A STORY WOVEN FROM THE THREAD OF RESISTANCE

Patricia Meléndez, the first Guna leader in Arquía, Chocó, defends her identity, culture and territory through language, ancestral knowledge and the fabric of community.

TEXT:
LUISA VIATELA, SOCIAL COMMUNICATOR FROM AKUBADAURA.
PHOTO:
COMUNIDAD DE JURISTAS AKUBADAURA

Guna Dule women weaving. Arquía Reserve, Unguía, Chocó.

In the Arquía reserve in Unguía, Chocó (Colombia), Patricia Meléndez, a Guna woman, is recognised as the first female leader of her community. Her leadership combines political representation with the defence of a way of life woven into language, ancestral knowledge and ties to the land. For her, being Gunadule is a daily practice that also involves fighting for collective rights and for women's participation in decision-making spaces.

Patricia stops in the shade of a tree, standing upright and looking alert. She wears glasses, a floral blouse and a skirt covered in green designs – plants, shapes, symbols – the traditional dress of the Gunadule indigenous women.

"I'm not afraid to speak for my community," she says, "because if I don't, who will?"

Arquía is an indigenous reserve located in the municipality of Unguía, in northern Chocó, near the border with Panama. There are rivers and trees that arch over the paths. There is a community: wooden houses built on stilts, courtyards with fire pits, words that travel from mouth to mouth and endure.

Since she was a child in Arquía, Patricia was guided by her grandfather, a chief, who passed on the stories, songs and teachings that shaped her identity. In every word he spoke, she says, "he sowed respect, a sense of belonging and responsibility".

She learned to weave *molas*, colourful fabrics that, in the Gunadule tradition, are not made for decoration but to tell stories. Women have been the bearers of this knowledge. She received it as something that requires care and determination. "For me, every stitch in the *mola* is a story I tell with my hands," she says. "Each design carries the memory of our ancestors, our land, who we are and who we want to continue to be."

Leadership did not come to Patricia overnight. Within the reserve, decisions are discussed, questioned and made collectively. Outside, dialogue with institutions is not always easy. There

Guna Dule women. Arquía Reserve, Unguía, Chocó.

are external perspectives that do not understand the relationship between territory, culture and autonomy.

In addition to this, there is something that is not always mentioned, but which is present nevertheless, which is that as a woman and indigenous person she faces a double barrier in many spaces. Defending her way of life, as she has said many times, is also a way of caring for what remains. She has felt the weight of responsibility, but she has not stopped speaking up. "I am not afraid to speak for my community," she says, "because if I don't, who will?"

She learned that leadership means listening, studying, engaging in dialogue and, above all, living with integrity. "Being *Saila*," she explains, "a traditional, spiritual and local authority, is a way of being. Everyone must be respected, from children to the authorities. You must behave in an exemplary manner. For his part, the *cacique*, who is a more political and representative authority, guides people not only with words, but also by example."

The territory, she says, is mother, home, source of life and identity. It is where the roots of the people lie, where the festivals, the *chicha* and the ancient songs are found. She has seen new technologies and customs arrive: some welcome, others that force people to pause and discuss collectively. "We have had to adapt without losing who we are," she says. In the face of change, the response has been to organise: to create councils, hold assemblies, make decisions.

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She talks about community politics as if she were talking about a teacher. "Here, we don't rule alone," she says. "We are part of something bigger and we must walk together, even if we think differently." For her, leadership is a responsibility in the service of the common good. That is why she insists on preserving the Guna language as an essential part of identity: "If we lose our language, we lose our history and our way of seeing the world." She explains that it should be passed on in daily life, in songs, in rituals, in conversations with younger people. It should also be passed on in intimate moments such as the celebration of a girl's first period.

Patricia participated for two years in the Akubadaura training process, which gave her the tools to become a former councillor for women, family and generation in Asorewa. Today, she is a political leader and works with the Chocó Indigenous Women's Programme, spending her days between meetings, workshops and craft work. Everything has a purpose: to strengthen the identity of her people. "It's not about surviving," she says, "it's about living with justice, rights and pride."

She dreams that the new generations will be able to move between two worlds without losing their own: that they will learn Spanish and use technology, but also know about medicinal plants, songs and the value of collective work. "I want today's children to become adults who are proud to be Gunas and who defend their culture," she concludes.

She leaves other indigenous communities with a message that is not meant to convince, but to accompany: "Don't give up. Fight for your culture, for your children and your future. Together we are stronger. And even if they want to silence us, we will continue to say: 'We are here, we are Guna and we will not disappear.'" FM