
Colombia: The Nukak, the last contacted nomadic people

The Nukak are a nomadic people from the Colombian Amazon, officially contacted in 1988. The present population is estimated at 390 people, distributed among 13 local groups, located in the inter-fluvial area between the Middle Guaviare and the High Inírida. Nukak as a tongue is understood by the Kakua or Bara from the Colombian Vaupes and both are classified as part of the Maku-Pinave linguistic family.

According to Nukak oral tradition, and ethnographic and linguistic information, they are a branch of the Kakua that emigrated to the North. One of the reasons for this displacement to their present territory was to evade the rubber merchants who used the indigenous peoples as slave labour at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, the Nukak's sophisticated knowledge and management of the fauna and flora of the zone point to an earlier occupation.

In the twentieth century, the Nukak remained isolated from their native territorial neighbours and agents of national society for over 50 years, among other reasons because they were afraid of alleged cannibalism by white people and other natives. In 1965 a group from the western sector attempted to peacefully approach a peasant. Unfortunately this episode ended in a confrontation leading to the death of several Nukak and the capturing of a couple. Following this ill-fated event, they isolated themselves in the forest, but only eight years later, in 1974, the groups from the eastern sector established contacts with the North American missionaries from the New Tribes Mission. In 1982, the contacts were permanent and in 1985 they already had a work station inside the territory.

During the eighties, in the areas bordering the northwest frontier of the Nukak territory the rhythm of colonization increased due to the favourable price of the coca leaf. This illegal crop attracted waves of peasants, trades-people and adventurers, seeking an opportunity to improve their living conditions. Thus, encounters with the peasants became increasingly inevitable because of the overlapping of the areas that both groups occupied. In this context and following the kidnapping of a white child by a Nukak group in 1987, the first flu epidemic and the appearance for the first time of a group in Calamar – a peasant village in the Guaviare – in April that same year, all the local groups gradually started visiting the colonized areas.

During the first five years after mass contact, the Nukak lost close on 40 per cent of their population as a result of respiratory diseases that started as flu. The age groups showing the greatest number of deaths were those over forty and under five years of age, thus leaving a large number of orphans. In fact, close on 30 children and young people were adopted by the peasants and some women also married peasants. All this led to an interruption in the transmission of their technical and ritual knowledge and a loss of confidence in their Chamanic practices.

Relations with the peasants were established quite quickly by the groups in the western sector occupying the oldest and most densely settled area, while for the groups in the less settled eastern sector where they had the support of the missionaries, the process was slower. At the mission station the Nukak found medical care, they were supplied with metal tools and seeds and had interlocutors to get to know the world of the white people. This generated a centripetal effect and attenuated the

motivation to migrate to settled areas. When the Missionaries' work station was abandoned in 1996 for public policy motives, this accelerated the expansion of the effects of contacts among the western sector groups.

Institutional action initiated to care for the Nukak has mainly been concentrated on health matters, on guaranteeing legal recognition of their territory and on protecting their rights as Indigenous people. However the scope of these initiatives and legal actions has been limited, given the extension of the area they occupy, the mobility and dispersion of the population, discontinuity due to administrative problems characterized by a lack of consensus in defining the type of intervention and limitations on circulation in the area, imposed by the self-named Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC). This organization is disputing control of the area with the paramilitary groups operating in the zone. Additionally the Nukak territory is surrounded by close on 15,000 peasants and located in one of the most dynamic agricultural frontiers of the Amazon.

Today, 16 years after the Colombian Government recognized the existence of the Nukak, they are now becoming sedentary and only one of the local groups in the eastern sector of the territory still maintains its nomadic treks through the forest in a permanent way. Most of them have built houses and have cultivated plots of land near the settled areas of their territory, mainly occupied by peasants who grow coca leaves. This activity is also a main source of employment for the male Nukak population and has contributed to displace activities such as hunting and gathering and has also facilitated the incorporation of agro-industrial food. Regarding health, the causes of morbidity have widened to include malnutrition and venereal diseases and the birth rate does not enable them to recover their population, as one out of two children dies before the age of five. It is also known that the groups in the western sector have problems with alcoholism, they have been involved in conflicts with firearms and at least three young men were involved with the FARC. Contrasting with this, recently celebrity magazines and programmes have devoted space to a Nukak top model, who probably had been adopted by the peasants.

In the meanwhile, institutional meetings still continue on the type of suitable intervention and the Nukak's capacity to face changes or to manage the budget that the State annually assigns to the populations in the Indigenous reserves of Colombia (transfer resources). Although six years ago it was concluded that the management of such resources belonging to the Nukak warranted a consultation with all the leaders of the local groups and commissions were set up for this purpose, they did not have any continuity. Today these resources cover the budgetary validity of eight years (1996-2004) and amount to over 400 million pesos, which cannot be executed until the Nukak decide on what they want to invest in.

Getting to know the opinion of the Nukak regarding their learning to live with the peasants and in general with the white man's world is a pressing task, as well as designing with them the strategies required to improve their living conditions. However, getting to know what the Nukak think or implementing any type of programme with them will not be feasible until there is the institutional will to consult them and respect their decisions. Also needed is the comprehension of the actors in the armed conflict to allow implementation of the actions all this requires. Paradoxically, this means to allow the Nukak to be contacted, that is to say, to establish a dialogue with them on their territory.

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