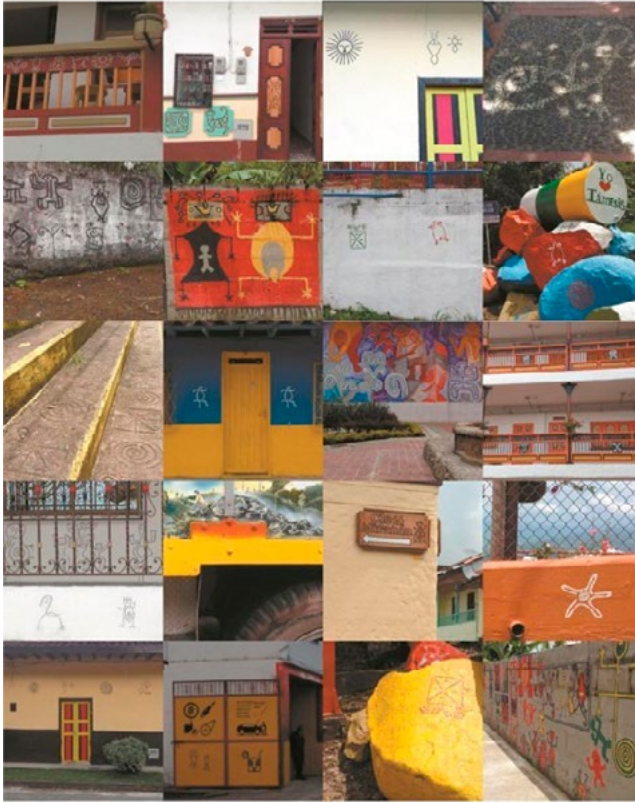


PHOTO N. 2. Collage of representations of the petroglyphs in the public space of Tamesis. Source: Ortega.

days the legitimacy and authority in our societies, sometimes replacing and undervaluing popular orality.

About the core question: When did these rocks with engravings start to be so popular? It was remarkable that for the old generations during their childhood the petroglyphs were not something relevant. They used to refer to them as “Indian rocks”, “Indian drawings” or “hieroglyphs” and not as “petroglyphs” as it is common today. “We did not love them or care too much about them as today we do”, “we used to play above them and even sometimes we added other figures to the rock” were some sentences during the interviews. As the engravings are located at the open air in medium and large size rocks, some of them were used as a playground by the kids. Many of them, the ones with easiest access and the more popular rocks, present recent alterations overlapping the ancient designs. Even if this still can happen, it exists nowadays many restrictions and interdictions for these kind of actions. This is considered now almost as a crime.

Today local people refer to the petroglyphs and their territory as a “rock art sanctuary”. The historical turn in the naming and use of these objects, passing from “rocks with Indian drawings” used sometimes as a playground by the children, to refer to them and their municipality as “rock art sanctuary” represents not only a different



attitude upon the objects but expresses also a particular conjuncture of the village. What is proposed here is that this change in the attitude and behavior of the people towards the petroglyphs would have not been possible without the concept of cultural heritage.

The fact that today almost all the people in the village refer to the ancient engravings as petroglyphs is a sign of the assimilation of a scholar term among the general population. They also refer to the petroglyphs as their heritage, which was not a common reference forty years ago. Thus, local names were replaced by technical names along the last decades. However, contrary to what one can easily conclude, this does not mean that the official-scholar discourse is dominating the local knowledge. This case of study depicts how the relationship between official (statal or transnational concepts that can be considered as external facts) are used and adapted by the local people according to their own needs and will.

Cultural heritage is a concept officially developed by UNESCO in the mid-20th century as an attempt to counter the material damages caused by world wars. Since then UNESCO has been the transnational institution in charge of providing a technical guide upon cultural heritage around the world. The concept has had some relevant changes over the years. It started being considered exclusively for the *tangible* and monumental buildings created by past societies and some years later it was integrated the *intangible* aspects of culture, as food, carnivals, music, traditional knowledge, native dialects, etc. The concept is very wide nowadays and there is even now the concept of *Living heritage*. Because of its many interpretations and uses this term is considered as a contested concept (Barreiro et al. 2016) which can be used for different and even contradictory purposes by diverse social actors.

Thanks to the historical accounts reconstructed by the people and the revision of local archives it can be said that the interest in petroglyphs started to increase during the 90s of the 20th century. Diverse internal and external factors were going on during this time. The major who was in charge of the municipality had an special interest in cultural and artistic matters. Few people remember that it was him who was promoting the use of the figures of the petroglyphs in the artistic manifestations and he started to use their iconography in public space. In this way, it was during the 90s that petroglyphs started to be a public matter impulsed by the very local government.

Other aspects were key in the popularization of petroglyphs during that time. Preventive archaeology started to be common at national level. During this decade there was a project of house building in which was compulsory the presence of the archaeological component. During this work petroglyphs were relevant as material culture that can be studied by specialists, namely, archaeologists. At the same time some students started to do their thesis about the petroglyphs, emerging then as an academic topic⁵.

At national level the Law of Culture of 1997 determined some rules about the cultural heritage and the Ministry of Culture was created. Thus in the 90s and onwards

⁵ Although in mid-20th century the anthropologist Graciliano Arcila did the first research about the petroglyphs in Tamesis and Antioquia (1956).

it started to be common the term *cultural heritage* in the national public policy (as it was also happening around the world). The concept implied a series of practices towards the objects considered heritage. New agreements and laws should be followed then by the countries which are UNESCO's members or associates.

At the same period, it was installed at national level the interest to exploit the natural resources as one of the main economic activities, specially through mining projects. The latter despites Colombia is a country with a great potential in agriculture, but the colonial logic of extracting resources of the colonies still operates even in the so-called post colonial times (Mignolo 2011). The statal mining project, *La locomotora minera*, was established during the national government at the beginning of the 20th century. A statal Code for mining was launched by the government (2001) and did not consider natural nor cultural areas for protection. Almost all the region of Antioquia was given to transnational companies for mining exploration. As an aftermath of this political and economic decision some social organizations were created to counter the extractivist model established by the national government which benefits specially foreigner companies.

During the 90s there was also an explosion of touristic services in the country as it was also happening around the world. In this way, as the agriculture in the countryside has not been historically well supported by the national government, tourism started to emerge as an economic option for many villages in Colombia.

Summarizing, a global agenda of a market economy in the late 20th century, the explosion of tourism as an economic model around the world and the obsession with the historical places and ruins, with a national crisis concerning the poor statal support for agriculture, and the extractivist model established by the national government, became a risky scenario for the local autonomy, jeopardizing their local use and conditions of the territory. Social leaders and general population insisted in the feeling of thread when they knew that mining companies could enter into their territories.

On the other hand, thanks to transnational organizations such as UNESCO, an interest in knowing and preserving the cultural heritage was also installed in the public agenda of the nation. As one can notice, two different external models, economic and cultural, both with diverse political effects but both with power within the public agenda, were creating a complex stage where the conflict of statal/transnational and local interests was finally unleashed.

It was during the first decade of the twentieth century that the term cultural heritage started to be frequently used not just only by the local government but also by the people, specially by the members of social organizations created during 2011 and 2012 to counter the large-scale mining projects adjudicated to the region. The organizations COA (*Cinturón Occidental Ambiental*) in Tamesis, and CODEATE (*Comité por la defensa del territorio*) in the widest region of the southwest of Antioquia, were founded during these years and they are nowadays strong organizations with relevant achievements in terms of local agency and territorial autonomy.

Those years (2011–2012) are remembered by some locals as the *years of fear*, with the helicopters flying above their lands. It was also common to meet in the town many engineers who were doing the diagnosis for the mining projects. One lady repeated





the words that one of the engineers told her while eating in her restaurant: “The mine pays much better than your orange fields. You will see in some years who wins.”

The lady replied to him that one eats oranges but one cannot eat gold. And this has been one of the most important insights along the fight of the *Tamesinos* against the mining companies. One of the most common mottos has been “No to the gold, yes to the water” (*Oro no, agua sí*), and “Our gold is the water” (*nuestro oro es el agua*). Along the allusions to the petroglyphs in the public space of the village, it was also seen signs with these mottos rejecting the gold mining in their territory. Thus, their stance towards the governmental economic plan was publicly expressed all around the village.

WHY THE CONCEPT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE IS SO STRONG IN THEIR SOCIAL FIGHT?

The concept of cultural heritage implies knowing, recording, researching, preserving, spreading, educating and promoting it. This implies following some technical and social measurements by the countries subscribed to UNESCO’s parameters. This means a statal compromise with a transnational agreement.

In the case of petroglyphs which are located in the open air, as happens in Tamesis, the figure of cultural heritage can provide a stronger mechanism of protection as the engravings are valued not only by their iconography and antiquity but also the landscape where they are situated must be considered under protection. In this way, a legal figure of protection for the petroglyphs imply also a measure of protection for the surrounding landscape, including measurements for the use of soil, and other natural resources. The entire ecological system around ends up being protected under this figure.

For the inhabitants of Tamesis who know the ecological effects of large scale mining (affecting agricultural activities and especially hitting the quality of water) and who were concerned about them, this formal measure of protection represented a good opportunity for their local fight defending their autonomy and sustainability of their land. In the own words of some political and cultural leaders of the village:

Cultural heritage has a key role in the defense of the territory against the multinationals (...). The past is protecting our future.

The archaeological component allows us to keep the territory as a free-mining territory. It gives us more arguments not just only sentimental arguments but legal and technical.

The last words expressed in the latter testimony -“gives us legal and technical arguments”- are the core of the social use of the concept cultural heritage in this case. The term, coined and developed by a transnational organization, is supported by the national government as Colombia is subscribed to UNESCO’s agreements and it is also been well received and used by the academic sphere. Not only the concept has played a relevant role in the defense of the territory, it has also played a part in terms of so-

cial cohesion. Having a common crisis to face as a community (mining projects, and the bad economy) made them work together to overcome the difficulties. Some locals even mention that even if there are political differences among them, they meet in the common point of caring about the petroglyphs and defending their territory.

One of the biggest mining projects openly rejected by the people was the project named Quebradona. It was assigned to a neighbouring municipality (Jericó) but its influence area extended to Tamesis. The company in charge of this project is Anglo-gold Ashanti and for the last years this name -Anglogold- has been constructed and experienced by the community as the name of an enemy. In October 2021, thanks to the organized social resistance the mining project was closed until new order. This was one of the biggest achievements for the region even if in terms of national economy implies losing money and a backward movement.

It has to be clarified that the intentional use of petroglyphs within the discourse of social fight was observed during the fieldwork especially by political and social leaders and it was not common among the general population. Rather among this latter group prevails a discourse of love and identity towards the petroglyphs than a political speech around them.

Finally, as it has been seen in the last decades the boom of touristic services has reached almost every corner in the world. Historical and archaeological sites are popular and the petroglyphs of Tamesis have been also included in this mechanism. Thus, ecotourism or sustainable tourism, agroecology and communitarian local economies are the current attempts in the region to develop their own economic model without destroying their natural and societal environment. Petroglyphs have an essential role both in promoting their territory as a touristic site and also providing a possibility to protect the territory from extractivist activities which can modify the landscape and the use of natural resources.

CONCLUSION

This study case portrays how two different transnational mechanisms, cultural heritage and extractivist economy, can be taken and adapted by local people according to their own interests.

In this case the concept has been used by the local community to strengthen their feeling of belonging to a community (identity) and has also been used as a political tool to fight against other transnational concepts and practices as it is the case of the extractivist economic model. Besides, and highlighting the diverse sides that this concept can have, the notion has also provided an economic strategy for the territory. A sustainable mean to impulse their economy through tourism, protecting and reassessing at the same time their agricultural activities. The concept of cultural heritage has had then multiple uses and advantages for the local people. In some years it can be also analyzed the disadvantages that this notion and it's practice can imply.

Even if the petroglyphs are considered cultural (archaeological) heritage there are not many studies about these objects as archaeological data. What is suggested here is that historical and archaeological research must be impulsed in order to fill





this materiality with content of the past human groups but it must be considered as well the contemporary uses and effects that these elements have in the local communities. This case proves how the acknowledgement of the past is a structural part of modern societies not only as a historical account, but also as a relevant component within contemporary geopolitics. The relation of each society with their past can be an indicative of their current geopolitical situation.

LITERATURE

- Arcila, G. (1956). Estudio preliminar de la Cultura Rupestre en Antioquia. *Boletín de Antropología Universidad de Antioquia*, Medellín, Vol. 2, No. 5.
- Barreiro et al. (2016). Archaeology and Heritage on the Way to Sustainability. Session TH2-21 in EAA 22 (Vilnius, 31 August – 4 September 2016). URL <http://hdl.handle.net/10261/154708> (link active to 31. 7. 2022)
- Fals B., O. (2010). *Antología Orlando Fals Borda*. Bogotá: Editorial Universidad Nacional de Colombia.
- Friedman, J. (1994). *Cultural identity and global process*. London: Sage.
- Gomez, A. (2015). *Petroglifos Támesis-Antioquia. Inventario y Evaluación*. Medellín: Fundación Ferrocarril de Antioquia.
- Hernando, A. (2009). El Patrimonio: entre la memoria y la identidad de la Modernidad. *Revista ph.*, No. 70, pp. 88–97.
- Mignolo, W. (2011). *The darker side of Western Modernity*. Duke University Press.
- Piazzini, C. (2011). *La arqueología entre la historia y la prehistoria: Estudio de una frontera conceptual*. Bogotá: Uniandes.
- Sahlins, M. (1985). *Islands of history*. University of Chicago Press.

Sara Ortega Ramírez is an anthropologist from Universidad de Antioquia in Colombia. She is also a MA student of Cultural Anthropology at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest (2020–2022). She focuses on studying the relationship between people and local history in Latin America with motivation to link the archaeological and historical knowledge as a key matter to understand the regional disruptions within a context of (post)colonialism.

Contact: saritaorte@gmail.com