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"Savages" and "Brutes": The Construction of Indigenous Stigma in Colombia Since the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract: This article reflects on the historical development and enduring nature of anti-indigenous stigmatization in Colombia from the nineteenth century to contemporary times. It explores how official discourse, legislative measures, and cultural entities – such as the National Museum during the early republican era – upheld dichotomous representations that celebrate pre-Hispanic civilizations while depicting present-day indigenous populations as primitive or violent. From the Regeneration era and the enactment of the 1886 Constitution to the exclusionary rhetoric of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez, 2002–1,010, this paper demonstrates how discriminatory ideologies have been institutionalized through government action and dominant narratives. These frameworks have sustained structural racism by withholding full political participation from Indigenous peoples and constructing them as obstacles to national advancement. Grounded in public history and decolonial critique, this work advocates for responsible engagement with silenced narratives and redefinitions of Colombian identity that center Indigenous presence and sovereignty.

Keywords: Indigenous people; Colombian social movements; public history; racism; right-wing politics

History is not, and has never been, a neutral endeavor. Its construction is inherently political, shaped by those who wield the power to define official narratives and the purposes they serve. As such, historical accounts can be just as harmful and destructive as physical weapons. In Colombia, discrimination, racism, and exclusion have profoundly impacted Indigenous peoples, as well as Afro-descendant populations, peasants, the Roma community, and other marginalized groups. These systemic inequalities are entrenched in historical processes that trace back to before the nineteenth century.

Through an exploration of the rhetoric employed by former Colombian President Álvaro Uribe and members of the Democratic Center Party, this reflection exposes how discriminatory ideologies and far-right worldviews are often disguised within seemingly inclusive and participatory language. Since the 1886 Constitution, political actors aligned with this tradition have repeatedly portrayed Indigenous, Black, and peasant communities as criminal, regressive, and inherently violent. These assertions – rooted in racism and historical denialism – reinforce damaging stereotypes and endanger the lives and spaces of the communities they target. Such discourse reveals the persistence of intolerance and resistance to cultural pluralism in contemporary Colombia. It underscores the urgent responsibility of public historians to confront and critically dismantle these narratives from political and ethical perspectives. By examining the historical continuities underlying this rhetoric, this analysis highlights the need to challenge the structural injustices that continue to marginalize entire populations.

1 Antiques Versus Curiosities

Throughout the nineteenth century, cultural and political leaders hoped for Colombia to become a country that prioritized economic and political progress. In this context, the founding of the National Museum of Colombia in 1823 was driven by an educational and scientific mission.[1] As a result, the institution played a crucial role in reinforcing the notion that Indigenous communities were not only exotic but inherently dangerous. Its displays often contrasted the so-called diabolic nature of contemporary Indigenous peoples with the glorified image of pre-Columbian cultures, which were admired for their goldwork, statuary, and woodcraft. Among the National Museum's earliest ethnographic holdings were arrows, blowpipes, and various weapons, reflecting the perceived danger attributed to

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1 Jhonny Antonio Pabón Cadavid, "Community Participation in the National Museum of Colombia from a Historical-Legal Analysis," *Chungará (Arica)* 53, no. 2 (2021): 329–40, https://doi.org/10.4067/S0717-73562021005000501.

contemporary Indigenous groups. One of the descriptions read as follows:

> … well sanded bow, an arrow shaped like a lance, lance like arrows with saw-like barbs on their sides. Three arrows with lance ends and carved only on one side, arrow with lance end in hard wood… These weapons are used by the Carare Indians, with them they killed a man and his partners.[2]

This dichotomy led to the creation of two categories: antiquities, representing pre-Hispanic cultures deemed valuable for their historical significance, and curiosities, referring to living Indigenous peoples as devoid of history and disconnected from the past due to their perceived lack of historical continuity and atypical way of life.

In 1902, mainly due to the loss of Panama and the conflict known as the Thousand Days' War, there was a renewed interest in crafting a Colombian identity.[3] These two historical events were experienced as a threat to national unity, and history was reinforced as a valuable discipline for the country. In this context, the Indigenous peoples became part of the nation; not only as antiques but also as curiosities, whose preservation began to be seen as an obligation. If great old civilizations, such as the *Muisca*, *Tairona*, *Calima*, *Tierradentro*, and *San Agustin* had already disappeared, the future of living ones, such as the *Guajiro*, *Paez*, *Guambiano*, *Sibundoy*, *Tunebo*, and others, was also in danger and had to be preserved. However, the collected objects for the National Museum of Colombia and their descriptions continued to be those associated with warfare, reinforcing the perceived dangerous character of the natives.

With the establishment of the Regeneration period (1878–1898), and the enactment of the 1886 Constitution, which was inspired by Catholic and Hispanic ideology, Colombia's colonial past was reassessed and positively valorized. The Catholic religion was granted a central role as an "essential element of the social order" of the nation.[4] In this context, Law 89 of 1890 was passed and stated: "By means of which the way in which the savages who are being reduced to civilized life should be governed is determined."[5] Although this law perpetuated a negative view of Indigenous peoples, labeling them as savages, it also marked a return to a policy of indirect governance reminiscent of colonial times. The law recognized Indigenous councils and collective lands, while simultaneously working toward their dissolution. Indigenous communities were excluded from the general legislation, placed under the guardianship of Catholic missions, and classified as "minors" within the civil and penal framework. This structure treated them as wards of the state, implying their inability to govern themselves and the necessity for external oversight. Additionally, the 1887 treaty between the Vatican and the Colombian state granted significant power to the Catholic Church over Indigenous populations. The Church was seen as crucial for maintaining social order and the primary tool for civilizing the Indigenous peoples.

The protective spirit of the 89th law of 1890 regarding native lands was overcome by Law 55 of 1905 that encouraged the division of their lands. These laws were seen not only as mechanisms of civilization but also as tools to weaken the Indigenous movements that were taking place at the beginning of the century.[6] There were rebellions in the south of the country that were so strong, that 'owners' of large pieces of land were having difficulties. So, if, in the eyes of the law, the Indians continued to be regarded as incapable of governing themselves, then the actions against them were justified.

Nonetheless, during the 1920s, a group called *Los Nuevos* (The New Ones) appeared with the purpose of highlighting contemporary indigenous life. It was composed of intellectuals, and despite having no major impact, it gave life to a new movement during the 1930s that had more influence in the way the Colombians thought about natives. This one was called *El Movimiento Bachué* (The Bachue Movement) and was composed of writers, painters, and sculptors and emphasized the significance of these living societies through novels and art. It can be considered as a prolongation of the 1850 romanticism towards the indigenous living groups as curiosities, but it had a fundamental new element: they were not trying to compare these living cultures with the pre-Columbian ones.[7] Even though they understood the importance of these ancient cultures, and admired them, they thought that living communities deserved more attention. The members of the Bachue Movement believed that the diversity of the Colombian nation was not studied well

2 Ernesto Restrepo Tirado, *Estudios sobre los aborígenes de Colombia* (Bogotá: Imprenta Nacional, 1913), 364.

3 Olga Yanet Acuña Rodríguez, "1910 Colombian Constitutional Reform and the Electoral System (1910–1914)," *Historia y Memoria* 14 (January 1, 2017): 97–126, https://doi.org/10.19053/20275137.n14.2017.5817.

4 Roberto Pineda C., "Estado y Pueblos Indígenas En El Siglo XIX," Revista Credencial, March 9, 2018, https://www.revistacredencial.com/historia/temas/estado-y-pueblos-indigenas-en-el-siglo-xix.

5 "Ley 89 de 1890 - Gestor Normativo," Inicio – Función Pública, December 1, 2015, https://www.funcionpublica.gov.co/eva/gestornormativo/norma.php?i=4920.

6 Karla Luzmer Escobar Hernández et al., *Camino y Ruptura: Una Historia Gráfica de Las Prácticas Jurídicas Indígenas En El Cauca a Principios Del Siglo XX* (Bogotá, D.C, Colombia: Universidad de los Andes, 2024).

7 Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*, second edition (Pluto Press: London and New York, 2010).

enough and that, even though history had a crucial role to play, there had to be a different approach towards the current indigenous population.

With the turn of the century, and the rise of home-grown indigenist movements inspired by the Mexican Revolution, wider Colombian perceptions towards Indigenous communities started to shift. Since 1920, grassroots movements had arisen in Colombia to counteract the notion that they were responsible for the nation's backwardness. One of the most significant ones was led by the Amerindian Manuel Quintín Lame (1880–1967), who wanted to create an Independent Indigenous Republic composed of various Colombian departments and pressed for recognition of Indigenous peoples as sources of national identity.[8] Along these lines, the Liberal Republic (1930–1946), a time during which Liberal actors ruled the country as opposed to the Conservative party, also marked a benchmark in the ways in which some Colombians kept viewing and referring to the Indigenous populations. Following historian Catalina Muñoz, however, it is crucial to understand this period as a nuanced time in which Indigenous communities gained rights and spaces, but hierarchies and stereotypes were reinforced. Muñoz contends that the liberal reforms of the period did not stem from an acknowledgment of the lived experiences of previously marginalized communities or the recognition of their political agency as rights-bearing subjects. Instead, these reforms were grounded in an essentialist view that depicted these groups as immature, dependent, in a state of vulnerability and helplessness, requiring external assistance.[9] This perspective, which claimed to be inclusive and democratic, ultimately reinforced rather than dismantled negative stereotypes about Colombia's Indigenous populations. It perpetuated notions of them being exotic, ahistorical, and atypical, positioning them as treacherous; trying to understand their way of life was dismissed as irrelevant. During the period from 1946 to 1953, when Conservative leaders regained power, the Colombian Indigenist Institute, founded in 1942, was dismantled in 1949. These moves effectively reversed progress made in securing rights for these communities, undermining efforts to address their social and political marginalization and even attempted to dismiss their existence:

> … there are CIVILIZED INDIANS, reduced to community life and considered civilized men, not now but since 1890. They are so because it is not possible to distinguish them by their habits, customs, traditions, culture, or own land productive system, and they are no different to the peasants.[10]

Since then, indigenous movements in the country have made meaningful strides in their struggles for rights, and several organizations and institutions have been created. These include the creation of the Division of Indigenous Affairs – currently called Direction of Indigenous, ROM, and Minorities Affairs (*Dirección de asuntos indígenas, Rom y minorías*) - in 1960, and the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (*Organización Nacional Indigena de Colombia, ONIC*) in 1982, that currently comprises 50 zonal and regional organizations. In addition, the Constitution of 1991 recognizes ethnic groups which include Indigenous and Black communities as political actors, acknowledges their right to self-government, the autonomy of traditional authorities, and their relationship with their territory. But there is still a long way to go for white Colombians to consider them as equal citizens with full rights.

2 Lingering Prejudices

Despite the ground gained there are still certain societal sectors, mainly those with right-wing positions, that maintain nineteenth-century conceptions of the Indigenous communities of Colombia. For them, they are the culprits of the country's lack of progress, they do not deserve to be recognized as part of history, and behave in unfamiliar ways. One example of this mindset and the effect these prejudices still have can be easily illustrated when President Uribe Vélez, leader of the political party the Democratic Center, and some mestizos and "white" Colombians coined the word "paramilitaries" to refer to Indigenous and Black communities. Uribe was in office from 2002 to 2010, and his mandate was characterized for antagonizing these populations. He accused them of being "vandals," "rioters," and "troublemakers" for fighting for their rights and organizing. In 2016, on national TV, Uribe declared that Colombia was not home to "African tribes, but a country with institutions."[11]

In major Colombian cities like Bogotá, Cali, and Medellín, there is still a sense that Indigenous communities do not

8 Jimena Perry, "Are There Any Indians Left in Colombia? The Indigenista Movement from 1940 to 1950," *AIBR. Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana* 11, no. 03 (September 1, 2016): 363–81, https://doi.org/10.11156/aibr.110304e.

9 Catalina Muñoz Rojas, *A Fervent Crusade for the National Soul: Cultural Politics in Colombia, 1930–1946* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022).

10 J. Díaz Rodríguez, "Ningún problema nacional se creará con la disolución de los resguardos indígenas," *El Tiempo*, April 23, 1944 (Bogotá).

11 Rossih Amira M. S., "Uribe también saca la piedra a los afro," *Colombia Plural*, October 9, 2016, accessed September 15, 2025, https://colombiaplural.com/racismo-d-uribe/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

belong there, thus their presence is rendered invisible. When they do show up, they are condemned to what Achille Mbembe has called 'deathworlds': "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead."[12] So, when these groups make themselves visible, they are labeled as disruptors of the social order.

In 2019, the Democratic Center party backed President Duque's approach to Indigenous mobilizations, arguing that the government should neither yield to pressure nor bypass established legal and institutional procedures. This position favored the preservation of public order over engagement through dialogue in the face of social protest.[13] Uribe Vélez not only endorsed this stance but reinforced stigmatizing narratives that depicted Indigenous communities as inherently violent and threatening. He declared, "If authority, serene, firm, and with social criteria, results in a massacre, it is because on the other side there is violence and terror rather than protest."[14] This controversial remark circulated widely in national newspapers and on social media platforms, provoking significant indignation among Indigenous groups who interpreted it as a justification for state repression and an affront to their legitimate demands. Another clear illustration of the present racism in Colombia showed its face in October 2020 when more than 8,000 members of Colombian Indigenous and Black communities arrived in Bogotá, the country's capital, organized as what is known as a Minga. The word Minga comes from the Quechua word *mink'a*, meaning "collective work done for the community."[15] During the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in Colombia, the *Minga Indígena* has been understood as a peaceful collective protest that marginal and impoverished groups resort to when they want the attention of the authorities and the government. Generally, the Minga starts in Indigenous or Black territories and passes through the country's main cities to finally reach Bogotá.

The 2020 minga took place during Iván Duque's mandate (2018–2022). It was triggered when the president made an ill-considered move, announcing that he planned to implement a wide-ranging new tax on goods and income streams such as pensions, basic foodstuffs like eggs and coffee, and public utilities, including electricity and water. The nation mobilized *en masse*, led by youth – who face very high unemployment rates – and representatives from Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and other severely marginalized groups who wanted to protest their lack employment opportunities, poor education, and scarce healthcare.[16]

Jhoe Sauca, coordinator of Defense of Life and Human Rights of the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC), acknowledged the commitment of the Minga and emphasize it had no political interests. According to him, their request for the president was to "face the communities," in other words, to make them visible. Their petitions had nothing to do with budget but with the defense of their life, territory, and governments. This Minga was concerned with peace and safety because of the increase of massacres and murders of social leaders. Since 2020, there have been more than 70 massacres and murders of social leaders. The Minga asked for the territorial and social demilitarization of their lands in compliance with agreements with social organizations, and the implementation of the Peace Agreement with the country's guerrillas.[17] However, some of the capital residents voiced their racism and prejudices by stating the Minga was composed of "brutes" and "savages," who should go back to the place they live and never step out of it. The reception to the Minga from some sectors of Bogotá was aligned with fear that the riots in Cali – where the Minga was attacked and shot by civilians and accused of raiding private property creating baseless chaos – would reoccur. In turn, Duque's government clearly stated its lack of support for the Minga by refusing any dialogue or contact with them, perpetuating the conservative historical position of zero acknowledgement. Duque's response to the 2020 minga is not surprising due to his allegiance to the Center Democratic Party and its Democratic Security Policy. From 2004, two years after Uribe's inauguration, until 2008, all the Mingas that took place in Colombia were condemned by the government, deepening the historically distrusting relationship between the State and Indigenous and Black communities.

12 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

13 Javier Forero, *"'Rechazamos los montajes del Centro Democrático': Minga indígena," El Tiempo*, October 15, 2020, https://www.eltiempo.com/politica/partidos-politicos/minga-indigenas-rechazan-acusaciones-del-centro-democratico-543495.

14 "El mensaje de Uribe que desata tormenta en redes sociales," *Portafolio*, April 8, 2019, https://www.portafolio.co/economia/gobierno/el-mensaje-de-uribe-que-desata-tormenta-en-redes-sociales-528324.

15 "Minga Indígena, Negra y Campesina En Colombia: Romper El Cerco, Tejiendo Con Las Iguales," *El Salto*, www.elsaltodiario.com, accessed December 16, 2024, https://www.elsaltodiario.com/america-latina/minga-indigena-negra-bogota-campesina-colombia-romper-cerco-tejiendo-iguales-cric.

16 Jimena Perry and Elizabeth O´Brien, "Opinion: Colombia Is in Crisis, and Vaccine Nationalism Is Making It Worse," *Latino Rebels*, May 20, 2021, https://www.latinorebels.com/2021/05/19/colombiacrisisvaccinenationalism/.

17 Antonio José Paz Cardona, "Más de 7,000 Indígenas Viajaron a Bogotá Y Piden Un Debate Político Con El Presidente Iván Duque," *Noticias ambientales*, October 22, 2020, https://es.mongabay.com/2020/10/minga-indigena-colombia-protestas-bogota-por-masacres/.

Regarding this Minga, Uribe and his followers proclaimed that the *Guardia Indígena*, Indigenous Guards, leaders of the social movement, were armed paramilitaries causing great outrage and indignation in said groups. Twisting words like this increased the divide between these communities and the state while putting them in the public spotlight, making them vulnerable to attacks and stigma. In a true right-wing fashion, Uribe and his followers took advantage of the stereotypes they themselves were validating.[18]

Since 2022, the administration of Gustavo Petro and Francia Márquez – the first Black Vice President in Colombia – has offered a renewed sense of hope for historically disenfranchised communities. The shifting political landscape is opening new avenues for public historians to construct narratives in which silenced voices are not only acknowledged but highlighted. The prospect of implementing antiracist public policies – long deemed unfeasible under conservative regimes – now appears within reach, presenting both promising possibilities and substantial challenges for those engaged in public historical work.

Practicing public history in complex and contested contexts such as Colombia necessitates a deep ethical and political engagement with the experiences of those excluded from dominant discourses. It also involves confronting the structural inequalities, state-sanctioned injustices, and enduring legacies of racism. Public history, in this sense, becomes a tool for restoring dignity and affirming cultural autonomy. Yet the responsibilities of public historians go beyond merely exposing historical wrongs or amplifying suppressed voices. In societies marked by polarization and ideological division, public history must foster critical consciousness. While the past shapes our present, it should not be a constraint to future possibilities. A nuanced and reflective approach is vital for generating dialogue and imagining more inclusive and equitable futures. Through reinterpretation, reframing, and the deliberate inclusion of diverse perspectives, public historians can help construct alternative historical narratives in which marginalized protagonists speak on their own terms, times, and with their own epistemological frameworks.

18 Ibid.