

DISSERTATION

“WHEN THE PEOPLE ARE THE TERRITORY”: THE POLITICS OF SEEDS AND THE
PRODUCTION OF GMO-FREE TERRITORIES IN COLOMBIA

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ABSTRACT

“WHEN THE PEOPLE ARE THE TERRITORY”: THE POLITICS OF SEEDS AND THE PRODUCTION OF GMO-FREE TERRITORIES IN COLOMBIA

This dissertation examines how Indigenous peoples in Colombia mobilize against genetically modified organisms (GMOs) by declaring and constructing GMO-Free Territories, asserting sovereignty over seeds, land, and ecological governance. Focusing on two cases—the Zenú Indigenous peoples and the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC)—it argues that conventional theories of state formation, predicated on coherent territorial control and centralized authority, fail to capture the fragmented and negotiated nature of postcolonial states. Through these case studies, the dissertation shows how Indigenous communities actively reshape the terms of governance, challenging agrarian extractivism and reconfiguring territory through land recuperation, seed and food sovereignty, and the formation of autonomous institutional structures.

Seed politics serves as a key lens through which Indigenous strategies of resistance and governance are enacted and made visible. Rather than representing a break from earlier struggles, seed sovereignty emerges as a new layer within long-standing processes of territorial defense and autonomy-building. These movements are not merely reactive but are also creative and future-oriented, constructing alternative territorial orders that defy both state and corporate development models. Using a process-tracing methodology, the study identifies mechanisms such as claims-making, memory work, identity formation, boundary activation, and

territorialization through which Indigenous actors contest spatial control and materialize autonomy.

Theoretically, the dissertation reframes the state as an unstable and relational formation, continually reshaped by resistance from below. It argues that “when the people are the territory,” territory is not simply a bounded administrative unit but a lived and political space, cultivated, remembered, and defended through embodied presence and collective action. These movements unsettle dominant models of sovereignty and open space for plural, decolonial, and ecologically grounded forms of governance rooted in the defense of seeds, land, and collective rights.

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DEDICATION

For the communities who live the questions this dissertation seeks to understand,
and whose struggles give meaning to every word written here.

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Chapter 1: Introduction: “When the People are the Territory”

Quite generally, the familiar, just because it is familiar, is not cognitively understood. The commonest way in which we deceive ourselves or others about understanding is by assuming something as familiar, and accepting it on that account.

- G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*

... there is little that investigates the term territory conceptually or historically. This is, in part, because it is generally assumed that territory is self-evident in meaning, and that its particular manifestations – territorial disputes, the territory of specific countries, etc. – can be studied without theoretical reflection on territory itself. Although it is a central term within political theory, geography, and international relations, the concept of territory has been underexamined.

- Stuart Elden, *The Birth of Territory*

Introduction

Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), particularly Genetically Modified (GM) seeds, have ignited global debates over their environmental, health, and socio-economic impacts, with Indigenous peoples emerging as vocal opponents¹. Indigenous peoples, alongside environmentalists, consumer advocates, peasant movements, and others, argue that GMOs pose

¹ The resistance against GMOs is often framed as part of a broader struggle for Indigenous rights, autonomy, and environmental protection. See Ryser 2011, Torres-Mazuera & Ramírez-Espinosa 2022, and Fuegos, Flores, & Ramos 2013.

serious risks to biodiversity, endanger traditional agricultural practices, and concentrate control over the global food supply in the hands of powerful corporations. Therefore, debates around GMOs are more than technical disagreements; they bring to light fundamental questions about land rights, environmental stewardship, and the politics of food sovereignty. For Indigenous peoples, resistance to GMOs is layered on top of broader and historical struggles to assert autonomy and protect their ancestral lands and cultural practices from encroachment by state and corporate actors, extending a new arena of struggle. Thus, the GMO debate is also about territorial sovereignty and self-determination, themes that expose the limitations of conventional theories on state territoriality. This dissertation argues, therefore, that traditional views on state territoriality often overlook the unique ways Indigenous communities engage with and contest state power over claimed space. The processes of Indigenous peoples in Colombia declaring and constructing GMO-Free Territories are investigated as a critical example of how Indigenous resistance redefines the boundaries and meanings of territorial control.

The GMO debate exposes the limits of state control over claimed territory. Even when states implement regulations to address environmental concerns, food security, or public health, competing agendas can weaken these efforts, highlighting gaps in the state's territorial authority over food systems and land use. In this sense, seeds become not only ecological or economic objects, but political instruments through which territorial claims are made and Indigenous autonomy is asserted. This situation underscores that territorial sovereignty can be fluid, as agricultural practices and technologies like GMOs expose vulnerabilities in a state's ability to fully control economic and environmental decisions within its own borders (Motta 2016).

For example, Argentina began adopting GM crops in 1996 in a process that did not allow for much public debate. Meanwhile, in neighboring Brazil, proponents of GM biotechnologies

were met with sharp opposition. Hence, GM seeds were not authorized in Brazil until 2003. However, in the meantime, GM seeds were illegally smuggled across the border from Argentina into Brazil. By 1999 it was estimated that over 800,000 hectares of Brazilian lands were sown with smuggled GM seeds (Motta 2016).

Elsewhere, negotiated trade agreements which include seed and GM issues impact a state's sovereign ability to govern its own territory. As an illustration, in response to Mexico's decision to phase out genetically modified (GM) corn, the United States has initiated a dispute settlement under the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). The U.S. contends that Mexico's restrictions on GM corn imports violate trade agreements and harm American exporters. This ongoing dispute centers around environmental, health, and agricultural concerns, highlighting tensions between trade obligations and national sovereignty over policies on GMOs (Turner 2024).

The internal politics of a state regarding seeds and GM technology implementation also highlight limits to sovereignty. For instance, in 2010 the Colombian state passed a resolution known as law 9.70 which gave the *Instituto Colombiano Agropecuario* (ICA, the national agriculture institute) policing powers and the ability to fine or jail farmers who exchange or commercialize seeds not approved by ICA (so far, only imported and genetically modified seeds have met the requirements²). Heavy opposition to this law contributed to the 2013 Agrarian Strike where peasant organizations, rural sectors, and others in solidarity blocked roads, dumped milk, and mostly stopped growing food for consumption in the cities. Law 9.70 was repealed and has not yet been successfully replaced (Grupo Semillas 2013).

² "It is as if seed evolution itself is being outlawed, and farmers are being made accomplices to the crime" (GRAIN 2013). Additionally, see GRAIN 2015, Wattnem 2016, and Visser 2017.

Moreover, in Colombia (similar to other parts of the Latin American region), the introduction of GMOs has intensified existing conflicts over land and agricultural governance. The recent GMO-free territories declared by Indigenous and peasant communities across Colombia (and across the Latin American region more broadly) represent a new challenge to state and corporate power, reconfiguring the territorial dimensions of these debates. These territories function as sites of resistance, where communities actively construct alternative models of governance based on food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture. Such territories are described as:

An area cultivated or not, where those who exercise control, individually or collectively, prevent the planting, use, or consumption of GMO seeds and foods. It is a preventative measure to protect native and local seeds, avoid genetic contamination, maintain healthy food, protect natural ecosystems from agrochemicals, strengthen regional and local food sovereignty, etc. (Ecologistas en Acción 2006).

Therefore, the idea that ‘the people are the territory’³ disrupts traditional frameworks of state and/or corporate territoriality by highlighting how local communities, especially Indigenous peoples, enact forms of governance and land stewardship that challenge those claims being made by external actors. This reframes territory as a contested space, one where local actors assert influence and reshape power dynamics, often in resistance to external forces. “When the people are the territory”, therefore, reflects a collective effort where local needs, values, and rights guide the governance of the space. It is about the possession and collective management of space by a

³ As the title of the dissertation states. This phrase was used in a community-based workshop in San Lorenzo, Nariño, in Southwest Colombia, October 1st, 2022.

permanent intervention of interested parties – the production of space for social needs, for use value, rather than an exchange value.

This dissertation investigates the establishment of GMO-Free Territories in Colombia, focusing on how Indigenous and peasant communities use these declarations to challenge the state's territorial claims and redefine sovereignty. It interrogates the assumption that the state's control over territory is monolithic or uncontested. By examining how local actors articulate their territorial rights in opposition to state policies promoting GMOs, the research problematizes the notion that state sovereignty and territoriality are fixed or unquestionable. Instead, the dissertation shows that territorial sovereignty is actively negotiated, contested, and redefined by non-state actors, particularly in spaces where state presence is uneven or resisted.

The theoretical contribution of this dissertation lies in its critical engagement with theories of state formation, particularly with regard to territoriality. While traditional state theory often presupposes the territorial integrity of the state, this research argues that territorial claims should not be taken for granted. The Colombian case illustrates how territorial sovereignty is fragmented and continuously shaped by local struggles, such as the creation of GMO-free territories. These zones of resistance illustrate how Indigenous, and peasant communities reclaim differing forms of sovereignty through practices of self-governance and environmental stewardship, offering alternative models to the territorial logic of the state.

In examining the territorial dimensions of the GMO debate in Colombia, this dissertation also contributes to broader discussions on environmental governance and Indigenous rights. For example, the processes of declaring and constructing GMO-Free Territories has shown that sovereignty does not need to be centralized or state-based but can exist in diverse, decentralized forms that reflect Indigenous governance traditions. Therefore, the revival of traditional

practices, languages, and governance structures are seen as forms of political resistance. In fact, highlighted throughout is how Indigenous-led resistance has led to innovation in political organizing and legal frameworks. The study thus opens new avenues for understanding how local actors resist and reshape state power, offering insights into the future of environmental governance and territorial justice in Colombia and beyond.

The Cases

Latin America is an important region for theory building on the concept of territory for at least three reasons. First, the absence of successful EU-like regional integration efforts (although there are numerous efforts⁴). Such arrangements have strengthened sub-state governments in Europe and formally rearranged territorial authority structures in the region. Due to the diversity of economic models and political ideologies across the region, as well as competition in global markets, and institutional weakness to enforce agreements, these regional inter-governmental organizations have not achieved significant impact and cohesion (O’Neil 2022). Second, in Latin America, the lower levels of state capacity and incomplete processes of state formation have left an intense territorial heterogeneity (Eaton 2017). This heterogeneity has led to uneven development and infrastructure, localized power structures and forms of self-governance, challenges in enforcing national policies, illicit economies, as well as militarization and conflict zones. Finally, social movements have turned their contention towards claims of territory and territoriality. For example, the 1990 national mobilization in Bolivia which was named “March for Life, Land, and Territory”, or the 2019 Colombian *Minga* in Defense of Life, Territory,

⁴ For example: The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), the Andean Community (CAN), the Bolivarian Alliance for the People of Our America (ALBA), the Latin American Integration Association (ALADI), the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Pacific Alliance, and the Central American Common Market (CACM).

Democracy, Justice, and Peace, the Zapatista movement in southern Mexico forming their own autonomous municipalities, or ‘rebel territories’.

In Latin America, Colombia is, perhaps, the country that best expresses the debates over the meaning of territory. This is in part because the tension of territorialities is set in contexts of civil war, with various guerrilla armies and paramilitary forces, narco-trafficking cartels, Indigenous and afro-descendant collective claims for territories, multinational corporations and extractive activities, not to mention the state and all its representatives/agencies, etc. The local, regional, and national are intertwined with international forces causing territorial instability. Due to all this, none of the social and political forces in Colombia’s history have managed to establish themselves as the hegemonic force across the entire territory. The physical geography has also contributed to territorial challenges in Colombia with the Caribbean, the Pacific, and the Amazon regions being separated by the Andes Mountain ranges and valleys. The regional diversity, divided society, and fractured geography are all included in explanations of state weakness, economic inequality, armed conflict, and more.

Additionally, Colombia has not yet resolved the issue of GM technologies. Attempts by the state to force policies regarding the registration, certification, and patenting of seeds, while criminalizing traditional seed saving and sharing practices, have been met several times with powerful agrarian mobilizations (GRAIN 2013, 2015). The issue was heightened through the signing of a free trade agreement with the United States which demands a change to domestic laws and the ratification of the international convention of The International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV) (GRAIN 2013). Therefore, the country is ripe for a case study investigation regarding the territorialities in contention regarding GMO seeds and the resistances which they provoke.

The Resguardo Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento in northern Colombia, was the first territory to declare itself GMO-Free in the country, making it an important case study to help uncover the mechanisms involved in such a process. Ebbing and flowing through centuries, the Zenú people have gained and lost territorial lands and rights in the figure of the resguardo, currently sharing the same space with municipal and departmental governments. The declaration as a GMO-Free Territory is an effort to assert their self-determination and give shape to their own envisioned territory and identity. In the southwest of Colombia, the Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca (CRIC), the first self-declared Indigenous organization (founded in 1971) in Colombia, has declared all Indigenous resguardos in the region (at least those that are members of CRIC) as GMO-Free. However, unlike the case of the Zenú, this strategy has not been integrated as a core element of their push for autonomy. These cases help to elucidate how, while similar mechanisms seem to be occurring, their interaction with the context is causing differing outcomes.

The Questions

A number of specific questions motivate this research:

- Why do Indigenous communities in Colombia mobilize against GMOs?
- What does it mean for them to declare their territories “GMO-Free”?
- What factors shape the ways Indigenous communities in Latin America organize to resist state control and assert greater power over their land and resources?
- Through what mechanisms do GMOs and the creation of GMO-Free Territories transform understandings of territoriality and political authority?

The Argument

The central argument of this dissertation develops as follows. The space which the state claims to occupy and govern is, in reality, a heterogeneous and fragmented mosaic of territories. Particularly in the Global South—and in Latin America and Colombia in particular—the state does not exercise equal or effective authority across its claimed territory (O’Donnell 2001; Gudynas 2020), leaving room for a range of actors to organize territorial life through alternative logics and institutions. Among these emerging territorial struggles, the defense of native seeds and the construction of GMO-Free Territories has become a particularly revealing site through which Indigenous communities assert jurisdiction and challenge extractive, state-aligned models of development. In this way, seed politics offers a window into the broader dynamics of Indigenous–state relations and the contested nature of territorial governance.

Traditional theories of state formation often rely on fixed concepts of territorial sovereignty and linear progressions of institutional development. Yet Indigenous territorial struggles challenge these assumptions by revealing the relational, fluid, and contested nature of territory and authority. State formation, in this view, is not a completed structure but an ongoing negotiation shaped by cultural, ecological, and political resistance.

The Zenú and CRIC movements in Colombia assert Indigenous jurisdiction not only through legal and historical claims but also through everyday practices of territorial construction—reclaiming land, building institutions, and protecting native seeds. The politics of GMOs and the creation of GMO-Free Territories represent a new, critical arena in these longer struggles. By defending native seeds, Indigenous communities assert governance over ecological reproduction and contest state and corporate models of spatial control. Seed sovereignty, then, is

not merely a form of resistance—it becomes a generative mechanism for reconfiguring territory and advancing Indigenous autonomy.

This dissertation adopts a process analysis approach to uncover the mechanisms that link these inputs—claims, practices, and resistances—to broader political outcomes. These mechanisms include claims-making, memory work, identity formation, boundary activation, and territorialization, all of which help explain how Indigenous actors carve out jurisdictional spaces within and against the state. The Colombian context, marked by overlapping territorial authorities, weak state presence, and intense extractivist pressures, offers a valuable lens to understand how alternative political geographies emerge from below. This research contributes to rethinking state territoriality by showing how Indigenous communities materialize new forms of governance through the layered and deeply political work of defending seeds, land, and collective life.

Theorizing and Studying the Production of Territory

Presupposing or taking literally the territorial claims of the modern nation state leaves no opening to investigate the spatiality and temporality of the non-state, or the spaces and moments in which the state is not the hegemonic force within its claimed borders. While most common theories on state formation take the concept of territory as nothing more than marking the boundaries of the territorial state (as well as sub-state territorial divisions), assertions of clearly defined boundaries of the state (Migdal 2001, Mitchell 1991), and assertions of total diffusion of state power within the claimed national territory (O'Donnell, 2001) are not as solid as assumed. Rather, the territorial sovereignty of the state is only ensured by the autonomy of the many differing socio-political forces that guarantee the state (Mançano Fernandes, 2009). Likewise, the social organizations that populated the space prior to state formation – churches and mosques;

tribal and ethnic groups; legal systems; community productive arrangements; and more – were seldom willing to just relinquish their power of providing strategies of production and survival, of mediating conflicts, educating children, distributing resources, etc. (Mann 2012, Scott 2009, Mitchell 1991).

Therefore, the process of state formation has been a process of substituting the state for other spaces, economically, socially, politically (although this has rarely been total). The state, therefore, has been in a process of waging war on local, autonomous, subsistence activities (Scott 2009, Illich 1978, 1981). With this, everyday forms of weapons of the weak (Scott 1985), as well as subcultures of resistance (Scott 1990) deployed by subordinated groups and classes, played a role in directing how the state was formed. Ordinary, grassroots, and subaltern peoples were involved in shaping the processes of state formation as they were/are an essential part of the political process (Tarrow 1998). Consequently, a definition of territory as a concept must point towards the strategies, tactics, and technologies that produce environmental and social transformations within a space (Velasco 2016, Elden 2013, Branch 2017). Such governance strategies, tactics, and technologies which enclose, administer, and shape human and natural environments have clear implications on peoples' cultures, rights, productive activities, family relations, consumption patterns, economic practices, etc. (Velasco 2014, 2016).

It is not possible, then, to understand the concept of territory without conceptualizing the power relations which determine and define different types of sovereignty. For example, political parties, unions, financial institutions, universities, churches, charitable foundations, cooperatives, companies, social movements, Indigenous peoples, ethnic communities, and non-governmental organizations, among many more actors, produce spaces and territories within the territory of the state, constituting different types of sovereignties (Mañano Fernandes 2008). Such a variety of

actors producing different types of sovereignties also causes overlapping and entangled territories, or multi-territorialities (Halvorsen 2018, Haesbaert 2013, Haesbert & Mason-Deese 2020). Permeating along these overlapped territories are power relations as the different actors try to impose their own delimitations and valuations of the space with domination and resistance co-existing in the processes of the production of a territory (Sharp et al. 2000).

Recognizing the multiplicity and entanglement of sovereignties within a single territory raises critical questions about how territoriality is mobilized as a strategy in power struggles. This dynamic is particularly evident in conflicts over natural resources, land rights, and the political reconfiguration of spaces (Halvorsen 2018, Halvorsen et al 2019). Political geographer Robert Sack (1986) defines territoriality as ‘a spatial strategy to affect, influence, or control resources, by controlling area’. Territoriality contains hints of sovereignty, property, discipline, surveillance, and jurisdiction. It refers to the production and reproduction of spatial enclosures that enforce their boundedness. But this boundedness can be permeable and can change shape over time (Soja 1989). Moreover, non-national jurisdictions are made inside the state’s claimed territory as are bordered spaces which cut across/through traditional state territorial boundaries (Sassen 2013). Therefore, territoriality is a claim which produces a social collectivity, although this does not always mean a state-based claim. Rather, it is the writing of power relations onto the land (Peluso and Lund 2011).

These nuanced understandings of territory and territoriality, as strategies for control and expressions of power, are pivotal to examining the “territorial turn” in Latin America. This shift foregrounds how land and territory have become central arenas for political contestation, particularly in struggles over autonomy, resource governance, and resistance to state and corporate encroachments.

The Territorial Turn in Latin American Politics

In the last few decades, scholars focused on Latin America have identified what is described as the ‘territorialization of politics’ (Rossi, 2019) or the ‘territorial turn’ in Latin American politics (Offen, 2003). This turn is situated in the historical juncture in which decentralizing Latin American states formally recognized community property rights and territory as legal space, including ethno-territorial rights of Indigenous and afro-descendant communities (Bryan, 2012; Falleti, 2012; Velasco, 2014). In many cases new progressive constitutions were written which formally protected large territorial claims. Moreover, important spatial/territorial issues were further considered in these constitutions, such as socio-economic rights, multiculturalism, and legal plurality, as well as collective group rights (Anthias, 2018; Gargarella, 2012; Kröger & Lalander, 2016). These constitutional reforms were the consequences of protracted cycles of contention (Tarrow, 1998) as well as social movement organizing based on territoriality (Van Cott 2001, Yashar 2005).

Moreover, other processes occurring during this same historical juncture which led to the territorial turn include: increased decisions by international human rights courts favoring the collective territorial rights of Indigenous peoples (Anaya 2009); global development institutions and regional aid agencies coming to focus their influence on sub-state territorial demarcation and attempt to push the process of the territorial turn into a market-led agenda (Escobar 2008, Hale 2011, Anthias 2018); as well as sub-state governments and other actors utilizing new tactics and strategies springing from new forms of decentralized authority to contest the national level economic development model (Eaton 2017), often putting forth efforts to resist extractivist policies and projects (Acosta García 2022, Svampa 2019).

This is especially important as simultaneous to the territorial turn, the region also witnessed increasing and intensifying conflicts over land use and natural resource extraction (Svampa 2019, Martínez Alier 2002). This is due, in part, to the arrangement and expansion of the extractivist economic model and the social resistances thereby instigated (Peluso & Lund 2011, Zibechi, 2012). This has led to what some have termed a ‘neo-extractivism’ (Gudynas 2018, 2019), or ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey 2003), as well as ‘land grabs’ (Borras Jr & Franco 2012) and the ‘reprimarization’ (Nadal 2011) of the economies of the global south. The concept of territory, in this context, is explored in terms of spatial processes related to power, authority, and identity (Manzanal 2008).

The recognition of vast and differing territorial communities breaks the notion of a homogenous state, or even of a homogenous municipality. Existing at different scales as well as different dimensions, territorial lines are often blurred (Mann 2012). Therefore, first, the territorial turn in Latin American politics does not only refer exclusively to the territorial ordering of the various levels of the state. Second, nor does it only refer to the territorial transformations demanded by large economic actors and certain development models. Third, it also includes the territorial dimension of social relations, especially of social resistances (Bebbington, 2012) the production of new relations within a social space to meet needs (Sitrin 2012). The following section will discuss, therefore, changes to the modern understanding of the concept of territory, as well as the historical processes of resistance to the incorporation of differing populations into the state and the defense of non-state autonomy.

State Space and Strategies of Escape

During the early modern period a vastly different understanding of the concept of territory emerged in Europe (Hall 2013, Elden 2013). Before this, in the Middle Ages, realms

had blurry borders, there were extensive non-state or frontier areas, unclear and overlapping jurisdictions, and sovereignty was distributed between types of actors (princes, the church, lords, etc.). Space was full of ambiguous notions of weaker, stronger, overlapping, or non-existent sovereignties. However, with the Westphalian treaties, two components regarding the concept of territory began to emerge. First, all territory belonged to one and only one state. Second, precise linear limits marked each sovereign state (Hall 2013). European states were then bound to recognize each other's authority as well as the territorial limits of their own authority (Sassen 2008), launching the international system of territorial states.

Assuming non-state space as the starting place for state theory, Scott (2009) argues that prior to this hegemony of the territorial state, populations made choices over how to position themselves in relation to the state, what kind of relationship the population was going to have with the state. Many chose to locate themselves in areas with difficult access, looking to supply themselves with the means to live and perpetuate themselves autonomously (Aguirre Beltrán 1979). For example, the region of Urabá in northwestern Colombia was historically neglected by the Colombian state. Due to clashes between the Spanish and other colonial groups, as well as the challenging terrain, it was difficult to establish permanent settlements during the colonial era. The territory gradually:

...became a refuge and stronghold for all those who, for whatever reason did not fit within the narrow bounds of the desired national identity: runaway negro slaves fleeing the mines and haciendas, Indians fleeing the reservations and opposing the authority of the whites and creoles, outlaws, smugglers of gold and European contraband, people vanquished during the endemic civil wars, political refugees, and societal outcasts, all gravitated to Urabá to form a highly diverse population... (Uribe de H 2005, p. 285).

However, since 1945 the nation-state, all around the world, has been “projecting its power to its outermost territorial borders and mopping up zones of weak or no sovereignty” (Scott 2009). The ensuing encounters between the expansionary state and non-state but self-governing peoples has been discussed as encounters between the barbarians and the civilized, with the state’s mission to civilize the barbarians, employing racist, colonial, and oppressive measures to do so (Scott 2009).

The state’s incorporation of these formally non-state spaces, or regions of refuge (Aguirre Beltrán 1979), has been justified with notions of development, economic progress, literacy, social integration, etc. However, in practice, the purpose is seen to have been to ensure that economic activity in these areas and populations was legible, taxable, confiscatable, and extractable (Scott 2009).

Scott describes how certain crops, like tubers⁵, were historically adopted by marginalized or stateless communities to evade state control. These crops were harder to tax, confiscate, or regulate because they were less visible and more resilient, providing food security while resisting state appropriation (Scott 2009). Similarly, in modern times, the defense of native seeds and opposition to GMOs reflect a struggle to maintain autonomy over food systems in the face of increasing corporate and state control.

GMOs, promoted by multinational corporations and often supported by state policies, represent a highly centralized form of agriculture. The seeds are typically patented, meaning that

⁵ Tubers, such as yams, taro, and sweet potatoes, are discussed as crops with specific attributes that lend themselves to evading state control. For example, Tubers grow underground, making them less visible and harder for state agents to monitor or seize compared to grain crops, which are typically cultivated in open fields. Unlike grains that must be harvested at a specific time, tubers can remain in the ground and be harvested as needed. This makes them more resilient to raids or taxation since they are not tied to a visible harvest period. Additionally, tubers can grow in a variety of soils and climates, including marginal and forested areas, which are often outside the state's reach. Scott 2009.

farmers must purchase them each season, surrendering the centuries-old practice of seed saving and breeding. The corporations that own the patents on these GM seeds, like Monsanto (now part of Bayer), gain a significant degree of control over what farmers grow and how they grow it. In this sense, GMOs enable new forms of state and corporate oversight in agriculture, similar to the state's control over grain production in historical contexts. By standardizing crops and centralizing control through patents, GMOs make food production more legible to both the state and corporate interests because the state can more easily monitor and regulate these crops (Grey & Patel 2015).

On the other hand, the strategies and tactics used in defense of native seeds parallels Scott's idea of escape crops. Native seeds, like the tubers in Scott's work, are often linked to traditional farming practices that are decentralized, diverse, and harder for the state or corporations to control. Indigenous and local communities in many parts of the world resist GMOs because they threaten their autonomy over food production and their ability to adapt crops to local ecological conditions. Much like Beltran's regions of refuge, movements against GMOs or in defense of native seeds across Latin America reflect a continuation of this struggle for self-determination in the face of globalized market forces (Merino 2022). These regions and practices are still seen as spaces where alternative lifeways and sustainable, locally driven agricultural practices can be protected from the homogenizing pressures of capitalist agriculture and state control. The movement for food sovereignty, which advocates for local control over seeds, land, and agricultural practices, mirrors the historical practices of stateless peoples who adopted escape crops to evade centralization and produce regions of refuge (Gonçalves et al. 2022).

In both cases, whether it's historical escape crops or the defense of contemporary native seeds, the underlying dynamic is the same: these crops symbolize resistance to external control and an assertion of local autonomy (Roman & Westengen 2022). The introduction of GMOs by large corporations resembles the historical efforts of states to centralize and control agriculture, while the defense of native seeds and agro-biodiversity resembles the historical tactics of communities seeking to evade that control and maintain their independence (Barthel et al. 2013).

This dynamic invites a deeper examination of the state's role in shaping these tensions. Rather than solely focusing on its legal authority or territorial claims, it becomes essential to explore the historical and social struggles that underpin such dynamics. Debates around the state's rights to territory, its authority, and its role in defining property relations must account for how these issues have continuously been contested through practices of resistance and assertions of local sovereignty. This broader perspective highlights not just the power of the state but also the substate dynamics and historical contingencies that have long-shaped territorial governance.

From Locke's natural rights to Marxist critiques of capitalist state formation, theories of state territoriality must account for the ways states interact with local communities, transnational actors, and global capital flows. For instance, as Scott's escape crops and Aguirre Beltrán's regions of refuge suggest, territorial control has always been contested by those who seek to evade or resist state power, and this resistance continues today in the form of debates over GMOs, Indigenous rights, and environmental governance. By reevaluating traditional assumptions, we can better understand the contested boundaries made invisible on a state's own map of its territory.

Liberal Tradition(s) of Territorial Rights

Debates on territorial rights within the liberal tradition focus on issues such as order, justice, and legitimate representation. These discussions typically revolve around jurisdiction, resource access, and border control (Miller 2012), drawing from theories of natural rights, consent, and justice. Within Lockean theory, there are two key interpretations: an individualist view where individual property owners contract with each other to form a political society with an authority to protect individual property (Nine 2008a), and a collectivist view where the state gains territorial rights through collective labor on the land (Nine 2008b). In this collective interpretation, the state labors to change the land by establishing and enforcing laws, creating efficient systems of agriculture and other land use practices, and ensuring land and resources are not wasted. The latter, though more compelling, faces challenges regarding differing interpretations of “efficient” versus “wasted” land use and the political struggles, as well as processes of domination, resistance, etc., inherent to such questions of land use (Van der Vossen 2015). For example, colonizers often deemed Indigenous land use as “wasteful”, using such claims to legitimize territorial conquest and resource extraction (Tully 1993; Coulthard 2014)

Other liberal theories, such as the Kantian argument for the primitive rights of states, challenge Lockean consent-based models. Kant suggests that only states can objectively interpret property rights, making it a moral imperative to live under the state's authority (Buchanan and Moore 2003). However, this justification is problematic when considering the often-unjust origins of states through conquest or colonization (Ypi 2014, Scott 1998).

These liberal theories help us understand issues of legitimacy, consent, and authority, but assume the state and its territorial boundaries to be self-evident, that there is nothing more to investigate than the specific manifestations of the territories of different countries (Elden 2010). However, Scott (1998, 2009) has extensively argued that the state form was not inevitable for

much of human history. Additionally, Agnew (1994) challenges the assumption that the state inherently commands sovereignty over a defined territory.

In reality, states often fail to penetrate their entire claimed territory, leaving local communities to develop their own political structures (O'Donnell 2001). Territoriality is also not confined to state boundaries or state actors, as individuals and communities create their own territorial claims and strategies (Sassen 2013, Sack 1986). These dynamics highlight the complexity of territorial rights, which do not always equate to sovereign statehood (Kolers 2009).

These liberal theories of state territoriality often fall short because they presume a unified, unchallenged state control over land and resources, treating territory as a static and universally recognized asset of the state. However, Indigenous movements and the debates surrounding GMO seeds illustrate the limitations of these theories by exposing the contested and plural nature of territorial claims. Indigenous communities' efforts to declare GMO-Free Territories reveal a form of territorial governance rooted in cultural autonomy, ecological stewardship, and self-determination that operates outside the conventional state framework. These dynamics underscore that territory is not simply an extension of state power; rather, it is a multifaceted space of negotiation and resistance where Indigenous peoples assert their own forms of governance and sovereignty.

The next section examines this idea of territory as a social and political construct, focusing on how it is continuously produced and contested through the actions and relationships of those who live within it. By foregrounding the role of human agency, it becomes clear that territory is not merely a passive backdrop for political struggle but an active, evolving space shaped by its inhabitants.

Territory as Produced through Social Relations

Henri Lefebvre was one of the first to recognize the role which social space plays in economic relations, class conflict, and the spatial articulations of state power (Lefebvre 1991, Brenner and Elden 2009). Lefebvre suggested that the way societies organize their economies and systems of production determines the physical and symbolic spaces they create, which in turn reinforce their social and political power. Therefore, space does not exist independently from social action but is produced and transformed through material (and immaterial) activity. With this, Lefebvre contends that space is not removed from ideology and politics. If it seems neutral, that is because it has already been appropriated by past political strategies.

Indeed, drawing upon Gramsci's notion of hegemony (Hesketh 2014, Gramsci 1971), Lefebvre observes how spatial forms serve the interests of class forces and influence public opinion. This is exemplified in the close collaboration between the state and the automobile industry. Highways, parking garages, motels, gas stations, sprawling parking lots, the withdrawal of investment in public transport, emissions check points, traffic jams, etc., represent a territory remodeled for certain class interests. This can also occur through architectural designs, street layouts, building and land use codes, and more. Mutually transformative physical, ideological, and social processes are found in the production of space. However, while spaces are produced through human action, once they are created, they exert powerful influence in shaping the rules and boundaries of possibilities for future action (Peck and Tickell 2002).

The national or state territory, then, is a physical space, modified and transformed by circuits, flows, and networks established within its borders – roads, canals, railroads, financial circuits, etc. This space is material, but it is also a social space, shaped by hierarchically ordered institutions, laws, conventions, class relations, ideas, and theories. It is this social structure that

constitutes the state (Lefebvre 2009). The material and natural dimensions of a space only become part of a territorial state through social relations (Santos 2021b). In this sense, the state plays a central role in shaping not only the physical space but also the way it is organized and governed.

As an instrument of homogenization, the state ensures that crops are legible, populations are taxable and controllable, resources are extractable, and investments are successful. Through various organizations, institutions, and bureaucracies, the state manages and produces space, working to make it appear uniform and controlled (Lefebvre 1991, 2009). This homogenization serves to standardize both the material and social landscapes, reinforcing the state's power over territory and its ability to define the legibility of land and resources. Therefore, the state and the territory seem to be mutually constitutive. This is because the state agencies and representatives, says Lefebvre (2009), seem to “administer, to manage, and to organize a natural space”. However, what they are doing in practice is substituting the state for other spaces, economically, socially, and politically. In doing so, the state clashes with the preexisting economic and political spaces which it encounters (Lefebvre 2009).

This dynamic reflects the broader process of territorial production, where the state's intervention is not merely about occupying space, but about actively reshaping it. In this light, Lefebvre's analysis builds on Marx's inversion of focus from the product to the production process. Just as Marx examines the labor process and relations of production, Lefebvre shifts the focus from mere descriptions of space or state territory to the active production of those spaces. This framework challenges the state as a natural or inevitable entity, while still recognizing it as a central actor in shaping and producing territories (Lefebvre 2009; Santos 2021). In this sense, the international state system becomes a network of competing territorial productions, with each

state's claim to space being negotiated both internally (through local production) and externally (through diplomacy, conflict, trade, or treaties) (Anderson 1991, Agnew 2009).

The Territorial State: Moderator of Global Economic Models

The state, as a particular form of capital relations (Clarke 2001, Pascual and Ghiotto 2020), is inherently tied to territoriality, yet it relies on the global reproduction of capital. This tension presents a dichotomy: state power is territorialized (spatially bounded), while capital is deterritorialized (operating beyond geographic limitations). However, the state is essential for territorializing production, while capital depends on the state's ability to regulate circulation across spaces. Both processes, territorializing production and deterritorializing circulation, are mediated by the state (Pascual and Ghiotto 2020).

As the command of the global economy operates on a transnational scale, the state intermediates between international production modes and national or local practices. States, particularly in facilitating extractive activities like agrarian extractivism involving GM seeds (McKay 2020), mediate these external forces into substate territories. However, this mediation reshapes their impact. While global actors aim to reorganize substate spaces, this process depends heavily on state intervention (Santos 2021a), and the state adapts to both international pressures and internal, localized demands.

The tension described between state territoriality and the global reproduction of capital is particularly relevant to the politics of GMOs. GMOs, as agricultural technologies promoted by multinational corporations, exemplify how global capital flows transcend national boundaries, while states are responsible for regulating the use and distribution of these technologies within their territories. The introduction of GMOs into a state's agricultural system often requires

changes in property laws, seed ownership rights, and regulatory frameworks—all of which are mediated by the state (which negotiates with multiple forces internally) (Dargent & Urteaga 2019).

On the one hand, the state's role in territorializing production is evident in its ability to enforce laws that govern seed use, agricultural practices, and land rights. For example, a state may encourage or mandate the use of GMO seeds as part of broader agricultural policies designed to boost production and economic growth. On the other hand, capital's deterritorialized nature comes into play as multinational corporations lobby for favorable regulations, seeking to ensure that their patented GMO seeds are adopted across diverse geographies, regardless of local cultural or environmental contexts.

This dynamic creates a complex relationship between state sovereignty and global capitalist interests, with the state acting as a mediator between local agricultural systems and the demands of global capital (Santos 2021). The imposition of GMO seeds often leads to conflicts with Indigenous groups and small farmers who seek to maintain traditional agricultural practices, illustrating the friction between localized forms of territorial production and global capitalist imperatives. In this way, the politics of GMOs are deeply intertwined with the state's role in managing both territorial and deterritorializing economic forces.

Despite this, while the state is the primary factor in territorial organization at the substate level, there are territorialities that, if only momentarily, escape the power of the state. It is important to understand what processes and mechanisms play a role in the construction of these moments and these spaces. Space and territory are not static or final products; rather, they are always in flux, actively shaped in the ongoing process of societal development and transformation (Santos 2021a). This dynamic nature of space underscores its role in the

continuous becoming of societies, constantly evolving as new social, political, and economic forces interact (Lefebvre 2009, Harvey 2006). Capital accumulation, according to Harvey (1982, 2019), requires spatial strategies to appropriate resources and maintain control, a concept he terms “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003). Resistance to this accumulation is often geographically specific, and territorialized social movements that challenge state power are among the most effective (Escobar 2008, 2001). These movements reflect deeper conflicts over different ontologies of land (Kolars 2009), where territorial claims are contested, and alternative visions of political space are defended.

The territorial dynamics described above illustrate how state power and territorial organization are continually contested. This is especially evident in Latin America, where extractivism and the resistance to it often intersect with these spatial struggles, highlighting the tensions between capitalist accumulation and the defense of alternative land-use and other socio-political practices.

Theorizing and Researching Resistance to Extractivism

The Latin American region was incorporated into the global economy as a site of extraction and appropriation of raw materials more than 500 years ago (Acosta 2013). Such conditions have been difficult for governments in the region to overcome (whether they are conservative, liberal, progressive, leftist, etc.) (Svampa 2019). Recently, the commodities boom of the early 21st century saw an increased dependence on the export of raw materials from the region. Mega-mining and oil exploration and extraction were expanded as well as agro-monocultures in the countryside. While the commodities boom took a dive around 2014, analysts soon expect an even bigger boom as transitioning to a green economy will demand massive amount of copper, lead, nickel, cadmium, silver, lithium, coltan, and more. This will also include

more humans to feed and agricultural lands increasingly under competing uses such as grains for animals, biofuels, fiber production, carbon offset initiatives, urban expansion, and more (Lane 2024). Such a model of economic development has come to be called extractivism (Gudynas 2020, Svampa 2013).

Extractivism is understood as a mode of appropriation rather than of production; a type of extraction of natural resources as primary goods to meet demand on the world market (Gudynas 2020). It is further characterized by social and sectoral disarticulation from the rest of the economy, the demand to consume is developed externally and does not depend on internal markets (de Janvry 1981). Such an economic development model is discussed as a structural feature of capitalism as a world-system, and a product of the original differentiation-hierarchization of colonial territories and imperial metropolises (Machado Aráoz 2014). Others add that extractivism is based on socio-ecologically destructive processes resulting in phenomena such as soil degradation, biodiversity loss, climate change, deforestation, displacement of communities, and more (Chagnon et al. 2022). In addition to its analytical vitality, the concept also carries a denunciatory and organizing character which articulates a critique of historic development models, and it centers the collective agency of social movements and local communities (Riofrancos 2020).

In addition to the process of extractivism, it is also found as an ideology. As such, it focuses on the Earth as a limitless supply of resources to be taken and placed into market-based processes, linking extractivism as part of ongoing colonial frameworks that transform nature into a mere resource. This also reveals how racialized hierarchies justify the exploitation of Indigenous lands and labor. Social movements, therefore, are resisting extractivism not just as an

economic model but as an imposed worldview (Svampa, 2019, Escobar 2011, Malin & Kallman 2022, Quijano 2000).

Extractivism and Territory

Extractivism across the Latin American region has been found to fragment geographies and generate extractivist territories. These are geographical and socio-political spaces defined by activities focused on the large-scale extraction of natural resources, such as minerals, fossil fuels, or agricultural commodities, typically for export. These territories characteristically emerge through state policies, corporate investments, and global market demands, often at the expense of local ecosystems and communities. This is because extractivism is always anchored at specific sites; for example, farmlands or fossil fuel deposits, etc., are all place-based (Gudynas 2020). This site-specific character necessitates support areas and infrastructure, such as dams to generate electricity. Likewise, site specific extractive projects rely on connecting networks, such as roads, railways, ports, airports, etc. This dynamic of extractivism requires intensive and expanding occupation of territory (Borras Jr and Franco 2012), which occurs through forms such as monoculture, displacing other local or regional territorial forms of agricultural production (Svampa 2019). The term *sacrifice zones* was created to describe those portions of national territories that were being expected to suffer the severe pollution and environmental destruction that companies and governments tolerate to continue industrial activities, sacrificing the health and well-being of local populations for economic gain (Juskus 2023, Lerner 2010, Valenzuela-Fuentes et al. 2010).

In this process, territories which have until recently been considered unproductive or unviable to capitalist development are being invaded and occupied by both transnational companies and states. This is facilitated by new intensive technologies, deregulation, structural

adjustment policies, decentralization, and more (Toledo et al. 2015). The state, in fact, plays a heavy role in facilitating extractivism within its territory. This is through granting mining, oil, forestry or fishery concessions, imposing territories through police and military force, opening new lands to agriculture, and regulating property relations and resource access. On the other hand, contemporary states, in many ways, depend on extractivist activities to meet economic goals (Gudynas 2020). Bolivian thinker Zavaleta Mercado (2013 [1984]) points to the history of the mutual need between the state, which needs a surplus, and those that take advantage of the surplus, who need the state.

Consequently, extractivism is seen not just as an economic activity but as a means by which the state consolidates power over Indigenous and other competing territories, shaping both the material and symbolic aspects of space (Anthias 2018). The ideology of extractivism enables the process of consolidating Indigenous territory into state control, as well as justifying the harms done to the environment, local economies, territorial networks, rooted livelihoods, and more. The territorial movements that arise in resistance to extractive industries not only oppose the environmental degradation associated with extractivism but also challenge the socio-political processes that enable such activity. The tension between resistance and extractive forces is framed as a contest for the control of space - not just the physical land, but also the political and cultural significance it holds (Riofrancos 2020). The ongoing struggle reflects the broader conflict between global capitalism's need for resources and local communities' efforts to maintain their territorial integrity and cultural heritage (Machado Araoz 2014).

Agrarian Extractivism and Genetically Modified Seeds

The concept of extractivism has been explored across diverse types of cases and regions, leading to a variety of nuanced understandings of its different forms and manifestations

(Chagnon et al. 2022). In the agrarian sector, an extractive character has been identified as similar to activities in the mining and hydrocarbon sectors, leading some to analyze the conditions and processes of ‘agrarian extractivism’ (McKay 2020). Agriculture is in fact a crucial site of analysis to illuminate the mechanisms and processes involved in extractivism and the resistances it spurs. The commodity-driven logics of agrarian extractivism include land-grabbing, class struggle, labor exploitation, mechanization, synthetic chemical input, and more. It is an agriculture oriented toward monoculture and the use of transgenics with little or no processing, and exportation of the produce as a commodity (Gudynas 2010). This includes biofuels production, which also re-configures territories (Svampa 2013). For example, in Argentina the expansion of agribusiness and the use of biotechnologies associated with GM crops have restructured the agricultural production in Argentina “into an essentially extractive system not very different from mining, as resources are extracted from the soil without recompense” (Giaracca & Teubal 2009, p. 158). This is rooted in the history of plantation agriculture during the conquest and colonization of the Latin American region, shaping the region's social, economic, and environmental pathways. (Veltmeyer & Ezquerro-Cañete 2023).

Such extractivism in agricultural production is made visible in the process of the Green Revolution which embodied extractivism both as a material process and as an ideological framework. It depleted soil fertility, reduced biodiversity, and created dependency on agrochemicals, mirroring resource extraction industries (Shiva 2016). Genetic extractivism commodified and privatized seeds, undermining seed sovereignty (Kloppenborg 1990). Large-scale irrigation and monocultures led to land and water grabbing, displacing small farmers (Borras & Franco 2012). Ideologically, it promoted a technocratic, corporate-driven model of agriculture that marginalized Indigenous and peasant knowledge (Patel 2012). By reinforcing

dependency on industrial inputs and Western-centric development narratives (McMichael 2012; Escobar 2011), the Green Revolution extended the extractivist logic into agrarian systems, deepening ecological and economic inequalities.

This agrarian extractivism has operated through the territorialization of GM crops (Hernández Vidal 2022) causing spatial expansion of export-oriented industrial agriculture (Svampa 2019). GMOs have played an important role in the consolidation of processes of accumulation through the dispossession of territories, natural resources, knowledges, traditional crops, and more (Harvey 2003). They have transformed agriculture, changing the uses of land, water, and soil, and they require external synthetic inputs for production. Moreover, these biotechnologies have allowed capital to overcome biophysical barriers to the commodification of agriculture. This process disrupts socio-territorial networks by degrading material, cultural, and environmental foundations, while appropriating resources such as labor, skills, knowledge, and ecosystems across territories (Kloppenburg 1990, McKay 2020). In Paraguay, the GM soy industry operates as an “enclave *sojero*”, meaning it functions as a disconnected sector with little integration into the broader economy. Its activities benefit large-scale agribusiness but do not significantly contribute to local economic development, instead undermining smallholder agriculture and traditional livelihoods. This exemplifies how such systems disrupt socio-territorial networks by prioritizing export-oriented production at the expense of diverse local economies and communities. (Fogel & Riquelme 2005).

GMO seeds, and seed politics generally, have contributed to processes of de-territorialization and re-territorialization as these different territorialities (Indigenous, campesino, afro-descendant, autonomous, traditional, modernizing, capitalist, industrial, globalized, etc.) exist together as a multi-territoriality, in constant conflict, tension, and negotiation (Haesbaert

2011). Larger conflicts over autonomy, self-determination, sovereignty, etc. - ways of inhabiting territory – are incorporating and being altered by conflicts surrounding GM seeds (Gutiérrez Escobar 2017). To better understand issues of justice, sovereignty, alternative development models, resilience, and more, it is important to examine how local, Indigenous, and peasant communities defend their territories, pushing back against the forces that seek to commodify and exploit these spaces.

Resistances to Agrarian Extractivism

These conditions have contributed to visions of alternative models of development based on the concept of food sovereignty and autonomy. In fact, a grassroots and territorialized social movement response to the threats of GM seeds has been the declaration and construction of GMO-Free Territories, agro-ecological territories, peasant agri-food territories, and more⁶ (Routledge 2015, Halvorsen et al. 2019). These are efforts towards ecological dignity or attempts to territorially withdraw from global extractivism (Courtheyn 2022). Resistance movements frame their struggle within broader discourses connecting environmental governance with territorial autonomy and sovereignty. The cultural dimensions of resistance are also emphasized, showing how Indigenous worldviews that regard nature as sacred challenge the capitalist logic behind extractivism. These movements are often grounded in alternative ontologies that resist the commodification of nature, aligning with global discourses on Buen Vivir (living well) and territorial defense (Svampa 2019, Escobar 2008).

⁶ These are all proposals and efforts from different social movement sectors in Colombia. While they have much in common and overlap in the majority of their goals, the history of fragmented agrarian movements in Colombia has led to the development of differing territorial proposals and visions. See Sankey 2023, and Salcedo 2013.

Existing literature understands the construction of these anti-extractive territories as processes towards the decentralization of socio-environmental conflict as well as the exercise of municipal autonomy (Monge Sánchez 2014), or as a defense of a sovereignty which transcends the state (Pearson 2012). Depending on their levels of formalization GMO-Free Territories can be understood as community protection which advances sustainable development (Lagunes Navarro & Arellano 2020), defends local, municipal, or sub-national autonomy (Monge Sánchez 2014), and develops a sovereignty which transcends the state (Pearson 2012). Still others, look to these GMO-Free Territories as examples of resistance to white supremacy represented in the continued colonization of territories (Hernández Vidal 2022). The struggles occurring in these spaces represent a broader fight for autonomy and local ways of sustaining land, resisting the enduring colonial power that privileges Euro-American knowledge systems over Latin American agricultural practices. Seeds, embodying both cultural and economic values, have become central symbols in this clash between colonial dominance and local resistance (Gutiérrez Escobar 2017). GMO-Free Territories, therefore, provide counter- technologies of governance that articulate seed and human relationships in a unique way that cannot always be co-opted by the state, or by technoscientific or financial powers (Hernández Vidal 2020). GMO-Free territorialities, therefore, are socially constructed and forged through human interaction and struggle, understood as the material dimensions of community self-organization (Svampa 2019). However, they have been found to unleash strong reactions from large agribusiness and its supporters in government (Palaez & Silva 2008). Consequently, much more is to be learned about the processes and the mechanisms involved in the development of GMO-Free Territories as political and territorial strategies to defend livelihoods, culture, biodiversity, autonomy, etc. This ongoing exploration is vital for understanding how such territories can serve as models for

resilience in addressing broader environmental challenges and political dynamics that threaten local autonomy, livelihoods, and biodiversity.

Outline

This introduction chapter lays the groundwork for understanding the political significance of debates over seeds and the use of genetically modified seeds, as well as the territorial implications of such debates within a framework of increasingly extractivist economies. The remainder of the dissertation proceeds as follows. Chapter two will detail the methodological approach to this research and the specific methods used for data collection, as well as the data that was collected. Chapter three explores the historical development of Indigenous-state relations in Colombia. The chapter focuses on three key themes in this historical process: the evolution of a fragmented society marked by deep-seated discrimination and regionalism; the central role of the Indigenous *resguardo* in asserting legal, cultural, and political identities; and the shifting state policies that have alternated between integration and separation of Indigenous peoples. Chapter four offers a conceptual analysis of GM seed regulation and resistance in Colombia, focusing on how global food system politics intersect with national and local dynamics. It explores the historical development of seed politics, tracing the influence of global trends like the Green Revolution and biotechnologies on Colombia's agricultural systems. Chapters five and six will be the case studies from Colombia. These include the case of the Resguardo Zenu and their development and construction of a GMO-Free Territory, and the case of the Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca (CRIC) and the differing strategies in seed activism that have not quite culminated in the declaration of a GMO-Free Territory. Chapter seven will delve into the comparison of these two similar but differing processes and tease out what can be learned to gain more understanding of why political actors take different paths. Finally, chapter

eight will conclude with a discussion of the broader theoretical implications of the role of seeds (and resistance to GM seeds) on political phenomena more broadly, including for the Latin American region, and even globally.

Chapter 2: Methods of Research

I do not believe it is possible to imagine the entire panorama of the contemporary world in one theory. It is not possible, above all, to set in theory its movement. We have to explore it and know it, episode by episode, facet by facet. Our view and our imagination will always be delayed in respect to the entirety of the phenomenon. (Mariategui, 2011: 125).

Ideas that are perfect, absolute, abstract, indifferent to the facts, to changing and moving reality do not work; ideas that are germinal, concrete, dialectic, workable, rich in potential and capable of movement do (Mariategui, 2011: 127).

Comparative Political Process Analysis

This is primarily a work of comparative political process analysis, which involves exploring cause-and-effect relationships in social interactions. A “process” is described as a sequence of events or actions that are causally connected, leading from an initial condition or cause to a specific outcome (George & Bennet 2005, Mahoney 2012). I examine how political processes influence one another across time and space, emphasizing that these processes operate differently depending on their historical and geographical contexts. The importance of history and geography in such a research agenda, therefore, necessitates a search for mechanisms that have a general but flexible scope (Tilly 2002, 2008).

An analysis of a political process includes the selection of salient features or significant differences of political phenomena in order to identify the ways that when and where an event or

process occurred affects how it occurred, why it occurred, and the consequences of its occurrence. All political processes, therefore, operate differently in different times and places. They incorporate institutions, understandings, and practices that have accumulated over time in their specific locations. As such, prior iterations of a process, like the (de)territorialization and/or (re)territorialization of certain lands and socio-political spaces, affect subsequent possibilities of action, as well as the identity of actors, the models of participation, etc. Political process analysis, therefore, must examine how prior iterations of a process affect current reiterations, as well as how locally accumulated institutions and practices compound to cause variation in outcomes across similar processes. This contributes to arguments that certain sequences, conditions, and combinations of mechanisms link together into processes with explicable but variable outcomes (Tilly 2005, 2008). Ultimately, the goal is to identify and understand the process in which relevant variables make an impact and to utilize close-up qualitative analysis to observe the causal process within individual cases (Hall 2006, Trampusch & Palier 2016).

The method of process analysis⁷ was first formally proposed in the discipline of political science by Alexander L. George in 1979. He suggested applying “the historians methodology of explanation” to “assess whether a statistical correlation between independent variables and the dependent variable is of causal significance” (George 1979, p. 46). Later, George and McKeown (1985, p. 35) put forward a procedure where they “attempt to trace the process – the intervening steps – by which beliefs influence behavior” through which they can make “historical arguments about causal processes in studies of human and organizational decision-making”. Since then, a large body of diverse and multifaceted contributions to the methodology have been made.

⁷ The methodology has been referred to with a number of different names. These include process tracing, process induction, process verification, congruence analysis, systematic process analysis, etc. See Trampusch & Palier 2016

In varying styles, many political and other social scientists have put into practice process analysis to important effect (whether or not intentionally naming their research methods as such), including: Moore (1993 [1966]) whose analysis highlights how differing economic development paths influence political regimes, linking historical patterns of class formation to contemporary state-building processes; Skocpol (2015 [1979]), who finds the structural conditions for transformation of social and political orders through revolutions, and emphasizes the interaction between state institutions, elite dynamics, and peasant mobilization as key factors driving revolutionary change; McAdam et al. (2001) where they develop a relational and dynamic framework to study political processes which integrates structural, cultural, and interactional factors to explain how protests, revolutions, and social movements emerge and evolve; Collier and Collier (1992) who make a key contribution to understanding political processes by analyzing the historical incorporation of labor movements into the political systems of eight Latin American countries. Their central concept, critical junctures, explains how pivotal moments in history shape long-term institutional patterns and political alignments; Rueschmeyer et al. (1992), by examining processes in the relationship between economic development and democratization, they argue capitalist development fosters democracy not solely through growth but by reshaping class structures, empowering the working and middle classes, and diminishing the power of landed elites; Falleti (2010), analyzes how different forms of decentralization affect political outcomes at the subnational level. Falleti highlights that the impact of decentralization depends on the sequencing of types of decentralization - whether fiscal, administrative, or political - and its historical and institutional context; and Simmons (2016) who emphasizes the cultural and symbolic dimensions of resistance and examines how processes of resistance emerge in response to state and market policies that affect people's basic subsistence.

The diversity of these studies have stretched the definition of process analysis in order cover analyses of nearly all types of processes. In fact, Trampusch and Palier (2016) find 18 different definitions corresponding to 18 different types of process analysis. Still, in all of this diversity regarding the investigation of social and political processes, it is generally agreed that the study of a process (or processes) is about identifying and understanding causal mechanisms. Therefore, it is a method for unpacking causality.

Causal Mechanisms

By providing the explanatory bridge between cause and effect, detailing how and why certain outcomes occur under specific conditions, mechanisms aim to uncover the processes, activities, and entities that produce causal relationships (Elster 1989, Tilly 2005, Mahoney 2012). Mechanisms are defined as: “A mechanism for a phenomenon consists of entities and activities organized in such a way that they are responsible for the phenomenon” (Illari & Williamson 2012, p. 120). With this, all mechanisms are the mechanisms of some phenomenon⁸ (Kauffman 1971, Glennan 2002). This entails that the task involved in searching for mechanisms begins with a provisional characterization of the phenomenon (the territorial-turn in seed politics, for example), then to follow strategies of localizing the mechanism within the system and then decomposing the phenomenon into distinct sub-functions (Bechtel & Richardson 2010).

In the social sciences, mechanisms have been described as “a delimited class of events that change relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations” (McAdam et al. 2001, p. 24). They have been discussed as the processes that account for causal relationships among variables – the nuts, bolts, cogs, and wheels that link

⁸ Although it is possible for a mechanism to be present and not cause a phenomenon. See Falleti & Lynch 2009.

causes with effects (Elster 1989). Others have defined social mechanisms as “a constellation of entities or activities that are linked to one another in such a way that they regularly bring about a particular type of outcome” (Hedström 2005). Therefore, mechanisms can be viewed as the building blocks or principal components of political processes (Falleti & Lynch 2008).

While social mechanisms are often characterized as the underlying processes that link causes with effects in political and social phenomena, their nature is not always directly observable, prompting debates about how to identify and measure their presence. Mechanisms remain fairly “abstract concepts or patterns of action” that explain how the different stages, events, episodes, etc., of political processes are plausibly connected (Falleti 2010, p. 23). Often, such mechanisms that “make the system tick” remain unobservable, yet “they tend to leave behind residual evidence of their presence” (George & Bennet 2005, p. 137, Bunge 2004, Little 2015, Gonzalez-Ocantos & LaPorte 2021). MacAdam et al. (2001) argue that even though the presence of some causal mechanisms might not be observable, we can still evaluate their presence or absence, at least through indirect measurement (Falleti & Lynch 2009).

This challenge of identifying and measuring mechanisms is compounded by their context-dependent nature, as the effects of a mechanism can vary significantly depending on the interaction with other mechanisms and the specific settings in which they operate. As such, mechanisms tend to be portable concepts able to travel from one process to another. However, there is not an invariant relationship between the existence of a mechanism and the empirical manifestation of its effects (the phenomenon). In differing contexts, we may find that the effects of one mechanism in one process may be counteracted by the presence of an additional mechanism in a different process (Olin Wright 1989). A good example of how the same mechanism can interact with different contexts is found in Falleti & Lynch (2009). Here, they

discuss the mechanism of ‘boundary control’ described as the strategies and actions employed by actors to regulate, manipulate, or maintain control over the boundaries of a specific domain, be it territorial, institutional, or social, in order to preserve power, autonomy, or influence. This social mechanism has been investigated as occurring and causing phenomena in culturally defined regions (Rokkan 1983), subnational political units (Gibson 2012), as well as disciplinary departments in academia (Gambetta 1998), all constituting “subunits of larger entities in which those who exert local domination seek to protect themselves from external influences” (Falleti & Lynch 2009, p. 1148). However, while they are portable, the causal effects of mechanisms depend on the interaction of each specific mechanism with aspects of the context in which it is operating (Falleti and Lynch 2009). Ultimately, mechanisms are relational and processual concepts, they are not reducible to intervening variables being applied to units of analysis. While variables are attributes of the units of analysis, mechanisms, as relational concepts, reside above and outside the units of analysis.

This contextual sensitivity highlights the advantage of mechanisms-based approaches in offering detailed, incremental explanations that focus on the components and sub-processes shaping observed political phenomena. Rather than aiming for broad theories or laws to unify vast social domains, a mechanisms-based approach involves addressing explanation incrementally. The focus is on identifying components and sub-processes within observed social arrangements to explain particular aspects (MaCadam et al. 2001, Falleti 2012, Tilly 2008). As Stinchcombe (1991, p. 367) has written, mechanisms are “bits of theory about entities at a different level (e.g., individuals) than the main entities being theorized about (e.g., groups) which serve to make the higher-level theory more supple, more accurate, or more general”. This relates

to Merton's (1968) idea of theories of the middle range. Merton describes these middle-range theories as follows:

theories that lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day-to-day research and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of social behavior, social organization, and social change. Middle-range theory – is intermediate to general theories of social systems which are too remote from particular classes of social behavior, organization, and change to account for what is observed and to those detailed orderly descriptions of particulars that are not generalized at all. Middle-range theory involves abstractions, of course, but they are close enough to observed data to be incorporated in propositions that permit empirical testing (Merton 1968, p. 39).

With this, the study of social causal mechanisms has numerous benefits. Mechanisms provide detailed explanations of how and why certain outcomes occur, moving beyond simple correlation. Unlike variable-centered approaches that can identify statistical associations, mechanism-based approaches focus on the causal processes that generate observed relationships (Elster 1989; Hedström and Swedberg 1998). Moreover, the study of mechanisms provides a generative approach to causality by showing how specific actions, interactions, or events combine to produce outcomes (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010). Additionally, mechanisms allow for context-sensitive explanations by recognizing that their operation and outcomes are contingent upon specific social, historical, and institutional conditions (Falleti and Lynch 2009). Finally, mechanisms serve as an analytical bridge between micro-level actions (individual behaviors), meso-level interactions (group dynamics), and macro-level outcomes (structural

changes). By identifying how individual actions aggregate into broader social phenomena, mechanism-based explanations integrate different levels of analysis (Coleman 1998).

Some scholars, however, critique the mechanism approach as unsatisfactory in causal explanation (Kincaid 1996, Opp 2005), for not dealing adequately with the issue of observability in social sciences (Humphreys 2019), or for the ambiguity of the concept of mechanisms, meaning different things to different people (Gerring 2010).

Proponents of mechanistic approaches argue that mechanisms provide a more nuanced and process-oriented understanding of causation compared to correlational or variable-based approaches. Unlike broad statistical associations, the mechanism approach focuses on the how and why behind causal relationships, breaking them into smaller, observable steps. For instance, Hedström and Ylikoski (2010) emphasize that mechanisms serve as causal pathways that clarify the link between causes and effects, making explanations more robust and transparent. While some mechanisms may not be directly observable, proponents assert that their constituent parts or implications can be observed. For example, Tilly (2001) argues that even if the entire mechanism isn't directly visible, its intermediate steps or outcomes can be empirically tested. The proponents of mechanistic explanation also acknowledge the conceptual ambiguity of the approach but argue that this reflects the complexity and diversity of social phenomena rather than a flaw. They suggest that instead of seeking a single definition, it is more productive to use a typology of mechanisms (e.g., cognitive, relational, environmental) as proposed by MacAdam et al. (2001). This typology allows for context-sensitive applications of the mechanism approach, making it adaptable rather than ambiguous. In this investigation I identify mainly relational mechanisms which are defined as those mechanisms which “alter connections among people, groups, and interpersonal networks”.

Fundamental to the approach is to examine the causal processes, or the hypothesized causal mechanisms, and measure their presence in the case under study to track their interactions with other mechanisms or phenomena from the cause to the effect. For this, a starting place must be chosen. This is the identification of some event, activity, entity, etc., that activates the mechanism(s) under hypothesis (Hall 2006, Crasnow 2017). For the case studies under examination in this dissertation, that starting place is the period of heightened rural unrest and the efforts at agrarian reform in Colombia. The Agrarian Reform law was written in 1961 and is a key critical juncture which set in motion the political processes found in the two cases. However, each case related to the agrarian reform efforts in different ways due to the distinct locally accumulated institutions and practices that affected the process, leading to differing interactions between the similarly occurring mechanisms and local contexts.

Critical Junctures and Path Dependency

Critical junctures are important to the study of political processes and the search for causal social mechanisms because they represent moments of significant change or contingency in which institutional configurations, decisions, or social structures are more fluid, allowing mechanisms to produce long-term effects by shaping the trajectories of political and social systems (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). These junctures illuminate how and when mechanisms operate, revealing their causal role in generating enduring patterns or outcomes in specific historical contexts.

The study and identification of critical junctures is a research framework launched by Lipset & Rokkan (1967) and importantly bolstered by Collier and Collier (1991). In this framework, critical junctures are defined as “1) a major episode of institutional innovation, 2)

occurring in distinct ways, 3) and generating an enduring legacy” (Collier & Munck 2017). The critical juncture itself and the following legacy are the two fundamental components.

Importantly, the same critical juncture (for example, the incorporation of Labor in Collier and Collier, 1991) takes different forms in different cases. This is due to the timing, sequence, context, combination of mechanisms, and antecedent conditions found in the differing cases. In my investigation, the process of state formation created a number of critical junctures regarding the structure of state-Indigenous relations, contributing to an evolving legacy built upon layers of critical junctures.

These critical junctures and their legacies are often viewed in terms of path dependency, in which the moment of openness found in the critical juncture, where the institutional development could have turned in many directions, becomes closed and the path set. In this, the past events and decisions constrain possibilities for different decisions and events in the future⁹. The preceding steps in a process, moving in a particular direction, induces further movement in that direction as the costs of reversal are high (Levi 1997, Pierson 2000). Indigenous identity being tied to resguardo lands, or the peasantization of Indigenous peoples, are examples of these legacies of prior critical junctures that set state-Indigenous relations on certain paths which have been changed or reversed at high costs, or not at all.

This study will center on two critical junctures which saw openings for institutional innovation, and which left long-lasting legacies. The first is the agrarian reform efforts in the 1960s. This juncture sought to alleviate rural unrest by creating new government agencies

⁹ This brings to mind the famous quote from Karl Marx’s “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” from 1852: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”

including those mandated to facilitate land distribution. It also saw the creation of state-sponsored social movement organizations in which certain sectors of the social movement radicalized outside of the original government plan. The second juncture is the 1991 Political Constitution of Colombia. This new pact recognized numerous rights of Indigenous peoples, protecting their autonomous forms of social life, government, and collective agency. While there are numerous other junctures that had important impacts on the cases under investigation, these two were the most responsible for the current paths on which state-Indigenous relations are currently set, and which put parameters on the possible strategies of Indigenous peoples to achieve autonomy.

Case Comparisons

Instead of focusing on the similarities and/or differences of independent and dependent variables across cases using a Most Similar or Most Different approach to comparison, this work seeks to detect, uncover, and explain causal social mechanisms¹⁰, and has a goal of explanation of variation across cases. Therefore, the cases are selected to shed light on the causal mechanisms: where can I see and explain these mechanisms best? In which cases are the mechanisms most evident? In which cases are similar mechanisms found with differing outcomes? Etc.

The contextualized comparison this approach offers allows for inferential analysis without sacrificing in-depth knowledge of the cases under study (Simmons 2016). This approach focuses on identifiable material conditions as the basis for comparison, as well as how specific processes and mechanisms influence such conditions. Cases are chosen that exhibit similar

¹⁰ John Stuart Mill himself had doubts about the applicability of his Most Similar and Most Different case comparisons approach to comparison in human affairs (Tilly 2005).

mechanisms, processes, and dynamics allowing for the flexibility to identify complex causal processes. Placing the cases in parallel with one another allows for the investigation of how differing agrarian dynamics impact the construction of political identities, how the dismantling of the barriers to commodification (Kloppenburg 1990) transforms territorial dynamics, and what mechanisms are found at the intersection of territorialization, agrarian extractivism, and Indigenous politics.

Mechanisms Under Consideration

While this study is an exploratory and inductive process, I recognize that a “pure exploration that starts from scratch is impossible” (Reiter 2013, p. 7). I came to the investigation with certain theories and potential causal explanations already mapped out in my mind. Therefore, postulated mechanisms featured in the study include claims-making, political identity formation, territorialization, and the larger top-level process of autonomy. However, I leave open the possibility of uncovering alternative mechanisms or altered forms of these mechanisms based on the analysis of the data collected.

Claims-making involves individuals or groups articulating demands, grievances, or rights to influence decision-makers and mobilize support. This mechanism connects structural conditions (such as inequality or exclusion) with collective action by providing a platform for expressing shared concerns and framing issues in ways that resonate with broader audiences. Through claims-making, actors not only seek to gain visibility and legitimacy but also aim to shift power dynamics, create alliances, and provoke institutional responses. Its effects are context-dependent, as the success of claims often relies on the political opportunity structure, framing strategies, and the interaction with other mechanisms. As a mechanism, claims-making can be measured as the frequency and intensity of the claims, the responses by the intended

targets of the claims (for example, policy changes), the formation of organizations to push the claims, responses from other organizations (international support, for example).

The formation of a political identity functions as a social causal mechanism through which Indigenous communities revive and assert their collective identity in response to historical marginalization and external political pressures. This process involves a re-interpretation of Indigenous traditions, languages, and values in a modern political context, where these cultural elements become central to the communities' demands for autonomy, recognition, and land rights. This mechanism is observable through shifts in political participation, the formation of Indigenous-led organizations, public demonstrations, and the articulation of demands for cultural preservation, territorial control, and self-governance. Measuring this mechanism involves tracking changes in the political actions of the Zenú and CRIC, the framing of Indigenous identity in political discourse, and the tangible impacts of these efforts, such as policy changes or the recognition of Indigenous rights.

Territorialization, as a social causal mechanism, refers to the process by which groups or communities assert control over land and resources, transforming these areas into spaces of cultural, political, or economic significance. This process involves the physical and symbolic marking of territories, where Indigenous groups assert their rights to land, engage in practices of resource management, and protect their cultural heritage from external threats, such as extractive industries or state encroachment. Territorialization also connects local cultural practices, such as agricultural traditions and spiritual connections to the land, to broader political struggles for recognition and sovereignty. This mechanism can be measured by observing the legal and political recognition of territorial claims, the establishment of boundaries (both symbolic and

physical), the mobilization of community resources to defend land, and the creation of policies or practices that enforce Indigenous control over their territories.

Together, these mechanisms drive the larger process of Indigenous territorial autonomy, where communities reclaim governance over their land and resources, create structures of self-rule, and protect their cultural heritage from external threats. This process is both a political and cultural assertion of sovereignty, aiming to restore Indigenous rights, reshape relationships with the state, and promote long-term sustainability and justice for Indigenous peoples. Measuring this process involves exploring the practices of building autonomy, the larger projects associated with attaining autonomy, as well as the ideas or visions guiding the actions of constructing autonomy. For example, creating a local community seed bank could be considered a practice or an activity contributing to autonomy, declaring the resguardo as a GMO-Free Territory is a longer-term project which furthers movement towards autonomy, and food sovereignty offers a vision to guide that movement towards autonomy.

Case Selection

Latin America is a key region for theorizing territory due to the absence of strong regional integration, the persistence of fragmented and incomplete state formation, and the prominence of territorial claims by social movements. Unlike Europe, where integration efforts have restructured authority across levels of government, Latin America's weaker state capacity has led to intense territorial heterogeneity. Social movements across the region have increasingly framed their struggles in terms of territory and territoriality. Colombia, in particular, embodies the complexity of these debates, where territorial struggles are shaped by overlapping conflicts involving armed actors, the state, illicit economies, extractive industries, and Indigenous and

Afro-descendant communities. Its fractured geography and history of contested governance have prevented any single force from asserting hegemony over the entire territory.

In this context, the spread of genetically modified (GM) crops adds another layer to Colombia's territorial disputes. State efforts to regulate seeds through patents and restrictions on traditional practices have triggered powerful agrarian mobilizations, especially following the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement and efforts at compliance with international intellectual property rights standards. These tensions have opened new political terrain for claims-making. The Zenú people's declaration of their resguardo as a GMO-Free Territory reflects a strategy of territorial assertion and self-determination, while the CRIC's more gradual engagement with seed politics illustrates a different trajectory of autonomy construction. By analyzing these two cases, this study explores how GMOs have become entangled with broader struggles over land, identity, and territorial governance in Colombia.

Sub-state Analysis

This research design creates another advantage from the methodological perspective. While the subdiscipline of Comparative Politics is generally viewed as the investigation of political phenomena across countries, this research design zooms in to investigate and compare political phenomena inside a country, at the sub-state level. This focus on more geographically limited places offers the opportunity for a more thorough process analysis (Simmons 2016). For example, when some researchers, such as Motta (2016), comparing GMO implementation and resistance between Argentina or Brazil, or Dargent and Urteaga (2019) finding the importance of timing and sequence in GMO regulation and resistance across Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru look at country case studies to explain resistance to GMOs or the non-existence of resistance, they cannot address the nuances of why some sub-state territorial units accept or resist

GMO implementation. Therefore, the nuanced processes and dynamics of variation at the sub-state level are often left underexplored.

The focus on the sub-state has spurred new substantive areas in Comparative Politics such as subnational authoritarianism as important in maintaining national level processes of democratization (Gibson 2012), or the different ways that the uneven reach of the state affects citizenship, security, development, public goods, etc. (O'Donnell 2001). Moreover, a sub-state perspective is found to drive theoretical progress through both refining existing theories and building new ones. A sub-state perspective helps to mitigate theory stretching as not all theories are relevant to all types or levels of territorial units. Additionally, a bottom-up approach to theory building helps to identify how national and international phenomena are shaped by sub-state dynamics, helping to alleviate incomplete explanations or fundamental misunderstandings at the national or international levels (Giraudy et al. 2019). The episode by episode, facet by facet, reform by reform, city by city, etc., analysis made possible from within country comparative approaches facilitate a deeper focus on processes and mechanisms which may contest, refine, or further elucidate national or international level explanations (Simmons 2016).

Collaborative Research

This research was conducted as part of a larger collaborative research project focused on strengthening local community and social movement construction of GMO-Free territories. This was through community-based processes of identifying the possible challenges or obstacles found in the construction of GMO-Free territories and their potential solutions. I have worked in tandem with community stakeholders to identify community needs and research priorities. This has been done collaboratively with Colombian social movement organizations *Grupo Semillas*, the *Campaña Semillas de Identidad*, and the *Red de Semillas Libres de Colombia*, as well as

local communities, municipalities, and Indigenous authorities. This way, to subject the decision on the research topic to a horizontal dialogue with the protagonists generates a flow of insight that would be impossible to achieve by other means (Hale and Stephen 2013).

Alongside the collaborating organizations, we designed interview protocols as well as a community-based workshop series. This involved an iterative process where the national level organizations and I designed the interview protocol then asked for input from local community organizations. This was done until various test interviews demonstrated that the questions were understood as intended and were collecting the information identified as necessary for the project. The interviews also contributed to the design of the workshop series. This series created spaces for discussion, debate, and planning. We began with an exploration of the historical development of agricultural strategies, using this to construct a historical timeline and to recuperate memories of former strategies. I then led workshop participants in an exercise to envision the territory as GMO-Free under the main question: What do we want to see in place in five years? The following workshops focused on identifying obstacles to achieving the vision articulated by the community and developing a strategic plan of action that would begin to address these barriers.

The methodological approach recognizes that, in the case of this research project, Indigenous peoples and peasant communities are simultaneously knowledge producers and political actors (Perry and Rappaport 2013). Therefore, creating conditions for the protagonists to assert their own knowledge, analysis, and political judgements gives fruits that are evident in descriptive understanding, strategic analysis, and theoretical innovation. First, these fruits include practical advantages such as access and motivation of the research participants. Playing a major role in determining the topics, access to research subjects is generally not an issue, and

motivation to participate tends to be high. Second, in the realm of theoretical innovation, the proximity between political struggle and data gathering allows for new theoretical insights to emerge that could not be found otherwise. Third, when the research project is inserted into struggles for collective empowerment, and especially when that collective in question embodies cultural differences, there is potential to produce knowledge that doesn't fit into the standard, Western categories, producing new forms of political knowledge on the topic (Hale and Stephen 2013, Perry and Rappaport 2013).

Data

To triangulate findings, I employed several methods for data collection: Online participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and archival documentation. Triangulation is important in social science research as it enhances the credibility, validity, and depth of the conclusions drawn. By using multiple methods, sources, or perspectives to study a phenomenon, researchers can cross-check and compare results, reducing the likelihood of bias or errors that might arise from relying on a single approach. Triangulation allows for a more comprehensive understanding of complex social processes, as different methods can provide complementary insights or highlight different aspects of the same issue.

In participant observation the researcher is not merely a passive observer, rather the researcher may assume a variety of roles in the field. According to Yin (2018), a distinctive opportunity of participant observation is the ability to gain access to events or groups that are otherwise inaccessible. This means, there might not be another way of collecting specific types of data other than through participant observation. Participation and observation conducted with reflexivity, combined with other methods for triangulation, produce data that are confident enough for extrapolation (Balsiger & Lambele 2014).

The challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic prompted social movement organizations to shift their meetings, seminars, trainings, and other events to online platforms. This allowed for unique opportunities for a researcher to observe and participate. This dissertation research project, therefore, began with utilizing online participant observation to attend online movement network events addressing socio-environmental, agrarian, and territorial conflicts in Colombia and Latin America more broadly. This process helped identify specific movement networks, local communities, and research topics, helping to select the case studies investigated in Colombia.

Through interviewing and community-based workshop methods, scholars can gain access to the motivations and perspectives of a broader and more diverse group of movement participants and community members than would be represented in documentary evidence. In semi-structured interviews and workshops, it is not only information that is sought but also themes, categories, and concepts that are generated from the responses of diverse participants. Participants can generate, challenge, clarify, elaborate or recontextualize understandings based on earlier data collection. In fact:

Through semi-structured interviewing, researchers can gain insight into the individual and collective visions, imaginings, hopes, expectations, critique of the present, and projection of the future on which the possibility of collective action rests and through which social movements form, endure or disband (Blee & Taylor 2002).

In this project, I conducted semi-structured interviews with over 40 individuals involved in anti-GMO activism or involved in Indigenous, peasant, and environmental organizations more broadly. I spent time in 2022 and 2023 in the resguardo Zenu de San Andrés de Sotavento, in Popayán, Cauca (headquarters of the CRIC), as well as surrounding communities. Interviewees

were identified through a snowball sampling, whereby one interviewee would assist in facilitating connection to others. These interviews connected historical processes of dispossession of lands and territories with differing efforts at organizing community resistance, as well as changes in relations with the state.

In addition, I spent time in each territory speaking with local residents about and observing everyday experiences and practices with food production, land rights, and seed conservation. I was also able to participate in meetings and activities of the Red de Semillas Libres (Free Seeds Network), as well as witness the review process of specific farmers' practices of acquiring, using, collecting, and conserving seeds in order to fulfill autonomous requirements for guaranteeing the safety, quality, and non-genetic modification of seeds being distributed through the seed networks.

The semi-structured interviews and ethnographic fieldwork informed the design of the community-based workshops. In conversation with research collaborators, these workshops were designed to recover historical memories of past strategies of sustainable agriculture and to identify the junctures which brought about significant changes to those strategies. Thirteen in-person workshops were held in Colombia during fieldwork, with over 80 participants in total.

To validate, question, and/or expand upon the findings from online participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and community workshops, I gathered additional documentation. This included laws, bills, and decrees from the national government, development plans from the municipal, departmental, and national levels, as well as Life Plans from Indigenous resguardos. I collected activist literature ranging from articles in publications with a national reach to local pamphlets designed for and used in door-to-door campaigns. Scholarly works were also collected from local libraries, universities, and research institutes.

This investigation, therefore, combines secondary sources with primary fieldwork. Weaving these differing sources together has helped in developing a methodologically grounded, theoretically engaged, and descriptive account of the emergence of GMO-Free Territories as strategies to construct territorial autonomy.

Chapter 3: Indigenous Peoples and the Nation-State: Context and History of the Development of Indigenous Politics in Colombia

This chapter examines the historical trajectory of Indigenous-state relations in Colombia, highlighting the complex interplay between colonial legacies, territorial and racial segregation, and the struggle for Indigenous rights. The chapter focuses on three key themes: First, the evolution of a fragmented society marked by deep-seated discrimination and regionalism; Second, the central role of the Indigenous *resguardo* in asserting legal, cultural, and political identities; And third, the shifting state policies that have alternated between integration and separation of Indigenous peoples from the Colombian society. These themes are explored through examining the critical moments in Colombia's history, providing a comprehensive understanding of the ongoing challenges and transformations in Indigenous politics. By examining the interplay between Indigenous sovereignty and state formation, the chapter provides insights into the current struggles for land rights, cultural preservation, and political recognition within the Colombian context. To organize the historical development of state-Indigenous relations, this chapter combines frameworks from Velasco (2016) which puts the territorial development of Colombia into four eras (1: Conquest and the Differentiation of Cultural Space, 2: Nation-building and the Barbarian Hinterland, 3: Self-Defense, Territorialized Resistance, and National Security, and 4: Failure of the Territorial State and Neoliberal Governance). This will be combined with the work of Leon Zamosc (1986) and Dario Fajardo (2014, 2019) who divide this history into more concrete periods such as when the more radical liberal faction took power for 3 decades in the middle of the 19th century, for example. Utilizing these eras and periods allows me to place the specific events that occurred, and shaped Indigenous-state relations, into their proper contexts in order to understand better their historical legacies. The timeline at the end of the chapter will exemplify this.

Introduction

Colombia is home to a diverse population which is highly segregated economically and geographically. The total population is over 48 million, according to the 2018 Census, and the Indigenous population numbers some 1,905,617 individuals belonging to 115 different ethnic groups. Approximately 58.3% of this Indigenous population lives in collectively owned *resguardos* (reserves)¹¹. Therefore, representing about 4.4% of the national population Indigenous communities overlap about 228 municipalities (20% of local governments), and live in 28 of Colombia's 33 departments in about 720 *resguardos* (Fajardo 2022).

While it is estimated that, currently, one third of the Colombian national territory is titled to Indigenous *resguardos*, it is important to consider that 79% of that land is located in the Amazonia or in the Orinoquia regions (southeastern regions of Colombia). Both are areas with low populations as well as low agricultural production and potential. Additionally, only 5% of Colombia's Indigenous population lives in these areas. Meanwhile, the other 95% of Indigenous peoples live on less than three hectares per person. In total, Indigenous peoples make up over 14% of the rural population, however, they only possess under 7% of agricultural lands (Fajardo 2022). This has been reinforced by the armed conflict. For example, from the early 1980s to 2000, armed groups are believed to have obtained around 50% of the most fertile land in the country (Elhawary 2007). This scenario leads to and is also the consequence of deep-seated discrimination, violence and marginalization of Indigenous peoples in Colombia, rooted in

¹¹ The Colombian figure of the *resguardo* is similar to that of the Native American Reservations in the USA. However, the translation into Spanish of reservation – *reservas indigenas* – implies a more limited autonomy, control, and self-government, as well as a more dependent relationship with the state, than does the term *resguardo*. The *resguardo* is a measure of self-government and autonomy with a particular and separate relationship with the state. Therefore, I have chosen to keep the Spanish term for its more accurate meaning (Ng'weno 2000).

colonial institutions, and reinforced through various laws and policies throughout colonial and republican history.

Recent developments to protect Indigenous peoples' rights in Colombia have included the 1991 Political Constitution which recognizes fundamental rights of Indigenous peoples and ratifies ILO Convention 169¹². In 2009 Colombia supported the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples after initially abstaining from voting in the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2007. Additionally, a 2009 Constitutional Court ruling ordered the Colombian state to protect 34 Indigenous peoples at risk of physical disappearance (Valencia Otova & Obispo González 2020). However, the country's Indigenous peoples remain disproportionately vulnerable to violence, rights abuses, displacement, diseases, and more (Anaya 2010). To understand this situation, it is imperative to take the long view of the development of Indigenous politics and relations with the Colombian state.

This chapter contains three distinct but interrelated themes. First, the historical development of a fragmented society, socially, politically, economically, etc. This contributes to the territorial and racial segregation and hierarchy which began with conquest and colonization and has morphed but remained in place throughout Colombia's history. Similarly, the inheritance of colonial institutions which created dependence on local bosses or *caudillos*¹³ has bolstered such regionalism. Second, the Indigenous *resguardo* has become fundamental to establishing Indigenous identity and the associated legal, cultural, and political rights. As such, the *resguardo* has been a central contentious element of Indigenous-state relations throughout Colombia's

¹² The Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 is an International Labour Organization Convention, also known as ILO Convention 169, or C169.

¹³ A *caudillo* is a political boss or overlord, the leader or chief of a politically distinctive territory. *Caudillismo* surfaced as a consequence of the wars of independence in Latin America after 1810. The power vacuum left by the fall of the Spanish empire in the Americas was filled in by the rise of *caudillos*—usually regional military officers—who became the guarantors of basic social peace and political stability in the regions they controlled militarily (McLean, I., & McMillan, A. 2009).

history. The *resguardo* has also recently been accepted as a special territorial entity, although this has not yet been adequately legislated. Third, the country has experienced dramatic alterations regarding the national goals of either the integration or the separation of Indigenous peoples. State policies regarding ethnic politics varied from perceiving the *resguardo* as a means of control to the dissolution of the *resguardo* to force Indigenous peoples to assimilate as individual citizens into Colombian society. The rest of this chapter will discuss the critical moments in the Indigenous-state relations in Colombia that have shaped, reinforced, or challenged these three themes, beginning with the processes of conquest and colonization.

Institutions of Conquest and Colonization: Establishing the Groundwork for Extraction, Exclusion, and Resistance

The Spanish Kingdom of Castile lacked the funds to fully explore and conquer all South America. Because of this, the Crown supported independent actors and corporations to colonize certain regions. Additionally, the decimation of Indigenous peoples and the destruction of their institutions compelled new forms of social and political organization to serve both the colonizers and the Crown in the newly conquered lands. Such institutions began with the *rescate*¹⁴, an institution promoting trade with Indigenous groups and demanding tribute payments from the colonizers to the Crown. Later, the *repartimiento*¹⁵ established the protection of trade routes and

¹⁴ During the “*rescate*” period (established and used heavily between 1500-1540), Spaniards engaged in trade with Indigenous people, exchanging mirrors, axes, knives, and other low-value items in return for gold (Pinzón 2013). When Indigenous communities refused to participate in the exchange, the Spanish resorted to violence to coerce compliance. Cities such as Panamá (1519), Santa Marta (1526), and Cartagena (1533) were established as strategic points of exchange, supporting the expansion of the *rescate* system in colonial New Granada. These settlements played a key role in facilitating the Spanish extraction of gold and other resources from Indigenous peoples (Faguet et al. 2017).

¹⁵ During the *repartimiento* system, Spanish colonists asserted property rights over Indigenous communities and their inhabitants, leading to the displacement of many Indigenous people who fled their territories and adopted nomadic lifestyles. Both the *rescate* (the forced exchange of goods for gold) and *repartimiento* systems began to decline as gold became scarcer, the Spanish settler population grew, and the Indigenous population was decimated by disease and violence. This situation heightened the demand for the expansion of colonial territories, as new resources were sought to sustain the empire (Colmenares 1999, Faguet et al. 2017).

relations, granting monopoly rights to specific Spanish colonizers. However, only allowed to trade with specific colonizers, Indigenous peoples were forced into relations of dependency (Matajira Gaitán 2016). This created the foundations for enduring systems of local and regional power holders which have evolved but persisted over time.

In the mid-16th century, the Spanish Crown introduced the *encomienda*¹⁶, granting soldiers, officials, or others (the *encomendero*) control over Indigenous populations for tribute and conversion to Christianity. Unlike a land grant, the *encomienda* involved control over the people within an area (Guillen Martínez 2022). Building on the earlier institutions of *rescate* and *repartimiento*, the *encomienda* served as the first bureaucratic means of managing Indigenous and slave labor (Machado Aráoz 2014).

As *encomenderos* tied their authority to the construction of *encomienda* towns, the foundation for the colonial state was formed. These towns weren't commercial centers but power bases from which the Spanish could extract goods and labor, further disrupting Indigenous social and political systems (introducing new production and economic structures, forcing the conversion to Christianity, and importing European goods, etc.) (McFarlane 1993, van der Hammen 2003, Monge Sánchez et al. 2014). Additionally, the *hacienda*¹⁷ was developed and centered on control of the land and especially the resources found therein. Later, as the Spanish

¹⁶ *Encomiendas* were allocated following the completion of conquest expeditions, once the spoils of war were divided. After subduing the local Indigenous population, the conquistador would distribute both the captured treasures and Indigenous people among his men and the financial backers, based on military rank and contributions (Groot 2008). Smaller chiefdoms were typically assigned to senior officers in full, while larger and more complex territories, such as Bogotá, were divided into multiple *encomiendas*, disrupting their existing social structures (Colmenares 2015; Gamboa 2013; Yeager 1995).

¹⁷ The *encomienda* system relied on the traditional Indigenous economies of the regions where it was implemented, meaning it depended on the survival of Indigenous social structures with minimal disruption. In contrast, the *hacienda* system involved a labor force that had been largely removed from its traditional societal context and permanently settled on estate-owned land. When this process was fully realized, the *hacienda* became independent from the local Indigenous economy, operating with a distinct labor structure that was disconnected from traditional systems (Keith 1971).

crown sought to end the encomienda system, land consolidation into haciendas became a primary objective for colonizers. (Lockhart 1969, Lockhart and Schwartz 1983).

The challenging terrain of the region, with the three Andes Mountain ranges dividing the Caribbean, Pacific, and Amazon regions, provided opportunities for escape from the encomienda and hacienda for native groups, afro-descendants, and other subalterns (Faguet et al. 2017). This process created an urban-rural dichotomy in Colombian imaginaries, depicting urban centers as civilized and the hinterlands inhabited by Indigenous and mixed-race peoples as barbarian (Serje 2005, Velasco 2016). This spatial segregation established a racialized political order reinforcing a race-based hierarchy. Continued colonization further divided the territory, creating distinct and competing regions associated with the conquering groups and tied to those who received the encomienda or hacienda grants.

Post-independence Colombia remained politically, socially, and administratively fragmented, with Spanish colonizers/settlers marking their territories (inherited from encomienda and hacienda grants) for control over resources, resulting in mostly autonomous local units (McFarlane 1993). In this, identities were formed, recognized, and established from the top-down as connected to the specific lands and territories occupied. The Spanish, however, faced resistance throughout conquest and colonization, sometimes into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The chronicles of conquest activities explain how both determined Indigenous peoples and rugged nature forced the Spanish to accept lands and territories as outside of their control (Serje 2005, Velasco 2016).

Later, the efforts by the Crown to place Indigenous communities under control of the royal bureaucracy as well as to limit the power of the conquistadors¹⁸ (the latter effort being mostly ineffective) eventually developed into the formation of the Indigenous *resguardos* (Hobsbawm 1974). The word ‘*resguardo*’ (often translated to English as reservation or as shelter) came from royal charters ordering that a “league of land measured in circles to be assigned to the Indian peoples for their *resguardo* and protection” (*Recopilación De Las Leyes De Los Reinos De Las Indias (Spanish Colonial Laws)* 2013). The assigning of *resguardo* lands to Indigenous peoples served two functions, both important to the continuation of the Spanish colonial economic system. First, the preservation of the Indigenous populations. Second, the stability of tribute coming from the protected Indigenous peoples (González 1970, Luna 1993). With this, however, Indigenous peoples maintained relative autonomy on *resguardo* lands during the colonial and republican eras, sustaining institutions and practices of self-governance, as well as cultural ties and productive relations. Today, the *resguardos* unify Indigenous communities and peoples and are a focal point of demand for the Colombian Indigenous movement, shaping contemporary Indigenous identity (Rappaport 1990).

A series of Spanish government reorganization policies during the 18th century, known as the Bourbon Reforms, aimed to reshape and strengthen the power of the Spanish state (empire) over powerful local economic actors in the American colonies (Burkholder and Johnson 2001). During these reforms, reports found the total number of Indigenous peoples was dropping and *mestizaje*¹⁹ was occurring more than the Crown or the creole elites approved. The official policy

¹⁸ The conquistadores, motivated by personal gain, often ignored or resisted royal edicts, particularly those aimed at limiting their economic exploitation of Indigenous labor, such as the New Laws of 1542 (Burkholder & Johnson 2001, Lockhart & Schwartz 1983).

¹⁹ The term *mestizaje* refers to racial or cultural mixing and is a principal theme in the valuation of national and cultural identity in Latin America and the Caribbean. (Carrasco, D. 2001).

of keeping the Spanish colonial populations out of the Indigenous *resguardos* was dropped and the intentional focus on the integration process became the new policy. Therefore, by the 1780 reforms, the privatization of *resguardo* lands was permitted and facilitating the assimilation of Indigenous peoples became a heavier concern (Safford 1991).

Furthermore, the *encomienda* system was mainly abolished during the Bourbon reforms. However, similar agrarian relations evolved into the *latifundio* system, featuring large estates dominating profitable lands and using Indigenous and peasant labor. Understood as *latifundio-minifundio*, this structure was characterized by the smaller number of large estates generally over 500 hectares (*latifundio*) dominating most of the profitable lands and depending on the rural labor force, and the smaller subsistence style peasant family farming on five hectares or less (*minifundio*). This agrarian structure spread into other established regions but did not spread, or only spread modestly, into frontier zones, creating diverse agrarian structures across the Colombian territory. In fact, Zamosc (1986) identifies four main patterns of agrarian organization across the country. 1) peasant economy based on the *minifundio*, 2) colonization areas or frontiers, 3) areas of traditional *latifundia*, and 4) agrarian capitalism identified with large estates and mechanized monocrop plantations for export-oriented production. Many Indigenous people and peasants became *terrejeros*, working in the *terraje* system, which was reminiscent of a feudal, servile relationship, in which an Indigenous person had to pay with free work within the *hacienda* for the right to live and use a small plot, located on the same lands that were taken from the Indigenous reservations by the landowners (McFarlane 1993, Serje 2005, Faguet, et al. 2020).

Towards the end of the colonial era, the *resguardo* continued to stand as the basis for Indigenous identities and rights. For example, the 1781 revolt of the *comuneros*²⁰ made demands which included that the Indigenous communities be given full property rights to their *resguardos* (Phelan 1978, Safford 1991).

Independence: Assimilation or Separation of Indigenous Peoples

Once declared independent from Spanish colonial rule in 1810, José Miguel Pey, the first governor of Colombia, decreed that all Indigenous people were recognized as citizens of the independent republic. With this he abolished the colonial institution of the *resguardo*, and the colonial system of tribute based on racial categories. A rising ideology of nation-building required the establishment of a single Colombian identity, and as *resguardos* continued to define distinct Indigenous identities, post-independence governments sought to dispose of such colonial protections. Although Bolívar decreed in 1820 in favor of upholding Indigenous *resguardos* (*decreto de octubre de 1821*), in the same year Congress passed a law subjecting Indigenous peoples to common law, converting communal lands into private holdings, leading to the breakup of many *resguardos* (*ley de octubre 11 de 1821*). Some Indigenous peoples, however, refused to sell their lands and maintained their *resguardos*, especially in Cauca, Caldas, and Tolima. In the Eastern Andean region as well as Nariño in the southwest, Indigenous peoples did privatize their lands but did not sell them and mostly developed into peasant minifundios (Zamosc 1986, Fajardo 2019).

²⁰ The Comuneros Revolt of 1781 in the Viceroyalty of New Granada (modern Colombia and parts of Venezuela) was a significant uprising fueled by colonial economic and governance grievances (during the Bourbon Reforms). The Spanish Crown's imposition of new taxes on tobacco as well as polling to finance defense against the British, along with rising prices for staples under the Bourbon reforms, exacerbated local frustrations (Phelan 1978, Aguilera Peña 1998).

Similar contested efforts regarding how the newly formed (forming) republic would manage a multicultural or plurinational population continued. For example, in 1824 President Santander decreed that all departments should inform the national government what Indigenous communities existed (both civilized and “savage”) as well as proposals for how to best convince them to abandon their “errant” life (*Decreto de 18 de septiembre de 1824, sobre naciones indígenas*). This was followed in 1826 with a plan of “civilizing” the Indigenous peoples and delivering resguardos to the provinces or other regional state entities (*Decreto de 11 de julio de 1826, sobre civilización de indígenas*). However, in 1828, Bolívar, now in power again, argued that the laws treating the Indigenous people as equal citizens were wrong as the Indigenous did not have the capacity to participate in civilized life and reestablished the Indigenous missions but remained willing to redistribute resguardo lands per family (*Decreto de 11 de julio de 1828*). Ultimately, these debates revolve around the establishment and definition of racial categories and the frontiers of White/European, Creole, mestizo, Indigenous, and afro-descendant space (Dussel 2007). Furthermore, the resguardo is demonstrated as part of a legacy of struggle between Indigenous peoples and the state, as well as differing sectors of state actors. The continued existence of resguardos are now symbols of hard-won victories against the state, both colonial and republican (Urban and Sherzer 1991).

During the mid-19th century, Colombia underwent sweeping liberalizing reforms, aligning with the global wave sparked by the 1848 European revolutions. Historian Eric Hobsbawm (1975) noted that in these years “No one liberalized more radically than the Republic of Nueva Granada (Colombia) between 1848 and 1854”. These reforms were spearheaded by the newly established Liberal Party, whose radical faction assumed the presidency in 1849. Central to these reforms was a process of decentralization and the establishment of a federal republic.

The decentralization in Nueva Granada was extreme compared to other Latin American nations of the time. Provinces enjoyed almost complete autonomy, to the point where some historians argue that the national government functioned more as a symbolic entity rather than an effective governing body. The decentralization exacerbated existing social divisions, as power was often concentrated in the hands of regional elites, undermining broader goals of equity and inclusivity (Palacios 2002). Additionally, the reforms terminated communal land ownership for Indigenous communities leaving many Indigenous communities at risk of widespread land loss. This resulted in a significant redistribution of land favoring already wealthy landowners (Luna 1993, McFarlane 1993).

During this period of radical decentralization, the constitution of the United States of Colombia of 1863 established the sovereign state of Cauca²¹, the country's largest and most prosperous region. Cauca led the way in shaping new laws and policies that would later be adopted by the federal government. For instance, law 90 of the sovereign state of Cauca of 1859, aimed at safeguarding Indigenous populations, delineated rules governing cabildos, specified the conservation of resguardos, and outlined the roles of protectors of Indigenous peoples (mostly municipalities which shared borders with resguardos, as well as local church authorities). This regional law significantly influenced the national Law 89 of 1890, which became a key reference for Indigenous claims and activism in the following century (Mayorga García 2016). The regions influence is also felt in animating Indigenous activism in the country. Throughout the rest of the 19th century and into the 20th century Indigenous communities in Cauca attempted to uplift

²¹ The region once governed by the former state of Cauca now comprises much of modern-day western and southern Colombia (including present day departments of Chocó, Tolima, Huila, Valle de Cauca, Nariño, Putumayo, Amazonas, and Caqueta) with portions of its vast territories integrated into what are now Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela.

themselves through the contentious repossession of lands that had been usurped under Spanish colonialism and the Colombian republic (Sanders 2004, Vega Cantor 2002).

Moreover, the rugged geography, difficult communications, regionalized economies, and political fragmentation made the central government mostly ineffective in uniformly enforcing laws across the entire Colombian territory. Vacuums of state power were filled by local bosses or other powerful groups which interpreted and adjusted federal and state laws to facilitate local strategies. This remains an important obstacle to Colombian state-building. Therefore, as stated by LeGrand, “The heart of politics lay in familial and local loyalties and rivalries; the way to get what one wanted was to cultivate personal connections with local and regional bosses” (LeGrand 1986). Those local and regional political bosses demanding local loyalty were the inheritors of the power established in the repartimientos, the encomiendas, the haciendas, etc. Therefore, the process of conquest and colonization, the establishment of encomienda towns, the Crown’s use of independent actors and corporations to realize control of much of the region, as well as the fractured geography, all contributed to asymmetric power dynamics throughout the territory claimed by Colombia which are being dealt with still today.

Such territorial division in Colombia continued the spatial separation of civilized and savage and worked towards building the racial hierarchy found in place today. Historian of Colombian racial and regional dynamics, Nancy Applebaum states:

As nineteenth-century Colombians explored, described, and colonized their interior, they mapped racial hierarchy onto an emerging national geography composed of distinct localities and regions. They elaborated a racialized discourse of regional differentiation that assigned greater morality and progress to certain regions – and to certain localities within regions – that they marked as “white”. Meanwhile those places defined as

“black” or “Indian” were associated with disorder, backwardness, and danger
(Appelbaum 2003, p. 3-4).

Those areas of backwardness or disorder are now understood as having low, weak, or no state presence and are considered as “zones of state absence” (González, et al. 2002), and sometimes as “zones of resistance” (Medina 1989, González Arias 1992).

Law 89 and the Territorial Incorporation of Indigenous Peoples

Beginning in the 1880s, a coalition of conservative politicians took power and began a period of more centralized political and fiscal policies. With this, an ideology valorizing past colonial relations took hold of the government. For the country’s Indigenous peoples this meant increased supervision by the central state as well as separation from Colombian society (Rappaport 1990). Most importantly, in 1890, Law 89 established the legality of collective land ownership for Indigenous groups in Colombia, recognizing both the colonial and Republican era *resguardos*. It also granted them the ability to create their own internal governing bodies, known as *Cabildos* or Indigenous Councils. These entities managed communal lands and maintained order, functioning as unique public bodies that connected Indigenous communities with the national administrative structure. The Indigenous *cabildo*’s decisions, however, lacked authority with state entities, leading to a dual governance structure coexisting with municipal and departmental governments. Still, the Indigenous *cabildo* remains vital for self-governance in Indigenous territories today (Ng’weno 2000).

However, Law 89 was also a plan for the dissolution of *resguardo* lands to be completed within 50 years. In fact, the goal of the law was ultimately a paternalistic one, to reduce the “savages” to civilized life, as well as to offer guidelines for how to deal with Indigenous peoples already reduced to civilized life. Both groups were considered different from Colombian

mainstream society and were exempted from certain Colombian laws (Appelbaum 2003). The effects of such paternalism are still felt today. For example, some Indigenous territories under Law 89 were defined as Mission territories and the people were put under the tutelage of the Catholic Church. This was bolstered by a Concordant with the Holy See of 1887 which had the purpose of reversing the separation of Church and State during the previous liberal governments, as well as by Law 72 of 1892 which empowered Church missions to decide how to govern Indigenous territories in their areas of influence (Jackson 2019). Such provisions were only overridden by the 1991 Constitution, yet the Indigenous peoples have continued to struggle to wrest control from the Catholic Church in these former mission territories (Rappaport 2005).

Accordingly, in its complicated relation to Indigenous rights, law 89 did officially adopt the cabildo as the organizational structure of Indigenous peoples. And it offered important groundwork for claims to collective lands of Indigenous peoples in the figure of the resguardo. However, it was a compromise between, on the one hand, self-government and Indigenous administrative autonomy, and on the other, the unified political and legal system of the Colombian state. In the 1970s, the law became an effective tool for Indigenous communities to recover their resguardo lands (Trojan 2008b).

Law 55 of 1905: Legacies of Dispossession and Resistance

At the start of the 20th century, large landowners sought to accelerate the dissolution of resguardos, leading to the 1905 law that confirmed the liquidation of Indigenous Resguardo lands (SwissAid 2023; Madera Paternina 2013). This legislation notably influenced oil contracting in the Atlantic Coast and spurred a process of 'peasantization' across Colombia. This process amalgamated rural identities, reducing diverse cultural and social distinctions to the 'peasant' category (Caruso 2013, Celis González 2018). Mexican Anthropologist, Guillermo

Bonfil Batalla, discusses such phenomena as ‘deindianization’, or the process by which Indigenous communities are stripped of their Indigenous identities (Bonfil Batalla 1996). Therefore, from this point, Indigenous identity became evident in two ways: as a cultural practice and as a political instrument (Velandia Díaz 2022).

In the early 20th Century, beginning around 1914, Nasa laborer, Manuel Quintin Lame, orchestrated Indigenous revolts, focused on reclaiming Indian resguardo lands in Cauca and Tolima, as well as freeing terrajeros from debt, and invoking legal mobilizations to support Indigenous rights claims (Velasco 2016). These efforts formed the foundation for the emergence of a broader Indigenous identity, evident in the demands for resguardo land recovery, their expansion, and the strengthening of the cabildos (Madera Paternina 2013, Castillo-Cárdenas 2024). This movement's significance is showcased in its influence on the country's first Indigenous organization, the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC, founded in 1971), which set the framework for a more unified Indigenous identity (Castrillón Arboleda 1973, Gow and Jaramillo Salgado 2013). However, while Lame confronted local and regional elites and centers of power which excluded and exploited Indigenous peoples, he held a trust that the central state would play a role to support inclusion, a trust which was often betrayed (Gow 2008). The rebellions led by the Quintin Lame movement caused a reaction resulting in Law 14 of 1919. In addition to affirming the division and dissolution of Indigenous resguardos (as stipulated in Law 55 of 1905), this law of 1919 outlined severe punishments for Indigenous communities and persons who opposed the division of resguardo lands (Pineda-Camacho 1995).

In response to the suppression of Indigenous movements, in the 1920s, a cultural and political *indigenista* movement developed in Colombia, mostly led by non-Indigenous intellectuals supporting Indigenous rights and often involving Indigenous activists. For over two

decades, it worked to solidify the association of ethnic identity with the *resguardo* and left a legacy of achieving a special status for Indigenous peoples in the Colombian imaginary. This special status continued and later contributed to bargaining power with the state (Troyan 2008b). In 1941, the *Instituto Indigenista Colombiano* was founded under the umbrella of the first Interamerican Indigenist Congress promoted by Mexican president Lázaro Cardenas. This institute focused on defending the *resguardo* and supported the establishment of new Indigenous policies in Colombia (León-Helguera 1974).

The rise of this indigenista institution reflected a broader shift in Colombia's national context, occurring at the same time as the Liberal party's return to power in 1930. Under the Liberals, there was a renewed commitment to economic development and market expansion. The 1920s saw a period of rapid economic growth stemming from investment from North America and growing global demand for coffee exports. However, this economic growth thrust Colombia onto a path of economic change towards industrialization, strengthened state structures, and an emerging corporativism. Such economic changes led to increased disputes between rural groups and the government, and to what came to be referred to as the agrarian problem (LeGrand 1986). In the 1920s, the Peasant Leagues emerged, organizations influenced by socialist thought and revolutionary agrarianism. Indigenous groups often played important roles in the organization of these peasant leagues (Sánchez 1977).

In response, the government adopted Agrarian Law 200 of 1936. In this law, the Colombian state attempted to establish an arrangement of territorial property in order to recover an ample portion of what were considered vacant lands that had been illegally appropriated and were not being utilized as an economic motor for the nation. This law recognized the primacy of social considerations regarding land disputes (Fajardo 2014), stipulating that if landlords did not

make their lands productive within 10 years they would return to public domain. This ten-year grace period to put the lands to productive use made this first attempt at agrarian reform mostly ineffective (LeGrand 1984). Furthermore, this law notably does not mention Indigenous resguardos or contemplate any legal framework in order to grant rights to Indigenous peoples (Gómez Hernández 2011). Furthermore, in some areas, landowners were even able to interpret and used the agrarian reform law to their advantage in taking over Indigenous communal lands (Sánchez 1977).

Meanwhile, a coalition of right-wing forces and people embedded in the government prevented more advanced steps in agrarian reform and promoted Law 100 of 1944 (during the second term of Liberal President López Pumarejo, whose first term established the agrarian reform in 1936). This Law reversed the little progress made in the implementation of law 200, especially regarding the fulfillment of the social function of property and kept intact the latifundio as the dominant form of agrarian relations in Colombia. In response to this counter-reform, an effort to not lose more land and rights, the Campesino and Indigenous Confederation was born in 1942 and conducted mobilizations around the whole country. Although this is the first national organization to recognize both rural identities, focus remained solely on the problem of access to land as the means of production, therefore, remaining squarely in class-based struggle rather than racial or ethnic struggle (Kalmanovitz and López Enciso 2006, Fajardo 2014).

La *Violencia* and the National Front

A period in Colombia known as *La Violencia* is believed to have commenced following the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on April 9, 1948. Gaitán was a presidential candidate from the Liberal Party and a leading contender for the November 1949 election. His killing

triggered the *Bogotazo* riots, a 10-hour-long outbreak of violence that caused approximately 5,000 casualties (Livingstone 2004). This violence spread throughout the country causing major conflicts in rural areas between Liberals and Conservatives. In this period, numerous Indigenous peoples were trapped in the middle of state violence and armed groups struggling to gain control of their territories, causing massive displacement. Indigeneity, and especially Indigenous *resguardos*, represented an obstacle for armed groups as well as for the consolidation of capitalist and state interests, and violence against Indigenous peoples became structural (Villa and Houghton 2005).

To end *La Violencia*, the Conservative and Liberal parties formed in 1958 the National Front, sharing power and rotating the presidency for the following 16 years. Moreover, to quell rural unrest, in 1961 Congress passed Law 135, the Agrarian Social Reform Law. Influenced by the US Alliance for Progress, this moderate agrarian reform was pursued to prevent a Cuba-inspired revolutionary movement (Zamosc 1986, Fajardo 2014). The main goal as stated in the document of Law 135 is: “to reform the agrarian social structure through procedures aimed at eliminating and preventing the inequitable concentration of rural property or its uneconomic fragmentation.” The law, however, was created more as a social palliative rather than as a commitment to structural transformations of the rural economy (Albertus and Kaplan 2013).

Still, Law 135 removed barriers for agrarian social movements which were empowered to more overtly make claims on lands and territories, as well as force important changes at the local level, especially regarding the *terraje* system. For example, the law facilitated the expropriation of underutilized or unproductive lands from large landowners which could then be redistributed to landless or small-scale farmers, including Indigenous communities. This weakened the power of large landholders by providing *terrajero* peasants with the opportunity to own land, reducing

their dependence on the *terraje* arrangement. Meanwhile, the landowners, backed by Law 1 of 1968, began to evict the terrajeros from the lands in an effort to turn them into landless peasants, reducing any claims they might be able to make on those lands. This, however, left landowners without adequate labor power. Law 6 of 1975 was meant to counteract this loss, regulating tenancy contracts on large estates and protecting those landowners who could prove legal sharecropping (*terraje*) contracts (Zamosc 1986).

However, the law fueled the growth of peasant and Indigenous movements, empowering them to modestly overcome such efforts. Moreover, the law fomented the creation of agrarian cooperatives and communal farming structures, which provided legal channels for Indigenous communities to collectively manage and cultivate lands, strengthening claims to *resguardos* as well as *cabildos*. This empowered them to resist the *terraje* system by providing an alternative means of subsistence and a land or territorial base that did not rely on the hierarchical and exploitative relationships inherent in the *terraje* system (Bergquist, et al. 1992, Bushnell 1993).

Additionally, the land reform made important contributions to the Indigenous movement regarding claims to territorial and land rights of the *resguardos*. At the time of its issue around 70 *resguardos* from both Colonial and Republican eras still existed across the Colombian territory and covered around 500,000 hectares (van der Hammen 2003). Law 135 held that “No allocations of vacant lands that are occupied by Indigenous people may be made, except with the favorable opinion of the Division of Indigenous Affairs” (Ley 135, Colombia). Moreover, the agrarian reform law made possible the creation of new *resguardos* (Pineda Camacho 1995). In fact, between 1961 and 1987 the INCORA created 158 new *resguardos* totaling over 12 million hectares (Findji 1992).

The agrarian elites were eventually able to effectively oppose the law, and the reform ultimately failed. In the mid-1960s, guerrilla movements, distrusting any kind of institutional reform, began or intensified their armed struggles (Jackson 2002). These groups positioned themselves as defenders of the rural poor, promising to redistribute land and fight against the inequalities entrenched by the elite (although with very mixed results as to their actual relationships with rural communities). For example, what became the largest guerrilla army in the country, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, Spanish Acronym), stated in their Revolutionary Agrarian Program in 1964:

To the Oligarchy's Agrarian Policy of Lies, we oppose an effective Revolutionary Agrarian Policy that radically changes the social structure of the Colombian countryside, delivering land completely free of charge to the peasants who work it or want to work it, based on the confiscation of large landowner property for the benefit of all working people (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo 1964).

While the Manifesto of the Army of National Liberation (ELN, Spanish acronym) states:

The land is exploited by peasants who have nowhere to fall dead and who use up their energy and that of their families for the benefit of the oligarchies that live in the cities like kings (Ejército de Liberación Nacional 1965).

The deep-seated need for agrarian reform in Colombia created conditions of extreme inequality, landlessness, and social discontent. The lack of meaningful reform left a large rural population vulnerable and without peaceful means to address their grievances, leading many to support or join armed groups.

While the initial National Front administrations hesitated to redistribute land due to pressure from the large landowners, Carlos Lleras Restrepo (1966-1970), a Liberal president, vigorously pursued the reforms by, among other things, strengthening the Institute for Agrarian Reform (INCORA) and initiating the ANUC (National Peasants Association of Colombia) in 1967 (Zamosc 1986, Fajardo 2019). This state-sponsored social movement organization aimed to involve peasants in rural services and the agrarian reform programs (Zamosc 2013). The ANUC was intended to form a peasant force capable of pushing the land redistribution and overcoming the opposition of large landowners. This effort quickly empowered rural communities to organize in efforts to overcome the power of local landholders and other elites. By early 1970 about three fourths of the peasantry were enrolled as members of ANUC (Bushnell 1993).

Following its inception, the ANUC developed more radical strategies, especially exemplified in increasing and contentious land invasions. However, this radicalization wasn't accepted uniformly and caused internal divisions. In its 1972 Congress, The ANUC split with the ANUC-Armenia Line loyal to government directives, and the ANUC-Sincelejo Line pursuing these more radical strategies and objectives. Additionally, the formation of paramilitary groups during the 1980s and 1990s coincides with the times of greatest land invasions (Zamosc 1986).

The ANUC also included a small but active Indigenous secretariat as part of its management structure. However, during the 1974 ANUC Congress, Indigenous organizations decided to separate from the ANUC due to the differing goals based on ethnicity, culture, and territorial autonomy, rather than focus on class-based land redistribution. (Zamosc 1986, Mamián Guzmán 2019). The Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca, or the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC) split from the ANUC early on and was the first self-proclaimed Indigenous organization in Colombia (Rappaport 2007, Troyan 2008a). The CRIC importantly reinterpreted

and re-signified Law 89 of 1890, mobilizing the law to regain resguardo lands that had been taken from them (CRIC 1978).

The CRIC also helped to establish many other Indigenous organizations around the country, including the initial Zenu organization which formed into the current cabildo (the CRIC and the Zenu being the two cases under study). In the following decade the Indigenous Union of Chocó, the Regional Indigenous Council of Vaupés, the Arhuaco Indigenous Confederation, and the Regional Indigenous Council of Tolima were all organized (Arango and Sánchez 1989). The CRIC also played an important role in developing the Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia, or the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) in 1982. The emergence of Indigenous organizations around the country also coincided with intensifying land struggle. The amplification of Indigenous organizing was felt as a threat to state and private interests, and in 1979 President Cesar Turbay proposed an ‘Indigenous Statute’, which ultimately failed. However, this statute would have dissolved cabildos into community actions boards²² disintegrating these organizations as Indigenous, and it proposed to end collective property ownership of the resguardos (Gros 1991, Morales 1997).

The 1991 Constitution and the Multicultural State

Amid a context of increasing pressure from civil society to rewrite the constitution of Colombia, a number of guerrilla groups entered peace negotiations with the Colombian government in the 1980s. These included the M-19 (19th of April Movement), the EPL (Popular Liberation Army), and the Movimiento Armado Quintín Lame²³. At the same time as these peace

²² Juntas de Acción Comunal (JACs) are aimed to help community members in Colombia meet, plan, and discuss ways to develop their community. These boards can take place in neighborhoods, cities, residential complexes, or any local level. They are not, however, territorial authorities.

²³ The M-19 (April 19th Movement) was a guerrilla army that formed in 1974 and disbanded in 1989, they were largely an urban guerrilla with the goals of achieving a representative democracy. The EPL were a Maoist guerrilla

processes, changing the constitution became part of a wide consensus across the country. Most notably, a student movement named *Todavía podemos salvar Colombia* (we can still save Colombia) was instigated by previous failed attempts at creating a constituent assembly. The students and other youths demonstrated on the streets demanding a constitutional assembly to address the ongoing conflicts in Colombia. The movement proposed a constituent assembly for the 1990 elections and held a special ballot called the *septima papeleta* (Seventh Ballot) during the regular elections, where the initiative was approved by voters²⁴. The Supreme Court validated this unofficial ballot, and a 70-delegate constituent assembly was formed including two Indigenous delegates, and a delegate from the Indigenous guerrilla Movimiento Armado Quintín Lame (Livingstone 2004).

Along with others, Indigenous organizations such as the CRIC and the ONIC, were empowered to enter into dialogue with the state through this constituent assembly (Van Cott 2000). The resulting 1991 Constitution recognizes a number of rights that specifically pertain to Indigenous communities, among them: the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Colombian state; that the communal lands of ethnic groups and resguardo lands cannot be taken away; senatorial posts were created and as many as five representatives to be elected by Indigenous communities in a special national election; Indigenous peoples' authorities may exercise jurisdictional functions within their territory and in accordance with their own laws and procedures, provided they are not contrary to the Constitution and the laws (*República de Colombia* 1991). It even included a radical restructuring of the Colombian territorial map with the inclusion of Indigenous

army that formed in 1967 which focused mostly on organizing in rural areas. The Movimiento Armado Quintín Lame (Quintín Lame Armed Movement) was an Indigenous guerrilla army that emerged in the southwest of the country in 1974 (*The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest* 2009).

²⁴ In that year's elections, there were 6 ballots: 1) senators, 2) representatives to the House, 3) mayors, 4) deputies, 5) governors and 6) councilors, the citizens sought to express with an additional vote, the seventh ballot, which was the demand to form a National Constituent Assembly to re-write the Constitution of Colombia.

Territorial Entities to administer Indigenous territories. Such territorial entities, however, have been slow to be legislated into existence (Rappaport 2007), taking three decades to come to initial existence (Arbelaez Jaramillo 2024). Moreover, issues such as financial transfers have dragged on in implementation. Until Decree 1953 of 2014, these transfers were mediated through local municipalities instead of given directly to resguardo authorities.

Colombia's political leaders recognized the benefits of local ethno-political autonomy and responded to Indigenous movements by incorporating constitutional recognition of cultural diversity. According to Roldán Ortega (2000) elites were receptive to recognizing Indigenous peoples' rights due to various factors. These include: the success of the indigenist movement forming the distinguished place of Indigenous peoples in the national imagination and their protection viewed as a responsibility of the state; that Indigenous peoples living at the frontiers of state presence-control sometimes are the only human presence capable of protecting the territory; the efforts of international and national environmental movements began to recognize Indigenous peoples as protectors of fragile ecosystems; the unceasing capacity and willingness (throughout Colombia's history) of Indigenous peoples to defend their rights, their forms of social organization, and their territories.

This recognition of Indigenous peoples' rights in the country was bolstered by the ratification of the International Labor Organization's Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (ILO 169) which also provided a source for important innovations regarding state-Indigenous relations in Colombia. One of the most important of these regards the rights to prior consultation. The Convention mandates that Indigenous and tribal peoples must be consulted on matters impacting them and ensures their ability to engage in free, informed participation in policy and

development processes that affect them, in ways that are adapted to their cultures and unique characteristics.

While the ILO has remained critical of the state's implementation of mechanisms for such consultation, important subsequent decisions from the Constitutional Court have upheld the right. For example, in Judgment T-652 of 1998, the Court ruled in favor of the Embera Katio people, who were not consulted before the construction of the Urrá hydroelectric dam, which affected their lands and way of life (Sentencia T-652/98). Moreover, Judgment C-030 of 2008 declared a new forestry law unconstitutional because it had not been subjected to prior consultation with Indigenous communities. This decision established the precedent that not only the approval of development projects, but also legislative acts must also be subject to prior consultation (Sentencia C-030/08).

With rights prior consultation, as well as others, Individual and collective rights were both established in the 1991 Constitution. Collective rights even established notions of new Indigenous jurisdictions to play a role in decentralization and state-building initiatives. Moreover, this reshaped interactions between levels of government including fiscal transfers, health and education, and customary justice systems (Velasco 2018). Although, much of this has not been implemented through legislation. Still, in this new constitution, the Indigenous movements successfully limited the power and reach of the state by delineating a certain sphere of autonomy. They also contributed to establishing the rule of law by redefining the terms of their citizenship in the protection of both individual and collective rights (Van Cott 2000).

Until the drafting of the 1991 Constitution of Colombia, nationalist policies from the early to mid-20th century, aimed to homogenize ethnic distinctions by favoring the peasant category while overlooking the existence of Indigenous groups. However, the 1991 Constitution

shifted this paradigm. Presently, the Indigenous identity takes precedence. The increased political influence of Indigenous identity brought significant changes to agrarian movements, transforming many land struggles into territorial conflicts (Esteva 2015, Celis González 2018). Hence, the colonial concept of the *resguardo* was reinforced through the 1991 Constitution, enabling Indigenous peoples to challenge Colombian state authority and to give shape to their own envisioned community and territorial identity (Hernández Vidal 2022).

However, the constitution is contradictory. On the one hand it develops a progressive framework for protecting the rights claims of historically marginalized groups. On the other, it sought to make the Colombian economy more competitive in the world market. Like similar reform experiences across the region, a tight connection has been found between these democratic and multicultural reforms and the adoption of neoliberal policies (Hale 2011). The neoliberal goal of a minimalist government and an expanded dependency on market forces meant an end for many state programs of social assistance in rural areas and has carried enormous consequences on Colombia's Indigenous peoples. Therefore, the long-standing problems of racial hierarchies, extreme unequal land distribution, dependency on extractive economies, a fragmented society, internal armed conflict, and more, have not been sufficiently addressed and remain as obstacles to accomplishing the goals of the 1991 Constitution (Roldán Ortega 2000, Jackson 2002).

Additionally, the shift from an agrarian economy to a mining and energy focused economy²⁵ further decreased supports for rural sectors (Pérez-Rincón 2014). For example, between 2002 and 2010, it was found that the geographic areas in which mining concessions

²⁵ President Juan Manuel Santos (president from 2010-2018), in the 2010-2014 National Development Plan identifies mining as the most significant pillar or “locomotive” of economic growth for Colombia. See Bebbington & Bebbington 2012.

were awarded had increased 1089% (El Espectador 2011). Furthermore, in the 1970s coffee represented around 60% of exports. By 2012 this had shifted, and the mining-energy sector had reached around 64% of national exports. This led to a crisis in rural areas which included a shift in the workforce to other sectors, increased cultivation of illicit crops, reduced agricultural land due to livestock farming, and heightened internal armed conflicts (Pérez-Rincón 2014). This transition exacerbated rural inequalities, undermined food security, and intensified socio-environmental conflicts, laying the groundwork for persistent rural crises.

2009 Constitutional Court Decision: Safeguarding and Empowering Vulnerable Indigenous Peoples

Building on a series of earlier court decisions, the Constitutional Court issued Judgment T-025 in 2004. This decision recognized the significant displacement of people within the country caused by the internal armed conflict. For example, by 1999, there were an estimated 1.8 million internally displaced people (IDPs), Indigenous or afro-Colombian communities making a disproportional amount of the total (USCR 2000). The decision declared that the states response to displacement represented an “unconstitutional state of affairs” and gave the Court jurisdiction over Colombia’s public policy towards IDPs. The Constitutional Court, therefore, gained the ability to establish mechanisms of oversight of government responses. Moreover, the Court has continually issued *autos de seguimiento*, referred to as *autos* (follow up cases) that provide analyses of distinct groups within the displaced population. Each of these follow up cases include requirements for government action.

In 2009, the Court issued *Auto 004* which specifically addressed the precarious situation of Indigenous peoples in Colombia amidst the armed conflict, recognizing that many Indigenous groups were at risk of physical and cultural extinction. A total of 34 Indigenous peoples were

named in the decision²⁶. The specific orders the Court handed down to the Colombian state included that the different state agencies implicated in protecting Indigenous peoples' human rights develop and implement a program of guarantees for the protection of human rights for Indigenous peoples in conditions of displacement. More importantly, the judgment ordered various state agencies and representatives²⁷ to formulate and implement safeguarding plans with each of the 34 Indigenous peoples. These Ethnic Safeguard Plans are understood by, for example, the Tontotuna people of Totoro, in Cauca:

So, for us, the Tontotuna people, the Ethnic Safeguard Plan is a mandate from the Constitutional Court, which obliges the Colombian Government to carry out a protection plan for us Indigenous people, which must be structured communally, which must contain actions to protect the environment, conserve and strengthen our own food systems, protect our traditional gardens, conserve the typical dress and our own Nam Trik language. In other words, the Ethnic Safeguard Plan must guarantee the protection and survival of the Tontotuna people, respecting our rights and strengthening our customs and traditions. Ultimately, the Safeguard Plan must be the territorial and cultural protection of our people, because this document is a legal tool and the State must guarantee its strict compliance, since it establishes a set of actions and norms that protect our rights and the effective enjoyment of them (Cabildo de la Parcialidad Indígena de Totoró, Cauca 2011).

²⁶ Wiwa, Kankuamo, Arhuaco, Kogui, Wayuu, Embera-Katio, Embera-Dobida, Embera-Chami, Wounaan, Awa, Nasa, Coreguaje, Cofan, Siona, Betoye y Nukak-Maku, Pijao, Sikuni, Guayabero, U'wa, Chimila, Kuna, Yukpa, Eperara-Siapidaara, Guambiano, Zenu, Yanacona, Kokonuko, Totoro, Huitoto, Inga, Kamentza, Kichwa y Kuiva. It should also be noted that the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) identified numerous other Indigenous groups at risk of extinction because they have fewer than 500 members each, including 18 groups with fewer than 200 members and 10 groups with fewer than 100 (Special Rapporteur).

²⁷ The Director of Social Action and the Minister of the Interior and Justice, - with the participation of the Director of ICBF (Colombian Institute of Family Welfare), the Minister of Education, the Minister of Social Protection, the Minister of Defense and the Director of the Comprehensive Action Program against Antipersonnel Mines.

The state agencies implicated in the decision were to facilitate the process but allow the Indigenous peoples themselves to design and implement their own methodologies of participatory processes for studying their situation of human rights and develop plans of action to improve their conditions. This included the invitation of social organizations that advocate for the rights of Indigenous peoples as external advisors.

The actual implementation of the design and elaboration of these Ethnic Safeguard Plans took much longer than the court had ordered. Additionally, the state waxes and wanes on commitments to respect them (depending on current government formations, as well as unequal commitment and motivation in the different state agencies)²⁸. However, the process of designing and elaborating the plans contributed to the organization of the specific Indigenous peoples involved, and the Indigenous movement broadly. Indigenous leaders and organizations involved in decision-making and design processes were reinforced as advocates for the rights of their communities. This process also included opportunities for Indigenous leaders, organizations, and communities to develop skills in negotiation, legal knowledge, and advocacy. Additionally, the process facilitated the formation of networks between different Indigenous groups, enabling them to share experiences, strategies, and support, as well as establishing partnerships between Indigenous communities, government agencies, and NGOs. These partnerships have provided resources, support, and advocacy, helping to sustain the initiatives launched through the safeguarding plans (ABColumbia 2018, 2019).

The text of the decision stresses the importance of legal title to resguardos in protecting Indigenous peoples' rights. This is especially highlighted when noting the that dangerous situations in which many Indigenous communities find themselves while waiting for formal land

²⁸ See reports from the ILO 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, as well as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous peoples report from 2009.

titles and state recognition of their resguardo facilitates dispossession and displacement. Therefore, the follow up decision notes how the process of regularization of Indigenous resguardos is intertwined with numerous factors related to the armed conflict. Citing a report from the non-governmental organization CODHES (Human rights and Displacement Consultancy), the decision demonstrates this by showing that in 2002 only 5.29% of municipalities in Colombia in which resguardos are in processes of attaining formal title did not report displacement of Indigenous populations, or that 94.7% of municipalities with Indigenous resguardos in such a process experienced displacement of Indigenous populations (CODHES/Corporación Opción Legal, 2004). This data underscores the deep entanglement between land formalization processes and the broader dynamics of violence and displacement in Colombia. It highlights how the struggle for Indigenous territorial recognition cannot be separated from the ongoing impacts of armed conflict, emphasizing the urgent need for policies that address both land rights and the security of Indigenous populations, based on the safeguarding plans.

2016 Peace Agreements, The Loss of an Opportunity?

During peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP (which occurred formally between 2012-2016), both parties held Indigenous rights and territorial autonomy as well as the rights of afro-Colombians autonomy at a distance. The government opposed Indigenous demands for the military to leave their lands, as well as their protests of oil, mining, and other extractive projects. Additionally, the FARC had grown accustomed to seeing Indigenous autonomy as an obstacle to their own territorial control²⁹.

²⁹ Throughout its 50 plus year campaign, the FARC is responsible for killing hundreds of Indigenous leaders and forcing communities from their lands. See Murillo 2006.

In response, national and regional organizations of afro-Colombians and of Indigenous peoples together formed the Ethnic Commission for Peace and Defense of Territorial Rights (Ethnic Commission) in 2016. The Ethnic Commission organized massive marches in the streets around the country, even blocking the Pan-American highway. They also garnered support from the Obama Administration, the US Congress, UN agencies, the guarantor countries of the peace talks, the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, and more. They were finally invited to meet with the delegates in Havana, Cuba in June of 2016. This engagement eventually led to the inclusion of the “Ethnic Chapter” of the Peace Agreements (signed in October of 2016). This chapter includes principles applicable to the entire agreement that guarantee a differentiated perspective to safeguard Afro-Colombians’ and Indigenous peoples’ rights. Importantly, this Ethnic Chapter created the independent Special High-Level Forum with Ethnic Peoples (IEANPE) to monitor and promote ethnic rights in the implementation of the Peace Agreement as a whole (Sánchez-Garzoli 2016, Eduardo Quiñones Mendoza 2022).

The territorial and racial hierarchies developed and reinforced throughout Colombia’s history are highlighted in this process. For example, the historical exclusion and marginalization of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities is demonstrated in their lands either being overlooked for government services or exploited without their consent. Therefore, the Ethnic Chapter also aims to address spatial inequalities where ethnic communities have historically been marginalized. This includes improving access to infrastructure, services, and economic opportunities in these areas. The Planes de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial (PDET, Spanish acronym, Development Programs with a Territorial Focus), for example, were designed in the Peace agreement to assist areas most impacted from the conflict. The majority of these holding large afro-Colombian and Indigenous populations. In fact, the 16 zones chosen for

implementation include 452 Indigenous and 305 Afro-descendant communities (Agencia de Renovación del Territorio 2016).

While the process of the inclusion of the Ethnic Chapter in the 2016 Peace Agreements demonstrates the strength of the Indigenous (and afro-Colombian) movement in the country, it is also important to note the lack of implementation of the agreement as a whole³⁰ (Echavarría Álvarez 2024). For example, in those same PDETs, a central piece of the agreements, three of the sixteen subregions are beginning to implement their first projects in 2021, and eight of the sixteen did not advance in 2020³¹ (Serrano Idrovo & Quinn 2024). Therefore, the process of the peace agreements could have been a progressive step for the Indigenous movement(s) in Colombia, however a lack of implementation and commitment from the beginning have hampered such possibilities.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted and discussed the critical moments that have shaped Indigenous-state relations throughout Colombia's history (both during colonization and in the post-independence era). Such developments have contributed to the territorial formation of the Colombian state as racially hierarchical and segregated. The early Indigenous and black (and poor campesinos) flight from the encomienda system, as well as other exploitative systems, created the imaginary of frontiers between civilization and barbarian socio-cultural spaces. This dynamic has facilitated the incorporation of frontier spaces into the nation-state project and

³⁰ The Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, which has been releasing annual reports on implementation of the 2016 peace agreements, found in 2024, the end of the seventh year, that out of the 578 stipulations in the agreement 10 percent of stipulations have not yet begun implementation, 39 percent are minimally implemented, 19 percent have reached an intermediate state, and 32 percent have been completed.

³¹ See "Sexto informe de seguimiento a la implementación del Acuerdo de Paz," Informes multipartidistas (Bogotá: Office of Rep. Juanita Goebertus, February 18, 2021), <https://www.juanitaenelcongreso.com/post/sexto-informe-de-seguimiento-a-la-implementacion-del-acuerdo-de-paz>.

economic growth efforts, but it has done so through a framework of agrarian violence, leading to persistent and widespread conflicts.

The Indigenous movement that grew out of the attempt at agrarian reform in the 1960s, and especially with the creation of the ANUC, has accomplished a great deal. One of the most important accomplishments is the drafting of the 1991 Constitution which offers more protections to Indigenous peoples than most other constitutions in the region. The ONIC has also situated itself as mediator between the state and Indigenous communities while also organizing actions such as highway blockades and strikes in opposition to state activities. However, despite such advancements, Indigenous peoples are still found at the bottom of socio-economic data, and disproportionately experience violence, displacements, and repression (Jackson 2011).

The resguardo has been a key element in state-Indigenous relations, serving to establish Indigenous identity, enabling the state to exert control over certain populations. At the same time, it has provided Indigenous peoples with a socio-political space to practice and develop autonomous governance, manage natural resources to some extent, maintain distinct cultural organization, and sustain local and regional food systems. The founding and recognition of Indigenous resguardos has become a powerful tool utilized by Indigenous peoples in Colombia to assert their autonomy over the territory, reclaim authority over resguardo lands and agricultural practices, and strengthen their own governance institutions. The colonial institution of the resguardo (along with the cabildo) continues to play a crucial role in Indigenous struggles, fostering ethnic solidarity across the country and, as will be demonstrated in the case studies, supporting food and seed autonomy in rural areas, both within and beyond resguardos. The conflictive ebbs and flows resulting from debates within Colombia's political and economic elite regarding the assimilation of Indigenous peoples as individual citizens or the separation of them

as distinct peoples has also been present throughout Colombia's history, even prior to the republican era. However, the critical moment of the 1991 Constitution might have placed the country on a trajectory that incorporates Indigenous peoples as a separate and distinct people, finding a middle ground. While this may only be a precarious situation, it has afforded more participation of Indigenous peoples in national politics, as well as more control over their own territories and communities.

To conclude, the current relations between Indigenous peoples and the Colombian State reflect both their historical struggles and ongoing innovations in governance and territorial autonomy. The constitutional reforms of 1991 provided a crucial turning point, yet the challenges they face underscore the need for continued vigilance in addressing socio-economic inequalities and systemic violence. These dynamics will be further examined in the case studies that follow, illuminating how Indigenous peoples creatively navigate the complex interplay of state policies, cultural preservation, and resource management to assert their sovereignty and strengthen their communities.

Table 1: Timeline of Indigenous-State Relations in Colombia

Era (Velasco 2016)	Period (Fajardo 2014, Zamosc 1986)	Events /Junctures	Context	Legacy
Conquest and the Differentiation of Cultural Space	Conquest and Colonization: 15 th century – 17 th century	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decimation of Indigenous peoples – including institutions, economies, food production systems, etc. New institutions established: Rescate; Repartimiento; Encomienda; Hacienda; Resguardo; Cabildo, etc. 	In order to realize conquest and colonization of region, Spanish Crown gave rights to individuals and corporations in specific areas. This necessitated establishing new institutions for the survival of the colonizers and for advancing Crown objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> These institutions established traditions of local bosses/elites which developed separate from each other (geographically), limiting national integration and centralization even today. The institutions also gave Indigenous groups political tools for future struggle (both as limiting and as expanding). Racialized hierarchies are developed
	Conquest and Colonization: Bourbon Reforms: 18 th century	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduced the dissolution of resguardos. Abolished the encomienda system and revoked land grants to encomenderos 	Efforts of the Spanish Crown to regain control over the colonies, trans-Atlantic trade, and more. Additionally, policies changed from maintaining separate Spanish-Indigenous spaces to facilitating the assimilation of Indigenous communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reforms initiated struggles (between Spanish and Creole elites) to dissolve or maintain collectively held resguardos. Encomiendas were revoked but the system morphed into latifundio and relations of terraje State presence was pushed further outside of main power centers
Nation-building and the Barbarian Hinterland	Independence, Building a Republic: 1820 – 1850	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decrees and laws recognizing Indigenous peoples as equal citizens, forcing Indigenous peoples under common law – individual citizens (assimilation), and dissolving resguardos. Bolivar, however, decrees in favor of maintaining resguardos 	An ideology of nation-building demanded a single Colombian identity. A divide is heightened between Colombian political elites regarding the assimilation or separation of Indigenous peoples.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indigenous rights and identities continue to be defined by resguardos. Debates about how to define Indigenous citizenship while maintaining a distinct racial and collective identity.

	Liberals Prevail: 1850 – 1886, The radical faction of newly created liberal party wins presidency.	Extreme decentralization and modernization efforts	The liberal republic during this period radically decentralized the country (almost to disintegration) and attempted to modernize the country. This also included dissolving the resguardos. Racial divisions are reinforced, and the territorial division of the country maintains a racial and hierarchical understanding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land redistribution (church lands, resguardos) favors already wealthy landowners. • Decentralization and land redistribution gives more power to local bosses inheritors of colonial institutions). • Racial separation and hierarchies formed/strengthened.
		Racialized hierarchies are attached to territorial subdivisions		
	Conservative Republic: 1886 – 1930	Law 89 of 1890	Conservatives take power and re-centralize political and fiscal policies, and valorized the past colonial structures, increasing state supervision of Indigenous peoples.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Until 1991 Constitution, Law 89 was main framework for protecting Indigenous rights in the country. However, it was paternalistic with repercussions still being felt today.
		Law 55 1905	While law 89 included the planned dissolution of the resguardos within 50 years, large landholders became impatient, and especially with oil prospects on the Atlantic coast, demanded their dissolution sooner.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spurred “peasantization” or “de-indianization” • Loss of resguardo lands, efforts at recuperating these lands continue today. • Indigenous identity became evident in two ways: as a cultural practice and as a political instrument.
		Manuel Quintin Lame, Indigenous movement	Southwest Indigenous organizing/movement initiated by Manuel Quintin Lame focuses on importance of resguardos and Indigenous identity, and abolishing terraje system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quintin Lame uprisings and legal mobilizations establish framework of Indigenous politics for years to come • led to broader understanding of “Indigenous” identity as a political category. Inspired the CRIC and the Quintin Lame Armed Movement.
		Indigenist movement	In a time of attempts to establish/strengthen a “Colombian” identity a movement mostly led by non-Indigenous intellectuals supporting Indigenous rights and often involving Indigenous activists.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solidified the association of ethnic identity with the resguardo. • Achieved a lasting special status for Indigenous peoples in Colombian imaginary.

Self-Defense, Territorialized Resistance, and National Security	Liberals win: 1930 – 1940s	Agrarian Reform: law 200 of 1936	Disputes between rural groups and the government intensified in the 1930s, this agrarian reform law was an attempt to pacify the countryside.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established the “social consideration” of land in state policies. Excluded Indigenous identity as a rural political category, sustaining processes of “peasantization”. Reactionary coalition formed (landowners, government officials, producers associations, etc.)
		Formation of the Campesino and Indigenous Federation	An effort to protect the small gains from the attempted agrarian reform and to not lose more land and rights, the Campesino and Indigenous Confederation was born in 1942 and conducted mobilizations around the whole country.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First attempt at national level organizing from rural sectors. While the federation recognized both rural identities, class-based goals remained central (over ethnic or racial goals).
	La Violencia & National Front: 1948 - 1974	Bogotazo riots, massive violence in countryside, civil war between Liberals and Conservatives	Assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán on April 9, 1948, a presidential candidate from the Liberal Party and a leading contender for the November 1949 election triggers massive violence and war between Conservative and Liberal parties, spreading into the countryside.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many Indigenous peoples were displaced due to this violence. Lands of displaced Indigenous peoples were later claimed by large landowners.
		Agrarian Reform: Law 135 of 1961	The growing need to give concessions to the peasant movement, along with pressure from the US, under the Alliance for Progress, pushed for agrarian reform in order to quell concerns of more followers of the example set by Cuba.	Agrarian reform law protected existing resguardos and made possible the creation of new resguardos, with 158 created in the following decades.
		Formation of ANUC (<i>Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos</i>)	State-sponsored peasant movement founded in order to push the reforms and overcome landowner resistance.	Split into two factions – one loyal to government directives, the other more radical in tactics and goals. Rural movements have splintered and fragmented ever since.
		Foundation of the CRIC (<i>Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca</i>)	CRIC split from ANUC due to the differing goals based on ethnicity, culture, and territorial autonomy, rather than class-based land redistribution.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The CRIC helped to establish many other Indigenous organizations around the country. Utilized law 89 in processes of land recuperations.

	1980s	Foundation of ONIC (<i>Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia</i>)	At the first National Indigenous Congress in 1982, ONIC was established by the members of the CRIC, along with the Arhuaco, Kogui, Sikuani, Emberá, Cañamomo, Pijao, Pasto, and several peoples from the Amazon region.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indigenous voice at the national level.
Failure of the Territorial State and Neoliberal Governance	1991 Constitution	Multicultural Reforms	Popular demands (especially student movements) for new constituent assembly. This was occurring during peace talks with a number of guerrilla groups. Lack of legitimacy of the state and failure to control the territory.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CRIC, ONIC, others, were empowered to enter into dialogue with the state through this constituent assembly • Constitutional rights to resguardos, cultural diversity, cabildos, senatorial posts, etc. • Indigenous identity is valorized over peasant identity, shifting agrarian struggles over land to conflicts over territory.
		Neoliberal Reforms	Focused on individual citizenship and ended state programs of social assistance, especially for rural areas. Numerous industries were privatized, agro-exports were prioritized and the intensification of exploitation of natural resources, shifting from an agrarian economy to a mining and energy economy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • According to Mingorance 2008, there is a 55.5% overlap between hydrocarbon production areas and Indigenous reserves.
		Auto 004 of 2009	34 Indigenous groups identified as at risk of physical and cultural extinction due to the effects of the armed conflict, development projects, and other factors. The decision held the state accountable for its failure to adequately protect Indigenous peoples and ordered specific actions to remedy these shortcomings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Court ordered the Colombian government to develop and implement safeguard plans tailored to each Indigenous group at risk, designed to guarantee their survival, protect their territories, and uphold their cultural integrity.
		Peace Agreements with FARC-EP 2016	After 52 years at war, the FARC-EP and the Colombian govt. signed a peace agreement. The first point was on Integral Rural Reform. Importantly, Indigenous and afro-descendant movements forced the inclusion of an overarching ethnic chapter in the agreement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The agreement included provisions for the political participation of Indigenous groups. • Has had limited implementation

Chapter 4: The Politics of Seeds: Privatization, Centralization, and Resistance

Introduction

This chapter builds on the previous analysis of Indigenous–state relations in Colombia by introducing seed politics as a new and consequential layer within that already contested terrain. While Indigenous peoples have long engaged the state over land rights, legal recognition, and territorial autonomy, the emergence of GMOs and seed regulation regimes has introduced fresh arenas of conflict and negotiation. Seed politics, which encompasses struggles over biodiversity, agricultural production models, knowledge systems, food sovereignty, and legal control, intersects with and intensifies existing tensions around jurisdiction, governance, and cultural survival. In this sense, the governance of seeds does not displace earlier conflicts but expands the field of Indigenous–state contestation to include the regulation of agriculture, cultural practices, and control over the means of sustaining life.

Offering a conceptual analysis of the politics of GM seeds in Colombia, requires focusing on how global food systems intersect with national and local dynamics. It explores the historical development of seed politics, tracing the influence of global trends like the Green Revolution and the development of biotechnologies on Colombia’s agricultural systems. The chapter highlights the diversity of actors (state institutions, private businesses, and agrarian social movements) that shape seed policy at different scales, often with conflicting visions. At the national and local levels, the struggles over GM seed adoption illustrate broader territorial conflicts involving land control, agricultural resources, and political autonomy. Indigenous communities, have constitutional rights to restrict GM seed use within their resguardo territories,

positioning them at the forefront of anti-GMO movements. Their establishment of GMO-Free Territories exemplifies how territorial sovereignty, cultural autonomy, and environmental sustainability are intertwined in the fight to protect native seeds. The chapter ultimately argues that seed politics in Colombia are deeply territorial, as they revolve around land governance, the defense of traditional practices, and the ecological risks of GM crop expansion, making seed regulation a critical battleground for sovereignty and local sustainability.

For a conceptual analysis of the impacts of GM seed regulation and resistance in Colombia it is imperative to look into various levels and issues regarding global food systems politics. Therefore, this chapter will explore global and historical perspectives on seed politics and the development of biotechnologies for agriculture as well as the national and local dynamics inside of Colombia. First, Colombia's agricultural systems did not develop in isolation but have been connected to global and historical dynamics in a multiplicity of ways. As such, transformations at the global level are linked to socio-economic, political, and environmental contexts within Colombia. Second, there are a diversity of actors and networks at the national and local levels within Colombia which have different visions and valuations of agricultural production. These differences often manifest as between the state, private businesses, and agrarian or food-related social movements. However, differences can also be found within each of those segments. For example, rural wage laborers might organize around different objectives for future agricultural production than small-holder peasant communities might, or the national government might come into confrontation with municipal governments over agrarian issues.

This chapter, therefore, investigates the historical development of seed politics, the development of genetically modified seeds, and the debates thereby instigated. After this, the global context is considered. This includes the role played by the Green Revolution as a

foundation for current pressures to use biotechnologies, as well as the role played by oppositional transnational social movements such as La Via Campesina. The dynamic between these varying proposals for agriculture has led to the complex negotiated and contradictory configuration of the international framework for governing and implementing biotechnologies.

After this, the Colombian national and local context will be explored. This will take into consideration the political context of when and how GM technologies were approved, the opposition and resistance to them, and the contradictory laws, policies, court decisions, etc. that allow for an ambiguous expectation regarding seed policies. However, in all of this, it remains unambiguous that Indigenous peoples have constitutional rights to place spatial and political limits on the use of GM seeds, bolstered by recent decisions from the Constitutional Court and Colombian laws. Consequently, the anti-GMO and broader environmental and agrarian movements depend on Indigenous peoples' political activism in favor of their own goals. These non-Indigenous environmental and/or agrarian movements have also found methods of attaching their own discourses and practices onto Indigenous successes. This is especially the case when it comes to the examples of territorial strategies.

Ultimately, I argue that the debates surrounding seeds are inherently territorial in nature. First, they center on the control of land and agricultural resources. For example, as the expansion of GM seeds goes hand in hand with industrialized monocrop agriculture, this shifts land use and governance away from local communities toward state and/or corporate interests. Second, these debates are intertwined with cultural and political autonomy, especially for Indigenous and peasant communities that view the protection of native seeds as crucial to their autonomy and the defense of traditional agricultural practices, as exemplified by the creation of GMO-Free Territories. Lastly, the co-existence of GM and native seeds poses critical environmental

challenges, where genetic contamination threatens local biodiversity, and the ecological sustainability of territories governed by traditional knowledge systems. In this way, seed politics are not just about agriculture, but also about territorial control, sovereignty, and the preservation of local environments.

Agrarian Origins: Seeds as Catalysts of Political History

Plants and their products form an indispensable material foundation upon which complex political systems have developed. This is true in all eras of human history, irrespective of the historical mode of production (Kloppenburg 1990). In addition to providing food, they also supply materials for making cloth, tools, medicines, etc. Control of seeds and their plants provided the possibility for the transformation to settled agricultural communities, which allowed for the creation of surplus food, which in turn supported population growth, urbanization, and the development of complex political systems (Sinclair & Sinclair 2010). This also laid the foundation for social hierarchies, property rights, and trade. In this sense, seeds are not just biological entities but also political tools that have shaped human history (Silvertown 2009). As such, control over their reproductive processes has been the source of contention for political authority.

For example, in Mesoamerica, the domestication of maize seeds was not just an agricultural innovation but a critical element in the development of social and political hierarchies. The cultivation of maize supported the growth of large urban centers such as Teotihuacan and Tikal, where political systems were closely tied to the control and distribution of maize. Rulers and elites often exercised power through their ability to manage agricultural production, secure labor for farming, and conduct religious ceremonies that emphasized the spiritual significance of maize (Hillel 1992). The organization of labor for large-scale maize

farming reinforced the power of the elite, and the ability to ensure seed production and crop success became central to political legitimacy. Maize seeds were thus not only a food source but also a key instrument of political control (Sinclair & Sinclair 2010).

Later, seeds played a crucial yet often overlooked role in the Spanish colonization of the Americas, serving as both instruments of imperial control and symbols of cultural imposition. Alongside the sword and the cross came seeds of wheat, barley, grapes, and other European crops, deliberately introduced to remake Indigenous landscapes in the image of Spain. As early as Columbus' second journey, farmers were granted wheat seeds on loan with the expectation that the farmers would repay the loan at harvest time, typically with one-tenth of their crop (Carrier 1923). In 1524, Hernán Cortés urged the Spanish king to mandate that ships from Seville to the West Indies carry seeds, plants, and livestock. The crown issued this order in 1532. By 1588, seeds of wheat, barley, herbs, beans, lettuce, colewort, radishes, onions, garlic, parsley, turnips, parsnips, eggplant, chicory, beets, spinach, grapes, and peas had been brought from Spain (Acosta 2010). These seeds were not only agricultural commodities but carriers of a colonial vision, imposing new food systems, land use patterns, and property regimes that displaced Indigenous ecologies and forms of sustenance. As such, the circulation and planting of seeds became a foundational mechanism through which colonial authorities sought to naturalize their presence, assert territorial dominance, and reorder the social and ecological fabric of the Americas (Whitaker 1929).

Moreover, the Spanish botanical expeditions to the viceroyalties of Peru, New Granada, and New Spain in the late 18th century were part of a broader Enlightenment effort to catalog and exploit the natural wealth of the colonies. Seeds and plant specimens collected during these missions enriched European botanical gardens, advanced scientific knowledge, offered medicinal

remedies, and strengthened Spanish food security by diversifying crops. However, these expeditions also facilitated the extraction of Indigenous ecological knowledge and resources, reinforcing colonial power dynamics and highlighting how scientific exploration often served the aims of empire (Steele 1964, Petersen 2001, Boyer 2012, Bleichmar 2018).

Therefore, as noted by Scott (2009), the choices groups make regarding which types of crops, which agricultural practices or models of food production to implement, have impacts on relations with authorities, with the state. In fact, this has been a long-standing conflict throughout human/state history. The production of food can bring groups under closer control of the state or assert autonomy from the state. This is highlighted in that the base of subsistence of all the early agrarian states was a staple grain: wheat, maize, millet, barley, etc. (Scott 2017). Such grains provided the main food starch and, importantly, the unit of taxation. As a unit of taxation these crops are visible, assessable, storable, and transportable. Such characteristics are what make these crops, according to Scott, “premier *political* crops” (2017). With this, seeds, as the irreducible core of agricultural crop production, become political resources. As stated by Fakhri, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food:

Seeds are the primary basis for human sustenance; they are the repository of the genetic potential of crop species and their varieties result from continuous selection and adaptation over time. Because seeds are so central to people’s cultures and food systems, to control seeds is to control life (Fakhri 2021).

These dynamics of control and autonomy through crop production are not new but trace back to the dawn of agriculture itself. Since the Neolithic era, farmers have used breeding techniques such as selection, crossbreeding, and hybridization to intentionally change the properties of plants. Therefore, crop improvement has been an historically important part of

agriculture. After thousands of years the slow accumulation of improved and advantageous seeds helped increase food production and security. From a certain perspective, then, it could be said that farmers, from very early on, have been involved in genetic modification. However, this contrasts sharply with today's biotechnology and genetic engineering practices for several reasons (Kinchy 2012, Dutfield 2020). As Kloppenburg (1990) points out, first, the slow, almost evolutionary process of plant selection, crossbreeding, and hybridization employed by farmers throughout history operated at the level of the whole organism. However, genetic technologies today work at the cellular or molecular level. Second, while the historical process worked through sexual means to transfer genetic material, today's technologies bypass this and can move genes between completely unrelated organisms. Lastly, and most importantly for this study, while generations produced ever-increasing quantities of locally adapted varieties freely available for everyone's benefit, the intellectual property rights and patent laws of today's biotechnologies erode farmer's rights to use, save, sell, or trade the seeds they harvest (Dutfield 2020).

This shift in agricultural practices and control over seeds underscores the fundamental tensions at the heart of modern agricultural debates. These tensions are most vividly seen in the controversies surrounding GMOs, where questions of technology, property rights, and farmer autonomy collide. The following section delves into these debates, exploring the various perspectives on the implications of genetically modified organisms for food systems and society.

Debates Surrounding the Genetic Modification of Seeds

GMOs are produced by introducing new genetic sequences into the nuclear or chloroplast DNA of plants, using one of several biotechnology processes (Magdoff et al. 2000). Usually, with the aid of a gene gun, genes are inserted from one to another living being, this could include

a bacterium or a virus, into the DNA of cells of certain seeds. The aim of genetic modification is to induce the expression of new traits in the target organism, often of herbicide tolerance and insect resistance (Leguizamón 2020). This has demanded the separation of seed production from crop production within agricultural systems, and the subsequent commercialization of seed production (Richard 2015), effectively separating the farmer from the reproduction of the seed (McKay 2021) and transforming the seed from a use-value to an exchange-value (Kloppenborg 1990).

Since their release into the world in the 1990s, the debates over the use of GMOs have been wrapped in dynamic ecological concerns regarding both their circulation in the environment (environmental and physical impact), as well as the trajectory of agriculture policy (social, economic, and political impact). Proponents claim the necessity of GMOs to feed a growing world population. For example, the Vitamin A-enhanced Golden Rice demonstrates the potential of how GM crops could enhance the lives (even save many) of the world's hungry and poor. This genetically modified rice seed contains beta carotene, a plant pigment that the body can convert into vitamin A when needed³² (IRRI 2018). However, it took decades and the investment of billions of dollars for these seeds just to be minimally released commercially for cultivation (Kinchy 2012, IRRI 2023).

Furthermore, Motta (2016) identifies various debates around the issue of GM technologies. These include issues of transformations in the global political economy (Magdoff, Foster, & Buttel, 2000; McMichael 2006), the culture of science or expert-based policy-making (Motta 2015, Seifert 2010), public and democratic debate over the use of biotechnology (Bauer

³² According to the World Health Organization: "Vitamin A deficiency is a public health problem in more than half of all countries, especially those in Africa and South-East Asia. The most severe effects of this deficiency are seen in young children and pregnant women in low-income countries" (WHO 2009).

2005, Peters 2005), the role of corporate actors in influencing scientists and public officials (Fuchs & Glaab 2011, Glover 2010) (;), as well as the organizing of anti-GMO social mobilizations (Arancibia 2013, Lapegna 2016). Such disputes over GM crops remain prevalent even after such technologies have been on the market for more than 20 years.

GMOs have been found to generate relations of debt and dependency, devastate local and regional economies, displace rural communities, trigger environmental contamination and illnesses due to the use of toxic agro-chemicals, and more (Fitting 2010, Leguizamón 2020). They have transformed agriculture, changing the uses of land, water, and soil, and they require external synthetic inputs for production. Moreover, these biotechnologies have allowed capital to overcome biophysical barriers to the commodification of agriculture. This has involved the destruction of the material, cultural and environmental structures of socio-territorial networks, appropriating the environment, labor, skills, knowledge, etc. within and across territories (Kloppenburg 1990, McKay 2020).

Failures of Genetically Modified Seeds

Moreover, GMOs have been considered as failures in many different aspects. For example, in retail, where manufacturers are required to provide labels with information on GM products, they opt not to use such ingredients (FSANZ 2016). Regarding biosecurity, GMOs have been found as challenging to eliminate or contain once they have been introduced (Agapito-Tenfen et al 2017). For example, test sites in Tasmania have been monitored for the past two decades with multiple audits. Every audit has identified rogue modified canola plants, despite strict containment practices (DPIPWE 2014, 2019, Paull 2019). Cases like this have ignited debates on the co-existence of GM and native seeds. Such debates focus on the challenges of maintaining seed purity, biodiversity, and farmers' rights in regions where both types of seeds are

grown. Proponents argue that with proper regulation, GM and native seeds can co-exist, while critics highlight the risks of genetic contamination through cross-pollination, which threatens Indigenous seed varieties and food sovereignty (Thies 2015). In Colombia, this debate is particularly pressing as Indigenous and peasant communities resist the spread of GM crops, fearing the erosion of native seed biodiversity and the undermining of territorial strategies like GMO-Free Territories aimed at protecting traditional agricultural systems (Grupo Semillas 2012).

A 2009 report (Union of Concerned Scientists) makes the critical distinction between intrinsic yield and operational yield. The distinction between these two concepts is important. The intrinsic yield refers to the crops potential under the best possible conditions, while the operational yield accounts for actual production levels after losses due to pests, drought, and other environmental factors. The study found that herbicide-tolerant soybeans, herbicide-tolerant corn, and *Bt* corn do not increase intrinsic yields, and only *Bt* corn increases operational yields, but not at significant levels (Gurian-Sherman 2009).

Such problems are exemplified through the case of GM cotton in Colombia. In the 1940s, cotton production surged in the Caribbean region of the country, with cultivated cotton areas growing from 700 hectares in 1948 to 25,000 hectares in 1950 (Parson 1952). The Colombian state supported the industry by subsidizing American farm machinery, providing certified seeds (imported mostly from the US as well), and building cotton gins in collaboration with textile mill owners. However, the cotton boom declined steadily after the 1970s, and by 2014, Colombia had stopped exporting cotton (Salazar Castellanos 2022). In 2003 GM cotton was introduced. This led to crop failures due to poor adaptation to local conditions, including ineffective pest control (Fonsesca Zambrano 2013). The design of the GM seeds occurred in US laboratories and test

fields, with differing types of pests, climates, and other conditions not found on the Colombian Caribbean coast.

These examples put into question the need to support genetic engineering for the purposes of increasing world food supplies. The investments into developing GM seeds, and the fertilizers, pesticides, and other inputs they depend on have come at the expense of technologies and practices that have proven to increase yields without creating extra costs for the majority of the world's peasant farmer's. For example, a report from the United Nations have identified agroecology, an integrated approach which “seeks to optimize the interactions between plants, animals, humans and the environment while taking into consideration the social aspects that need to be addressed for a sustainable and fair food system” (Committee on World Food Security 2019), as foundational to global food security.

The preceding discussion underscores the multifaceted debates associated with GM seeds, including their environmental, social, and economic repercussions. While proponents highlight potential benefits, such as enhanced nutrition and yield improvements, the unintended consequences and outright failures have spurred debates about their role in sustainable agriculture. This sets the stage for a broader exploration of the global frameworks governing seeds, examining the regulatory, political, and economic systems that shape their productions, distribution, and use.

The Global Context of Seed Control

Food and Seed Regimes

The commercial planting of GM crops around the globe went from 1.7 million hectares in 1996 to 190 million hectares in 2017 (ISAAA 2017). This dramatic change has led scholars of

global food politics to suggest that genetic modification and its regulation are central to the current food regime (McMichael, 2006, Pechlaner & Otero 2008). A food regime can be understood as the projection of power into food circuits which come out of specific historical relations of production (McMichael 2009). Food regimes analysis identifies stable periods of capital accumulation linked with particular formations of global political power (Roa-Clavijo 2022). The food regimes literature identifies the first food regime (1870-1914) during the period of British hegemony in the world economy. The second (1945-1973) under US hegemony in the postwar world economy.

The current food regime (beginning in the 1980s), is often called the ‘corporate’ food regime (McMichael 2009, 2012) or the neoliberal food regime (Otero 2018). The development of this regime has led to the situation where only six multinational seed and agrochemical companies control 63 percent of the global commercial seed market and 75 percent of private sector research in seeds and pesticides (ETC Group 2015). Previously, and as recently as the 1970s, these markets were found to have been controlled by thousands of small-scale and family-owned businesses with most research conducted at publicly funded universities (Howard 2015).

Therefore, a corporate or neoliberal seed regime refers to a system in which large agribusiness corporations dominate the production, distribution, and control of seeds through proprietary technologies such as genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and the use of intellectual property rights (IPRs), particularly patents. This regime prioritizes the commercial interests of seed companies, often to the detriment of traditional seed-saving practices and local agricultural biodiversity. It centralizes control over seed resources in the hands of a few multinational corporations, which market high-yield, patented seeds, often requiring the use of specific agrochemicals, creating dependency among farmers. Under a corporate seed regime,

corporations enforce seed patents and plant breeders' rights, preventing farmers from saving, sharing, or replanting patented seeds (Kloppenborg 1990, Howard 2009).

The Impacts of the Green Revolution

The current seed and food regime find their roots in the logic of the Green Revolution which entailed, in addition to the introduction of GM seeds, heavy machinery, irrigation, and intensive use of chemicals in the global South. This developed what has been called an 'efficiency-oriented model' of agriculture (Godfray & Garnett 2014), which overly focuses on supply, productivity, and technology. As plant breeding was professionalized in this process (wrested away from peasant farmers), a commercial seed sector emerged. A major impact this has had on food production across the globe, and especially in the global South, is the emphasis on scaling-up. This includes scaling up production at the local level, scaling up markets at the regional and global level, and scaling up the reach and power of the seed sector. Causing a trend towards monocultures, high-cost inputs, and centralization of ownership. Additionally, it puts customary farmer practices at risk and marginalizes traditional or native seeds and seed systems³³, ultimately threatening the livelihoods of small-scale farmers and communities (Tsioumani 2018). Based in Cold War ideology, the Green Revolution aimed to increase food productivity through technological intensification in countries viewed as potentially susceptible to communism due to widespread poverty and hunger. Initially funded by private foundations such as the Rockefeller and Ford foundations, public institutions and governments eventually took over the funding of the projects (Holt-Giménez et al. 2009). As such, through government

³³ A seed system refers to the network of actors, processes, and institutions involved in the development, production, distribution, and management of seeds used for agricultural production. Seed systems can be formal (regulated by state agencies and commercial in purpose) or informal (community-based and small-scale). See Almekinders & Louwaars 2002, Louwaars 2007, Wattnem 2016, Mushita & Thompson 2019.

investment in research, subsidizing fertilizers, pesticides, and irrigation systems, providing certain types of credit, and facilitating the transfer of technologies, the Green Revolution was largely driven by the state (Cullather 2010).

Although India might be more well known as a test case for Green Revolution experimentation, Mexico was the first country where such agricultural visions were tested. In 1941 the Rockefeller Foundation and the Mexican government came to an agreement to launch a new agricultural research effort. The expectation was to see success in Mexico to export this new model globally, especially into the developing countries (Wright 2005). Plant breeding was a central component of this project. Processes of testing hybrid and improved seeds in different locations in Mexico led to seeds that were generally capable of producing higher yields than the traditional seeds. However, in most cases, the seeds could not produce higher yields without the support of more water (more than traditional seeds), large quantities of fertilizers, and chemical pesticides. Such requirements meant grand scale public and private financing. Traditional farmers, without sufficient capital, tended to lose out on any benefits of the new agricultural model (Karim 1986, Jennings 1988).

Similarly, during the Green Revolution in India the agricultural sector was largely converted into a highly industrialized system. This was mainly for the use of high yielding varieties of wheat, cotton, and rice, improved quality of fertilizers, and new irrigation techniques. The model was also accompanied by an increased use of pesticides, insecticides, and herbicides, heavy machinery, as well as land reforms to consolidate large land holdings. Initially, this led to significant increases in agricultural production (Frankel 1971). For example, in Punjab, where the model was first implemented, agricultural production increased to the point that the province

was producing 70% of the country's total grain output³⁴. Significantly, the implementation of Monsanto's Bt cotton seeds only produced higher yields when coupled with expensive pesticides and large irrigation systems. The expensive technological package to make the modified seeds work were found to entrap farmers in cycles of debt³⁵. Moreover, the increased, and oftentimes, excessive use of pesticides and other chemicals, had the adverse effect of polluting waterways and killing beneficial insects and animals. The large-scale irrigation also led to soil degradation. In addition, as this model of agriculture could only work in certain ecological settings, such as highly irrigated and rainfed areas, many regions of the country were left out, causing regional disparities (Karim 1986, Shiva 2016).

Both cases show that agricultural interventions (whether we are talking about pest management strategies or seed improvement programs) affect much more than just farming techniques. They link farmers to broader systems and shape their long-term decision-making possibilities. Because food production is foundational to the functioning of the state and other authority structures, these interventions also interact in complex ways with larger political dynamics. The Green Revolution introduced high-yielding seed varieties and chemical inputs into regions like Latin America and Asia. This imposition of new agricultural models disrupted traditional farming practices, and the control local farmers had over their seeds and land. It shifted power and control over agricultural practices from local communities to national governments and global corporations, leading to conflicts over who governs the land and the

³⁴ Significantly, the state's output increased from 1.9 million tons to 5.6 million tons between 1965 and 1972. See Singhal Kohli & Singh 1997.

³⁵ Official data finds that at least 160,000 farmers committed suicide in India between 1997 and 2009. Most of these deaths occurred in areas where farmers grow Bt cotton. While such a phenomena is sure to be multifaceted and complex, the correlation should also not be ignored.

resources it produces and reinforcing territorial struggles over autonomy and natural resource governance.

These shifts in agricultural control have sparked resistance from farmers and communities, especially those who view these changes as threats to their autonomy and sovereignty. Social movements like La Via Campesina have become key actors in this struggle, advocating food sovereignty and opposing the dominance of GMOs and corporate-led agriculture. The following section discusses the rise of these global movements, their resistance to genetically modified crops, and their efforts to reclaim control over agricultural systems and natural resources.

Social Movement Resistance to Corporate Control

Additionally, it is important to recognize that global GM politics emerges out of the negotiated and contradictory configurations which in part come out of social movement resistance to these powerful processes and institutions. At the transnational level, one of the most important social movements related to food production is the peasant movement La Vía Campesina and especially its articulation of food and seed sovereignty. This movement comprises about 150 local and national organizations in 70 countries from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas and altogether, it represents about 200 million farmers (La Via Campesina 2006). At the World Food Summit in 1996, La Via Campesina coined the term “food sovereignty”, which is defined as the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food, produced through sustainable methods, and the right to identify their own food and agriculture systems. In a sense, this is about putting the control of the food system with those that will be producing and eating the food (La Via Campesina 2009). This differs from the concept of food security which is more focused on access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet dietary

needs for an active and healthy life (Patel 2009). Additionally, Indigenous peoples in Latin America articulate a vision for food autonomy. While food sovereignty expresses resistance to GMOs and corporate seed regimes, the concept of food autonomy is more focused on re-establishing local community-based control over traditional seed varieties and farming practices (Calderón Farfán et al. 2021).

The international La Via Campesina movement has also coined the term “seed sovereignty”. With intensifying processes of corporate appropriation of plant genetic resources, development of transgenic crops, and the global imposition of intellectual property rights, the free exchange of seeds and the development of new cultivars by farmers is severely constrained. Therefore, the notion of seed sovereignty is to reclaim seeds as commons and public goods (Hernández Rodríguez 2023). It is about the farmer’s rights to breed and exchange diverse seeds which can be saved, and which are not patented, genetically modified, owned, or controlled privately (Kloppenburg 2014, García López et al. 2019). Moreover, the movement has created important spaces to give the peasant voice in negotiations over global policy and procedures. Most notably, this resulted in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) (Gaarde 2017).

Although it operates on a global scale, La Via Campesina works by amplifying local territorial struggles, such as the creation of GMO-Free Territories or campaigns against land grabs. These local actions are framed as part of a larger resistance to the global forces of neoliberalism and agribusiness, yet they remain deeply rooted in the defense of specific lands, resources, and ways of life (Mann 2014). In this way, the movement highlights the territorial nature of seed politics, where even global campaigns are expressions of local land and territorial struggles.

As La Via Campesina and similar movements advocate for food sovereignty and resist corporate control of agriculture, their efforts are both confronted by and impact upon international legal frameworks that govern seeds. These frameworks, which include intellectual property laws and trade agreements, play a critical role in shaping the global governance of seeds and the struggles over their control.

International Framework

The challenging international legal landscape regarding seeds and biotechnologies, as well as property rights, plant breeders rights and/or farmers' rights, puts states under two legal frameworks, coupled with two types of seed systems. This is exemplified in the differing international legal instruments which protect either intellectual property or farmers' human rights or those which attempt to walk the line between the two.

The International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants

The International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV) was founded in 1961 with the goal of providing a blueprint set of regulations regarding the protection of the breeders/developers of new plant varieties. In this, the focus is largely on protecting plant breeders rights, which, at the time, was a new form of exclusive property rights. The Convention has since been revised in 1972, 1978, and most recently in 1991. Importantly, the 1991 revision mostly takes away the "farmers' exception" or the clause allowing farmers to reproduce or trade seeds, as the rights of the breeder previously only extended to production for the purpose of marketing. In 1991, these rights of the breeder/developer were expanded to include the multiplication of a variety (Peschard 2022). Moreover, while in 1990 there were only 19 countries as members of the UPOV convention, the number grew significantly throughout that

decade, especially as countries from Latin America, Asia, and Africa joined. This growth in membership to the Convention is likely due to the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights agreement (TRIPS), negotiated in 1989-1990, and obliges WTO members to form national legislation protecting the developers of new plant varieties. Additionally, especially the European Union, the US, and Japan began to include obligations of protecting plant breeders/developers as clauses in bilateral trade and investment treaties. For example, at least nine countries in the Latin American region have signed bilateral treaties with either the EU, the US, Japan, or with regional multilateral bodies which either oblige or encourage adherence to UPOV (Sanderson 2017, GRAIN 2022).

The Convention on Biological Diversity

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) of 1991 contains three main objectives. The first is about the conservation of biodiversity. The second covers the sustainable use of the components of biodiversity. With this, the Convention is often critiqued as seeking to conserve biodiversity without addressing root causes of its degradations. The third goal is the fair and equitable participation in the benefits derived from utilizing genetic resources. This entails adequate access (for the users, such as pharmaceutical companies, universities, etc.) and appropriate transfer of the derived technologies (to the countries originally in possession of the resources). However, in the Convention this access to genetic resources, as well as the transfer of any benefits or technologies derived from the genetic diversity, is left to be stipulated on a case-by-case basis through contracts (Rosendal 2000). These contracts will tend to be negotiated between unequal partners. Meanwhile, the rights regarding final products derived from the genetic resources are protected by strict intellectual property rules. States, in negotiation with breeders, developers, or others (including other more powerful states), will negotiate contracts to

allow access to the genetic materials, and to receive compensation. Therefore, while the Convention does offer protections to Indigenous peoples and local communities, it is also critiqued as taking biodiversity out of the realm of a heritage belonging to all of humanity and placing it in the domain of a resource belonging to a sovereign state and as something which can be negotiated away. Additionally, through the negotiation of contracts, the actual details of access and benefit sharing are subject to the rules of the global markets. The process of contract negotiation between unequal partners was reinforced by the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing, signed in 2014 (Alianza Biodiversidad 2020).

Human Rights Declarations of the United Nations

However, due to peasants', Indigenous peoples', family farmers organizations', and others' involvement in organizing transnationally, there are a number of international legal instruments that oblige members or signatories to protect native seeds and the rights of rural populations. First, the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, while not explicitly addressing GMOs or seed issues, supports the protection of Indigenous seed systems and implicitly challenges the spread of GMOs through its emphasis on Indigenous rights to land, resources, culture, and self-determination. This is especially true in the recognition of the right to free, prior, and informed consent for any projects affecting Indigenous lands and resources, which includes agricultural or biotech projects introducing GMOs, which could have ecological and cultural impacts³⁶ (Anaya 2009). Similarly, ILO Convention 169 reinforces these protections through its legally binding recognition of Indigenous peoples' rights to participate in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of development projects that affect them. Its

³⁶ In fact, Indigenous peoples in Colombia have successfully utilized this right to sue the Colombian state for allowing GM seeds in the country without processes of prior consultation.

provisions also underscore the importance of protecting Indigenous methods of subsistence and cultural integrity, which includes safeguarding traditional agricultural knowledge and seed systems.

Additionally, the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) recognizes farmers' right to "save, use, exchange and sell their farm-saved seed or propagating material". Other significant aspects highlighted in the declaration encompass: land access; a sufficient income ensuring equitable market prices for goods; and a focus on civil liberties aimed at shielding small-scale farmers from escalating hostilities, displacements, and legal persecution. While human rights norms are considered to be legally and morally above other types of international legal standards (such as free trade agreements), the UNDRIP and the UNDROP remain declarations, or as merely aspirational agreements, with little to no enforcement other than through the politics of shame for the violation of the rights they define (Claeys & Edelman 2020).

The International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture

However, the International Treaty for Plant Genetic Resources for Agriculture (ITPGRFA) codifies similar rights regarding seeds in the UNDROP article 9. This Treaty has a governing body, financial obligations for membership, and a secretariat to monitor and promote further adherence. With a focus on access and benefit sharing that differs from the CBD, the ITPGRFA facilitates access to the genetic material of 64 seed varieties. Only the ratifying countries can access the genetic materials, and they cannot claim any intellectual property over the resources they receive. The goal is the development of a multilateral system providing access and benefit sharing. The treaty faces criticism because, while intellectual property rights cannot

be claimed over seeds preserved in seed banks, once plant breeders modify these seeds, the resulting new varieties can be patented. Therefore, the treaty system does little to change the growing dynamics of privatization of seeds. Furthermore, plant breeders from the global North have more access to the seed banks of this system, while most rural and Indigenous communities of the global South, while acting as the providers of the seeds stored in the seed banks, do not have the same access (Christinck & Tvedt 2015, Shashikant 2016).

All these international legal instruments, while addressing different fields of law, and created to protect differing social groups, all overlap regarding the issue of seeds. This overlap leaves state governments with an ambiguous international legal framework to guide them in writing seed laws domestically. This ambiguity is heightened through the force of bilateral trade and investment treaties. Such treaties can go through international arbitration when investors feel that the trade agreement is not being respected. This often occurs because the implementation of farmers' rights as outlined in other international instruments (such as UNDROP) places regulations or other limits on the investment. For example, in 2020 Mexico's President announced that the country would end the cultivation of GM corn for human consumption and eventually for animal feed as well. This was in response to the country's 2019-2024 Development Plan, the pressure from farmers organizations, and in compliance with the CBD and its Cartagena Protocol. In reaction, US lawmakers and biotech companies have complained that those measures violate the North American Free Trade Agreement and its successor the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) as it discriminates against non-Mexican agriculture. The case has since been involved in dispute settlement consultation processes³⁷ (IATP 2024).

³⁷ An argument made by the National Peasant's Alliance (*Alianza Nacional de Campesinas*) in favor of Mexico's decree states: "Preserving the integrity of our ancestral foods goes hand in hand with protecting biodiversity and

This demonstrates the role the state plays in shaping the governance of seeds and agricultural systems. By enforcing laws, crafting policies, and engaging in international treaties, states mediate the tension between corporate interests, smallholder farmers, and global food security. Examining the state's involvement in these debates highlights how power dynamics and regulatory frameworks influence the control and distribution of agricultural resources.

The Role of the State

As Pechlaner and Otero (2008) and Motta (2016) recognize, the implementation of the global food regime, or the rules and regulations promoting the use of biotechnology in agriculture, relies on states. It is states which interpret rights and responsibilities according to the conflicting and contradictory international legal framework. States, then, provide the institutional arrangements which create the conditions to either advance corporate and agrarian elite interests or to protect farmers' rights. Moreover, as each state makes decisions on if and how to adopt and implement GM crops, we find variations in the patterns of the current food regime at the state and sub-state levels.

As the global economy operates on an international scale, the state acts as a crucial intermediary between global production systems and national or local economies. It plays a central role in facilitating extractive practices, including agrarian extractivism that relies on integrating GM seeds into agricultural systems (McKay 2020). However, in translating external economic forces into substate regions, the state reshapes their meaning and impact, often altering their original intentions or expected effects.

Indigenous peoples' rights. By supporting Mexico's decree to ban the use of GM corn in tortillas and flour, we also decrease the risk that workers could be exposed to dangerous pesticides, such as glyphosate, which are often used after planting GM seeds. Besides workers' rights, this is also about ensuring that our future generations can enjoy the foods that their ancestors did." See Picciano & Trevino-Sauceda 2024.

By passing laws and policies, such as biosafety regulations, patent laws, and intellectual property rights frameworks, the state decides whether and how GM seeds are integrated into national agriculture. For example, in Colombia, the government's approval of GM seed usage, despite local opposition, illustrates how state policies facilitate the spread of GM technology. As will be discussed in more detail, in some cases, states enforce the adoption of GM seeds through coercive measures or by actively policing compliance with GM seed regulations. This can include criminalizing the use of unapproved seeds, penalizing farmers for violating seed patents, or subsidizing GM seed adoption while restricting access to non-GM seeds. The state can also support GM seed implementation through state-owned agricultural programs, providing incentives like credits, insurance, or subsidies to promote GM seed use. Even in contexts where there is local or grassroots resistance to GM seeds, the state can exert force to ensure the implementation of GM technologies, especially if it aligns with broader economic or trade strategies (Wattnem 2016).

GMOs in Latin America

In the Latin American region, the adoption of GM technology occurred in the context of neoliberal structural reforms as well as multicultural democratic openings. The neoliberalization of Latin American economies since the 1980s witnessed the lifting of protectionist policies, the lowering or elimination of tariffs, the privatization of public organizations offering rural credit, the end or the reversal of land reforms, and the reorientation of food policies toward an export model, (Otero 2008). The region is, therefore, situated in a context of transformations in the structures of agrarian production (Newell 2008).

As has been previously mentioned, during the wave of neoliberal reforms in Latin America, many states simultaneously moved to formally recognize community property rights

and territorial claims, including the ethno-territorial rights of Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples (Bryan 2012; Falletti 2012; Velasco 2014). This period saw the adoption of progressive constitutions that addressed longstanding spatial and territorial demands by emphasizing socio-economic rights, multiculturalism, legal pluralism, and collective group rights. These reforms reflected growing calls for the recognition of diverse identities and more just approaches to resource governance (Anthias 2018; Gargarella 2012; Kröger & Lalander 2016).

The implementation of GM seeds in the region can be understood as a new factor layered onto centuries of extractive activities serving global markets. Due to the regions incorporation into global economies being centered on the extraction of natural resources, economic, social, and political developments have been designed to facilitate such a model of environmental governance (de Castro & Baud 2016). At the same time, the ways that the implementation of GM seeds have been carried out are the results of the contention and negotiation of social movements opposed to GM seeds which have been bolstered by the multicultural democratic and decentralizing reforms found in the new constitutions across the region.

In 1996, Argentina became the first official adopter of GM crops in the region with the approval of the use of GM soy seeds. Lacking concerted public resistance, the bureaucracy was able to quickly implement the release of GM soy seeds, rapidly changing agricultural models in the country to a monocrop and export model. This has come to be referred to as the *sojization* or the soy model (*el model sojero*) of agriculture (Motta 2016, Leguizamón 2020). While today, Brazil ranks as the second largest producer of GM crops, their adoption and implementation were heavily resisted by an organized movement of family farmers, peasants, human rights activists, consumer rights activists, and local governments. This delayed their adoption until 2003, which has since developed into what is termed the agribusiness model (*agronegócio*).

Additionally, the process of adoption involved contention between different levels of government as well as party in-fighting (Motta 2016). After numerous departments of Peru had written regional ordinances prohibiting the use of GM seeds, the national government issued a 10-year moratorium on the entry and cultivation of GM seeds. The main argument was about protecting biodiversity and the practices which have kept it intact in the country. The moratorium has since been extended for another 15 years with the approval of Law 31111 (Branford 2014, Third World Network Biosafety Service Center).

In April 2012, the Colombian Congress passed Bill 1518 adopting UPOV 1991. However, Colombian civil society immediately denounced this new law and appealed to the Constitutional Court. The Court decided that the law was unenforceable due to the fact that the Colombian government did not consult with Indigenous and tribal peoples as required by Article 6 of the International Labor Organization's Convention 169. Likewise, Honduras' Supreme Court of Justice struck down as unconstitutional Legislative Decree No. 21-2012, which was to implement UPOV 1991, declaring that the law contradicted a number of human rights as well as the state's responsibility to protect the environment and used reference to the UNDROP's article 19 (GRAIN 2013).

As states attempt to implement the standards found within the international frameworks, they must negotiate such ambiguous and contradictory visions with differing and competing sectors of their own populations. While national level laws write standards across the claimed territory, they are the results of local debates. Moreover, and are also unevenly implemented, enforced, respected, or interpreted at the sub-state level.

GMOs at the National and Sub-state Levels

At the national and sub-national levels, the introduction of GM seeds has been found to cause rapid structural changes, contributing significantly to territorial conflicts. This includes the substitution of traditional or conventional seed usage with GM seed systems, putting into question the ownership of seeds and the decreasing area of cultivation for native and other traditional seeds (Mitre & Reis 2014, IICA 2013). This is also connected to the loss of biodiversity, as well as the appropriation of nature and knowledges for capital accumulation (Poht 2021). It also empowers large and medium sized farmers, meaning that those with more capital are able to adopt new technologies and will have their power entrenched in the seed system, leading to further deregulation and land concentration (Scoones 2008, Lapegna 2016). Additionally, the implementation of GMO seeds has forced small-scale farmers, unable to afford the entire GM package, to rent their lands to large agribusiness, becoming dependent on the rents and on further GMO deregulation (McKay 2020, Fitting 2011, Dargent & Urteaga 2019). Otherwise, small farmers and rural communities find reduced employment opportunities causing rural out-migration or are dispossessed from their lands through directly violent means (Lapegna 2016).

These changes are facilitated by certain types of seed laws and regulations. On one hand, there are seed laws and regulations as intellectual property rights, authorizing and legitimizing the privatization of seeds (Kloppenburger 1990, McMichael 2009). As plants are self-reproducing, without a law to prevent it, farmers could simply replant harvested seed (Dutfield 2020). Therefore, such property rights are a way for privatizing industries to capture the free reproduction of seeds, otherwise called their “biological barrier to commodification” (Kloppenburger, 1990, p. 11). Such privatization and commercialization of seeds is often framed in anti-GMO activism as Harvey’s (2003) accumulation by dispossession, or as a new wave of

enclosures (Bensaïd 2021). To be eligible for protection for Intellectual Property Rights under the UPOV Treaty, the plant varieties must meet several criteria. These are categorized regarding their need to be new, distinct, stable, and uniform³⁸ (Dutfield 2020).

On the other hand, there are types of non-intellectual property rights-based laws and regulations. These oblige farmers to certify their seeds according to pre-established standards (Gutiérrez Escobar and Vélez 2016, Fitting et al. 2021), creating tools for the dissolution of traditional, or native, seed systems. This is because such laws prohibit and police traditional seed saving and sharing, through the burning of non-certified seeds, the systematic inspection of small farmers' seeds, even 'denounce your neighbor' hotlines and websites (Wattnem 2016). These laws and regulations facilitate the concentration of power in the food system into the seed industry (Filomeno 2014, Howard 2015). These laws, therefore, are found to facilitate the use of GMOs as a tool for transnational agribusiness to expand territorial control (McKay 2020, Lapegna 2016).

However, such focus on the nation-state level as the unit of analysis potentially ignores that the social and environmental effects of global expansion of GM technology are mostly felt in food producing regions, in peasant, Indigenous, farming communities, thus at the local or substate levels³⁹. Therefore, looking into the sub-state opens up the potential for understanding how livelihood strategies and resistances to GM seed adoption are elaborated, as well as how

³⁸ These categories are considered as: **Novelty**: The variety must be new and not previously exploited or sold before a certain date. **Distinctness**: It must have one or more unique characteristics that set it apart from existing, commonly known varieties. **Stability**: These distinguishing traits must remain consistent through repeated reproductions. **Uniformity**: The variety should exhibit consistent characteristics when compared to others of the same species (Dutfield 2020).

³⁹ For example, while seed quality can be a significant challenge in many countries, as some sellers distribute low-quality seeds with poor germination rates. This issue primarily affects the seed industry, which faces competition from counterfeit seed sellers. However, this problem is less prevalent among peasant farmers, who traditionally preserve seeds within their own farms or communities. In villages, seed selection and storage often rely on trusted individuals. Since villagers are familiar with each other and the seed sources, scams are rare in these local systems. Focusing only on the nation-state level ignores this. See GRAIN 2015.

social, political, and environmental consequences are experienced (Gills 2000, Escobar 2011). The consequences of GM technologies - such as dependency on seed corporations, loss of traditional farming practices, and the rise of monocultures - are felt most directly by those who live off the land (Patel 2012). The environmental effects of GM technologies, such as contamination of local seed varieties, increased use of agrochemicals, and changes in land use, are also felt more acutely at the sub-state level. Peasant and Indigenous communities are often the first to experience biodiversity loss, soil degradation, and water pollution (Nixon 2013). Therefore, the sub-state level provides a lens through which we can see the political agency of communities, particularly in their mobilization against GM technologies. Movements towards GMO-free territories, led by Indigenous and peasant communities, show how localized resistance can shape policy debates and challenge both state and corporate narratives. These strategies redefine the relationship between land, food sovereignty, and political power at the local level.

The Implementation of GM Seeds in Colombia

Colombia's rugged geography, its fragmented political landscape, and isolated regions have actually contributed to the preservation of seed diversity by limiting external agricultural pressures in some areas. However, these same factors also reinforced hierarchical and racialized structures, impacting Indigenous peoples' access to and control over land and seeds. The physical separation of communities and limited communication between regions allowed traditional agricultural practices and locally adapted seeds to thrive for long periods of time without the influence of widespread monoculture or industrial farming techniques. This isolation helped protect biodiversity by reducing the spread of uniform crop varieties and preserving the genetic diversity essential for resilience in local ecosystems (Gúzman-Aguilera 2018). However,

over time, processes of agricultural expansion and frontier settlement brought more centralized policies and practices that promoted industrial farming and monoculture. These changes increasingly threatened local seed diversity, as they replaced traditional crops with commercial varieties and integrated rural areas into larger agricultural markets.

The processes of agrarian expansion, what sociologist Orlando Fals Borda (1975) called the law of three steps, included labor (Indigenous, peasant, afro-descendant) converting forests into farmland, then wealthier farmers acquiring it, and eventually large landowners and foreign firms consolidating holdings. The landless laborers would then be forced to clear more land, continuing the cycle. However, the mixed-race, Indigenous, and afro-descendant laborers, their families, and extended networks, regularly fled or escaped these processes. They tended to remain on the agrarian frontiers of state and market expansion, representing what the new state of Colombia was forming against (Ballve 2020). While this process contributed to the spatial segregation of civilized and barbarians in the Colombian elite imaginations, it also gave way for the possibility for supporting (at least temporarily and sporadically) of free farming communities which depended on a diversity of seeds for their more or less autonomous survival.

In this way, the efforts of these groups to ward off incorporation into the state advanced models of escape agriculture and the preservation of escape crops (Scott 2009). Otherwise, as O'Donnell's (2001) notion of brown areas contends, forms of citizenship into the Colombian state tend to fade away at the frontiers of various regions as well as ethnic and racial relations. As such, the need of these farmers and farming communities to ensure their subsistence by generating income from very few resources pushed forward processes of plant improvement. This led to the propagation and conservation of a diversity of seeds well-suited to their ecological contexts.

These seeds have been absorbed into elite political narratives, where they are often labeled as emblematic of backward regions or outdated agricultural practices, reinforcing stereotypes about rural and Indigenous communities. In a sense the seeds have been racialized along with their users and developers (Hernández Vidal 2020). Improved seeds, including hybrids and genetically modified seeds, therefore, are seen as superior to native seeds, not just because of their technological development, but also because of their racial, cultural, and class-based origins.

In Colombia, the first controlled experiments using GM seeds was the cultivation of blue carnations in 2000. Cotton was later approved in 2003, with GM maize approved for controlled plots in 2007, followed by the commercial production of soybeans in 2011 (Fitting 2013). The approval of these GM seeds was done without environmental and socioeconomic impact studies, and without the consultation of Indigenous peoples and the Colombian society more broadly (Gúzman-Aguilera 2018). In fact, a 2017 decision by the Constitutional Court found that Resolution 3168 of 2015 (an effort to repeal and replace resolution 9.70, which will be discussed in more detail below) violated Indigenous peoples' rights to prior consultation.

With the spread of commercial seeds in the country, monoculture farming for export also grew. Therein, the state supports including funding, technical assistance, training, and subsidies became conditional on the use of commercial seeds, most of which are imported from the United States, and are not labeled as to whether they are GM. Moreover, drastic changes in Colombia's food system over the last three decades has seen a country that was relatively food-sufficient and an overall exporter, become dependent on increasing imports and a loss of food sovereignty (Pérez-Rincón 2014). Meanwhile, the multicultural and decentralizing reforms which occurred in Colombia alongside the neoliberal reforms created rule in favor of ethnic communities. These rules have fostered (not always equally or uniformly) tools for the protection of traditional

agricultural practices. This has also allowed Indigenous communities to take legal steps for the protection of their seeds. For example, a lawsuit brought by several Indigenous resguardos to the Constitutional Court ended with a decision in 2023 that:

The plaintiff Indigenous populations demonstrated direct, significant and real biocultural and socioeconomic effects on their collective and individual fundamental rights, as a consequence of the loss of their traditional practices and the risks associated with the lack of protection of their native and creole seeds (Sentencia T-246-23).

The Court then ordered the Colombian State to create a framework that recognizes Indigenous peoples' rights to protection, conservation, and production of their native and traditional seeds, including free and prior consultation. Additionally, the Court ordered the State to grant the same rights to all Indigenous peoples and communities who were not plaintiffs to this case.

Most legal provisions in Colombia applying to seeds, however, only contemplate the protection of the breeders of new plant varieties and fail to mention traditional seed stocks and systems. For example, the Andean Community Decision 345 of 1993 only led to a *sui generis* system of the protection of new plant varieties through a system of certification. Colombia's Decree 533 of 1994 guarantees the implementation of this decision by the Andean Community and appoints ICA as the responsible entity for its execution. Therefore, ICA was the competent authority to establish tests regarding newness, distinctness, stability, and uniformity, as well as to establish the procedures of certification. In 1995, Colombia implemented the UPOV 1978 through Law 243. However, although UPOV 1978 still allowed for the Farmer's Exception, a system of penal sanctions was established in 2006 with Law 1032. This law stated:

Any person who fraudulently uses a trade name, a trademark, patent, utility model, industrial design, or infringes Plants Breeders' Rights, which are legally protected or

similar to the point of confusion to a right legally protected, shall receive the penalty of prison sentence of four (4) to eight (8) years, and a fine of twenty six point sixty six (26.66) to one thousand five hundred (1,500) minimum monthly legal salaries in force.

Later, the Constitutional Court of Colombia found this law as unconstitutional. The Court argues that while the law doesn't explicitly prohibit the use of native or creole seeds, it does penalize the use of seeds that might be similarly confusable to ones that are protected with rights for the plant breeder. Ultimately, according to the Court, this means that farmers are being forced to exclusively use protected or certified seeds, of which there are none of the farmers' native and traditional seeds⁴⁰, although this has not been further developed into policy or legislation.

Additionally, an earlier law on Agriculture and Fisheries Development (1993) also charged the ICA with questions of agricultural health, including technical inspection of farming inputs. To do this, the ICA eventually developed its resolution 9.70 in 2010 which laid down the rules of certification and established a seed registry. Moreover, law 9.70 was meant to fulfil requirements of the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement in bringing Colombia's seed laws in accordance with UPOV 1991. This resolution gave the *Instituto Colombiano Agropecuario* (ICA, the national agriculture institute) policing powers and the ability to fine or jail farmers who exchange peasant seeds which have not been certified by ICA. A specific episode in the municipality of *Campoalegre* in the department of *Huila*, Southwest Colombia, captured a mobilizing image regarding seed politics in Colombia. In this case, ICA, along with anti-riot police, confiscated and destroyed over 70 tons of non-certified seeds belonging to small-scale farmers (Emblin 2013). The Colombian weekly *Semana* stated in 2013 that the law had led to the

⁴⁰ The Court's decision also discusses the possibility of recognizing the value of farmer innovation regarding plant breeding and the potential for collective ownership over the varieties they have developed under the UPOV convention (Gúzman-Aguilera 2018).

destruction of 4,271 tons of seeds of rice, potatoes, maize, and others (Semana 2013).

Subsequently, the Colombian government suspended resolution 9.70 as part of the negotiation process with the strikers of the massive 2013 Agrarian Strike. However, the law has not been replaced and much remains in limbo regarding seeds in the country. New resolutions, such as Resolution 3168 maintain an ambiguity. For example, when discussing regulations on commercial seeds, it does not distinguish traditional or native seeds from improved, hybrid or GM seeds (Gúzman-Aguilera 2018).

Furthermore, while Colombia has signed the ITPGRFA, the international instrument has not been ratified and has no legal force in the country. However, a 2023 change to the Colombian Constitution recognizes the peasantry as a political subject with rights. This includes the right to land and territory, as well as the right to save, use, sell, trade, etc. traditional peasant seeds. Prior to this, the Colombian govt. had sent a note to the United Nations General Assembly stating its support of the UNDROP (La Via Campesina 2022).

Having ratified the International Labor Organization's Convention 169, or the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, Colombia is obligated to respect, protect, and fulfill Indigenous people's right to prior consultation regarding the "formulation, implementation and evaluation of plans and programs for national and regional development which may affect them directly". This was the foundation for the case decided in favor of repealing resolution 3168 of 2015. Later, Colombia supported the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which further outlines and clarifies Indigenous peoples' rights to free, prior, and informed consent regarding legislative or administrative measures that may affect them, redress or restitution for lands taken without consent, the placement or disposal of hazardous materials, the approval of development projects, the use of their lands for military purposes, etc. These

international legal instruments guiding protection of Indigenous peoples' rights are bolstered by the 1991 Colombian Constitution and ensuing domestic legal developments (*República de Colombia* 1991).

The 2016 Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP, (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army), included an Integral Rural Reform, effectively replacing the prior projects of Agrarian Reform. This agreement included the democratization of access to land, the creation of programs of rural development with a territorial focus, the creation of infrastructure and productivity plans, to provide the conditions for food security. This agreement also included a chapter on technical assistance which contemplates seed systems and was the basis for unfinished negotiations between the government and mainly the ONIC on Indigenous seed systems. The peace process invigorated discussions on the protection of traditional agricultural practices, including the safeguarding of native seeds. Many rural communities, especially those involved in Indigenous and peasant movements, have argued for the recognition of their right to cultivate native seeds as part of their cultural heritage and food sovereignty (Acevedo Osorio 2022). The peace agreement opened space for more inclusive policy discussions, allowing these communities to advocate for GMO-Free Territories and other strategies to resist corporate seed regimes. By creating conditions for greater community participation in rural governance⁴¹ (Red de Semillas Libres de Colombia 2017).

Colombia's legal framework surrounding seeds is marked by contradictions, where national policies often promote the use of GM seeds in alignment with global market forces,

⁴¹ In fact, in 2020, a bill was introduced in the Colombian House of Representatives which had the goal of incentivizing the creation of territories free of genetically modified products: <https://www.camara.gov.co/incentivos-para-asegurar-territorios-libres-de-productos-transgenicos-iniciativa-aprobada-en>

while simultaneously attempting to uphold environmental and cultural protections. On one hand, laws like Resolution 970 restricted the exchange of uncertified seeds, heavily favoring corporate seed regimes and threatening local practices of seed saving. On the other hand, court decisions and constitutional protections, such as those for Indigenous territories, have carved out spaces where traditional and native seeds are safeguarded. Indigenous peoples, in particular, have been granted clear constitutional rights to regulate their agricultural practices within their territories, allowing them to reject GM seeds and protect their biodiversity. As a result, Indigenous movements—led by groups like the Zenú and CRIC, have taken a prominent role in defending native seeds, not only within their own territories but also as leaders in broader national and transnational movements against GMOs. Their ability to declare GMO-Free Territories demonstrates how Indigenous political and legal authority has become central in the fight for seed sovereignty in Colombia.

Local resistances

In this context, of at least two different seed systems governing seeds in the country, of unclear (to say the least) rules regarding how seed laws will affect native seeds, the first national gathering of the Free Seeds Network of Colombia was held in 2013. Over 80 peasant and Indigenous organizations, NGOs, activist groups, and academic groups addressed methods for recovering, conserving, and managing native seeds, as well as avenues for political advocacy. This first event was organized under the slogan: “For each seed they decommission from us, we will make them germinate and flourish again, multiply, spread, and freely walk with the farmers through the fields of Colombia” (RSLC 2013). This network has played a fundamental role in resistance efforts against GM seeds and in advancing GMO-Free Territories. In fact, it has been

discussed that the GMO-Free Territories (discussed in more detail below) can be understood as the development of a territorial base of the Free Seeds Network (Hernández Vidal 2022).

Therefore, throughout this process of changing agriculture towards biotechnology, monoculture plantations, privatization, etc. the power of large industries and other powerful actors has not gone uncontested. The contestation of seed governance by those involved in the Free Seeds Network and similar processes ranges from mass mobilization to countering narratives in the media, education in schools and places of worship, lawsuits, public hearings, supporting agroecological farming systems, creating seed houses and larger networks of seed keepers⁴², as well as the rejection of agriculture programs from the state or private entities that use GM (or unlabeled) seeds.

Colombian rural communities have used Participatory Systems of Guarantees (SPG) as a means to certify organic and native products and bypass the corporate-dominated certification processes. SPG systems are farmer-led, and they allow small-scale producers to ensure quality standards while maintaining control over their seeds and production methods. This legal framework empowers communities to set their own agricultural standards, protecting native seeds and traditional farming practices (Semillas de Identidad 2019). Additionally, educational campaigns have linked seed preservation with broader environmental concerns, such as water rights and land use, mobilizing both farmers and urban consumers in the fight against GMOs (Motta 2014).

⁴² Networks of seed-keepers refer to organized groups or alliances that focus on the conservation, sharing, and protection of traditional or heirloom seeds, often in opposition to industrial seed systems dominated by genetically modified (GM) seeds and corporate control. These networks aim to preserve biodiversity, promote agroecological practices, and ensure food sovereignty by maintaining local seed varieties adapted to specific environmental conditions. See Da Via 2012, Gutiérrez Escobar 2016c, Fitting et al. 2021, Phillips 2013.

These strategies illustrate that the conflict over GM seeds is not merely about technology, access, or economic benefits; it is about territorial control. Local communities see GM seeds as a threat to their ability to govern their land, protect biodiversity, and maintain cultural and agricultural sovereignty. By resisting GMOs, they are defending their right to manage their own territories, set the terms of agricultural production, and reject external forces that threaten their autonomy. Thus, the battle over seeds is a territorial struggle where land, culture, and sovereignty are deeply intertwined.

GMO-Free Territories

The beginning of the twenty-first century saw the emergence of an evolving process across mainly Europe and Latin America of different communities, regions, zones, municipalities, Indigenous reserves, etc., different territorial entities, declaring themselves to be GMO-Free Territories. Such territories are described as:

An area cultivated or not, where those who exercise control, individually or collectively, prevent the planting, use, or consumption of GMO seeds and foods. It is a preventive measure to protect native and local seeds, avoid genetic contamination, maintain conventional and organic agriculture, recover traditional knowledge, maintain healthy food, protect natural ecosystems from agrochemicals, strengthen regional and local food sovereignty, etc.

According to the Spanish environmental organization, *Ecologistas en Acción* (2006) as of 2006 there were around 4,500 local governments and 170 larger regions that had declared themselves as GMO-Free throughout the European Union. This trend was started in 2003 and was heavily strengthened with the signing of *Europe's Regional Governments and Local*

Authorities Charter, in 2005. Signatories of this Charter officially promote and enhance specific projects to support traditional agricultural practices and organic farming, as well as anti-GMO measures.

In the Latin American region, the *Red Por Una América Latina Libre de Transgénicos* (Network for a GMO-Free Latin America), was founded in 1999. This Network was founded mainly by Indigenous, peasant, environmental, and other civil society organizations and social movements. An important aspect of the work of this Network is the promotion of GMO-Free Territories. In Costa Rica, for example, as of 2014 around 84% of municipalities had declared themselves as GMO-Free (Pacheco & García 2014). In other countries with long-standing and broad experiences with GMOs, such as Argentina, the focus has been on reducing the zone of fumigations and use of agro-chemicals (which many GMO seeds depend on). Furthermore, the defense of Indigenous territory and autonomy has been an important mobilizing factor in anti-GMO activism in the region.

As of 2022, there are nine Indigenous reservations, and two rural municipalities declared as GMO-Free Territories in Colombia. The construction of these territories as GMO-Free has included the development of seed houses which defend local community economies by maintaining autonomous seed production and distribution systems. Agro-ecological practices, the suppression of pesticide use, the promotion and recovery of traditional knowledges, local mechanisms for democratic participation, the sharing of best practices across territories, and forming national and international networks have also been important actions.

A GMO-Free Territory is an effort to materialize self-determination. It gets at the fundamental rights of farmers, Indigenous communities, afro-descendant communities, as well as urban producers and consumers. In declaring their territories GMO-Free, they are claiming the

rights to decide how their lands and resources are managed. As a foundation for the continued defense and construction of territory, it is an effort at territorializing certain valuations of agrarian production, intellectual property, traditional knowledges, democratic participation, etc.

A transgenic-free territory is a territorial space in which its inhabitants have decided to adopt the right of the principle of precaution in using certain technology, in this case transgenic technology. It is a territory that has decided to not cultivate those seeds and to make use of that protection for their food heritage in their territories. In other words, we have been cultivating for millennia, we have our own food tradition and we want to preserve it. So, the GMO-Free Territory means autonomy for the people to decide what to plant, how to plant it, and to have that freedom to decide⁴³.

Political Geographer Carlos Walter Porto-Gonçalves reminds us that: “politics is exactly the art of defining limits” (Porto Gonçalves 2001). These GMO-Free Territories are placing spatial limits on forces of dispossession and spatially constructing self-determination over decisions regarding what kind of food is grown, how it is grown, for what purposes, and more. Ultimately, other models of life, economics, and society are being defended (Escobar 2020).

Conclusion

The debates over seeds are fundamentally territorial issues for several reasons. First, they involve control over land and resources, as the spread of GM seeds often aligns with industrial agricultural expansion, shifting land use and control from local communities to states and corporations. The development of the politics of seeds, biotechnologies, intellectual property, and peasant and Indigenous rights, presented here in this chapter, exemplifies the history of

⁴³ Interview with a seed activist, Pasto, Nariño, March 21st, 2022.

capitalism as a history of the advancement of private property over commons. It also shows the history of resistance to such a process. As Kloppenborg (1990) identifies, the development of GM seeds as patentable, and the modernization of agriculture more broadly, have been processes of the advancement of capital throughout the countryside and into the production of food.

Moreover, the history shows the state as the necessary actor for the imposition of regulations to make legible the population within the state territory, as well as to make legible the activities of that population (including agricultural productive models). The regulation, or attempted regulation, of territories, of biodiversity (plant genetic resources), of seeds, however, have been processes of supplanting social mechanisms of regulation, developed over time to foster sustainable agricultural practices in specific contexts, with more centralized, authoritarian, uniform, and foreign rules.

Second, these debates are tied to cultural and political sovereignty, especially for Indigenous and peasant communities who view the defense of native seeds as part of their struggle for territorial autonomy and the preservation of traditional agricultural systems. The early agrarian states tended to expand and amplify their agroecological setting by landscaping and other means: repairing channels, digging canals, penalizing subjects for not cultivating, clearing forests for new fields, forbidding nontaxable subsistence activities, etc. (Scott 2017). Such a process can be seen continuing today in biotechnology and genetically modified seeds. In addition to the Criminalization of traditional and local seed distribution systems, a brief look at the main GM crops planted around the world shows a striking similarity to the characteristics of the staple crops of the early agrarian states. For example, soybeans, corn, cotton, and canola make up 99 percent of all transgenic crops globally (Leguizamón 2020).

Finally, the co-existence of GM and native seeds has significant environmental implications, with the risk of genetic contamination threatening local biodiversity and the ecological integrity of territories managed through traditional practices. Seeds, the associated knowledges of their uses, and the models of agriculture which foster their sustainability and diversification, have progressed throughout centuries of peasant and Indigenous labor. This has led peasant and Indigenous communities (and more) to resist the privatization and centralization of seeds. In the case of Colombia, the ambiguous and at least dual legal system to draw upon leaves such communities with unknown rights, and unstable avenues to make claims. However, due to the political activism of Indigenous peoples at local, national, and international scales over the last thirty years, relations between states and Indigenous peoples have been transformed, allowing Indigenous peoples to take leading roles in agrarian struggles.

The contestation over GM seeds is intricately linked to Indigenous and peasant struggles for territorial autonomy and food sovereignty. In Colombia and globally, the defense of native seeds represents resistance against the privatization of life and the loss of autonomy over land and resources. These movements underscore the enduring fight for self-determination and ecological integrity, demonstrating how Indigenous activism has reshaped relationships with the state and carved out spaces for leadership in agrarian and environmental struggles.

Chapter 5: The Role of Seeds in the (Re)construction of an Indigenous *Resguardo*: The case of the Pueblo Zenú in Córdoba and Sucre

Contemporary Indigenous identity is based, in reality, on a history of struggles that are related to the recovery of lands and the construction of their own territory (Velendia Díaz 2022, pg. 19).

*Whenever you want to understand the significance of the Indigenous *resguardo* today, you must recognize historically the processes of struggle and the defense of the territories (Madera Paternina 2013, pg. 57).*

In the Zenú case, the process of reclaiming autonomy in the *resguardo* has unfolded through a set of interconnected mechanisms: claims-making, memory work, identity revival, boundary activation, and territorialization. These mechanisms have been crucial in reconstructing a political project in a territory where Indigenous presence was nearly erased from public and legal recognition. The mobilization around seed activism, particularly the formal declaration of the *resguardo* as a GMO-Free Territory, became a catalytic moment through which these dynamics coalesced. As will be demonstrated, seed politics offered the Zenú not only a new site of struggle, but also a means of articulating jurisdiction, reviving Indigenous identity, and materializing autonomy through ecological and territorial governance.

Context

Declaration of a GMO-Free Territory in Colombia

In October of 2005, a regional meeting of over 300 people (Indigenous authorities or *cabildos*, captains of Indigenous community councils, representatives of producer associations,

schoolteachers, students, and more) made the decision to declare the Zenú Indigenous Resguardo of San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba and Sucre⁴⁴ as a “GMO-Free Territory”. This was the first area of Colombia to declare itself GMO-Free (Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre, Colombia 2010). The central motivation for this declaration, according to interviewees, was:

The protection of our culture, the protection of our food sovereignty, the guarantee of healthy food, of a well-formed nutrition. Life. It is synonymous with life. And Indigenous peoples are just that. We are a construction of life, and that is what is intended by protecting our food sovereignty, to guarantee the survival of future generations⁴⁵.

Later, in 2010, the Cabildo Mayor of the resguardo ratified the declaration with a resolution and a number of internal regulations. In this legal document, it is stated that the resolution and the regulations are to be implemented and enforced across the entire 83,000 hectares of the 1773 colonial resguardo. As will be demonstrated below, the contested nature of the existence, limits, population, authority structure, etc. of the resguardo throughout Colombia’s history plays an important role in this declaration as a GMO-Free Territory. Waves of state and industry led efforts to take lands away from the resguardo and to put them into private hands put severe strains on Zenu identity and culture (Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre, Colombia 2015). While various parcels, farms, or pastures have been recuperated by the Zenu since the 1970s and 1980s contentious period of land takeovers, they only form a

⁴⁴ The Colombian figure of the resguardo is similar to that of the Native American Reservations in the USA. However, the translation into Spanish of reservation – *reservas indígenas* – implies a more limited autonomy, control, and self-government, as well as a more dependent relationship with the state, than does the term resguardo. The resguardo is a measure of self-government and autonomy with a particular and separate relationship with the state. Therefore, I have chosen to keep the Spanish term for its more accurate meaning (Ng’weno 2000).

⁴⁵ Author interview with community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 24, 2022.

kind of patchwork with numerous large landowners⁴⁶ still in control of their lands for cattle ranching or monocrop plantations. Additionally, 16 municipalities have been established throughout the historic area of the Indigenous resguardo with competing claims to political authority (Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre, Colombia 2015).

Therefore, in addition to prohibiting GM seeds, the GMO-Free Territory also prohibits studies which might appropriate or privatize elements of Zenu cultural or natural patrimony; any type of intellectual property over genetic resources or traditional knowledge; mono-crop plantations; the burning of forests and protected areas; and the regulations make a special notice of prohibiting any food aid which might contain GM seeds. Likewise, it confers responsibilities on the Indigenous authorities to distribute the declaration and resolution in all possible spaces of education and formation in the resguardo; to conduct a diagnostic to identify existing native seeds in each community; to promote agroecological practices; and to form a Regional Committee on Genetic Resource (Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre, Colombia 2010). The resguardo Zenu, in declaring itself a GMO-Free Territory, is a component of a larger process of struggle, control, subjugation, colonization, resistance, cultural adaptation, state-building, and more, all within specific space-time contexts.

History of the Zenu People and the Resguardo

It is believed that the Zenu made contact with the Spanish during the early 16th century (Támara Gómez 1998). Epidemics, bad treatment, and violent conflicts followed, leading to significant population declines for the Zenu. Additionally, the introduction of new production

⁴⁶ The Spanish word *terrateniente* refers to the owners of large tracts of lands. It comes from the feudal system and the role of the nobles in owning vast agricultural lands. It is currently used to refer to those who come from this legacy and/or own large tracts of land. I use the English term 'large landowners' or 'landholders' referring to this context.

systems, conversion to Christianity, and the arrival of European goods disrupted Zenu social and political structures (van der Hammen 2003). In an effort to protect the Zenu people (or, as others have argued, a method to maintain a labor force and the supply of goods), the Spanish Crown created the resguardo by Royal Charter Number 1060 in 1773 covering 83,000 hectares (RECAR 2007, Támara Gómez 1998, Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre, Colombia 2015)⁴⁷. However, waves of methods to take away resguardo lands continued. Since the creation of the resguardo, the process of land loss is largely due to the arrival of landowners who promoted extensive livestock farming and monocultures, and numerous other efforts to take land away from the Indigenous people.

The rise of cattle ranching in the Caribbean coastal plains (Codazzi and Domínguez 1996) coincided with the policies of the Liberal government beginning in the 1850s of terminating communal land, inducing Indigenous families to lose their lands and become tenant farmers (Luna 1993, Gonzalez 1970, Friede 1972). On top of this extensive and intensive cattle ranching, around 1880, the lumber industry experienced a boom in Caribbean Colombia, especially regarding cedar and mahogany forests. These endeavors helped clear the way for further cattle ranching and the growth of urban centers such as Montería (Parsons 1952). Later, mechanized agriculture, increased government funding, international aid, and chemical herbicides further accelerated deforestation and land acquisition, deeply integrating the region into the Colombian state (Van Ausdal 2009, Leal and Van Ausdal 2013).

⁴⁷Additionally, there were previous efforts at creating resguardos for the Zenu at a smaller scale, for example, in 1675 resguardo were created in Colosó, Morroa, Sampués, Jugua, and Guaza in today's department of Sucre. However, these resguardos were invaded almost immediately after their creation and quickly disappeared (García Alvarez 2012).

By the time Law 55 was passed in 1905, the municipal representative, Pedro Pablo Herazo, declared that the Resguardo Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento had disappeared, and with it, the Indigenous peoples which once inhabited the resguardo (Madera Paternina 2013). This had tremendous impacts on the Zenu identity, culture, territory, etc.

We lost a large part of our cultural identity, because Law 55 of 1905 prohibited the Zenúes from talking about the resguardo, from talking about our customs, our traditions, our systems of government. So, a large part of that cultural identity was lost there, which had a great impact on us. And the loss of the territory also had a great impact⁴⁸.

Another interviewee claimed:

The Congress of the Republic in 1905 issued Law 55 specifically for the Zenúes, where it stated that the reservation had been extinguished, that the lands did not exist, and that the few lands that were available had to become property of the municipal administrations, in this case as property of the mayors. And that the Zenúes no longer existed, that they had become extinct, that there were no Zenúes. More than extermination, those of us who were left alive, our parents, our grandparents, were subjugated⁴⁹.

Later, in 1924, armed with legal documentation collected from previous territorial disputes, community leader Pedro Gerónimo Dignasés went to Bogotá in order to address the President of Colombia, and was able leave a record of the protocolization of the limits of the

⁴⁸ Author interview with Indigenous authority, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023.

⁴⁹ Author interview with community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023

colonial resguardo of San Andrés de Sotavento with deed 1060 of 1928(Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre, Colombia 2015).

From the 1920s to the 1940s, failed efforts were made to extract oil from the former Zenu resguardo. The South American Oil Company initiated drilling in 1922 with promising initial results. However, after months of more drilling, no oil was found, leading most companies to withdraw (Madera Paternina 2013, ¹ Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre, Colombia 2015). However, the oil issue triggered intense legal battles over the ownership of the land destined for oil exploration. For example, in a case between large landowners and Indigenous people, the Supreme Court of Justice determined that any vacant lands have become abandoned and cease belonging to Indigenous jurisdiction (Pardo 1993, Velendia 2003). Moreover, in the late 1940s, cotton production surged in the region, with cultivated cotton areas growing from 700 hectares in 1948 to 25,000 hectares in 1950 (Parsons 1952). The Colombian state supported the industry by subsidizing American farm machinery, providing certified seeds to farmers, and building cotton gins in collaboration with textile mill owners. However, the cotton boom declined steadily after the 1970s, and by 2014, Colombia had stopped exporting cotton (Salazar Castellanos 2022).

In the 1950s, Eusebio Feria de la Cruz, a Zenu community leader protocolized the land titles to the Indigenous parcialidad of the communities of Los Cerros Vidales, guaranteeing, for the time being, the survival of the Indigenous Zenú people with Deed 81 of 1953 (Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre, Colombia 2015). These documents and protocols left from community leaders were eventually re-discovered during a contentious period of land invasions, referred to as “recuperations” by the Zenú, and they assisted to formalize titles to the recuperated lands.

In the processes of the loss of the resguardo the food sovereignty of the Zenu people was also lost. This can be represented in the amount of monocrop plantations in the region which sow GM seeds. According to Agro-bio (Agro-Bio 2022), as of 2021, in the department of Córdoba (where the majority of the resguardo Zenu lies) there are 16,863 hectares of GM maize and 2,365 hectares of GM cotton. This is the department in Colombia with the second highest amount of land dedicated to GM crop production. This context means less cultivable area per family and the loss of local genetic materials creating a dependence on outside seeds and inputs. The loss of food sovereignty is strengthened by the expansion of pastures for cattle, the introduction of commercial agriculture models, government development programs, and the construction of roads. This all caused the loss of certain animals as well as plant species. As cattle ranches and monocrop plantations don't need as many laborers as traditional family and community-based sustenance agriculture, Zenu people became dependent on day labor work outside of the resguardo, even moving into other regions. Moreover, seeking economic security, many became dependent on illicit crops. Ultimately, this created dependence on food sources from outside of the resguardo (García Alvarez 2012).

The case reveals connections between mechanisms of claims-making, identity revival, and territorialization within the larger or overarching process of Indigenous construction of territorial autonomy. Ultimately, the current efforts to make the resguardo a GMO-Free Territory is a continuation of the process begun in those land recuperations. It is a part of the territorialization of the Zenu people, to assert their autonomous authority over the territory⁵⁰. Therefore, to understand the declaration of the Resguardo Zenú of San Andrés de Sotavento as a

⁵⁰ Author conversations with community leaders during fieldwork, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023

GMO-Free Territory, it must be placed in the context of the process of the recuperation of Indigenous identity and the (re)construction of the Indigenous resguardo.

Agrarian Reform as Critical Juncture (1961 – 1974)

The agrarian reform based on law 135 of 1961 was a moderate effort at alleviating rural unrest. New institutions were established, such as INCORA (Institute for Agrarian Reform) and older institutions revived and repurposed, such as IDEMA (Agricultural Marketing Institute)⁵¹, but mainly the large landowners were able to fend off major land redistribution. In fact, the early years of 1962-1967 are considered as a period of merely institutional organization of agrarian reform, including initiatives for supporting agricultural production, adaptation and changes in land use, and providing credit to peasant farmers, mostly leaving aside the topic of land-redistribution. The Caribbean region of Colombia, including Córdoba and Sucre, had a long history of land concentration dating back to colonial times, with wealthy families and elites maintaining control over vast tracts of land. Therefore, despite the reform initiatives, the Córdoba and Sucre regions continued to experience high levels of land concentration, with large estates remaining predominant and many peasants lacking access to land (Berry 2004).

The colonial hacienda model persisted throughout the history of the region, although layered with capitalist oriented production. This created a configuration in which the regional political powers were heavily tied to the organization and distribution of property. With this, the large landowners not only monopolized agricultural production in the region but also achieved

⁵¹ Discussions in community workshops highlighted key contributions of the agrarian reform institutions to Zenu consciousness of safeguarding native seeds. First, in the 1980s, INCORA provided credits to support Zenu cultivation of native maize, cassava, and yams. Second, the Instituto Mercadeo Agropecuario (IDEMA), founded in 1944, was revitalized and repurposed during the agrarian reform in the 1960s. IDEMA managed agricultural product marketing, encompassing purchasing, sale, storage, import, and export. Zenu participants recalled IDEMA collaborating with them in the 1970s to procure and distribute locally sourced products in the Caribbean region, promoting the preservation of local and native seed varieties. Conversations during community-based workshops, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, October 6, 2022

important alliances meant to coopt the institutions of the local municipalities and the departments. Together with this model the administration of security (security of private property) formed into a private security and organized and controlled by the large landowners. These were some of the roots of the paramilitary organizations that came to power in the 1980s-1990s (CINEP 2016).

As mentioned above, the Liberal president Lleras Restrepo initiated the ANUC (National Peasants Association of Colombia) in 1967 as a state-sponsored organization that would promote peasant involvement in the provision of rural services and in the agrarian reform program, hopefully exerting the pressure that was needed to overcome the landowners' opposition (Zamosc 1986). As Lleras Restrepo stated it: "There will be no agrarian reform if the peasantry, its organizations and users do not impose it. Without organized peasant pressure, there will be no agrarian reform"⁵². Initially, the ANUC played this role as channeling the demands from the countryside to the state and supporting the National Front governments. However, as it became clear that the next conservative president Pastrana (1970-1974) was not going to support the agrarian reform process⁵³, the ANUC began to re-consider strategies (Zamosc 2013).

The ANUC, especially on the Caribbean Coast, quickly radicalized, and land invasions became a central strategy to force the land reform process. Such methods of land invasion is described by Hobsbawm:

The mobilization of an invasion normally takes place in the evening, the actual operation, on sound military principles, at dawn, though this is not invariable. A more or less large

⁵² Excerpts from the speech by Carlos Lleras Restrepo at the inauguration of the first Departmental Association of Peasant Users (ANUC-Sucre), in Sincelejo, Sucre. In Apolinar Díaz-Callejas 2002.

⁵³ The Pact of Chicarol, where President Misael Pastrana, along with Congressmen from the Liberal and Conservative parties with significant interests in land, particularly in Cauca, the eastern plains, and the Caribbean, agreed to reform Law 135 of 1961. This reform fundamentally changed the law's essence by eliminating the expropriation of unproductive large estates and prioritizing business exploitation of the land and resources over peasant development (Zamosc 2013).

mass of men, women and children – to the number of hundreds or even thousands – accompanied by livestock, implements and building materials, occupies the disputed territory, tearing down fences, walls and other boundary markers, and immediately proceeds to build simple huts or other structures, generally along the line of the boundary claimed as legitimate (Hobsbawm 1974, pg. 128).

Land invasions or land recuperations, therefore, are a form of contentious claims-making where rural communities occupy land to assert their rights, challenge existing property relations, or demand land reform. The tactic is often used in contexts where rural communities face landlessness, displacement, or exploitation, and where legal or institutional avenues for addressing these grievances are inadequate or unavailable (Fernandes 2013).

In 1971, the ANUC was involved in occupying 645 large estates. This was the highest number of the land takeovers in a given year during the contentious process. By 1985 this number was down to 100 for the year. Overall, the ANUC helped lead over 2000 land invasions or recuperations under the slogan “the land for those who work it”, the majority of the recuperations occurred on the Caribbean Coast and other places where the latifundio system is predominant (Zamosc 1986, Fajardo 2014). While the early phases of the Zenú revival centered on recovering land and recognition, it will be demonstrated how these efforts increasingly turned toward the defense of native seeds, which became a new site of political struggle and a tool for asserting territorial control.

Making Claims on the Land, the Territory, and the Resguardo (1960s – 1990s)

As we have always claimed, here, this is a resguardo. In the different cities such as Sincelejo, Monteria, Cartagena, where we can make claims like this to the state, we always insist that this must be⁵⁴.

The Declaration of the Indigenous Zenu Resguardo as a GMO-Free Territory begins by making claims to the original 83,000 hectares of the resguardo from the Royal Charter of 1773. In fact, the internal regulations define the resguardo as a collective territory, stating that the resguardo is a:

geographical space within the ancestral territory of the Zenu people, communal property, recognized by the colonial title of 1773 and by legal adjudication before the corresponding state entity (INCODER). In this territory, our own laws and self-government are exercised in accordance with our customs and traditions (Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre, Colombia 2010).

Importantly, this is not solely a claim on the land, rather the Zenu are making a territorial claim. The distinction between land and territorial claims is pivotal. While rural communities may have strong connections to specific lands crucial for their livelihoods, these claims usually don't challenge established rules and institutions. Territorial claims, however, transcend mere land ownership; they aim to transform existing rules and regulations, asserting power, identity, autonomy, and control over natural resources, seeking changes in institutional frameworks (Offen 2003). To more fully understand such a claims making process, therefore, the claims being made to the territory of the colonial resguardo must be put into the context of the land recovery process sparked by a 1960s effort at limited and mostly failed agrarian reform.

⁵⁴ Author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023.

From Peasants to Indigenous

It was in the efforts at gaining and formalizing titles to these recuperated lands that the documents which Pedro Gerónimo Dignasés in the 1920s and Eusebio Feria de la Cruz in the 1950s had registered to leave record of the Zenu resguardo were re-discovered⁵⁵. Such discovery gave potency to the notion of claiming the territory as Indigenous people rather than claiming the land as peasants, re-igniting Zenu cultural and identity mobilization⁵⁶. However, resorting forcefully to the colonial title led to difficulties in coupling agrarian mass struggle with an Indigenous territorial struggle. During the 1974 ANUC Congress, Indigenous organizations, including the Zenu, decided to separate from the ANUC due to the differing goals based on ethnicity, culture, and territorial autonomy, rather than class-based land redistribution as private property (Zamosc 1986, Mamián Guzmán 2019). Moreover, the CRIC (Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca, formed in 1971) aided Indigenous groups nationwide to establish their own organizations. The Zenu Indigenous Organization emerged in 1979-1980, resulting from these collaborations with the ANUC and the CRIC (Zamosc 1986). The organization of a more centralized cabildo mayor to articulate the efforts of the smaller communities, and to represent the Zenu externally began in 1981 (Resguardo Indígena Zenú San Andrés de Sotavento Córdoba-Sucre 2015).

This sparked a contentious period of land recuperations by the Zenú based on their Indigenous identity which began in 1974 with the takeover of La Esmeralda and Aguas Mohosas estates (about 200 hectares combined) (Madera Paternina 2013). Referring to the initial land takeovers, an interviewee stated:

⁵⁵ Deed 1060 of 1928, Deed 81 of 1953.

⁵⁶ Author interviews with community leaders and Indigenous authorities, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023; conversations during community-based workshops, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, October 6, 2022.

From there came all of this, the rest of the land recoveries. And that gave rise to organizing and structuring a board of directors that would manage and begin to coordinate the issue of empowerment and strengthening and making visible the Indigenous movement. That is when we can say the resguardo is reborn, revived, when it reappears. And it is born with strength and with clear arguments to continue with our juridical life even today⁵⁷.

I can remember that I was there at about eight or ten years old. I had to go out with my dad and offer my duty to be there with the mingas⁵⁸. To be there and talk with the authorities. It was very important for me to be in that process. And that process of struggle has remained and will remain over time, because it has been going on for a long time in our territory⁵⁹.

This change in identity, from peasant to Indigenous, and the change in claims, from land to territory, opened new, or if not quite new, latent opportunities. For example, at the national level claims based on Indigenous identity and the founding of Indigenous organizations was growing. The birth of the Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC) in 1971 and other organizational structures in other departments, as well as the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) at the national level in 1982, bolstered claims being made based on Indigenous identity (Zamosc 1986). Moreover, the Zenu now had legal tools such as the continuing force of Law 89 of 1890 as governing state-Indigenous relations. For example,

⁵⁷ Author interview with Indigenous authority, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, October 6, 2022.

⁵⁸ The *minga* is a Quechua word for communal work and is an important custom practiced across the Andean region. It refers to collective work which benefits the whole community, and also includes meetings and other deliberative processes in this work. It is about neighbors or community members working in solidarity to achieve collective tasks. In Colombia, the word has especially taken on the notion of the collective work necessary for political struggle (Poole 2009).

⁵⁹ Author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023

referring to the process of establishing Indigenous decision-making authorities over the newly recuperated resguardo lands, the Zenu write in their Life Plan:

Protected by Law 89 of 1890, we organized our cabildos and began registration processes to determine the collective distribution of the recovered lands. This was not easy, since the cabildos not only had to coordinate and develop internal activities of our communities, but they were also our main representation and dialogue with the State (Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre 2015).

Subsequent years witnessed only sporadic recuperations, often followed by incarcerations, abuses, and assassinations (Madera Paternina 2013, Observatorio del Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos y Derecho Internacional Humanitario 2009). However, the process of land recuperations with the goal of rebuilding the resguardo intensified around 1987 and remained at a high level until around 1992. The majority of Zenu land recuperations occurred during this time.

Presence of Armed Conflict

In the late 1970s, the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL, The Popular Army of Liberation) expanded from the Urabá region into Córdoba and Sucre, often giving support to the peasant movement. Moreover, in the 1980s, the FARC and the Quintin Lame entered the region of the resguardo. These armed insurgent groups often supported campesino and Indigenous causes, but also operated autonomously, and could sometimes use extortion, assassinations, forced displacement of communities, kidnapping, and more in order to advance their own agendas (Montoya Noriega 2018, CINEP 2016, and Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2010).

Additionally, the formation of paramilitary groups in the region during the 1980s coincides with the time of greatest land recoveries, leading to heightened violence and

contention. These paramilitary groups in the region formed as a project to protect the landholdings of the large landowners and the cattle ranchers. During this process, over 30 Zenú leaders were assassinated, at least five massacres occurred, numerous death threats were issued towards Zenu community leaders, and damage was inflicted on the Casa Indígena de San Andrés (place of government) (Madera Paternina 2013). The paramilitary power managed to weaken the organization of land recuperations and stopped them after 1997. These efforts were bolstered by Law 160 of 1994, which shifted the focus from state-led agrarian reform to market-based land distribution and privatization. During this heightened violence in the region, the Interamerican Court of Human Rights passed a resolution requiring the Colombian state to take the necessary measures to protect the lives of threatened Zenu leaders (some having already fled the resguardo)⁶⁰. Moreover, with the rise and domination of the paramilitary organization beginning in the late 1990s and especially in the second half of the first decade of the 21st century, the Zenu Cabildo Mayor as well as the cabildo menores were obligated to negotiate certain political rights and organizational authority. Some communities were more permissive of the paramilitary movement forming certain alliances, while others not trusting the paramilitaries, ending up being persecuted and silenced by the paramilitaries, resulting in paramilitary dominance within the resguardo. Such paramilitary efforts were intended to have control over the newly established State financial transfers to the resguardo.

Such situations caused by the ongoing armed conflict furthered the risk of the disintegration of Zenu culture and identity, as well as the emerging community and resguardo. The structural problems of this conflict have a long history in the country, and especially in the Caribbean region. This is highlighted in the historical development of land occupation and

⁶⁰ See Clemente Teherán *et al.* Case, Order of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights of January 29, 1999, Inter-Am. Ct. H.R. (Ser. E) (1999).

frontier expansion, as Fals Borda describes in his law of three steps⁶¹. With the land recuperation efforts through land invasions, the context of the armed conflict in the region was complicated and is better understood as processes of multiple converging and diverging territorial transformations.

Over time, the Zenú formalized their occupied lands, leading to reduced violence. Importantly, starting in 1984, the Colombian State, represented by INCORA, was compelled to develop a plan to acquire and return lands to the Indigenous Zenú. This involved 2,842 Zenu families and 5,835 hectares of the former reservation (Resguardo Indígena Zenú San Andrés de Sotavento Córdoba-Sucre, 2015). As the community expanded its land holdings, INCORA and the Indigenous Affairs Division of the Ministry of Government continued to acquire and allocate lands. According to data collected by the NGO SwissAid, in total, 91 farms with 10,086 hectares were recovered (SWISSAID 2023).

International Accompaniment

With a presence in rural communities in Colombia since 1974, the international non-governmental organization SWISSAID began to accompany the Zenu in their efforts at establishing themselves on the newly recuperated lands in 1987⁶². Beginning with 3,000 families, SWISSAID assisted in advancing cassava, corn, and yam production for family/community sustenance on farms between one and ten hectares. This accompaniment played a major role in the development of the initiative for food sovereignty in the territory

⁶¹ See Fals Borda (1975) in which he discusses how a dynamic was generated in which the marginal settlers felled the forest, adapted the land, and later ranchers and merchants appropriated it, in many cases through violence, eventually selling it to international companies or national capitalists. Once the cycle was completed, it was repeated, and on and on.

⁶² Conversations during community-based workshops, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, October 6, 2022, identified this as a critical moment in the trajectory of the project of autonomy in the resguardo.

focused on the recovery of native seed varieties. In fact, in this initial project, 25 varieties of corn were recovered and conserved by the early 1990s (SWISSAID 2023). In support of the land recovery process, and directly confronting the legacy of Law 55 of 1905, SWISSAID also assisted in the creation of a video titled “The Indians of Colombia Do Exist” (*Los Indios de Colombia Si Existen*), which went viral in the media and played an important role in supporting the land recovery campaign of the Zenu Resguardo (Ibid.).

In a second project, SWISSAID identified that displacement due to the armed conflict was a major contributor to the loss of traditional or native seeds and local ancestral diets. Therefore, a project was developed which supported the return of Zenu members displaced due to the heightened intensity of the conflict in the 1980s and 1990s. The focus on returning families and community members was on advancing food sovereignty (Ibid.). After the completion of this project, the experience led to the creation of a guide which was distributed throughout the resguardo territory and even across the country into other communities. This guide, titled “Recovering life. Guide for the recovery of seeds and food sovereignty in situations of conflict in Colombia” explains that typical food distributed as humanitarian aid (as the Zenu families could receive in situations of displacement) were not traditional or local foods, and the seeds were often “improved” (meaning proprietary) and couldn’t be saved from season to season. The guide, for example, assists families and communities in a rapid participatory diagnostic on the issue of seeds upon returning to the recuperated lands and a subsequent plan of action for returning communities which includes the creation of seed banks, seed saving networks, agroecological techniques, and more. Later, this led to a diagnostic across the entire resguardo territory outlining the differing varieties of native and traditional seeds, their cultural

significance, the methods for planting, and preparation of their products for consumption (SWISSAID 2004, RECAR 2016).

Memory Work

The support of international accompaniment from SWISSAID not only provided crucial resources for the Zenú's territorial claims but also played a significant role in amplifying narratives of historical injustice and cultural loss. This external validation helped catalyze a process of memory work that reconnected the Zenú with their past, framing the recovery of their resguardo as an act of historical redress and identity revival.

The revival of the Indigenous Zenu identity in this process necessitated the selective construction and dissemination of shared memories that frame historical events in ways that justify claims, foster group cohesion, and legitimize political demands. By narrating past experiences of resistance or injustice, such memory work transforms fragmented or suppressed histories into a collective memory that becomes a resource for identity formation and boundary activation. Through these acts of historical recall, the Zenú engaged in deliberate memory work, a mechanism that recollected the past to justify present claims and to project a future grounded in historical continuity

The Zenú's memory work was oriented around a narrative of historical injustice. It focused on the loss of the resguardo, forced displacement, and erasure of identity, constructing a collective memory that underscored the need to right past wrongs. This approach highlighted episodes of dispossession and cultural loss as the foundation for their claims to territory and autonomy⁶³. This is reflected in the Zenú's legal petitions and public declarations, which often

⁶³ Conversations during community-based workshops, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, October 6, 2022

referenced colonial-era titles and documented instances of land loss and discrimination, as well as in their focus on reclaiming traditional agricultural practices as a means of restoring cultural identity. As their safeguarding plan states:

So, the Zenú people have to continue weaving their identity with the fibers of the land recoveries, from that history and memory. The Spanish invasion, the loss of lands to third parties, the colonization of our thought and knowledge, first by the Catholic Church and now by churches of Protestant origin; the presence of megaprojects and the entry of large-scale trade in their crafts are threats to the continuity of cultural practices that have managed to remain, blending or mixing with more hegemonic practices such as religious processions and celebrations (Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre 2015).

Moreover, in pedagogical materials distributed throughout the resguardo, the 1905 law 55 is often centered as an historical moment in which the Colombian state along with the large landowners attempted to finally and permanently take away the resguardo lands from the Zenu⁶⁴. In this focus on the memory of past injustices the Zenu were framing their claims to the resguardo and later to being a GMO-free territory as acts of restoration and redress. In general, the relationship to food production plays a fundamental role in this memory work, in describing the current situation, and in connecting the Zenu identity to seeds.

We have our own unique corn varieties. History itself, through archaeological studies, shows that the Zenu culture was the first culture in this part to domesticate corn. An emblematic site of our territory is designated as the Mohan Hill in Momil as the site where corn was first domesticated. This represents the incorporation of corn into our

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*identity, our essence, our life. That is why we are called children of corn, because corn is part of our gastronomy, our identity, our nutritional strength, and that led us to continue defending, protecting, and safeguarding that cultural heritage that we possess*⁶⁵.

When specific native corn varieties are used and passed down from generation to generation, the ancestral memory mentioned above is strengthened and the Zenu feel more resilient in their resguardo territories. Therefore, the memory work of linking the injustices of the past to the seeds as a symbol of Zenu identity acts as a way of preserving and dynamizing the social and communitarian processes of creating that collective cultural memory. The ways that seeds are planted, the way that those plants are tended to, the ways they are prepared and consumed or otherwise used, this has all been tied to the work of constructing the collective memory of the Zenu people. Furthermore, this is connected to the threat seen in the incursion of GMO seeds as more continuation of the injustices that the Zenu have suffered: “Therefore, our own seeds have deep roots in our history, in the memory of the people, and GMOs would erase that”⁶⁶.

In this way, the Zenú's memory work not only framed their past as a history of injustice and dispossession but also positioned the defense of native seeds and traditional agricultural practices as a vital act of resistance against the continuation of those injustices. By rejecting GMOs, the Zenú asserted a vision of food sovereignty that was inseparable from their efforts to reclaim identity, territory, and autonomy. By framing the memory of past injustices as an ongoing struggle, the Zenú were able to align their claims with broader discourses on human rights Indigenous sovereignty. This strategic use of memory work allowed them to gain

⁶⁵ Author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023.

⁶⁶ Author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023.

sympathy and support from international organizations and to present their claims in legal and political arenas more effectively.

Land occupations, or recuperations, therefore, are a form of contentious claims-making, a disruptive direct action. The claims-making through land recuperations demonstrates the process through which groups articulate demands, grievances, calls for change, and actions to implement change, targeting authorities or broader publics to address injustices. Recuperating the colonial resguardo unified Indigenous efforts and reshaped their relationship with the Colombian state (Velendia Díaz 2022).

Table 2: Indicators and Evidence of Zenu Claims-Making

Indicator of Claims-Making	Empirical Manifestation
Public Demonstrations of Claim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land takeovers, first with ANUC peasant movement, then as an Indigenous movement.
Legal Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turning to Law 89 of 1890 to gain recognition of cabildos • Seeking title to occupied (recuperated) lands
Formation of Organizations/Govts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zenu Indigenous Organization 1979-80 • Cabildos
Policy Changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INCORA resolution 054 of 1984
Accompaniment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ANUC • CRIC • ONIC • SWISSAID
Collective Memory Construction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safeguarding Plans • Pedagogical materials

The Revival of an Indigenous Identity (1980s -Present)

Fundamentally, in the particular process of the Zenú, the process of political identity formation occurred simultaneously and through the struggle for the recuperation of resguardo lands via the land takeovers. As demonstrated above, while they inclined towards ethnic identity in relation to recuperating the resguardo lands, it was not, however, the initial source of the struggles for land (Velendia Díaz 2022; Zamosc 1986). In addition to the increasing number of people identifying as Zenu, evidence for the revival of the Indigenous identity can be found in

the recovery and strengthening of cultural practices, political mobilization and organization, institutional recognition, as well as the development of culturally differential educational models, among other indicators. This identity formation, as a revived collective identity, interacted dynamically with the mechanisms of memory work and claims-making, making the assertion of Indigenous status both a political strategy and a cultural necessity for resguardo reconstruction.

Growth of an Indigenous Identity

According to the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), the Indigenous population has grown disproportionately in the departments of Cordoba and Sucre on Colombia’s Caribbean Coast, the two departments in which the Resguardo Zenu is found. Looking into four recent censuses conducted in Colombia (1985, 1993, 2005, 2018), the increased population of the Zenu is highlighted. It is important to note that in the 1985 census, the Indigenous populations are not disaggregated according to department, so the number of Zenu is the total across the country, with Zenu communities existing elsewhere, outside of the Resguardo de San Andres de Sotavento. Additionally, in the three censuses afterwards (1993, 2005, 2018), the Indigenous group in each department is not disaggregated, so, for example, the department of Cordoba includes the Zenu, the Embera, and others. However, demonstrated in box 1 is the general trend of Indigenous identity growing, and of the Zenu identity growing, disproportionately to either the department or the national population.

Table 3: Census Data on Indigenous and Zenu Population Growth. Sources: DANE⁶⁷

Year	Cordoba Total	Cordoba Indigenous	%	Sucre Total	Sucre Indigenous	%	National Total Zenu	National Total	%

⁶⁷ See Dane 1985, 1993, 2005, 2018

1985							15,887	27,867,326	.05%
1993	1,088,086	26,932	2.5%	624,463	11,378	1.8%	38,736	33,109,840	.13%
2005	1,467,929	151,199	10%	772,010	151,064	19%	233,052	41,468,384	.56%
2018	1,784,783	202,621	11%	904,863	202,621	22%	307,091	48,258,494	.63%

Moreover, in Table 2 we can see consistent growth in population numbers of the resguardo from the 1980s and into the 1990s.

Table 4: Population Growth in the Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento⁶⁸

Year	Population
1984	15,747
1993	33,106
1995	48,818
1999	55,000
2001	70,000

Additionally, the growth of the movement for the recovery of the resguardo and Zenu identity can be found in the increasing number of cabildos. In 1983 the resguardo was made up of six cabildos menores, and efforts at forming a centralized cabildo mayor. This grew drastically into the 1990s, with 70 by 1994, and 84 by 1995. In 2001, there were a total of 335 cabildos menores. Likewise, the resguardo has gone from having territories in 4 municipalities in 1983, to having them in 20 municipalities between the departments of Córdoba and Sucre in 2001.

The 2001 Plan of Territorial Structuring of the municipality of San Adnres de Sotavento recognizes the Indigenous territories within the municipality as well as their autonomous administrative rights. Additionally, in the most recent Municipal Development Plan for 2020-

⁶⁸ See Resguardo Indígena Zenú San Andrés de Sotavento Córdoba-Sucre, 2015.

2023, San Andrés de Sotavento recorded just under 95% of its population as Indigenous (San Andrés de Sotavento 2001, 2005.).

The 1991 Constitution, Indigenous Rights, and Autonomous Education

The shift in identity during the contentious episode beginning in the 1970s was bolstered with the 1991 Constitution. With this, the Indigenous identity allowed for certain claims to be made regarding collective rights, claims to the resguardo lands, for specific protection as a distinct culture, and more.

There has been progress in the aspect of the recognition of our rights as Indigenous peoples living in this country. In this aspect, the issue of our cultural identity has been strengthened, the issue of our customs and habits (usos y costumbres), the issue of our spirituality and our worldview, and the very relationship between us and nature has been getting stronger⁶⁹.

For example, enacting the newly drafted constitutional rights to autonomous education with Law 115 of 1994, the importance of education being “linked to the environment, the productive process, the social and cultural process, and with due respect for beliefs” was highlighted. Furthermore, with Decree 2406 of 2007, the National Commission for Work and Coordination of Educational Policy for Indigenous Peoples (CONTCEPI), was created and proposed a consultation between state authorities and Indigenous peoples. This resulted in Decree 2500 of 2010, which outlined the gradual transfer of the administration of education systems to Indigenous peoples. The formation of the Indigenous Autonomous Educational System (SEIP) currently aims to support the recovery of culture, and the development of

⁶⁹ Author interview with an Indigenous authority, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023

educational plans and policies regarding learning mechanisms and pedagogical strategies for the transmission of knowledge (Resguardo Indígena Zenú San Andrés de Sotavento Córdoba-Sucre 2015).

In 2010, the Zenu began to elaborate a plan of autonomous education, and in 2011 chose five pilot educational institutions. Furthermore, the Zenu designed an Indigenous curriculum that would train teachers to be educators in Indigenous communities. In 2012, the designed pedagogical project was named “Feeling and Thinking Zenú: A Weaving of Our Education (Ibid.)” and by 2013, eight educational establishments were implementing the pedagogy. In 2015, there were a total of 22 educational institutions implementing the Zenu autonomously developed pedagogy through 40 different projects. Many of these projects were based on education through the recovery of cultural practices, for example: The rescue of ancestral knowledge about medicinal plants, strengthening native Zenu traditions through the use of corn and its derivatives, reforestation and the conservation of a lake, strengthening cultural knowledge through the construction of traditional homes as a mathematics project, and more.

Consequently, the processes of land recovery were reinforced by additional strategies such as the design of autonomous education, as well as recuperating traditional and organic agricultural practices, returning to the use of traditional medicines and artisanal craft production, all for recovering Zenú identity (Larrain 2014). For example, the recuperation of the resguardo has also meant a reteaching of clay pottery practices; creating and using grinding stones; braiding practices with the *caña flecha* (*Gynerium sagitatum*) fibers; handicrafts using vines; weaving patterns with banana, plantain, and certain grasses; making musical instruments; recovering culinary flavors; livestock production methods; plants for traditional medicine; proverbs, riddles,

myths, and legends; rites, celebrations, and dances; cosmological knowledge, etc⁷⁰. All these activities have been important in the process of (re)territorialization of the Zenu people in the resguardo lands (Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre. 2015).

Referring to the land recuperations as the initiating movement of the recovery of Zenu identity, one interviewee states:

The struggle for the land has allowed us to assert our identity, from the traditional symbol such as the Sombrero Vueltiao⁷¹, as well as the recovery, use, and the conservation of native seeds. This is very important because we feed ourselves corn, we feed ourselves with our native seeds, and that is the basis of our sovereignty and food security. So, the land is fought for, the territory is fought for to be able to cultivate, to be able to maintain that identity, that culture, that planting of corn, cassava, plantains, sweet potatoes and many other things⁷².

Therefore, with new multicultural policies establishing rights for Indigenous peoples since the 1991 constitution, the Zenu have been able to establish and utilize systems of social formation such as educational institutions to instill and strengthen the Zenu identity.

Indigenous Zenu Identity Recovered Through Seeds

⁷⁰ Conversations during community-based workshops, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, October 6, 2022.

⁷¹ The Zenu braiding practices with the *caña flecha* (*Gynerium sagittatum*) fibers is recognized by the UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage for Sustainable Development. The most iconic product of these practices is the sombrero vueltiao, a traditional hat worn widely in the region (UNESCO 2021). Moreover, Resolution 144 of 2024 of the Ministry of Cultures, Arts, and Knowledges recognizes the braiding of the *caña flecha* and associates artisanal practices and knowledge as intangible cultural heritage of the nation and approved a Special Safeguarding Plan of the cultural practice.

⁷² Author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023.

Demonstrated in many of the pedagogical projects of Zenu autonomous education, food production and culinary traditions play an important role in recovering identity (Resguardo Indígena Zenú San Andrés de Sotavento Córdoba-Sucre 2015). With this, the recuperation of Zenu Indigenous identity became tied to the recovery, use, and conservation of native seeds. The relationship between seeds and Indigenous identity is highlighted in the struggle for food autonomy as necessary for broader autonomy in the resguardo:

Food security does not guarantee that we have food autonomy... But here, since we already have our own native seeds, there has been a lot of struggle over the issue of seeds because we seek to guarantee the food autonomy or sovereignty of the Indigenous communities. And to guarantee this, food autonomy is very important, because it also guarantees our survival as an Indigenous people⁷³.

As well as the interconnections between Indigenous identity, seeds, and the defense of territory:

This is part of the cosmogony of the Zenu people. This is an ancestral wisdom that has been transmitted from generation to generation, in a traditional way, in a family way. Due to ancestral knowledge and territorial autonomy some seeds have been able to be preserved. We have traces of many seeds, we have recovered them, and today we want to continue expanding that knowledge and defending our territory⁷⁴.

That is one of the priorities. It was the recognition of our identity, our traditions, our customs. Yes, this whole cultural issue, this whole issue of seed recovery. Yes, because that is who we are as a people, as a territory. This great biodiversity, that is our wealth, which is our heritage. All this great biodiversity of corn that we have in the territory

⁷³ Author interview with an Indigenous authority, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023.

⁷⁴ Author interview with an Indigenous authority, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023.

*today. Yes, that is ours, that strengthens us to continue maintaining those traditions and our cultural identity*⁷⁵.

Differing types of seeds used in food production processes have major impacts on the mode of food production in a territory. For example, native seeds allow for household and community-based food production and give space for agroecological practices, keeping decisions local and maintaining autonomous seed distribution systems, while GM seeds necessitate industrial farming techniques and monocrop plantations, with decision often made by people not involved in farming⁷⁶, and require the purchase of additional inputs (fertilizers, insecticides, etc.) (McKay 2020). The impact that these differences have on identity is recognized by Zenu leaders:

*The nutritional richness of our native corn is much higher. Growing transgenic seeds or improved seeds is going to deteriorate our food sovereignty and is going to threaten our life, our worldview, our essence, our cultural wealth: this is about food sovereignty*⁷⁷.

Therefore, GMO seeds and their need for industrial monocrop plantation style agriculture would drastically change the territoriality, shifting power dynamics, livelihoods, governance agendas, and more. Ultimately, seeds are demonstrated to be a powerful political force in the process of identity and territory making.

Boundary Creation

The revival of the Indigenous Zenu identity emphasized cultural and historical grievances. The Spanish invasion and conquest, the loss of the resguardo in 1905, the

⁷⁵ Author interview with an Indigenous authority, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, March 24, 2022.

⁷⁶ For example, Lapegna (2016) shares a conversation in which an agrarian engineer in Argentina discusses the pre-established, step-by-step process that is relatively easy to follow in GM soybean production and jokes that “you can produce soybeans by email”, p. 29.

⁷⁷ Author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, March 24, 2022.

suppression of Zenu culture and identity, for example. However, the revival of the Indigenous identity allowed the Zenu to demand special legal protections and collective land rights for Indigenous territories, separate from those of peasants. Therefore, the separation from the broader peasant movement as an Indigenous movement created a sense of “us” and “them” between Indigenous communities and peasant groups, often leading to different strategic alignments and demands in their contentious struggles during and after the agrarian reforms. Ultimately, with the changes brought about with the 1991 Constitution, Indigenous communities were empowered with clear rights and purpose grounded in autonomy and resistance rather than class struggle alone.

This boundary was first created between the recovering Zenu identity and the broader campesino movement. As noted above, this shifted the struggle from land distribution to territorial control, causing a change in the terms of contestation, of strategies, and tactics. However, it also separated rural groups. This is about differentiating and organizing social relations by establishing new categories of identity, belonging, or exclusion.

A struggle was born in this part of the territory of Córdoba, from the struggle of the peasant movement. By 1978 we, the leaders of that time, we realized that we were not peasants, but that there were Indigenous movements at a national level, such as in Tolima, such as in Cauca, that the CRIC had already been born, and there was an exchange of opinions, ideas, dialogue, and it was discovered that there was a colonial title here from 1773, which had been granted by the Spanish crown. That forced a turn in the struggle. We no longer continued fighting for land as a peasant movement, but as an

*Indigenous movement, and we advanced in that process until the decade of 2001 to 2010*⁷⁸.

Another interviewee explained how this shift occurred in the midst of a particular land struggle:

*In the Indigenous community of Venecia, it was a long struggle, a strong struggle, with a lot of abuse by the landowners, by the government, by the Army. It was a struggle in which there were many injuries, there was blood, there were deaths, and it was a struggle that took place in two parts. The first part took place at the peasant level, because at that time, when the recovery of Venecia began, the title was unknown. So that is the first part. But the recovery of the Venecia farm has two stories, one at the peasant level and one at the Indigenous level. So, during the second part, when the title from the Spanish Crown was discovered, and this had already been recognized and established as a resguardo, that is where the struggles began at the Indigenous level*⁷⁹.

The Zenú's Indigenous identity was nearly erased through colonial and post-colonial policies. Their resguardo was largely dissolved and their collective memory as a distinct Indigenous people was generally fragmented. The process of creating the boundary between Indigenous and peasant involved reconstructing historical narratives of land loss and injustice, emphasizing an almost-forgotten territorial identity. Later, the declaration of the resguardo as a GMO-Free Territory served as a political tool to strengthen this developing boundary. The work of creating this separate identity became attached to models of agricultural production: those that used agroecological methods vs. those that used mono-crop plantation models; those that used

⁷⁸ Author interview with an Indigenous authority, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023.

⁷⁹ Author interview with an Indigenous authority, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023

chemical inputs vs. those that used organic methods; and those that used native seeds (our seeds) vs. those that used hybrid, transgenic, or otherwise improved seeds (their seeds).

If we go to the municipality of San Andrés, there are some agricultural companies that carry these hybrid or transgenic corn seeds, and they affect our corn seeds. We tested our corn and there was one of our seeds that was contaminated. That is what we do not allow ourselves to accept, that our neighbors plant their transgenic corn, because then we will all be affected⁸⁰.

The importance of maintaining that boundary of ‘our’ seeds and ‘their’ seeds was projected into the future. This is the work of sustaining the boundary of Indigenous identity and those that practice other ways of agricultural production from generation to generation, further attaching seeds to the identity being revived.

Many of us have become aware that we have to safeguard our native seeds and we have to continue cultivating it, because that is the cultural heritage that we are going to leave to our generation, to our children, to our grandchildren, and to our great-grandchildren. It is a struggle for cultural identity⁸¹.

The creation of social boundaries, in the Zenú case, evolved from initially distinguishing Indigenous movements from peasant organizations during the agrarian reform to a more complex delineation based on models of agricultural production. This transformation redefined the boundary in terms of a struggle between native seeds and transgenic seeds—or, more

⁸⁰ Author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, March 24, 2022.

⁸¹ Author interview with an Indigenous authority, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, March 24, 2022

profoundly, between ‘our seeds’ and ‘their seeds’, thus reinforcing a collective Zenú identity rooted in the defense of ancestral practices and territorial sovereignty.

Identity and the Changing Nature of Political Struggle

As Tilly (2005) argues, the political identities which have standing will impact the types of claims being made in political struggles. For the Zenu, this change from a land struggle to a territorial conflict, from a peasant identity to an Indigenous identity, also caused the changing focus from land distribution to the reconstruction of the colonial resguardo, the re-founding of the Indigenous cabildo system of government, the turning to cultural practices which constitute that Indigenous identity, and more. Zenu cultural identity which had largely been lost (rather, made invisible) through centuries of colonization is now revived politically and reinforced with the possibility of reestablishing a unity between the people and the territory.

In this, the Zenu struggle ceases to be about land as property, and turns towards territory as the articulation of needs, demands, and the processes of struggle. This also constituted the formation of a political organization with authority over the territory and as recognized by the state. Ultimately, this means a shifting of the nature of the political struggle from one of inclusion into the current institutions (land, property, title, etc.) to one of autonomy, challenging notions of state sovereignty, and making historical claims of peoplehood.

Basing their claims on their Indigenous identity, the Zenu were politically activating a place-based culture with a history and memory of self-governance and autonomy. Such social and cultural mobilizations were efforts to classify the space as an Indigenous resguardo, based on a colonial charter, is a manifestation of their re-activated Indigenous identity.

Table 5: Indicators and Evidence of Zenu Identity Revival

Indicators of Identity Revival	Empirical Manifestations
Cultural Practices	Conservation, use, and defense of native seeds; heightened production of <i>cana flecha</i> and sombrero vueltaio.
Political Mobilization	Increasing number of cabildos across the claimed territory
Institutional Recognition	Population statistics, growing Zenu population generally, and in resguardo specifically.
Educational Programs	<i>Sentir y Pensar Zenu</i> , autonomous education model designed.
Boundary Creation	Shift from peasant to Indigenous, includes separation; Framing of ‘our seeds’ and ‘their seeds’.

The (Re)Territorialization of the Zenu (1991 – present)

An Indigenous people without their territory is a people that cannot recount their history. Territory is one of the four essential elements of the Indigenous movement, as is unity, culture, and autonomy⁸². But obviously the territory is an essential part of the life of an Indigenous people. The territory is Mother Earth, our Pachamama. In that order, the need was seen to recover the reservation that had been lost and that was in the hands of landowners, endorsed or granted by national policy, by the government, by local government entities⁸³.

A new notion of national identity was constructed in the Constituent Assembly which elaborated the 1991 Constitution. This new identity now includes pluralism and ethnic and cultural diversity as founding principles of the Social State of Law⁸⁴. This is seen as fundamental

⁸² Through national and regional Indigenous organizations in Colombia, especially the ONIC (National Indigenous Organization of Colombia), these four components have become a sort of slogan for the Indigenous movement (ONIC 2001).

⁸³ Author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023.

⁸⁴ *Estado Social de Derecho*, according to Colombia’s National Ombudsmen the social rule of law is a form of political organization that is characterized by the special nature of its mission: to ensure respect for, and guarantee the comprehensive realization of human rights, which become the foundation and ultimate justification of the State’s existence: Otálora Gómez (2013).

to the territorialization of the Zenu, especially with the special legal value given to Indigenous territories⁸⁵.

Being integrated into the State's territorial planning scheme caused a change regarding Indigenous relationships with the State. From fighting against the State, Indigenous peoples were now a part of the State (at least those which the state recognizes). This has meant State support for the autonomous design of institutions and policies in the resguardos, as well as plans of social and economic development. This has also meant the reception and distribution of the resources transferred in the General Participation System in order to promote and plan specific public investments (Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre. 2015)⁸⁶.

A new legal, political, and social framework, therefore, was commenced offering new avenues, spaces, and rights for Indigenous peoples to construct territorial as well as cultural autonomy and self-government, to territorialize. Importantly, this new framework did not limit, rather it bolstered Indigenous political participation and access to State resources.

However, the organization of the distribution of state resources to the resguardo has been central in causing division. With the organization of political authority in the resguardo following a competition-based model encouraged by the state, competition is more and more about control of those transfers. Regardless, the transfer of state resources for the resguardo's autonomous use exemplifies the Zenu's ability to territorialize their own political project, even though that political project is in constant debate, motion, negotiation, etc.

⁸⁵ Conversations during community-based workshops, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, October 6, 2022. Also, see Article 286 of the 1991 Constitution of Colombia.

⁸⁶ Also, this was discussed during community-based workshops, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, October 6, 2022.

Formalizing the Land Recovery

There is a law, there is a document that says that the Indigenous resguardo of Córdoba and Sucre must have 83,000 hectares. And so far, we are, I think, about 11,000, and including the ancestral lands, another 20,000. In other words, we are only 1/3 of the way through... We are going to have an ample territory free of genetic contamination⁸⁷.

The earliest source on the dimensions of the colonial reservation of San Andrés de Sotavento Córdoba-Sucre is deed 1060 of 1928. This document compiles information from the Royal Decree of 1773 and deeds 27 (dated August 3, 1870) and 30 (dated June 1, 1927). It describes the process of measuring the reservation, where a surveyor, accompanied by a commission of local authorities, demarcated its perimeter between 1773 and 1774. The second reference is a boundary study by the Agustín Codazzi Geographic Institute in 1981, conducted during the process of land legalization after the recuperations. Based on deed 1060 of 1928, the study determined the reservation covers approximately 73,000 hectares with a perimeter of 106 kilometers (Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento Córdoba y Sucre. 2015).

Later, after the Constitutional Court recognized 34 different Indigenous peoples at risk of physical and cultural extinction in 2009, the Zenu organized a participatory community diagnostic for the development of the Plan of Safeguarding. The study was conducted in 2014. This included an investigation of the 1928 deed and the 1981 study and included the geographic references in Zenu oral tradition. According to this work, the colonial reservation has an area of 73,472 hectares, delimited by a length of 107 kilometers. However, the INCORA's resolution 054 of 1984 makes reference to the 83,000 hectares. The dispute is mainly resolved landing on

⁸⁷ Author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, March 24, 2022

the number of 83,000 hectares as the official size of the colonial resguardo, and, therefore, the goals of the Zenu people (Ibid.).

By the end of the 1960s, when the ANUC began organizing in the region, there was only one Zenu community with an organized cabildo according to the requirements of Law 89 of 1890. This was Cerro Vidales and was land protocolized in the 1950s by Eusebio Feria de la Cruz in today's municipality of Tuchin. Additionally, at the time of the attempted agrarian reform many Zenu communities were organized in Juntas de Acción Comunal (Community Action Boards)⁸⁸, which was an organizational model of the campesinos. The first recuperated properties of the ANUC struggle in the region were then formed and organized under this model as well (Zamosc 1986). After the (re)discovery of the colonial title, the process of land recuperation divided the Zenu population into two main camps, one in favor of organizing as Indigenous and under the colonial title to the resguardo, the other in favor of organizing as campesinos for land distribution and as community action boards. By 1981, the two camps had mostly reunited under the Indigenous identity with the goal of reconstructing the resguardo (Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento Córdoba y Sucre. 2015).

As mentioned above, the 1984 INCORA resolution 054 established a plan for the acquisition and return of lands to the Zenu. According to the Life Plan of the resguardo, in 1984 the resguardo was made up of 5,385 hectares (Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre. 2015). With an additional 384 hectares awarded in the same year, in

⁸⁸ Juntas de Acción Comunal (Community Action Boards) evolved from village and community development sessions dating back centuries throughout Colombia. They become institutionalized through law 19 in 1958 to channel citizen participation in urban and rural settings. Communities create them to promote the solution of public problems, monitor and contribute to the provision of services, encourage community integration, demand the execution of public works, and choose representatives who intervene before public authorities, see Documento Conpes 3661. Política nacional para el fortalecimiento de los organismos de acción comunal 2010.

the municipalities of San Andres de Sotavento and Sampués. Therefore, in 1984, the resguardo began with a total of 6,219 hectares. Later, in 1990, through Resolution 041, the INCORA expanded the resguardo by adding 34 more estates in the municipalities of San Andres de Sotavento, Sampues, San Antonio de Palmito, and Sincelejo totaling an additional 4,378 hectares. Additionally, in that same year, the Ministry of Government, through the Communal Development Fund, acquired 857 hectares to be delivered to the resguardo. Therefore, by 1990, the resguardo formally had a total of 10,213⁸⁹ hectares distributed through discontinuous lands, a patchwork of farms, pastures, and other properties either won through the land recuperation process or negotiated by INCORA.

Eight years later INCORA issued Resolution 0043 in 1998, which expanded resguardo lands by another 1,385 hectares through the addition of 36 properties. This expanded the resguardo lands to 11,598 hectares. However, the socio-economic study done to justify this expansion was based on the demographic data taken from the 1984 Resolution 054 and did not consider socioeconomic or population changes over the 14 years in between. In 2010, the resguardo was expanded by 312 hectares in the municipalities of Chima and San Andrés de Sotavento through the voluntary sales by property owners and justified by the 2010-2014 National Development Plan which outlines a program of “restructuring of the reservations of colonial and republican origin” (Colombia’s National Development Plan for 2010-2014 “Prosperity for All”, p. 373). There has been little advancement on the titling of lands to the Zenu resguardo after these examples.

⁸⁹ This total area did not include the 384 mentioned as recovery in resolution 051 of 1984 nor 180 hectares corresponding to two properties delivered directly to communities and not to the resguardo (although the communities are part of the resguardo), See del Resguardo Indígena Zenú San Andrés de Sotavento Córdoba-Sucre, 2015.

Forming the Organizational Structure of the Cabildo and Indigenous Authority

During the process of recuperating the resguardo lands, whether through land takeovers or through INCORA negotiations with landowners, the need for the Zenu to form organizational structures became apparent. Based on Law 89 of 1890, cabildos were organized and began to be registered. In 1981 the first assembly of the Zenu people was held and elected a *cabildo mayor*. Moreover, the changing framework of Indigenous-state relations from the 1991 Constitution reinforced Zenu attempts at exercising autonomy (Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre. 2015).

The current political structure of the Zenu is based on the authority of a collegial body of 10 members who are elected in an assembly and for a period of two years. Towards the end of the 1990s they adopted an internal statute which regulated the number of members of the cabildo mayor as well as the number of members participating in the assembly. Moreover, communities established on the recuperated lands began organizing cabildos menores, in both rural and urban centers. This process of establishing the cabildos follows similarly to the process of re-indigenization of the Zenu identity and the recovery of territory in the 1970s through the 1990s. The Zenu identify three main phases in this process (Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre. 2015)⁹⁰:

Phase 1: The Mobilization of the Zenu and the fight for land.

⁹⁰Also, for more detailed outline of the structure of the resguardo authority and decision-making process, see Berrocal 1999, and the Law of Self-Governance of 2017.

The political organization of the Zenu was not initially evident organically as there was no political platform to make claims externally. Instead, the traditional authority⁹¹ was embodied by the senior captain, a figure integral to the community, which resolved daily issues among families and upheld vital cultural practices, such as transferring leadership between generations. However, this role wasn't intended for external representation. Therefore, community leaders were prone to articulate with the demands of the ANUC, based more on issues of access to subsidies and loans, land titles, and other rural development issues. However, with the (re)discovery of the colonial title to the resguardo a different source of legitimacy of the land struggle, and therefore a different goal, was initiated.

Phase 2: Recovery of the Cabildo

Demanding recognition of the colonial title necessitated creating an independent organizational structure adhering to the stipulations set by Law 89 of 1890 for the organization of a reservation. Therefore, this stage includes both the expansion of Indigenous mobilization for the recovery of territories and the rescue of the figure of the Cabildo as a political-administrative structure for external dialogue. The community captains initially formed a central board of the cabildo mayor and founded their internal and external representation on the recovery of the resguardo lands. Their main tasks were to promote mobilization and to formalize lands recovered. External representation was bolstered at the national level by the formation of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC).

Phase 3: Interlocution with the State

⁹¹ This traditional authority is represented in the one cabildo that existed prior to the land recovery process, the cabildo Los Cerros Vidales.

This third phase constitutes a rearrangement of the government structure and the next step in the expansion process of the Zenú, especially into the urban context. With the 1991 Constitution and adherence to international standards and regulations regarding Indigenous rights, the Zenu were forced to reconsider the land recuperation process. A new legal context which recognizes rights of access to State resources, as well as rights of political participation at the local, regional, and national levels, forced a rearrangement of organizational structures for the Zenu. Turning from the cabildo as an organizational instrument with a focus on the necessity of recuperating lands for expanding the resguardo, Zenu leaders began to focus more on forming the cabildo as a political instrument to facilitate participation of local, regional, and national politics. This was argued to be necessary in seeking solutions to precarious conditions of the region, including poverty, health disparities, etc. However, this turn towards political participation, including electoral participation, also attracted the interest of powerful political groups of the region, including political parties. Political processes of elections based on party-style competitions has caused lasting division within the movement and resguardo authorities.

These phases have not been precisely linear but rather have followed a more cyclical process. Mobilization, external negotiation, internal organization, and reflection have all happened and continue in differing methods. As identified by Vanegas, changes in the forms of resistance by Indigenous peoples also revolved around identities and territories. From utilizing the law and legal avenues to massive marches, land occupations, and more, the movement, since the legal liberalism of the 1991 Constitution, mainly demobilized from the marches and occupations in favor of lawsuits and other legal channels.

We have made progress in some aspects: in the educational aspect, in the health aspect, in infrastructure, in basic sanitation, in roads, in communication, in productive

*programs. In short, today we have something to show. But that has left us a story of the loss of many people in this process of struggle. That is the exemplary history of the starts and restarts of the struggles that we have fought as a people*⁹².

Later, the Regional Congress of The Zenu held a meeting in 2017 to approve the Law of Self-Government to regulate the composition and function of the Structure of Government of the Zenu Indigenous People. This outlines that the highest authority is the entire community of Zenu people, who then are represented by popular election of the Regional Congress of the Zenu People. This is then the highest political-organizational authority in the structure of self-government in the resguardo. The members of the Regional Cabildo Mayor exercise the executive. There is also space for traditional authorities, who are considered those who work to guarantee the perpetuity of Zenu customs through daily activities and oral traditions (Resguardo Indígena Zenú San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba-Sucre. 2017).

Other important decision-making and administrative institutions are the Regional Congress of the Zenú People; the General Assembly of Indigenous Authorities of the Zenú People; the Regional Cabildo Mayor of the Zenú People; the Territorial Assembly of Cabildos Menores; the Territorial Assembly, the Community or Local Assembly; the Cabildo Menor; the Court of Justice of the Zenú People; the Indigenous Guard and the Regional Women's Committees, as well as the Autonomous Education and Autonomous Health systems among others.

The Law of Self-Government also outlines the Zenu commitment to the campaign to conserve native seeds in the resguardo in order to promote actions aimed at protecting seeds and

⁹² Author interview with an Indigenous authority, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023.

traditional cultivation systems to guarantee the food security and sovereignty of the territory. Moreover, the Law of Self-Government orders the creation of the regional genetic resources committee which was established in resolution 007 of December 17, 2010 (the internal regulations to implement the GMO-Free Declaration of 2005) (Ibid.).

The use of law to claim rights, especially since the 1991 Constitution, creates new tools for the Zenu to territorialize the resguardo lands. Being placed within the structures of the state, the resguardo authorities have certain legal avenues now available which are being mobilized to assert authority over the resguardo territory.

Plan de Vida, Plan de Salvaguarda Etnica

Beyond the Zenu's experiences discussed in this case study, Indigenous peoples across Colombia have faced numerous historical and structural issues due to colonization, land expropriation, and the internal armed conflict's disproportionate impact. They have also suffered from the influence of drug trafficking groups, extractive policies, political and institutional inefficiency, and the appropriation of state institutions by illegal armed groups. These factors have systematically prevented them from enjoying their rights and threatened their physical and cultural survival. In this context, the Constitutional Court ordered the Colombian State in Auto 004 of 2009, implementing ruling T-025 of 2004, to create a program to guarantee the rights of Indigenous peoples affected by forced displacement including the elaboration of Ethnic Safeguard Plans for 34 Indigenous groups at risk of physical and cultural extermination. This included the Zenu.

Such circumstances motivated the Cabildo Mayor of the resguardo Zenu de San Andres de Sotavento, along with the cabildos menores, and other community organizations to conduct an investigation aimed at identifying the factors that entail and sustain their social, economic,

political and cultural problems, from which a diagnosis⁹³ of the situation of their fundamental rights was made. This diagnostic laid the foundation for the Safeguarding Plan, and later the Life Plan⁹⁴ of the resguardo. In these documents, the Zenu authorities establish plans for governance of the territory, the administration of justice within the territory, intercultural education, health systems, productive systems, as well as planning and administrative systems especially regarding the use of natural resources within the resguardo (Resguardo Indígena Zenú San Andrés de Sotavento Córdoba-Sucre 2015).

In the process of elaborating the Life Plan seven principles guiding the territorialization are identified, as well as 26 projects in order to make the life plan a reality. The principles include:

- land and water for our food sovereignty,
- nature is our life,
- Zenú identity is our Indigenous essence,
- in Buen Vivir is our health,
- unity and collective work are the basis of our autonomy,
- Zenú women weave the shield of our territory,
- the future is in our permanence in the territory.

The importance of food sovereignty is identified in the first principle of the Zenu Life Plan. The projects and plans of action include the protection and restoration of forests, of water sources, the investigation and recuperation of sacred sites, the creation of a museum of Zenu culture and history, an Indigenous education system, agricultural productive projects (focused on

⁹³ This diagnosis is the foundation for the Plan de Salvaguarda Étnica (Ethnic Safeguarding Plan) and the Life Plan. See Plan de Vida del Resguardo Colonial Indígena Zenú San Andrés de Sotavento Córdoba-Sucre, Tomo I 2015.

⁹⁴ With the state decentralization process launched from the 1991 Constitution, municipal governments gained power to design and administer their own development plans. However Indigenous peoples within the municipalities were being left out of these plans, and the municipalities argued that since Indigenous governments receive budgets from the state that the municipalities weren't responsible for their development. So, the Indigenous peoples began developing alternative development plans based on their own visions, called Life Plans. These were especially bolstered when the Constitutional Court found 34 Indigenous groups across Colombia at risk of physical or cultural extermination, which included the Zenu. See Hermission 2010.

agroecological production), as well as healthcare, infrastructure, institutional strengthening of the Cabildo Mayor, and more (Ibid)..

In this Life Plan, the process of territorialization is demonstrated in the creation, recuperation or repurposing of new institutions. The cabildos, the resguardo itself, new Indigenous structures for education and health, etc. are all forms of asserting Zenu authority over the territory, of creating the resguardo as Zenu territory. Such institutions also imply the deterritorialization of overlapping territorial claims (of the municipalities, of large landowners and multinational corporations, of other state agencies, etc.). This could be understood as the concerted effort of the deterritorialization of territories set up over centuries with state and capital support (Arboleda 2020). This creates the situation of an existing multi-territory, or the simultaneous existence of multiple territories within the same claimed space of governance (Halvorsen 2018). Due to the Indigenous identity, this also becomes a territorialization process with an ethnic character. Basing their claims on their Indigenous identity, the Zenu were politically activating a place-based culture with a history and memory of self-governance and autonomy. Such social and cultural mobilizations were efforts to classify the space as an Indigenous resguardo, based on a colonial charter, is a manifestation of their competing territoriality.

Community-based Organizing

While newly founded support and justification from the state gives a top-down power to Zenu territorialization, it is also necessary to have a grassroots or bottom-up process in the formation of a community, a people, committed to the territorial project, in materializing the territorial project. This ensures a more sustainable and empowered territory, capable of continuing despite changes in authorities both locally and nationally.

Although community leaders and activists began organizing as the Association of Alternative Producers (ASPROAL) in the mid-1980s, the formal founding of the organization in 1994 was identified as an important marker in the creation of the vision of an autonomous resguardo with their own seed saving and distribution systems⁹⁵. ASPROAL is an organization and network of Zenu agriculturalists with a focus on forming leaders and implementing agroecological practices for a “fairer political, social and economic development and to promote the defense of biodiversity and nature, food sovereignty and security, to contribute to the life plan of the Indigenous Zenu people” (ASPROAL 2017). Most importantly, ASPROAL founded the Zenu community seed house. As a space for the members of the organization to interchange and commercialize their native seeds, the seed house assists in the self-management of resguardo life. There are currently more than 60 seed custodians in the resguardo who contribute seeds to the seed house⁹⁶.

ASPROAL is understood by many Zenu⁹⁷ as a space for organization, activism, advocacy, and more that is outside of the space of the cabildo (but not in opposition). In fact, the organizing efforts of ASPROAL is recognized as having contributed greatly to the declaration of the resguardo as a GMO-Free Territory:

In 2005, agreements began between the ASPROAL and the resguardo authorities. They started with the community captains, with leaders, to promote the issue of the protection

⁹⁵ Conversations during community-based workshops, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, October 6, 2022. Also, author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, March 24, 2022.

⁹⁶ Networks of seed activists in Colombia have organized a system for local community seed houses to develop their own autonomous guarantee of seed quality, countering the certification system of the Colombian state in what has been referred to as ‘epistemic resistance’ (Gutiérrez Escobar 2017).

⁹⁷ Conversations during community-based workshops, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, October 6, 2022, and May 25, 2024.

*of native seeds and that is where we began to realize, for example, in this territory, here they grew cotton, here they grew other corn, improved corn*⁹⁸.

The role of ASPROAL is also recognized in the process of political conscientization in the resguardo: “They have been working and fomenting community trainings, workshops for community members, raising awareness, the need to maintain our seeds and what damage GMOs cause”⁹⁹. And sharing a vision for what ASPROAL could be for the Zenu resguardo: “We want to empower it and we want it to become like a defensive muscle”¹⁰⁰.

While ASPROAL mainly conducts its work in the department of Córdoba, other community-based Indigenous agricultural organizations formed in the department of Sucre. For example, the Asociación de Productores Indígenas de San Antonio de Palmito (ASPROINPAL, the Association of Indigenous Producers of San Antonio de Palmito) was founded in 1999 with the assistance of ASPROAL. ASPROINPAL quickly claimed itself as part of the life of the resguardo, submitted itself to resguardo authorities, and claimed to be based in Zenu cultural values (ASPOINPAL 2019). Likewise, in 1999, a Zenu women’s organization was founded in the municipality of Sampués, Sucre. The Asociación de Productores Indígenas de Sucre (ASPRINSU, acronym in Spanish) works to strengthen the patios¹⁰¹ through training in

⁹⁸ Improved corn is a reference to modification of some type, whether that be genetic or not. It refers to seeds that are registered or certified and sold as part of a technological package. Author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023

⁹⁹ Author interview with an Indigenous authority, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, March 24, 2022

¹⁰⁰ Author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023.

¹⁰¹ According to a report on traditional and native seeds in the region, the patio is described as “We see that the patio is more than a plot where women grow crops, it is clearly a space of resistance where the Zenú life project is being built. There, not only seeds for storage are grown, but also dreams for the future, hope for children, that is why it is located around the house, it has an area between half and a quarter of a hectare where the woman sows between forty and seventy species of various plants and for varied purposes.” See RECAR 2016.

soil management, vegetable cultivation, recovery of native seeds, planting and use of medicinal plants, management of poultry and pigs, basic sanitation and management of drinking water.

There is also training in topics such as leadership and community participation, legislation, and management of Indigenous territory. The recuperation and conservation of native seeds became central to the work of these community-based organizations. Along with other community-based organizations such as the Artisans Association in San Andres de Sotavento, Alternative Agricultural Producers Association (APRALSA, acronym in Spanish), and the Farmers Association of the Montes de María (ASALMA, acronym in Spanish) created an umbrella organization, the Red Agroecológica del Caribe (The Agroecological Network of the Caribbean, RECAR, acronym in Spanish) in 2002 in order to have a broader and regional impact (RECAR 2004, RECAR 2016, ASPROAL 2017, ASPROINPAL 2019, and Caruso & Montaña Salgado 2020).

GMO-Free Territory

One of the motivations is that we know that, as an Indigenous people, the issue of native seeds is part of our culture, they are not foreign, they are part of our diet, they are one of the main axes of our Indigenous territory... So, one of the ideas was to also protect the seeds, because if we do not protect the seeds, we are also putting our Zenú resguardo at risk regarding its food, and identity, and security¹⁰².

This regulation is an exercise of autonomy and territorial government of the Zenu people, which seeks to protect the permanence of the communities in their territory before the entry of technologies such as transgenic seeds. It also intends to control external

¹⁰² Author interview with an Indigenous authority, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023.

development projects that may affect the territories and local production systems; It also seeks to control bioprospecting activities that could lead to biopiracy of local genetic resources and the traditional knowledge of the Zenues (Resguardo Indígena Zenú San Andrés de Sotavento Córdoba-Sucre 2011).

The 2005 declaration of the resguardo as a GMO-Free Territory, along with the 2010 internal regulations making the declaration legally more concrete within the resguardo demonstrate a continuation of the process begun in those land recuperations. It is a part of the territorialization of the Zenu people, to assert their autonomous authority over the territory¹⁰³.

The declaration of the Zenú resguardo as a GMO-Free Territory served to institutionalize Indigenous governance through new agricultural norms and enforcement practices, reinforcing the Zenú's authority over ecological and cultural reproduction. It shifted decision-making power over seeds, farming practices, and land use away from state and corporate actors and toward the cabildos and community-based organizations. In doing so, it challenged the assumed legitimacy of national seed certification laws by establishing autonomous quality control systems. The declaration also challenged corporate seed ownership regimes, asserting instead a jurisdiction grounded in collective self-determination. The declaration thus became a legal and political tool through which the Zenú could govern territory on their own terms.

There have been advances in spreading knowledge of the declaration in the resguardo, of constructing their own autonomous seed production, conservation, and distribution systems, of halting mono-crop plantation in the territory, and of strengthening seed-saver networks. On the

¹⁰³ Author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023. As well as conversations during community-based workshops, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, October 6, 2022

other hand, one of the major obstacles identified was the territorial overlap that the Zenu resguardo is forced to navigate between numerous municipal governments. In fact, an analysis of all 16 municipalities which share authority over the resguardo lands (the colonial resguardo of 83,000 hectares) found that only one, the municipality of San Andrés de Sotavento, mentions the conservation of native seeds in their recent municipal development plans¹⁰⁴.

Such advances and obstacles in territorializing the Zenu political project highlights that the declaration of a GMO-Free Territory is about more than seeds, it is about self-determination. It is about the rights of Indigenous peoples (in this case). The long process of losing and recuperating resguardo lands, of encroaching extractive economic activities, of changing legal and institutional frameworks, etc., demonstrates that the declaration of the resguardo as a GMO-Free Territory is not the end goal, but part of laying a foundation to continue asserting authority over the territory. Additionally, this all highlights that it takes concrete actions to materialize the GMO-Free Territory, and, therefore, the Zenu political project of an autonomous resguardo. As stated in the prologue to Resolution 007 (signed by the Indigenous authorities of the resguardo making the declaration as a GMO-Free Territory official law in 2010):

The Declaration of the GMO-Free Territory is a form of self-protection of the territory, in favor of the fundamental rights of farmers, communities and consumers, in defense of native seeds, traditional knowledge, food sovereignty and food autonomy (Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre, Colombia 2010).

¹⁰⁴ The development plans analyzed include the municipalities of Cerete (2020-2023), Chima (2020-2023), Chinú (2016-2019, 2020-2023), Ciénega de Oro (2020-2023), Coloso (2016-2019), Coveñas (2020-2023), San Antonio de Palmito (2020-2023), Sahagún (2020-2023), Sampués (2020-2023), San Andrés de Sotavento (2020-2023), San Marcos (2016-2019, 2020-2023), San Onofre (2020-2023), Santiago de Tolú (2020-2023), Sincelejo (2016-2019, 2020-2023), Toluviéjo (2020-2023), Tuchín (2009-2011, 2012-2015, 2020-2023), as well as the development plans of the departments of Córdoba (2020-2023), and Sucre (2020-2023).

As stated by an interviewee:

When we started to regulate the territory, as Indigenous and as members of the people, we also started to act and we started removing from the community what is industrial cassava, what is improved corn, the cultivation of cotton, this no longer exists, so from there some changes began¹⁰⁵.

This long and complex history of this Indigenous resguardo demonstrates the competing territorialities that come from historical decisions guiding its development into specific directions, each with differing levels of difficulty to overcome. Laws, economies, identities, cultures, political institutions, are all deployed in this history for the differing actors to lay claim to the territory and implement their political vision. The declaration of the Zenú Resguardo as a GMO-Free Territory is a significant step in the ongoing process of territorialization, building on their earlier land recuperation efforts. Additionally, this move emphasizes a commitment to sustainable agriculture, protecting biodiversity, and preserving traditional farming practices. By asserting control over their land and rejecting GMOs, the Zenú reinforce their sovereignty and cultural identity, while struggling for the health and environmental integrity of their territory. This action is a continuation of their efforts to reclaim and manage their ancestral lands in accordance with their cultural values and goals of self-determination. This act of territorialization, materialized through ecological regulation and the public governance of seed systems, embedded the Zenú identity into the landscape. It tied autonomy not only to space but to the ecological and political control of what grows there.

The Zenú case demonstrates how struggles over land, identity, and political autonomy have, in recent years, incorporated seed sovereignty as a vital new arena. The declaration of the

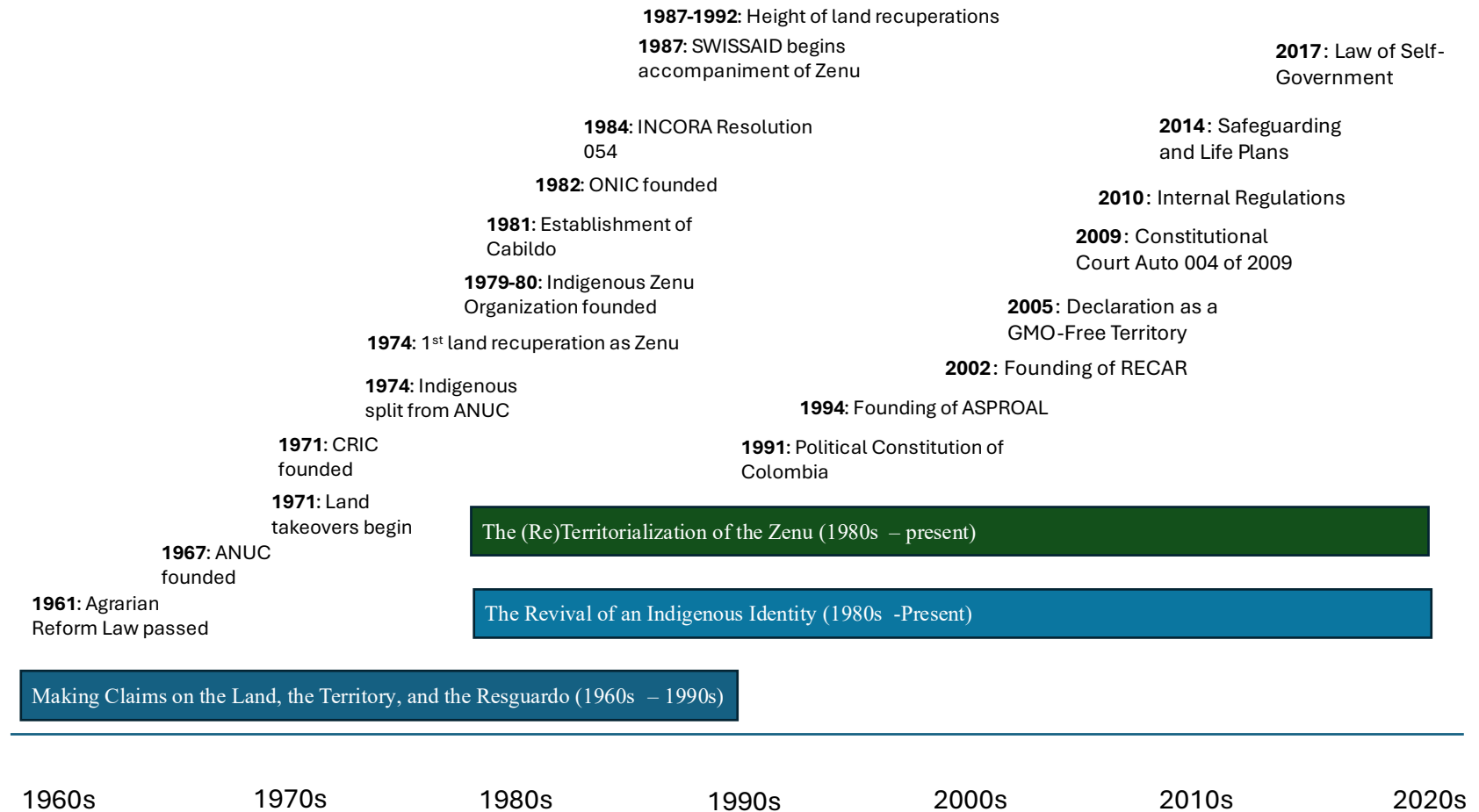
¹⁰⁵ Author interview with an Indigenous authority, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023.

resguardo as a GMO-Free Territory was not an isolated environmental act but part of a broader strategy to reassert jurisdiction over land, life, and governance. Through defending native seeds, the Zenú movement deepened its claims to territorial control and expanded the scope of Indigenous autonomy within overlapping state structures. Seed politics thus became a means through which broader territorial and political projects were articulated and advanced.

Table 6: Indicators and Evidence of Zenu Territorialization

Indicators of Territorialization	Empirical Manifestations
State Territorial Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State recognition through 1991 Constitution and subsequent laws outlining Indigenous rights
Governance Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan de Salvaguarda, and Plan de Vida • Law of Self-Governance
Community cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth of number of community-based organizations • Alliances of community-based organizations
Declarations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GMO-Free Territory
Legal Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INCORA Resolution 054 of 1984 – land titles • Recognition of Cabildos
Organizational Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth of cabildos • Establishment of Cabildo Mayor

Figure 1: Timeline of Zenu process of Territorialization



Process of Autonomy Construction

Autonomy and self-determination are the capacity that our people have to define and respond to the needs related to our cultural, economic, political, religious and social life. Autonomy is built and conquered through the struggles we wage in defense of our rights and in the search for solutions to our problems and needs. Autonomy is manifested in the capacity we have to freely make our decisions to govern ourselves, administer justice and establish our own development, thinking about our future generations and the protection of our collective or ethnic rights (Resguardo Indígena Zenú San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba-Sucre. 2017).

In the Zenu's journey of contentious claims-making through land recuperations, identity recovery or revival, the formalization of gains won in the process, and the subsequent territorialization of their political project, the overarching objective is to attain autonomy. Drawing on Lefebvre's (2009) concept of *autogestion* (self-management), autonomy is about social groups mastering their conditions of existence and rejecting current circumstances. This includes territorial units. For example, the Zenu work to govern a political space, territorialize their project, and struggle to establish a territory to meet their social needs, engaging in autogestion and moving toward autonomy. Therefore, in order to better understand autonomy as a process, Bretón et al. (2002) and further expanded upon by Velasco and Kline (2025) suggest, autonomy should be seen as a project, a practice, and a vision. Thus, when groups create territories to meet their social needs, they embark on projects, practices, and visions that reflect their goals for self-management and self-determination.

Project

We have a designation of origin, we have a nominative trademark, and we have a special plan of safeguarding in regards to the danger of extinction in which we find ourselves. Likewise, we have our life plan, we have our law of self-government, which is the governing legal framework, and we have a resolution made by our authorities that defends, protects and guarantees the stability of our native seed, such as the resolution for a territory free of transgenics¹⁰⁶.

First, autonomy as a project involves the specific plans or strategies which the Zenu are using to claim their Indigenous rights, including the way they frame sociopolitical and economic interests. To be able to govern themselves, make their own territory according to their own social needs and political visions, is a central goal in declaring the resguardo as a GMO-Free Territory. Moreover, in this declaration as GMO-Free, there is a recognition that autonomy regarding food is fundamental to the autonomy of the Indigenous people in general.

We see those seeds that our ancestors discovered, that have been in the rhythm of life in our population for decades and decades. Today they are part of our cultural identity and that is why we say that we are autonomous. We have more than 20 varieties of seeds that we sow throughout this territory, this great colonial reservation. For this reason, we have undertaken the task of struggling in different scenarios to achieve such autonomy¹⁰⁷.

As a project of the Zenu to establish an autonomous resguardo, the declaration and implementation of a GMO-Free Territory follows and is combined with other projects such as the reconstruction of the Indigenous identity, gaining the legal title to the resguardo lands, and establishing their own Indigenous government. While these other projects are more concerned

¹⁰⁶ Author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023

¹⁰⁷ Author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023.

with decision-making structures, establishing inclusion and exclusion of membership, and broadening legal territorial control, the Declaration of a GMO-Free Territory is more broadly focused on production within the territory, limiting certain types of production and supporting others. As stated by an interviewee: “We cannot continue implementing foreign models that threaten our identity and our autonomy”¹⁰⁸.

Moreover, the declaration as a GMO-Free Territory reinforces many of the other projects intent on moving towards autonomy. For example, by banning GMOs, the Zenú protect their traditional agricultural practices, which are integral to their cultural heritage. This, in turn, strengthens their identity and cultural revival projects by maintaining the use of Indigenous seeds and farming methods that have been passed down through generations. Additionally, the declaration is a powerful assertion of sovereignty, reinforcing the capacity of the Cabildo Mayor and other governance structures to make decisions that reflect the community’s values and priorities. This enhances political participation and self-governance¹⁰⁹.

Practices

Second, autonomy as practice refers to the concrete actions being implemented to empower or organize their own Indigenous authorities to be able to make autonomous decisions. The aggregation of practices form the foundation of the broader projects discussed above. These actions can be de jure (for example, when the Zenu appeal to the INCORA to give title to specific lands) or de facto (for example, when the Zenu would invade and recuperate lands claimed to be a part of the resguardo). Additionally, practices of the Zenu in constructing their

¹⁰⁸ Author interview with an Indigenous authority, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023.

¹⁰⁹ Conversations during community-based workshops, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, October 6, 2022, as well as conversations during community-based workshops, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023

autonomy in the resguardo range from the large scale such as participating in a class action lawsuit against the Colombian state for allowing genetic contamination of cultural patrimony (native seeds), to the more regional scale such as the formation of associations like ASPROAL, and to the local, community or family level, such as the holding of native seed exchanges.

According to one interviewee:

The first action was to make inventories of the seeds we had and after that also do research on each of the products of these seeds. That also gave us information about what ways they are used and what knowledges we have about each of the seeds, and what we do with them, how we cultivate each one, how we prepare the food they give¹¹⁰.

Other practices which have contributed to the project of the construction of a GMO-Free Territory have included community-based seed exchanges, storing seeds in community-based seed houses, joining national level networks such as the Free Seeds Network of Colombia, community education campaigns, community-based participatory processes to develop standards and requirements for seed quality. Additionally, the practice of taking samples from seeds purchased from different areas of the resguardo to test them for genetic modifications has been an important practice.

In this defense of our native seeds, we have also advanced in tests, tests that have included sampling. But we must continue doing them periodically because we did it in 2016 and now in 2020 and 2022. So let it be more periodically, and we want to do it in a

¹¹⁰ Author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, March 254, 2022. This process discussed by the interviewee became a community education-oriented booklet, made to tell the story of seeds in the resguardo (as well as of the resguardo itself), and to offer the gastronomic and nutritional history of the Zenu people as a story of resistance: <https://www.semillas.org.co/es/publicaciones/semillas-criollas-del-pueblo-zen-recuperacin-de-la-memoria-del-territorio-y-del-conocimiento-tradicional>.

broader way, with more producers and with more varieties to be able to better evaluate¹¹¹.

In fact, these tests conducted in 2016 found that the seeds from the community seed house were not genetically modified, while seeds purchased from other markets included five varieties which were genetically altered (Red de Semillas Libres de Colombia 2019). A key factor in declaring the resguardo as a GMO-Free Territory was the active involvement of the entire community. The Zenú held and continue to hold numerous meetings and workshops to discuss the implications of GMOs and to build consensus around the decision to declare their territory GMO-free.

This grassroots approach ensured that the declaration had broad-based support and was seen as a collective achievement. Additionally, the Zenú engaged in persistent legal and political advocacy to secure recognition of their decision. They worked closely with local and national authorities¹¹² to ensure that their GMO-free status was formally acknowledged and protected by law. This involved leveraging existing legal frameworks that support Indigenous rights and environmental protection¹¹³.

Visions

The practices outlined above can be seen as accumulating into broader projects of Indigenous autonomy in the resguardo Zenu de San Andres de Sotavento. These projects (and

¹¹¹ Author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, March 254, 2022

¹¹² In fact, in ICA resolution 00464 of 2007, the state responds to the claim of Indigenous rights to declare the resguardo as GMO-Free by establishing that GM seeds cannot be sown in Indigenous resguardos, and they must not be sown within 300 meters of the resguardo. The Zenu contend that 300 meters are not enough to separate conventional corn and native seeds from transgenic corn; since there are studies in several regions that have shown that with strong winds and certain topographic conditions, like the Caribbean region, the risk of pollinating other crops could reach distances of up to 500 and 1000 meters (Pollack 2004, Eastham & Sweet 2002).

¹¹³ Conversations during community-based workshops, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, October 6, 2022.

the practices as well) are, in turn, guided by certain visions or ideas which encompass a set of symbols and normative views supporting cultural survival delineating the political project through which the Zenu seek to regain control of their lives (Velasco and Kline 2025).

The foundation of this vision for the Zenu is the recuperation of the resguardo lands, all 83,000 hectares. The vision of the resguardo is clarified as a territory (which they are producing for their own social purposes), as an institution (one with authority to control the territory and exchange with the state), and as an ideal or an ultimate goal which is still being struggled for, both in terms of unifying the entire 83,000 hectares of the original colonial title, and in asserting authority over more fields of life within the areas currently recognized by the state.

That is why we Zenues not only fight to safeguard and defend the fourteen thousand hectares that we currently have and control, but also to recover the entire territory that was stolen from us. The expansion of the extensive livestock model, the implementation of agrofuel production policies, the planting of monocultures, the introduction of transgenic crops in nearby areas, and the desperate migration of young people forced to produce coca... are the newest threats that we face (RECAR 2016).

For the Zenú, claiming the figure of the resguardo represents not only a form of control of the land, but also a collective comprehension of the meaning of territory. For example:

The fight, or the struggle, or the essence of having a territory is not simply to demonstrate territorial dominion. It is about empowerment. To be able to guarantee our food sovereignty. That is why the land, that is why the territory is so important to an Indigenous people¹¹⁴.

¹¹⁴ Author interview with an Indigenous authority, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023

The declaration of a GMO-Free Territory demonstrates how the vision of the recuperation of the resguardo and of establishing autonomous Zenu authority over the territory flows into the necessity of food sovereignty. When discussing the motivating factors which led to the land recuperation process it was stated that:

We were abandoned by the state, by the municipal, departmental, and national governments. We had no education, we had no health, we had no means of communication, we had no housing, or rather, we had nothing at that time. We had no land to plant our food on¹¹⁵.

Discussed above, the process of the loss of the resguardo, of Zenu Indigenous identity, of cultural practices, and living in conditions of poverty and marginalization, included a loss of food sovereignty. With this, the vision of an autonomous resguardo sovereign over its own food system entails discourses against neoliberalism and comes into conflict with claims of state sovereignty (Bretón et al., 2022, p. 548).

And that action, that declaration, today allows us to conserve even more of our native seeds. That is why we think of it as defensive. But we continue to advance, we continue to take actions in educational institutions, in many organizations, imparting all this knowledge that we have about the recovery of native seeds. As well as the territories that were fought for, the lands that we have won, the recovered farms, the estates recovered, today we are promoting the recovery of native corn... Many previous governments came up with different processes of imparting projects, seeds that they call improved seeds,

¹¹⁵ Author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, May 25, 2023.

*technological packages with the seeds were offered by many institutions. So, we defend, that is, we do not allow these seeds to enter our territory*¹¹⁶.

Food, in fact, is one of the first aspects that should be considered regarding the maintenance of autonomy for Indigenous peoples. The progressive loss of food sovereignty experienced by the Zenu not only deteriorated collective life but impeded the ability to move towards autonomy in the resguardo during and after the recuperations. That is why the Zenu identify seeds with the territory of the resguardo:

*Fortunately, there is a story that indicates that a discovery also occurred here thousands of years ago. That was the corn seed that still remains today. And it is our task to maintain these native seeds to feed ourselves, to safeguard our food security or food sovereignty, but also as a potential to leave to new generations. In other words, we have very urgent and important tasks of safeguarding all those native seeds, to ensure that they are planted throughout the territory of the great colonial reservation*¹¹⁷.

For this, the Law of Self-Government establishes that the Economic Development Council of the resguardo must promote actions aimed at protecting seeds and traditional cultivation systems to guarantee the food security and sovereignty of the territory (Resguardo Indígena Zenú San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba-Sucre. 2017).

Founded on the goal of recuperating the entire 83,000 hectares of the colonial resguardo and moving into the vision of a resguardo sovereign over its own food system, the vision of autonomy found in the declaration of a GMO-Free Territory is multifaceted. The vision of autonomy includes self-determination, cultural preservation, environmental protection, as well as

¹¹⁶ Author interview with an Indigenous authority, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, March 24, 2022

¹¹⁷ Author interview with a community leader, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, March 24, 2022

political autonomy, economic independence, and social cohesion. Therefore, this vision embodies an idea and ideology rooted in the preservation of Indigenous agricultural practices, the protection of biodiversity, and the assertion of self-determination.

Conclusion

This process encapsulates a journey of cultural revival, political mobilization, direct action, and legal battles aimed at reclaiming both their ancestral lands and their Indigenous identity. Through reclaiming their lands, the Zenu were able to transition from a fragmented peasant identity to a more unified Indigenous identity. The process of land recovery was, therefore, not just a physical reclamation of territory but also a symbolic and practical recovery of their identity, autonomy, and cultural heritage. Through land recovery, the Zenu reasserted themselves as an Indigenous people with a distinct and resilient identity, capable of navigating and resisting external pressures while preserving their cultural and social actuality. The cultural revival was not only about preserving traditions but also about strengthening a collective identity that could unify the community in their struggles. Importantly, the identification of the conservation of native seeds to achieve autonomy, bolster cultural revival, and strengthen community became a central building block of this process. Through the revival of identity, the reassertion of historical claims, and the defense of seed sovereignty, the Zenú have not only challenged the spatial reach of the state but also constructed a new territorial order grounded in Indigenous governance. These efforts, though constrained by state frameworks, represent a meaningful articulation of autonomy and a vision for collective life that resists extractive and colonial logics.

Chapter 6: Food Autonomy and Sustained Resistance: The Case of the Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca

Since time immemorial, seeds have been a fundamental part of life, of food sovereignty and autonomy, and in general, the dynamics of the territories (CRIC 2022).

The entire relationship with the territory, and all the sociocultural and sociospiritual relationships are related to the seed and the way of producing food. Everything is related to the seed and food production, as well as to the fruits of that production and the question of feeding ourselves¹¹⁸.

This chapter traces how the CRIC mobilized key mechanisms, such as claims-making, memory work, identity assertion, boundary activation, and territorialization, to build and sustain a process of autonomy. It demonstrated the ways in which seed politics became a key domain through which these mechanisms are expressed. Rather than analyzing resistance as a reactive or purely legal process, the focus here is on how these mechanisms function relationally to construct Indigenous political space and institutional alternatives. As the CRIC transitioned from land recuperation to territorial governance, seed sovereignty emerged not as a separate concern but as a deepening of its political project, linking ecological reproduction to jurisdictional control and cultural revitalization.

Context

Emerging Recognition of the Importance of Seeds

¹¹⁸ Author Interview with Indigenous activist in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023.

After nearly two centuries without practicing the *Saakhelu* ritual - “awakening of the seeds”, the Nasa Indigenous people in Colombia’s southwest department of Cauca re-established their important sacred ritual in December of 2010. The ritual signifies the time to prepare the land for the sowing season and harmonize the seeds. It is a “community exercise in defense of life, territory, native seeds, and nature” (CRIC 2010)¹¹⁹, and was concentrated on the themes of resistance and food sovereignty. The ritual revolved around a seed festival which included seed exchanges, community-based trainings on the proper sowing of certain seeds, and the establishment of a community seed bank. This seed festival exhibited a newly emerging focus in the region on the importance of native seeds for the construction and defense of Indigenous territorial and cultural autonomy.

This Nasa ritual, representing the emerging focus on the political importance of seeds, was preceded in the Cauca department by the Indigenous Yanacona of the Purace resguardo, who in 1999 included reflections on the recuperation of native and traditional seeds in their Life Plan (Plan de Salvaguarda del Pueblo Yanacona 2009). Later, in the 2007 *Ley de Origen* (Autoridades del Nu Nakchak del Pueblo Misak. 2013)¹²⁰ of the Indigenous Misak people, it is stated that “The use of Misak territory for the introduction, sowing, use and commercialization of genetically modified seeds and products and their derivatives, as well as plants whose purpose is contrary to nature and culture, is prohibited.” That same year the CRIC included the issue of seeds in its regional and organizational-wide Life Plan of 2007. The Life Plan discusses the

¹¹⁹ Also, the revival of this ritual was discussed as a shift in Indigenous political organizing in the region during community-based workshops, Popayán, Colombia, September 27th, 2022.

¹²⁰ The *Ley de Origen* refers to their ancestral laws, values, and traditions that govern their relationship with the land, community, and the cosmos. It is a legal system rooted in their worldview (*cosmovisión*), a guiding framework of knowledge, spirituality, and governance, which predates and often contrasts with the Colombian legal system. The *Ley de Origen* thereby represents a mechanism through which Indigenous groups assert sovereignty and protect their way of life from encroachment by the state or private entities. See, CRIC 2022, or Rodríguez 2017.

mandate for the cabildos members of the CRIC to: “Strengthen food sovereignty, the rescue, defense, and conservation of biodiversity and traditional knowledge, for which it is urgent to issue a resolution of control for the protection and defense of the native seeds of our territories”. The Life Plan also included plans for the establishment of seed banks, inventories of native seeds per zone, seed exchanges between regions, and participation in regional and national seed-guardian networks.

Finally, in the 2018 mandate of the *Autoridad Territorial Económico Ambiental* (Territorial, Economic, and Environmental Authority)¹²¹ of the CRIC the prohibition of GM seeds is declared for all Indigenous territories in Cauca members of the CRIC. Article 27 of this mandate states:

Article 27. Native seeds. Traditional Indigenous authorities shall adopt the pertinent measures and the respective strategies for the conservation of their own seeds in order to prevent the entry, transit, commercialization, production, and distribution of transgenic seeds into Indigenous territories.

Paragraph 1. Indigenous authorities shall create banks of seeds, plants, and other native species for the implementation of plans, programs, projects, and the conservation, protection, and recovery of living spaces, in accordance with the ancestral knowledge and practice of each people.

¹²¹ According to the CRIC website, this Territorial, Economic, and Environmental Authority: “has the mandate to care for, recover, protect, and safeguard living spaces in the original territories of Cauca for the good living of the Indigenous peoples in harmony and balance with Mother Earth.” The goal is to have an authority responsible for consolidating autonomous systems of government in work towards food autonomy and based in the *ley de origen, derecho mayor*, and *usos y costumbres*. See <https://ateacric.org/>. Moreover, this Indigenous authority was recognized by the Colombian government through Decree 1094 of 2024.

*Paragraph 2. Indigenous territories are declared **free of transgenic seeds**, and we reject the implementation of government or private programs and projects for agricultural promotion or food security that contain transgenic seeds and foods or technological packages that threaten our traditional seeds, ancestral knowledge, and territory.*

Since the 1990s, seeds have emerged as a significant issue for the CRIC and Indigenous communities in Cauca due to increasing threats to traditional agricultural practices and biodiversity. The CRIC's fight for autonomy, which began as a push for land rights and Indigenous governance, has expanded to confront the encroachment of transgenic seeds and corporate control over agricultural inputs, which threaten traditional seed varieties and food sovereignty. The arrival of GM seeds and associated restrictions on traditional seed-saving practices imposed by international trade agreements sparked a defensive movement for seed autonomy among Indigenous groups in Cauca. That is, a proactive and defensive movement to safeguard native seeds before GM seeds overwhelm the region. This movement, therefore, aims to preserve traditional agricultural knowledge, biodiversity, and cultural identity. The CRIC and allied organizations have advocated for the resistance to GM seeds in their resguardos, creating policies that emphasize the right to freely save, share, and cultivate native seeds as an extension of territorial sovereignty and environmental governance.

Brief History of the Indigenous Movement in Cauca

The Spanish arrived in the region of Cauca around the year of 1535 intent on subjugating Indigenous peoples and seizing lands. Popayán, the capital of today's Cauca Department, was founded by the Spanish conquistador Sebastián de Belalcázar on January 13, 1537. These origins are discussed as the creation of two republics: one for the Spanish, and another for the Indians (Díaz 2001). Additionally, the elites of the region became sustained by a system of slavery

predominantly of people of African descent. Popayán's strategic location between Lima, Quito, and Cartagena made it crucial for transferring gold and other riches to Cartagena in route to Spain. Gold was also mined in the region and the upper class of the province of Popayán built their wealth thanks to the slaves they brought to the haciendas and to the mines. The trajectory of this expansive and powerful region up to the late 19th century was largely driven by cycles of mining activity in its surrounding zones and the growth of haciendas sustained by enslaved labor (Peñaranda 2012).

Indigenous Resistance

In Cauca, the resistance of Indigenous peoples prolonged the Spanish wars of conquest for over 100 years. At first isolated peoples and communities would face the Spanish alone, but they quickly realized the power of joining forces. A multitude of alliances were formed between the independent Indigenous peoples of the region in their mutual struggle to evade conquest and maintain their freedom. However, in 1656 the last recorded uprising against the Spanish invaders was violently crushed (Bonilla 2015).

Indigenous groups, such as the Misak, the Yanacona, the Paez, and others, led several rebellions against Spanish rule, including the significant 1537 rebellion led by La Gaitana (Guaitipán)¹²². In the 16th century, Pedro Cieza de León, the first Spanish chronicler to travel the region, recounted how between 1540 and 1550 the Nasa people, in Tierradentro, fiercely resisted

¹²² According to the Banco de la República la Gaitana was: “a chieftainess of the Yalcón culture during the 16th century, an Indigenous woman who resisted the colonization of her territory, initially bringing together more than six thousand Indigenous people from different communities (initially Timanaes, Yalcones, and Pijaos) against the violent acts of domination of Pedro de Añasco and his men, who acted by order of the conqueror Sebastián de Belalcázar.” See [https://enciclopedia.banrepcultural.org/index.php?title=La_Gaitana_\(english_version\)#Valor_and_Indigenous_Strategy](https://enciclopedia.banrepcultural.org/index.php?title=La_Gaitana_(english_version)#Valor_and_Indigenous_Strategy).

the invasion of the Europeans who attacked from Popayán (Comisión de la Verdad 2021). Later, the legal activism of Juan Tama¹²³, during the 18th century has been counted as inspiration for today's Indigenous movement. Subsequently, although mostly concentrated in Santander, the *Comunero* Revolt had significant participation from Indigenous groups in Cauca, protesting against excessive taxation and colonial exploitation (Phelan 1978).

The Cauca region was also the last region to implement the Bourbon reforms' abolition of the *encomienda* system. This created lasting impacts of entrenched agrarian structures of Indigenous peoples working as *terrejeros*, forced to pay tribute to the landowner up until the struggles of the CRIC (Bonilla 2015). The efforts of large landowners and the Colombian state to expropriate *resguardo* lands and even dissolve the *resguardos* in the early 20th century (Law 55 of 1905, for example) were met with fierce resistance in Cauca. For example, Indigenous leader Manuel Quintín Lame organized Indigenous communities to reclaim lands and assert rights, reforming early Indigenous *cabildos*. Additionally, Quintín Lame led a series of uprisings and organized legal campaigns to reclaim land and rights for Indigenous peoples in Cauca and other regions. This movement slowed down the loss of *resguardo* lands compared to other regions of Colombia, however before the founding of the CRIC, the number of *resguardos* in Cauca had been reduced from 66 to 28 (Castrillón Arboleda 1973, Castillo-Cárdenas 2024).

While initially a faithful member of the Quintín Lame movement, José González Sánchez later separated and helped found the Communist Party of Colombia in 1930. Among his local, national, and international organizing, between 1936 and 1938 he was elected as a council

¹²³ Juan Tama de la Estrella was an Indigenous leader of the Nasa people, chief of Vitoncó between 1682 and 1718, who led the process for the Spanish crown to legally recognize Indigenous territories. Utilizing arguments based in colonial law he was able to ensure reservation titles to five Nasa populations: Jambaló, Vitoncó, San Lorenzo de Caldone, Quichaya and Pitayó. See Bonilla 2015.

member of the municipality of Silvia, Cauca and served as president of the Confederación Campesina e Indígena (Peasant and Indigenous Confederation) (Gamboa 2020, Villanueva 1993). The legacy of such radical organizing is exemplified in some of the key founders of the CRIC who came with experience in previously organizing with the Movimiento Revolucionario Liberal¹²⁴ (MRL, Revolutionary Liberal Movement), as well as with peasant unions and cooperatives. Moreover, at the time of the 1961 Agrarian Reform, political and social movement organizations were expanding in the region. For example, the *Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca* (CRIC) emerged from the *Frente Social y Agraria* (FRESAGRO), which had the principal motivation of struggle for land, and later became a member of the ANUC. The experiences and challenges faced within these broader movements highlighted the necessity for an organization specifically dedicated to Indigenous issues.

While the Indigenous peoples of Cauca were integrated into Colombian political life (as peasants) through the Conservative and Liberal political party structures, this system broke down with the advent of La Violencia. La Violencia, the period of intense bipartisan violence between Liberal and Conservative parties from 1948-1958, significantly affected Indigenous communities through displacement and violence, furthering the loss of land, cultural erosion, social marginalization, and economic hardship. Beyond the conflicts of the parties, tensions were also being drawn along social class and ethnic lines. Therefore, the agrarian reform Law 135 of 1961 was to help overcome the causes of La Violencia as well as to compensate for the loss of lands and traditional political avenues. Indigenous peasants of Cauca participated in the agrarian

¹²⁴ The MRL was a political movement in Colombia founded in 1959 by Alfonso López Michelsen as a breakaway faction of the traditional Liberal Party. The MRL emerged in opposition to the National Front (Frente Nacional), the bipartisan power-sharing agreement between Liberals and Conservatives (1958-1974) that aimed to end the period of political violence known as *La Violencia*. See Pantoja 2024.

reform in several ways which included forming and joining cooperatives, joining the ANUC, and mobilizing politically (on the basis of social class).

Meanwhile, many of the lands, including resguardo lands, were being used for sugar production from companies mainly from the Valle del Cauca (department to the north of Cauca). The sugar industry in northern Cauca has a long history, beginning with the introduction of sugarcane by Spanish colonizers in the 16th century. By the 18th century, it became a key export crop, and in the 20th century, large-scale plantations expanded, displacing Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. Industrialization further intensified environmental damage, including deforestation and water diversion. The CRIC and other Indigenous organizations resisted this expansion, leading to violent conflicts, such as the 1991 Huellas-Caloto massacre (Murillo 2009, Sturges-Vera 1999).

By the time the CRIC was founded in 1971, the cumulative effects of colonization, land dispossession, and cultural marginalization had left many Indigenous communities in Cauca with limited control over their food systems. Dependency on external markets, loss of ancestral lands, and the erosion of traditional agricultural practices created widespread food insecurity and weakened cultural ties to traditional diets.

Founding of the CRIC

In February of 1971, around two thousand Indigenous peasants from the Cauca region gathered to work towards forming an Indigenous organization together. The main participants were Nasas and Guambianos, the two largest Indigenous groups from the region. Also at this meeting were non-Indigenous government officials from the INCORA, who had funded the meeting, as well as non-Indigenous leftist activists, and afro-Colombian community leaders from

the region (Troyan 2008). In this meeting, discussion and demands were still tied to dominant leftist class-based ideas of land redistribution towards family-owned private property as well as the revolutionary fervor in the country.

The second founding meeting of the CRIC honed in on the ethnic nature of the emerging organization. This second meeting (often recognized as the actual founding of the CRIC), took place in September of 1971 (8 months after the first meeting) and articulated demands that are almost identical to the demands of the Manuel Quintin Lame movement of the early 20th century. These are: The repossession of resguardo lands; The expansion of the resguardos; The strengthening of cabildos; An end to sharecropping¹²⁵; The promotion of the knowledge of Indigenous legislation and that it be applied; The defense of the history, language, and customs of native communities; The training and employment of Indigenous teachers.

The change in demands and programs outlined in this second conference demonstrates a shift in strategy, from a peasant, class-based framework to one rooted in Indigenous identity and territoriality. This reorientation not only shaped the foundational political agenda of the CRIC but continues to inform its contemporary governance strategies, demonstrated in relation to CRIC efforts towards seed sovereignty. The CRIC (and its members) has embedded resistance to GMOs within traditional governing structures and processes, such as the cabildos, communal assemblies, and the broader framework of territorial autonomy outlined in the original 7-point program, as well as in the sustained *derecho mayor*, *ley de origen*, and *usos y costumbres*. By prioritizing the protection of native seeds, agroecological practices, and collective land management, the CRIC are effectively engaged in constructing GMO-Free Territories through a

¹²⁵ This is the only demand made at both principal meetings of the founding of the CRIC.

de facto approach that aligns with their historical struggle for self-determination. This strategy safeguards Indigenous agricultural practices, demonstrating that the absence of explicit declarations does not equate to an absence of anti-GMO activism.

Agrarian Reform as Critical Juncture (1961 - 1974)

The agrarian reform in Cauca, based on Law 135 of 1961, was a modest attempt to address rural discontent. The initial years of the reform (1962-1967) are often viewed as a time when the emphasis was on establishing agrarian reform institutions, enhancing agricultural production, altering land usage, and offering credit to peasant farmers, with actual redistribution taking a backseat. In Cauca, the legacy of land concentration was deeply rooted in colonial history, with wealthy families and elites maintaining control over large estates. As a result, despite the reform efforts, land concentration persisted in Cauca, with vast estates continuing to dominate and many peasants still without access to land.

The colonial legacy of the Popayán Governorate saw large estates (haciendas) controlled by landowning families who used the terraje system as a means of exerting control over Indigenous labor. These lands had been taken from the ancestors of Indigenous communities. The combination of unequal land access, exploitation of Indigenous peoples, and the ideological influence of the Church set the stage for the transformations that began in the 1970s (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición: Capítulo de Pueblos Étnicos 2022).

The fear that other Latin American countries might follow the example of the Cuban Revolution led the United States, under President John F. Kennedy, to launch the Alliance for Progress. This initiative aimed to encourage Latin American governments to implement agrarian

reform before communist ideologies took hold in the countryside. Additionally, it sought to boost rural production to accelerate global industrialization and open up markets. These reforms were driven by the prevailing notion of “progress” at the time, which aligned with rural movements that saw landowners as a barrier to development. As a result, there was a degree of consensus between the government and peasant and Indigenous movements regarding land demands, leading to a surge in mobilization for land recovery across the country (Galeano Lozano 2006). However, similar to other regions of the country, the attempted agrarian reform faced challenges due to entrenched landowners who managed to limit the redistribution of land. While new institutions like INCORA (Institute for Agrarian Reform) were established, land redistribution remained slow.

In Cauca, the formation of the CRIC (Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca) in 1971 can be seen as part of a broader movement to address Indigenous land and territorial rights. While the ANUC initially played a role in pushing for reform and supporting the National Front governments, it became clear by the early 1970s that political leaders like President Pastrana were not committed to supporting genuine land redistribution. Similarly, in Cauca, the CRIC was created in response to the failure of state-led reforms and disagreements with the ANUC, with Indigenous leaders organizing to assert their territorial rights and challenge the ongoing colonial legacies of land dispossession.

Although the need for Indigenous organization had been present in the region for some time, the motivation to act in 1971 stemmed from the realization that the ongoing agrarian reform (1968) would threaten the existence of Indigenous reservations. INCORA was purchasing land and distributing it as private individual ownership, which would result in the loss of territorial autonomy, the dismantling of traditional cabildos, and the transformation of

Indigenous people into peasants. In the Safeguarding Plan of the Coconuco, it is stated that: “With the enactment of Law 135 on agrarian reform, the National Government sought to subdivide the reservation. The leaders of that time opposed titling the plots as private property” (Asociación de Cabildos Genaro Sánchez – Autoridad Tradicional de los Territorios Ancestrales del Pueblo Kokonuko. 2013). Additionally, this shift meant that these already impoverished communities would be forced to pay property taxes (Galeano Lozano 2006).

This tension between state-led initiatives and the demands of Indigenous groups ultimately led to a surge in local mobilization, culminating in the founding of the CRIC. The agrarian reform initiated by the Lleras Restrepo government in 1968 helped ignite a wave of agrarian struggles across Colombia. In Cauca, these reforms intersected with the distinctive historical trajectory of the Indigenous peoples, seeing themselves as heirs to the legacy of Quintín Lame’s early 20th-century uprising, creating fertile ground for the emergence of a radical Indigenous movement. Within a few years, this movement positioned itself as a key political and social force in the country (Houghton & Villa 2005).

By asserting their rights and organizing collective resistance, Indigenous communities in Cauca sought not only to defend their land but also to affirm their autonomy against a backdrop of increasing state interference. Their struggle was not only about land redistribution but also about reclaiming control over their territories, reinforcing their cultural heritage, and ensuring their survival in a rapidly changing socio-political environment. The formation of the CRIC marked a pivotal moment in the history of agrarian reform in the region, as it symbolized a shift towards more radical forms of territorial defense and Indigenous self-determination.

Making Claims on Land, Memory, Difference, and Solidarity (1960s – 1980s)

The idea is not to clash, but to articulate and ensure that our process is respected, without ignoring that there are other processes as well, and that inter-institutional coordination is necessary to allow progress towards the harmony that must exist in the territories... So there are differences, but ultimately, we are united by a common goal, which is to be able to advance towards autonomy¹²⁶.

The claims-making mechanism was foundational to the CRIC's struggle for Indigenous autonomy and territorial rights in Cauca, articulated most clearly through its original 7-point program established in 1971. This program set forth a bold agenda demanding the recovery of usurped lands, the strengthening of resguardos, autonomous education, and the defense of cultural practices, among other priorities. At its core, the 7-point program was a collective declaration of grievances and aspirations that transformed disparate local struggles into a unified movement for Indigenous sovereignty. By framing these demands in terms of resistances to historical injustice as well as commitments to self-determination, the CRIC was able to mobilize widespread support and challenge state policies that perpetuated land inequality and cultural erasure.

Strategic Meetings and Massive Mobilizations

So, we had to hold meetings at night, we had to hide from the landowners, we had to make endless strategies to be able to meet with the Indigenous communities and to be able to establish a political position, because we have always been persecuted¹²⁷.

¹²⁶ Interviews with Indigenous activists in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023.

¹²⁷ Interview with Indigenous activist in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023.

As indicated by the quote above, the CRIC was born out of local meetings that culminated in organizing strategic massive meetings of differing Indigenous representatives, and other peasant organizations, from the department of Cauca (and elsewhere), along with representatives of other ethnic groups, political activists, and even government officials sympathetic to their problems (mainly from INCORA). These strategic meetings begin with those first two, in which the CRIC were founded in 1971. However, over the next years, community-based meetings became the core of CRIC organizing. These grew into more regional meetings which at times grew into the general assemblies of the CRIC, and finally into national meetings.

At the first gathering for the founding of the CRIC in 1971 over 2000 people were present. This gathering was emblematic as the beginning of a shift from peasant and class-based organizing to the Indigenous and ethnic based organizing. However, the focus at this meeting on land distribution remained central. This is partly explained by the large number of participants working as sharecroppers (*terrajeros*), rather than Indigenous peoples living on collective land (Trojan 2002, 2008). Importantly, Colombian military and police were present to monitor the gathering, and a number of participants were arrested afterwards. Later that same year, the second founding meeting of the CRIC was held clandestinely due to the repression experienced at the first meeting. At this second meeting the focus became more strongly on the Indigenous claims¹²⁸.

In 1972 the ANUC planned the National Peasant March to Bogota in which large Indigenous columns from Popayán and Silvia in the Cauca department joined. Government

¹²⁸ This is partly explained by the change in location to an area of Cauca where Indigenous communities maintained collective lands and *resguardos*. It is also argued that certain advisors to the gathering such as the indigenist Victor Danilo Bonilla played an oversized role in shaping the conversations at the second gathering.

repression, including the arrest of leaders, forced other regions of the department to cease their participation. However, involvement in this march left positive results for the CRIC as many members experienced a massive march for the first time, with many different sectors of Colombian society in support¹²⁹.

The third assembly of the CRIC took place in 1973. At this assembly, two important developments occurred. First, at the same gathering, the first national Indigenous gathering took place. This included Indigenous organizations from Tolima, Caldas, Nariño, and Putumayo. Second, at this third assembly, the Indigenous communities themselves took on the leadership, organization, and facilitation of the assembly, while the non-Indigenous external members took on more advisory roles. This shift, of more empowered Indigenous organizing, is exemplified in the twenty-eight peaceful demonstrations organized by the CRIC between 1971 and 1974.

During the CRIC's Fourth Congress (1975), and Fifth Congress (1978) solidifying relations with the broader peasant movement became a central focus. Now that the Indigenous movement was separate and distinct as well as more organized with clear demands, solidarity with the class-based struggle for national transformation was once again centered. For example, when discussing the relationship with the ANUC at the Fourth Congress, the final report states: "At the national level, the Indigenous movement must continue to collaborate closely with the peasant movement and continue to act within the ANUC". However, "It is not the CRIC that is responsible for coordinating tasks at a national level, but rather the Indigenous Secretariat, but this should be appointed by the Indigenous bases and have autonomy within the ANUC" (CRIC 1974).

¹²⁹ Interview with Indigenous authority in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023.

This movement towards building solidary relations with other sectors is further exemplified in the Fifth Congress, where over 50 peasant, labor, student, university, cooperative, journalist, parents, and other associations were present. The final report from this Congress states “We commit ourselves to further strengthen fraternal relations to promote the unity of all the exploited” (CRIC 1978). An interviewee explained:

It was even mandated through resolutions, mandates from regional congresses, from the boards of directors of the organization and also from our own local meetings, from activities at both the zonal and local level. But also in Cauca there are many organizations that are doing it, not only the Indigenous organization, there are also peasant organizations that are fighting very hard against, especially mining, extraction of natural resources in the territories. Also, here in Cauca there are many community councils that fight, that try to survive within their collective properties, so that their culture and their territories are respected. So, yes, there is a social articulation between groups¹³⁰.

First, these gatherings, meetings, and mobilizations created a structured environment where common grievances, such as land rights, cultural preservation, and autonomy, could be voiced collectively, creating a shared platform that highlights unified objectives. Additionally, the preparation and execution of such large-scale actions foster practical networks of collaboration, where leaders and participants learn logistical and organizational skills that reinforce future mobilizations. To see the evolution of these Congresses, see table seven below.

¹³⁰ Author interview with Indigenous authority in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, March 21, 2022.

These events also serve as informal educational spaces where political consciousness and Indigenous identity are reinforced, linking individual members to a larger, historically rooted cause that extends beyond immediate demands. This cyclical mechanism of convening, planning, and mobilizing thereby exemplifies how coordinated action is sustained and magnified within the CRIC, leveraging collective identity for continued resistance and advocacy. The strategic meetings and congresses organized by the CRIC serve as critical components of the claims-making mechanism by providing platforms for deliberation, agenda-setting, and the public articulation of demands.

Table 7: Congresses of the CRIC

Congress	Year	Important Outcomes
1 st	1971	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marks the founding of the CRIC
2 nd	1971	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The establishment of the Sevent Point Program
3 rd	1973	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies in favor of cultural, social, and territorial identity. • First National Indigenous Gathering. • Free elections of cabildos is established. • Highlights the importance of Indigenous agricultural practices.
4 th	1975	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of a legal program designed to address the numerous cases of incarceration resulting from land recovery efforts. • Commitment to broader rural-peasant movement. • Policies in favor of cultural, social, and territorial identity.
5 th	1978	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Represents a stage of consolidation of the Indigenous movement. • Bilingual and intercultural education was formalized as policy. • A network of cooperatives and community stores was created • Self-sustaining, traditional farming practices was reinforced as central to the autonomy of the Indigenous territories
6 th	1981	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approved 8th point “Promote Community Economic Organizations”. • Mandated the creation of CRIC health programs, to strengthen traditional medicine • Created the local and zonal boards.
7 th	1983	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandate to strengthen Indigenous spirituality through traditional medicine and autonomous education.
8 th	1988	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approved 9th point, the “Defense, management, protection and recovery of Natural Resources by Indigenous Communities and their Authorities” • The Quintín Lame Armed Movement proposes demobilization in favor of political participation.
9 th	1993	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Economy and Development Committee is assigned the task of creating an “Economic Proposal for Indigenous Communities”. • The formal recognition of the Indigenous women’s movement

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • decentralization of the CRIC. • The peace accords and the new Constitution are analyzed
10 th	1997	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communities asked to develop “Life Plans” rather than development projects. • Creation of the Special Indigenous Health system • The professionalization of health and bilingual education mandated.
Extraordinary	1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CRIC declared a social, cultural, and economic emergency, which the government acknowledged in Decree 982 of 1999. Through Resolution No. 025, the CRIC was formally recognized as a Traditional Indigenous Authority.
11 th	2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commission appointed for the development of a Nasa alphabet. • The Indigenous Guard is positioned as protectors of the territory.
12 th	2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established the protection of intellectual property of the knowledge of Indigenous peoples. • Approved 10th point “the defense of the family as the fundamental core of the organization.
Extraordinary		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect for sacred sites, spirituality, and the different cultural practices that exist in each community is mandated as a fundamental component in the formation and organization processes.
13 th	2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established program Defense of Life and Human Rights • Mandates the implementation of autonomous health systems and education systems.
Extraordinary	2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandate to generate guidelines for efforts to end the country's armed conflict. • The creation of a legal, political, technical, and administrative route is mandated for the legalization of the processes of Land Restitution and reparation to the victims from a differential public policy.
14 th	2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To strengthen Indigenous justice, legal committees are mandated in each zone, along with centers for harmonization and resocialization to reduce reliance on state prisons. • The creation and strengthening of local, zonal, and regional family councils, the goal is also to strengthen the family as a fundamental pillar of the Indigenous movement.
15 th	2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen the exercise of <i>economia propia</i> by promoting the bartering or exchanging of seeds. • The creation of autonomous schools for political formation is mandated. • Mandates to continue making political claim on the pre-existing nature of colonial titles. • The character of the Indigenous guard as guardians of the territory is reaffirmed.
16 th	2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluating the CRIC's 50-year journey and planning for the future, focusing on strengthening Indigenous political systems, health, education, and governance. • The importance of seeds in the resilience and continuity of Indigenous communities in the face of external threats was highlighted.

1972 Censo Indigena

In 1972, the DANE (National Administrative Department of Statistics) proposed carrying out an Indigenous census in Cauca along with the INCORA. The CRIC eventually took charge of the collection of data through a contract with the DANE. This became a central effort of the CRIC during 1972. The process allowed the CRIC to learn more about the number of Indigenous peoples living in the department, how many cabildos existed, how many Indigenous communities and resguardos existed, including the size, distribution, and socio-economic conditions of various communities¹³¹. According to this census the department of Cauca had 85,000 Indigenous people, while the estimates of the Indigenous population at the national scale was 200,000 (Gros & Cusminsky 1988). The census also highlighted the poverty, marginalization, hunger, and food insecurity faced by Indigenous communities, providing a basis for advocating for better access to education, support services, healthcare, and economic opportunities. This laid the groundwork for the subsequent identification and establishment of the focus on food and seed sovereignty for the Indigenous peoples of the region¹³².

Additionally, the process functioned to support the political education and politicization of the Indigenous peoples of the department. According to the CRIC:

Participation in conducting the surveys allowed for a wide dissemination of the CRIC organization and its proposed programs, and we made contacts with all the regions of the department and with many communities that have subsequently undertaken significant struggles to defend their rights (CRIC 1978).

¹³¹ The questionnaire contained more than 100 questions. 48 reservations (out of 53) from 15 municipalities in the department were surveyed. See CRIC 1978.

¹³² Discussions during community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, September 27th, 2022.

After each day of collecting data, the CRIC-based Indigenous census takers met with the community leaders to provide guidance on the goals of the CRIC. The seven-point program, especially in relation to land recovery and non-payment of land taxes, was always the central theme. In this process, community-based study groups were formed on topics such as socialism, agrarian reforms in Latin America, worker and peasant struggles, the history of Colombia, the economic and social structure of Cauca, and Indigenous legislation.

The working method was as follows: during the day, house-to-house visits were made to fill out the surveys and everyone was invited to participate in meetings in the afternoon. At this meeting, the CRIC program was made known, as well as some official documents. Among them was the one signed between the Indigenous people and the national government in Bogotá, guaranteeing the return of the lands in Tacueyó, Toribío, San Francisco, Pitayó and Jambaló, and the Memorandum of the Agrarian Attorney, in which various abuses against the Indigenous people were denounced (CRIC 1978).

The census, therefore, became a tool for training CRIC organizers and Indigenous communities on the importance of the recognition of the resguardos, the struggle for land, the importance of the cabildos as political instruments, and the necessity of developing an *economía propia*. The CRIC utilized state funds to travel throughout the department. Raising consciousness of shared Indigenous issues conduct this census which strengthened their abilities to organize disparate resguardos across the department, as well as offer political education to various Indigenous communities (CRIC 1978).

This was a collective effort that required the coordination of numerous cabildos and community leaders under the guidance of the CRIC. The process of conducting the census itself was a mobilizing activity that reinforced a collective Indigenous identity, essential for building a

unified front for claims-making. It involved local leaders and communities directly, fostering a sense of ownership over the claims being made. Moreover, the census collected documentation of Indigenous land ownership and usage patterns. This information was essential for supporting Indigenous land claims and demands for the recognition of ancestral territories. This was exemplified in a steep rise in efforts at land recuperations as well as the reconstitution of cabildos after the 1972 Census (Cortés L. 1984).

Land Recoveries and the Terraje System

The first point of the CRIC's platform of struggle, the recuperation of lands, can be seen as the center of claims being made. By the mid-1970s these land recoveries had extended to 12 of the 41 municipalities of Cauca. By the late 1970s some 12,000 hectares of land had already been recovered (CINEP 1978). By 1986 some 40 cabildos had been reestablished and around 30,000 hectares of land recovered (Pearce 1990, Hristov 2009).

In Cauca, the colonial legacy of the Government of Popayán left the region's economy closely tied to haciendas controlled by powerful landowning families. These families maintained their dominance over the land as part of a system that exploited Indigenous labor. The "terraje" system, which was denounced by Indigenous leader Manuel Quintín Lame in the early 20th century, continued to persist into the 1970s, with large landowning families still exerting control over the Indigenous workforce.

The Agrarian Reform laws of 1968 had particular effects where the struggle to maintain and expand resguardos was minimal and the terraje system of the large haciendas was predominate. This is because the law stipulated that if the Indigenous workers on the haciendas were considered terrajeros (sharecroppers) the reform law would give opportunities to become

landowners, breaking apart the hacienda and dividing parcels. However, if the Indigenous workers were considered laborers by the reform law, the hacienda owners would have to recognize their remuneration and social benefits. Therefore, to avoid losing land, many hacienda owners began processes of evicting the Indigenous workers from the hacienda and replacing them with salaried workers (Cortés L. 1984).

Additionally, as it was also the goal of the Indigenous movement in Cauca to end the terraje system, many Indigenous terrajeros began to refuse to pay the terraje (work for the landlord or pay with produce from their labor). Because of this, the hacienda or large landowners would not allow them to work the hacienda lands, reducing their production to family plots, finding themselves faced with hunger and food insecurity and the necessity to struggle to recuperate lands for themselves and their communities. After the CRIC was created, the process spread to the resguardos which had little land, then to those that had been dispossessed of part of their territory, as well as to the Indigenous communities that had survived as communities with an ethnic identity but that did not have their own territory. The land struggle has been the central axis throughout the development of the CRIC¹³³.

One of the first farms to be recovered was Cobaló, in Kokonuco territory, owned by the archbishop of Popayán, Monsignor Arce Vivas, in 1971. Of the 13,000 hectares that the Kokonuco Reservation currently has, only 1,688 remained before the recoveries began. Another early process of recovery is found in López Adentro, an hacienda in the municipality of Caloto. The recoveries launched the focus on food production:

¹³³ Discussions during community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, September 27th, 2022.

Because previously, our lands were not enough for us to grow corn, cassava, yams, rice, llamas, sweet potatoes, different foods for our nutrition. That was when the lands were recovered, which are now recuperated lands. So, now we can harvest larger crops, we collect more seeds in that entire productive field¹³⁴.

The CRIC emerged as a political organization representing several distinct Indigenous groups, including the Nasa, Guambiano, Yanacona, and Totoroes peoples. Each group had its own cultural, political, and territorial dynamics. However, the common grievances related to land dispossession, marginalization, and the erosion of their rights allowed these groups to come together under the umbrella of the CRIC. The shared understanding that land was integral to their cultural survival and self-determination was a powerful unifying force.

The land recovery process facilitated greater interaction and exchange between the geographically scattered Indigenous groups. By working together in protests, congresses, and assemblies, these groups were able to share cultural practices, political strategies, and develop a collective identity that transcended their local differences. This cultural and political exchange was vital in forging a unified Indigenous movement that could operate on both local and national stages.

However, at the beginning of this CRIC process, INCORA did not hand over the recovered lands to the resguardos but to community enterprises formed by Indigenous community members who were recovering land, under the same legal and ownership conditions as the peasant community enterprises. In the 1970s and up to 1982, 74,757 hectares were handed over to 47 Indigenous community-based enterprises.

¹³⁴ Author interview with Indigenous authority in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, March 21, 2022.

Organizing Community-based Economic Entities and *Economía Propia*¹³⁵

As an effort to modernize agrarian production, the agrarian reform fomented the founding of cooperative businesses in the countryside. For example, Law 135 states in Article 3 sub-heading K: “Promote the formation of ‘rural action units’ referred to in this Law, and of cooperatives, among landowners and workers in the countryside”, while article 45 states: “Agricultural workers’ cooperatives that have received approval from the Government may obtain allotments within the lands designated for ‘family agricultural units’”. It also contemplates the inclusion of Indigenous resguardos into the promotion of cooperative economic organization in article 94¹³⁶.

The CRIC, however, were mainly opposed to establishing these official cooperatives as approved (or as the CRIC understood it, as under control) by the state. They saw the end goal to be to facilitate capitalism’s taking hold in the countryside. Therefore, they focused on forming their own community-based businesses, cooperatives, and other community-based organizations for the purposes of economic production and strengthening *economía propia*. By 1979 there were a total of 80 economic organizations (cooperatives, stores, and other businesses) across Cauca related to the Indigenous movement (CRIC 1978). The significance of this is demonstrated in the difficult history of the cooperative movement in Colombia. The official start date of the movement is 1933 with the founding of four cooperatives. Between then and 1960, over 100

¹³⁵*Economía Propia* is a community-driven economic model rooted in Indigenous, peasant, ethnic, and popular movements, emphasizing autonomy in organizing production, trade, finance, and consumption. Rather than prioritizing profit and capital accumulation, it fosters collective well-being by centering solidarity, cooperation, and reciprocity. This approach envisions economic activity as a means to sustain livelihoods, strengthen territorial sovereignty, and promote *buen vivir*—a dignified life in balance with nature—where human labor and social relationships take precedence over market-driven imperatives. It is often related to what in English is called the Social and Solidarity Economy. See Londoño 2005.

¹³⁶ See Ley 135 de 1961 “*Sobre reforma social agraria*”.

rural cooperatives were founded around the country, however, by 1960 only 46 of those remained functioning (INCORA 1970).

In fact, the organization of community-based and cooperative economic entities quickly became a central pillar of the CRIC's strategy. In order to territorialize the newly recuperated lands and extended resguardos, in order to strengthen the cabildos, new economic relations needed to be established. By focusing on forming cooperatives and community-based economic projects, the CRIC was able to create a robust infrastructure to facilitate claims-making. These efforts not only provided the material and organizational resources needed for sustained collective action but also fostered a shared identity and mutual support network that was essential for the CRIC's early successes. These community-based economic entities provided credit to each other, due to the difficulty in obtaining such support from the government. Additionally, the surplus from a cooperative was often used for financing the travel of community representatives to conferences and other meetings at the regional level (Berglund 1982).

One of the first experiences of cooperative or community-based economic entities, and a reference point for the origins of the CRIC itself, was that of the Agrarian Cooperative of Las Delicias in the municipality of Silvia. Due to its pioneering nature, this cooperative became an inspiration in the course of subsequent efforts in the region at strengthening Indigenous organizations and served as an example (as a political school) for practices of self-management and autonomy. With its origins a little less than a decade before the founding of the CRIC, the las Delicias Cooperativa was founded in 1963 with a syndicalist organizational structure, owing to the previous experiences with the organizing of peasant unions.

In 1962, the Guámbianos founded the Sindicato Gremial Agrario de las Delicias (Agricultural Union of Las Delicias), affiliated with the Federación Agraria Nacional. Later, in order to access an agricultural credit that would allow them to buy the San Fernando farm, they transformed themselves into the Cooperativa Agraria las Delicias. From the farm they began a process of popular education for the local farmers, and little by little they began to organize the surrounding Indigenous community and promoted the recuperation of the lands in Silvia. Later, about 200 people from differing Indigenous backgrounds create the Eastern Caucaño Union in Tierradentro, a conglomeration of cooperatives working in solidarity. These cooperatives were later linked in 1971 to the CRIC. They played a significant role in forming the early land recovery committees (Cortés L. 1984). By its fifth Congress in Tóez (August 1975), the CRIC emphasized the organization of production in the recovered territories, as well as on the installation of a network of stores and cooperatives that would provide the necessary service for the community and reinforce the administrative structure and economic power of the Indigenous council(s).

Early community-based economic entities such as Las Delicias in Silvia eventually formed into the Central Cooperativa Indígena del Cauca (CENCOIC), which was legally established in 1979. The process of consolidating a cooperative center of community stores was initiated, in order to "...maintain its autonomy from official entities. Its general objective is to strengthen the communities economically and organizationally and educate them to fight for a change of system (CRIC 1978)." As the newspaper Indigenous Unity (which will be discussed in more detail later) states:

We have made progress towards putting community stores at the service of our struggle and the strengthening of our organization, using the profits to help with community work

*and to provide solidarity to other comrades, to finance the costs of visits and of courses, to support health programs and different community initiatives. In some places, the community store has fomented community-oriented production, the study of this newspaper, discussion and criticism and correction of internal problems have been encouraged through the community store*¹³⁷.

The formation of cooperatives and other economic organizations fostered a sense of solidarity among disparate Indigenous communities. The goal of the CRIC was for these economic organizations to belong to the movement, and not just to one single community. As economic tools and social structures, these cooperatives encouraged collective decision-making and mutual support. This collective ethos of the community-based economic entities was crucial for the CRIC's broader goals of land reclamation and political mobilization. As these organizations grew, they helped to build the organizational capacity needed to undertake large-scale actions, such as land occupations and protests.

Moreover, by engaging in cooperative activities, community members learned essential skills in management, negotiation, and advocacy. These skills were transferable to other areas of the CRIC's work, including negotiations with the government and participation in national and regional political processes. The cooperative model also served as a practical example of self-governance, reinforcing the principles of autonomy and self-determination that were central to the CRIC's mission¹³⁸.

At the sixth Congress of the CRIC, in 1981, the focus on productive activities was formalized into the eighth objective of the platform of struggle. This objective states: “Promote

¹³⁷ See *Unidad Indígena*, No 21 p. 9.

¹³⁸ Discussions during community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, September 27th, 2022.

community economic organizations – which allows for the creation of the economic program and inter-institutional work” (Cortés L. 1984).

Memory Work

The Claims-making of the CRIC was also connected to constructing a collective memory of resistance. This memory work invoked figures like Quintín Lame and Juan Tama as symbols of enduring struggle, emphasizing a history of active defiance against colonial and state oppression. By framing their identity around a legacy of resistance, the CRIC was able to mobilize communities, legitimize their claims for territorial autonomy, and strengthen the boundaries between Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities while maintaining ties of solidarity. For example, in the CRICs 2007 *Plan de Vida*, the regional context is set up with an overview of the historical struggles of La Gaitana, Juan Tama, and Manuel Quintin Lame (CRIC 2007).

Early on, the CRIC navigated a complex relationship with the peasant movement by asserting a distinct Indigenous identity while also recognizing the shared struggles over land and rights. This balance is evident in their discourse, which emphasized the reconstitution of cabildos and territorial autonomy as uniquely Indigenous demands, separate from the class-based framing of the peasant movement. For example, the Misak people, in discussing the impact of the ANUC, state:

This movement influenced the activation of the Indigenous movement, since in fact, some Indigenous peoples participated in the process, even one of the first secretaries of the ANUC for Cauca was Taita Trino Morales in 1969. But after a short while our movement began to differentiate itself from the peasant movement, since not only the social base,

but also the traditions, cultures and objectives that each of us pursued were different, although we both claimed the land (Autoridades del Nu Nakchak del Pueblo Misak, 2013).

This separation created a certain independence from the peasant movement, at least in its operational and organizational aspects. However, the CRIC saw their movement organizing efforts, not as dividing the rural population, but as giving another form of struggle to the movement, ensuring different identities could fit into the broader struggle.

For both identities, land and agricultural production remained central. For example, the CRIC discuss:

We have always said in our Indigenous communities that the most important process for the resistance of our people is food and the diversity that we have in that food. In the processes that lead to monoculture, there will always be processes of cultural degradation, of there being only one crop, of there being no diversity. So, I believe that the big fight is to preserve that diversity that we have and that diverse knowledge that we have with each of those seeds and with each of those different species¹³⁹.

In this context, for the CRIC, seeds are embedded in a narrative of continuous resistance against both state and capitalist encroachments. The memory work focuses on how seeds symbolize autonomy and Indigenous identity itself: “There is a very close relationship between seeds and the knowledges with which we identify ourselves as Indigenous”¹⁴⁰. Protecting native

¹³⁹ Interview with Indigenous authority in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023. This was also discussed during community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, September 27th, 2022.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Indigenous activist in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023.

seeds is presented as part of a broader struggle to uphold Indigenous governance systems and resist assimilation.

If we say that we are truly Indigenous, we must always have such a knowledge or conviction that we must take care of our natural resources such as soil, water, and also the seeds¹⁴¹.

The issue of seeds is deeply intertwined with the history of colonization, framing the defense of native seeds as part of a broader struggle against the continued imposition of external control. They identify GMOs and industrial agriculture as modern manifestations of colonial dynamics, attempts to erode Indigenous autonomy, knowledge systems, and territorial governance¹⁴². By linking the protection of native seeds to the fight against colonization, the CRIC positions seed sovereignty and autonomy as a form of resistance that preserves not only agricultural practices but also cultural and political self-determination. This framing emphasizes that the battle over seeds is fundamentally a battle over the power to define and sustain Indigenous ways of life.

Transgenics are part of a process that has been developing for a long time, continuing the issue of colonization. Not only the colonization of knowledge, but also the colonization of nature, and in that same respect the colonization of seeds¹⁴³.

Since the 1990s, the CRIC have established processes of seed activism, not for the purpose of justifying their Indigenous identity but rather about fortifying an already well-established movement rooted in decades/centuries of resistance and autonomous governance. By

¹⁴¹ Interview with Indigenous community member in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023.

¹⁴² Discussions during community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, September 27th, 2022.

¹⁴³ Interview with Indigenous authority in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023.

integrating seed sovereignty into their broader struggle against colonization and external control, the CRIC demonstrated that the defense of native seeds was a continuation of their historical demands for land, autonomy, and cultural preservation.

In sum, the CRIC's claims-making efforts and collective memory of resistance were instrumental in transforming local grievances into a unified and regional struggle for Indigenous autonomy and territorial rights. By articulating demands through the 7-point program and embedding them in practices such as land recoveries, constructing collective memory, and community-based cooperatives, the CRIC not only contested state policies but also laid the groundwork for an alternative governance model rooted in self-determination. Together, these forms of evidence illustrate how the CRIC's claims-making and memory work mechanisms not only articulated demands but also constructed alternative institutional practices that prefigured Indigenous autonomy.

Moreover, although the CRIC's early claims demonstrated here centered on land rights and cultural recognition, the more recent incorporation of seed sovereignty into their legal and political demands reflects an expanded vision of territorial control. By framing seeds as part of their collective heritage and jurisdiction, the CRIC extends its claims-making into the domain of ecological governance, challenging both state seed regimes and corporate property claims over biodiversity.

Table 8: Indicators and Evidence of CRIC Claims-making

Indicators	Empirical Manifestations
Strategic Meetings and Mobilizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Founding meetings of CRIC • Continued congresses • Participation in national peasant march
1972 Censo Indigena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CRIC contract with DANE (through INCORA)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CRIC documentation of political meetings after data collection
Land Recoveries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abolishing terraje system • Lopez Adentro land takeover • Solidarity between differing ethnic groups
Community-based Economic Enterprises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid growth in numbers • Support interactions with CRIC and larger Indigenous community in Cauca • Central Strategy
Memory Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History of Resistance • Seeds tied to efforts at colonization

Politically Asserting the Indigenous Identity (1970s - 1990s)

The Paeces, Guambianos, Coconucos and other Indigenous people of Cauca live in the mountains, on farms and reservations. We are peasants... We are the majority of the peasantry of Cauca.

We Paeces, Guambianos, and others, we are Indians. We are descendants of the Indigenous nations that inhabited these territories centuries before the invaders from Spain arrived. We are Indians, 'natural' as they say, and we have the right to our land. We enjoy these customs, these languages, and this history that unites and strengthens us (CRIC 1978).

The CRC's identity assertion emerges as a foundational mechanism in its broader struggle for autonomy, grounded in the reactivation and transformation of Indigenous governance and cultural practices. Central to this process was the reconstitution of the cabildos, which not only revived colonial-era institutions of local governance but redefined them as platforms for asserting collective rights and territorial control. Alongside this, the development of an autonomous Indigenous education system and the establishment of the newspaper *Unidad*

Indígena fostered new forms of political consciousness and cultural revitalization. Together, these initiatives enabled a public and organized reaffirmation of Indigenous identity, anchoring it within the everyday life of the communities and projecting it into regional and national political arenas.

Reconstituting Cabildos in Cauca

The third point of the CRIC platform of struggle is to “strengthen the Indigenous cabildos” (CRIC 1978). The Agrarian Reform laws of 1968 promoted the organization of the peasantry into Juntas de Usuarios Campesinos (peasant user boards) as local mechanisms to pressure for the implementation of the reform. The CRIC, however, decided to focus on strengthening cabildos as an already existing organization which played a role in community defense. At the time, however, a number of existing cabildos were loyal to local landowners or church authorities. The CRIC then had to develop influence or assert pressure on them to re-focus on defending the Indigenous communities. Largely succeeding at this, the Indigenous cabildos became the political structure that brought together the struggles of the Indigenous peoples of Cauca under the organization of the CRIC. Cabildos were historically established under colonial law as local governing bodies that allowed Indigenous communities some degree of self-governance while also ensuring their subordination to colonial authorities. Over time, these structures were reappropriated by Indigenous communities as vehicles for political resistance, cultural preservation, and territorial governance. The importance of the cabildos is demonstrated in that “all resguardos have a cabildo, and there are even Indigenous communities that do not have a resguardo but do have a cabildo” (Cortes L. 1984).

The CRIC began with five-member cabildos (Toribio, San Francisco, Jambalo, Pitayo, and Totoro), and by the end of the 1970s, 36 cabildos formed part of the CRIC. By 2007, there

were nine Cabildo Associations, which group together 84 resguardos and 115 cabildos, which represent different Indigenous peoples (CRIC 2007). Such a process strengthened local organization and abilities to resist oppression. For example:

But these communities have always had a very political position. In Mosoco, for example, before there was a cabildo, there was a police station. So, the police station served as the territorial entity that gave order. But now with the Indigenous territorial authorities through the cabildos and the whole process of 50 years with the CRIC, the Indigenous movement has been greatly strengthened and has overcome the police station as the territorial authority¹⁴⁴.

In addition to providing an institutional support for organizing and resistance, the Cabildos during this period transformed from being primarily local administrative units to becoming central players in broader regional and national Indigenous movements. This is because, while cabildos represent governance at the communal level, their collaboration within the CRIC allowed for a regional identity to emerge. This dual-level identity assertion (local and regional) strengthened the broader Indigenous movement in Cauca.

In our case, we are a community in Purace, and we are part of the Genaro Sánchez Association of Cabildos of the Coconuco People, which is made up of nine cabildos, but also at a regional level, we are part of the CRIC, where we are around 137 authorities of the Indigenous territories. And this means that, in the midst of ethnic and geographic diversity we find some points of agreement, some priorities in the face of the processes of struggle where we are all in agreement, such as the defense of life and of territory¹⁴⁵.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Indigenous authority in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, March 21, 2022.

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Indigenous activist in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023.

Playing an important role as vehicles for political, cultural, and territorial self-determination, cabildos gave organization to the Indigenous movement as custodians of ancestral lands, organizing the recovery of territories and defending resguardos against encroachment by landowners and the state. By reclaiming land through cabildos, communities not only secured their material livelihoods but also symbolically reinforced their identity as Indigenous peoples tied to specific territories.

The cabildos were recognized by Colombian law in Law 89 of 1890, giving them a degree of legal legitimacy that Indigenous communities used to assert their rights. By leveraging this legal recognition, Indigenous peoples affirmed their identity within the framework of the Colombian state while challenging its exclusions. The CRIC heavily invoked Law 89's provisions on Indigenous self-governance and communal land management to legitimize their demands for territorial autonomy and the protection of resguardos. While the law originally contained aspects meant to control and assimilate Indigenous communities, the CRIC reframed its provisions to argue for the legal recognition of cabildos and their authority over land use and governance. This approach allowed the CRIC to leverage existing legal frameworks to challenge the expansion of haciendas and state policies that threatened their territories, effectively transforming a tool of subjugation into a means of claims-making for Indigenous rights and self-determination¹⁴⁶.

Building on this legal foundation, the CRIC's struggle for territorial autonomy has become deeply intertwined with food and seed politics. The defense and expansion of resguardos was not just about securing land but also about preserving Indigenous agricultural practices,

¹⁴⁶ Discussions during community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, September 27th, 2022.

traditional seed varieties, and food autonomy. Land recovery efforts were accompanied by the revitalization of ancestral farming systems, which prioritized communal land use, agroecological methods, and the protection of native seeds from external pressures such as Green Revolution policies and later, the introduction of GMOs. By asserting control over their territories, Indigenous communities also resisted the industrialization of agriculture, which threatened both their cultural traditions and their ability to sustain themselves independently. Through the cabildos, Indigenous leaders promoted local seed exchanges, collective farming initiatives, and policies to prohibit the use of external, corporate-controlled seeds, reinforcing their autonomy not only in governance but also in food production. In this way, land recovery became fundamental to the broader struggle to reclaim Indigenous food systems and resist the economic and political forces that sought to undermine them¹⁴⁷.

The reconstitution of the cabildos was a foundational step in reclaiming Indigenous governance and enabling the practice of ancestral law, *derecho mayor*, *ley de origen*, and *usos y costumbres*, within the territories. As the cabildos regained their authority, they became key institutions for articulating and enforcing forms of justice, land use, and social organization rooted in Indigenous worldviews. This revival of traditional governance structures allowed Indigenous communities to not only manage their own affairs but also to reassert jurisdiction over their territories according to customary principles¹⁴⁸.

Strengthened cabildos provided a formal Indigenous governance structure that could advocate for and implement processes such as education systems aligned with Indigenous knowledge, languages, and traditions. Through their leadership, Indigenous communities gained

¹⁴⁷ Discussions during community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, September 27th, 2022 &, July 5th, 2023.

¹⁴⁸ Discussions during community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, September 27th, 2022.

the ability to design curricula that reflected their histories and values rather than the dominant national narrative.

However, in the late 1970s, tensions within the CRIC surfaced over the organization's perceived centralized, bureaucratic structure and its close alliances with peasant and leftist movements. Critics, especially from the Guambiano and Misak cabildos, argued that the CRIC was straying from the forms of traditional Indigenous authority, prompting concerns that its executive leadership resembled a non-Indigenous organization rather than a council grounded in traditional governance. These disputes culminated in 1978 with Guambiano leaders breaking away to form the *Autoridades Indígenas del Suroccidente* (AISO, or Indigenous Authorities of the Southwest), and later, alongside other local Indigenous authorities in the departments of Nariño and Putumayo, founding AICO (Indigenous Authorities of Colombia) in 1987. The split did not stem merely from organizational disagreements but reflected divergent visions of identity, authority, and political strategy within Indigenous politics in Cauca (Gow & Jaramillo Salgado 2013, Bravo 2020)).

This division marked a significant moment in the co-construction and boundary activation of distinct Indigenous identities. On one side, the CRIC emphasized a collectivist identity oriented around land recovery, regional unity, and structural transformation through alliances with broader social movements. On the other, AICO's leaders stressed a return to cabildos and ancestral modes of decision-making. In doing so, AICO focused on the definition of indigeneity more in terms of being locally grounded and spiritually anchored (Bolaños 2012, La Silla Vacía 2024).

The CRIC–AICO split thus illustrates identity formation as a contested process, unfolding through organizational reconfiguration and boundary work. Both CRIC and AICO

deployed memory, narratives, and political practices to institutionalize different identities: one aiming for regional unity and structural changes, the other privileging cultural diversity, ancestral governance, and local self-regulation. This dynamic continues to shape Indigenous autonomy in Colombia, demonstrating that the path to autonomy is often forged through internal differentiation and dialogic negotiation about what it means to be Indigenous in relation to land, authority, and the state.

Autonomous Indigenous Educational Programs

Before 1971, official education in the Cauca region was known for the divorce between the educational institution and community politics, which was manifested in the lack of appreciation for Indigenous people, the absence of respect for community authorities, the silence of the Indigenous language inside school classrooms, the authoritarianism of teachers and a teaching that ignored and undervalued the cultural environment of the student. School education was in the hands of the government and the Catholic Church, and this factor was pointed out as a fact that did not benefit Indigenous interests (Bolaños & Ramos, p. 387-388).

The initial seven-point program of struggle for the CRIC included: Point 6 “Defend the history, language, and customs of the Indigenous peoples” as well as Point 7 “Form bilingual professors in order to educate according to the situation of Indigenous communities and in their respective languages”. These points of struggle are seen in the development of the CRIC’s autonomous education system(s). Therefore, the organization and implementation of *educación*

*propia*¹⁴⁹ played a fundamental role in the assertion of the Indigenous identity and the defense of territory in Cauca.

Community-based schools were founded in the communities that had been involved in land struggles, that is, critical places where there had been organizational progress. For example, a school was established in La Laguna de Siberia, a multiethnic territory where there was an imminent risk of losing the *Nasa Yuwe* language, as well as progress in recuperating reservation lands, and where there were efforts by the landowners to re-take the reservation territories for themselves (Bolaños et al 2012). Therefore, the process of establishing, developing, and expanding Indigenous education in Cauca is also tied to the processes of land struggle.

Seven community schools were initially founded in the first two years of land struggles. In addition to La Laguna de Siberia, schools were founded in La Marquesa (municipality of Silvia), el Cabuyo (Tierradentro) Vitoyo (municipality of Jambalo), Potrerito (municipality of Toribio), el Canelo (municipality of Popayán), and Las Delicias (Buenos Aires). In 1974, the number of community-based schools was nine, and by 1975 there were 19 community-based schools. By the 1990s this number was up to 40. One interviewee explained this development as:

We worked basically in the area of education, of raising awareness with communities.

We did exercises, for example, we work on something we call the advocacy agendas, which is promoting meetings of many organizations so that they can draw up political objectives of local public policy and set advocacy goals. So, it is about working on an organizational strategy¹⁵⁰.

¹⁴⁹ *Educación propia* is a Spanish phrase that translates to “own education” in English. It is a political project of resistance and cultural survival that is important for Indigenous people. It is also a way to strengthen cultural identity, ancestral knowledge, and the use of one's own language. See Ballesteros & Ramírez 2019.

¹⁵⁰ Author interview with Indigenous authority in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, March 21, 2022.

At the 4th Congress of the CRIC in 1975, education was raised as a fundamental tool towards the defense of Indigenous culture, and the necessity was recognized to rethink Indigenous education in Cauca from the interests and needs of Indigenous communities (CRIC 1978). Later, at the 1978 5th Congress, bilingual and intercultural education was formalized as CRIC policy in the *Programa de Educación Bilingüe e Intercultural* (PEBI for its acronym in Spanish, Intercultural and Bilingual Education Program). The final report from this congress proposes “to strengthen the cultural and political organization with an educational project according to the interests and needs of the Indigenous peoples, as foundational to autonomy” (CRIC 1978).

Towards the end of the 1970s, as Indigenous activism within Colombia combined with international expectations towards the recognition of cultural differences in regard to education, the Colombian state began to accommodate such autonomous education. For example, the 1976 decree 088 states in its 11th article “Regular educational programs in Indigenous communities will take into account their anthropological reality and will promote the preservation and dissemination of their native cultures”. Later, the 1978 decree 1142 states in its 6th article:

Education for Indigenous communities must be linked to the environment, the productive process, and the entire social and cultural life of the community. Consequently, the curricular programs will ensure respect for and the promotion of their economic, natural, cultural, and social heritage, their artistic values, their means of expression, and their religious beliefs. Curriculums must be based on the culture of each community to develop the different abilities and skills in individuals and groups necessary to function in their social environment.

This decree effectively legalizes the CRIC's experiences in constructing autonomous Indigenous education. Moreover, in these educational reforms, the government created the figure of the pedagogical bachelor. This regulatory framework facilitated community teachers who did not have official accreditation in pedagogical matters. A specialized secondary-type diploma was then developed within Indigenous education frameworks. Graduates often take on educational roles within their communities, teaching younger generations and promoting cultural continuity. This program is integral to strengthening Indigenous autonomy and addressing educational needs specific to Indigenous communities in Cauca.

During the 7th CRIC Congress in 1983, the need was articulated to integrate the autonomous Indigenous and bilingual education of the CRIC with agricultural production, stating “it is recommended that education should take into account (agricultural) production so that children and young people contribute to protecting nature. It is also recommended that (agricultural) production in schools be linked to the teachings of spiritual leaders” (CRIC 1978). Out of this proposal came a focus on creating school gardens so that students could learn and work together cultivating fruits and vegetables, gaining knowledge about the best conditions for cultivation, how to make organic compost, remedies for plagues, and linking agricultural production to the pedagogical process¹⁵¹.

By the end of the 1990s, the CRIC had already developed a solid team of community teachers and pedagogical researchers, which laid the foundations for its own teaching profession. The development programs of ethno-education in the 1980s eventually evolved into what became the *Sistema de Educación Indígena* (SEIP for the acronym in Spanish, Indigenous

¹⁵¹ Discussions during community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, September 27th, 2022.

Education System in English). In 2007, the National Commission for Work and Coordination for the Education of Indigenous Peoples (CONTCEPI, acronym in Spanish) was formed. This Commission served as a collaborative platform between Indigenous organizations and the national government to design and implement educational policies tailored to Indigenous needs (Ballosteros & Ramírez 2019).

Lastly, the 2003 establishment of the Intercultural Indigenous Autonomous University (UAIIN, acronym in Spanish) marked a significant milestone in Indigenous education in Colombia, as it was the first Indigenous university recognized by the state. The CRIC and UAIIN collaborate closely, with the political platform of the CRIC guiding various academic programs, including the Bachelor in Communitarian Education, which prepares future Indigenous educators. Other programs, such as Our Own Rights, focus on internal social norms which are recognized by the Colombian Constitution, equipping Indigenous communities with legal knowledge to defend their rights at the national level. Additionally, UAIIN offers graduate programs, including a Master of Development for Identity further strengthening Indigenous autonomy and self-determination¹⁵².

At the UAIIN, food sovereignty is central to the curriculum as part of a broader goal to resist external influences, particularly those imposed by industrial agriculture. Courses often focus on the political and cultural implications of food production, highlighting seed-saving practices, the maintenance of local agro-ecological systems, and the fight against genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The curriculum encourages students to engage with their communities to promote agricultural resilience and environmental stewardship, framing food

¹⁵² See the website for the Universidad Autónoma Indígena Intercultural. See <https://uaiinpebi-cric.edu.co/>.

production as a form of resistance that aligns with the CRIC’s goals of autonomy and self-determination¹⁵³.

Coursework intertwines food, health, and education, because I would say that there was only one content: teaching, practicing, and doing. So, in that process, we already know what the seeds were for and how they were cared for and protected. They were cared for because the elders knew, because they said that the seeds cannot be used up because that would be the end of life¹⁵⁴.

These programs strengthen collective identity by embedding Indigenous epistemologies and agricultural practices into formal education, promoting pride in cultural heritage, and reinforcing political and social autonomy. Through identity assertion, CRIC’s educational programs support Indigenous agency and foster a strong communal narrative of resistance and self-determination, grounding these values in the educational experiences of each new generation.

“Unidad Indígena” Newspaper

In Unidad Indígena we will speak with our own voice, how we truly are: men, women, and children of meat and bones, with our own dignity, our own language, our own religions, with our own land (CRIC & Secretaría Indígena of ANUC, Unidad Indígena, No. 1 January 1975, p. 3).

In 1975 the CRIC launched the monthly publication, “Unidad Indígena” (Indigenous Unity) in order to offer political education, history, and context of the movement to a wider

¹⁵³ Interview with Indigenous authority in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, March 21, 2022. This was also discussed during community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5th, 2023.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Indigenous authority in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, March 21, 2022.

audience. It provided a platform to share news, updates, and educational content about Indigenous rights, land struggles, and cultural identity, ensuring that communities were well-informed and could coordinate their actions. With this, the newspaper played a central political role regarding the communication strategies and the consolidation of the CRIC at the departmental level, as well as with the national Indigenous movement, as later the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) would take over its publication.

It was during the Third Peasant Congress of the ANUC, held in Bogotá in September 1974, that a group of 400 Indigenous representatives decided to found a newspaper that would be the spokesperson for their own interests within the ANUC and broader peasant movement. In its first issue, the newspaper states that this “appears as a response to the development of the Indigenous Movement and in accordance with the need to have our own newspaper that serves to represent in a fair and correct manner our needs and the way in which we are trying to resolve them” (*Unidad Indígena*. No. 1. Cited in: Guzmán and Morales 1988). Therefore, the newspaper *Unidad Indígena* was created as a tool to inform Indigenous communities and other grassroots sectors across Colombia about the roots of their struggles and possible paths forward. It aimed to foster greater unity among diverse Indigenous groups, strengthening their collective capacity to organize and advance their shared goals.

The first issue of which was published in January 1975, with the motto “unity, land and culture” as a subtitle and with a cover on which the following slogan could be read: “Without unity we will never have the strength to defend our land and the future of our children.” The newspaper was primarily distributed among local cabildos and community organizations, ensuring that information reached grassroots movements. The newspaper demonstrates the efforts of the CRIC, and other Indigenous organizations, to clarify and distinguish Indigenous

culture(s) from the dominant culture, as well as to look for the spaces of intercultural dialogue. This is exemplified in a response to a criticism of the newspaper that it was too focused on unity with all exploited classes abandoning a stronger focus on Indigenous unity first. In this response the editors of the newspaper stated:

The newspaper, from its first issue, which reported on the Purace strike, to the last, in which there are articles on Indigenous communities inside and outside Cauca, has tried to reflect the Indigenous reality and also the relations of the Indigenous struggles with those of the most exploited... Summarizing, the position of the CRIC and the newspaper will continue to be that of promoting both Indigenous unity and unity with the exploited classes, clarifying that we understand Indigenous unity to be directed against the exploiters and not against a supposed Colombian nation (Cortés L. 1984).

Before the formation of the CRIC in 1971, Indigenous identity in Colombia was largely marginalized and depoliticized. *Unidad Indígena*, launched in 1975, played a crucial role in politicizing this identity by unifying diverse Indigenous communities under a collective struggle for land, autonomy, and rights. The newspaper documented mobilizations, challenged state narratives, and built political consciousness by educating Indigenous peoples on their history, legal rights, and resistance movements. It also fostered solidarity beyond Indigenous communities, connecting their struggles with those of peasants, workers, and other exploited classes, reinforcing a broader movement against structural injustices. By creating an alternative public sphere, *Unidad Indígena* transformed Indigenous identity from a private, localized

condition into a more powerful political force, asserting Indigenous peoples as active agents in local, regional, and national politics¹⁵⁵.

The newspaper was used to raise awareness about the need to protect traditional food systems and Indigenous knowledge related to agriculture. It also highlighted the growing threat of external economic pressures, such as the imposition of genetically modified crops and industrial agriculture, that endangered local seed varieties and food sovereignty. Through articles, editorials, and discussions, *Unidad Indígena* became a space where Indigenous leaders and communities could assert their right to maintain their traditional agricultural practices and control over their food systems¹⁵⁶.

Separation from the Peasant Movement

We don't have any discrepancies with the peasant class, not even with ANUC. The problem is with ANUC's leaders... We have our own specificities and problems as Indians... They wanted to swallow our movement in order to lead it to their political goals... We see the Indians as an exploited class, in a process of conscientization. The idea is to keep working until the people understand what has to be done. The political stage will come, but first we have to consolidate. Each organization should develop the consciousness of its class: ANUC with the peasants, the trade unions with the workers, etc.... in order to finally reach a political level in which we can all come together¹⁵⁷.

¹⁵⁵ Discussion during community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5th, 2023.

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Indigenous authority in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, March 21, 2022. This was also discussed during community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5th, 2023.

¹⁵⁷ Gregorio Palechor, as cited by Zamosc 1986, p. 259. See also CRIC, “*posición de los Indígenas en el Movimiento Campesino*” 1974.

The boundary activation in the case of the CRIC is demonstrated on multiple levels. First, the legal and territorial claims. CRIC leaders highlighted the distinct legal status of resguardos, which were recognized under colonial and republican law, particularly through Law 89 of 1890. Unlike the land reforms pursued by the ANUC, which focused on redistributing land as private property to individual peasants, the CRIC framed their demands around the recognition and expansion of collectively held Indigenous territories.

The Indigenous peoples of Cauca are distinguished by their great diversity of thought and cultural origins, which distinguish them from other inhabitants of the region. This is why our elders say that we are Indigenous, because we have our own laws, and that those laws are the basis of our existence. This natural law we call the law of origin, or what we also call the Derecho Mayor of each people, because it belongs to us and lives within our thinking (CRIC 2007).

This distinction of law(s) reinforced a separate Indigenous political identity and justified the need for an Indigenous-led movement rather than one subsumed under the peasant struggle.

A second boundary activation is found in the historical and cultural narratives. The CRIC drew upon historical narratives of dispossession and cultural distinction, emphasizing how Indigenous lands had been systematically taken over by large landowners, state policies, and agrarian reform efforts that ignored their communal forms of land tenure.

We are different. We think differently. We have different territorial contexts. Each Indigenous peoples have their distinct worldview. The mere fact of being Indigenous peoples means we already have a long history in the territory. We want the mayor, the

*police, the inspector, and the prosecutor's office to recognize our identity and respect what we think. Because it is our culture. It is our identity*¹⁵⁸.

This contrasted with the ANUC's focus on agrarian reform as a means for individual peasants to gain access to land, thus reinforcing a collective Indigenous identity tied to ancestral territories. In this process, the act of recovering land itself became a mechanism for reinforcing Indigenous identity, as communities mobilized around shared histories, legal claims, and cultural practices to assert their distinction from the broader campesino movement.

The CRIC's strategic use of legal frameworks such as Law 89 of 1890 and the ancestral principle of *usos y costumbres* has served not only to legitimize their authority but also to activate jurisdictional boundaries that distinguish Indigenous governance from other forms of rural organization. By drawing on these legal and customary norms, the CRIC effectively demarcated a political and spatial boundary that separated Indigenous territories from the broader peasant movement and the developmentalist state. This differentiation allowed CRIC to claim exclusive authority over internal governance, land use, education, and eventually, seed systems. This marked Indigenous territory not just geographically but also institutionally and epistemologically. In doing so, the CRIC established a mode of territorial governance that resists assimilation into state structures while leveraging legal recognition to consolidate autonomy from within.

The CRIC's later efforts to protect native seeds and promote agroecology have also contributed to reinforcing Indigenous identity. This is not only through cultural practices, but through a collective stance that defines Indigeneity in opposition to extractive agriculture. Seed

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Indigenous authority in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, March 21, 2022.

sovereignty becomes a marker of identity, distinguishing Indigenous communities from state-aligned development models and even from other peasant movements by asserting a specific type of relationship to their territory, which they claim is rooted in care, reciprocity, and tradition.

In sum, the assertion of Indigenous identity by the CRIC was profoundly shaped by the reconstitution of cabildos, the development of an autonomous education system, and the discursive power of the *Unidad Indigena* newspaper. These efforts not only reclaimed historical governance structures but also activated boundaries between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, reinforcing a collective identity grounded in self-determination and cultural continuity. Through these mechanisms, the CRIC transformed Indigenous identity into a powerful political force capable of challenging state policies and asserting territorial autonomy.

Table 9: Indicators and Evidence of CRIC Identity Assertion

Indicators	Empirical Manifestations
Reconstitution of Cabildos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From five to 135 cabildos • Eleven regional cabildo associations • Cabildo leadership in CRIC
Establishment and Growth of Autonomous Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community schools • Education program, bilingual and intercultural • Changing National Laws and Policies • Indigenous University
Indigenous-led Media (newspaper)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CRIC publication • Broader Indigenous identity • Solidarity between differing ethnic groups and between social movements
Separation from ANUC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on cultural and historical differences • Differing political structures

From Land Recuperation to Territorial Defense (1991 – Present)

The 1991 Constitution of Colombia is fundamental to today’s Indigenous struggle for territorial defense in the country, including the work of the CRIC. It represents a significant shift

in the legal and political recognition of Indigenous rights, especially in terms of land, autonomy, and cultural preservation. The 1991 Constitution serves as a legal foundation that empowers the CRIC and other Indigenous groups to assert their territorial rights. The constitutional recognition of Indigenous autonomy, collective property, environmental rights, and the right to prior consultation provides the legal framework for Indigenous communities to resist external pressures, protect their lands, and uphold their sovereignty. In practice, this means that the CRIC can better engage with the state, leverage judicial mechanisms, and participate in broader political processes to defend their territories from environmental degradation, resource exploitation, and loss of cultural heritage.

While early land recoveries laid the groundwork for reclaiming territory, these efforts have since expanded into new forms of territorial defense, as Indigenous communities face new incursions, from militarization to transgenic agriculture. This section traces how the CRIC's strategy evolved in response, building autonomous institutional arrangements from the grassroots. This section will look at institutional developments such as the guardia indigena, the resurgence of the traditional Indigenous minga, and the founding of a specific Indigenous authority in Cauca, recognized by the Colombian state. These developments are bolstered by the rights and recognitions found in the 1991 Constitution and demonstrate efforts at territorializing the CRIC's broader processes.

Guardia Indigena

The Guardia Indígena (Indigenous Guard) in Cauca is a powerful example of “territorial defense” through its non-violent, community-led actions to protect Indigenous lands, autonomy, and culture. This mechanism of defense is particularly important in the context of armed conflict, illegal resource extraction, and territorial disputes that have threatened Indigenous lands in the

Cauca region. The Guardia Indígena is an unarmed group composed of men, women, and youth from Indigenous communities who patrol and defend their territories. They aim to prevent illegal land encroachments, including armed groups, drug traffickers, illegal miners, and loggers. Their role is critical in resisting these external pressures and maintaining the integrity of Indigenous territories (Forero Sandoval 2008, Chaves et al 2019).

The Indigenous guard reinforces the application of ancestral law by serving as a community-based institution of territorial control and conflict resolution. Operating under the ancestral and customary legal principles of *derecho mayor*, *ley de origen*, and *usos y costumbres*, the guardia does not replicate state security models but instead embodies a distinct mode of authority rooted in Indigenous normative frameworks. Through their involvement in monitoring territorial boundaries, mediating disputes, and supporting collective decision-making processes, the *guardia* plays a key role in the everyday enactment of Indigenous law. Their presence not only deters external threats but also affirms the legitimacy of Indigenous jurisdiction, contributing to the consolidation of autonomous governance structures within the *resguardos*.

The Indigenous guard was officially founded by the CRIC in 2001, although its roots can be traced back to earlier Indigenous efforts to protect land during the land recovery struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. Initially, with around 3,000 members (Sur Journal 2020), one of the initial primary roles of the Guardia was to patrol and defend the physical borders of Indigenous territories in Cauca, ensuring that territorial autonomy and cultural practices were preserved.

In the context of the armed conflict in Colombia, Indigenous territories have been targeted by armed actors, and the Guardia serves as a community-organized defense force that protects land and people through their presence and monitoring activities. Referring to

government attempts at securing Indigenous territories in this context of the armed conflict in Cauca, one interviewee stated:

These government policies have not worked in the territories. There is a strong presence of public forces in the territory, but for us the issue of the Guardia Indígena as peacekeepers has been more useful, which is what defends the territory and controls the issue of crops and food production, and so they are the ones at the checkpoints who are controlling the inputs that come in, the products that go out¹⁵⁹.

The Constitutional Court ruled on the legality of the implementation of the Indigenous Guard and, through ruling T-601/11, officially recognized its legal existence. The decision also granted the Guard the right to negotiate with government agencies for additional support and reinforcement. Beyond protecting land, the Guardia Indígena has evolved into a method of defending the cultural identity and environmental rights of the Indigenous communities of Cauca. This is partly due to expansion of membership, as an estimated 13,000 guards participated in 2019 (Wallis 2019). In regions where extractive industries threaten biodiversity and Indigenous livelihoods, the Guardia plays a key role in preventing environmental degradation and ensuring that the land is used in accordance with Indigenous practices. This defense of the environment is a critical part of territorial defense, as the land is directly tied to the cultural survival of Indigenous peoples. CRIC activists view this as pertaining to the protection of seeds, when discussing the Guardia Indígena:

¹⁵⁹ Interviews with Indigenous activists in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023.

They have expanded, and I think they need to get more involved in the work of protecting seeds, because they also play an important role when it comes to contamination, such as what is external to our natural environment¹⁶⁰.

As well as:

That is where the Indigenous guard also makes its presence felt. Preventing them (privatized seeds) from passing through and from trampling on what has been built over thousands of years. So, I would say that the Indigenous Guard is a traditional authority that defends these spaces and defends both the seeds and the other actions that are carried out within the territory¹⁶¹.

Additionally, the Indigenous guard is not just a localized defense force but is also connected to broader social movements in Colombia (Indigenous and non-Indigenous). For example, during the nationwide protests which occurred in December 2019, members of the Indigenous guard traveled to Bogotá to join in addressing issues such as corruption, social inequality, and violence against social leaders (Abaakouk 2019). Moreover, during the National Strike that began in April 2021, the Indigenous guard played a crucial role in establishing humanitarian corridors in cities like Cali and Popayán. These corridors facilitated the safe passage of essential goods and services amidst widespread protests and repression (Sánchez Jaramillo 2021). This active role in broader social movements further demonstrates how the Guardia defends not only the physical land but also the broader political and legal frameworks that support Indigenous autonomy.

¹⁶⁰ Interview with Indigenous authority in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, March 21, 2022

¹⁶¹ Interviews with Indigenous leader in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023.

The growth and institutionalization of the Guardia Indígena over the past two and half decades illustrate how Indigenous communities attempt to assert control over their territories, resisting external threats from armed groups, extractive industries, and state forces. By patrolling lands, mediating conflicts, and upholding customary law, the Guardia transforms abstract principles of autonomy into tangible, everyday practices of governance and resistance. Their actions not only safeguard physical space but also reinforce Indigenous political identity, ensuring that territorial defense remains a living, evolving process within broader struggles for self-governance¹⁶².

Minga Indigena

The word minga or Minka is a Quechua word which refers to collective efforts that benefit the entire community, encompassing not only physical labor but also the work carried out in meetings and other deliberative spaces. It involves neighbors, community members, and allies coming together in solidarity to undertake a shared communal task. It is an ancestral and cultural practice with echoes across the the Andean region. In the 1920s, Peruvian intellectual José Carlos Mariátegui discussed the concept as: “Work which a *parcelero*, even if he is not a member of a community, cannot perform without help, or because of sickness or similar reasons, is carried out with the cooperation and aid of the neighboring *parceleros*, who in return receive part of the harvest if it is large enough, or additional help for themselves at a later time” (Mariátegui 1992, p. 35.). For example, when discussing community relations, one interviewee stated:

If I don't have corn at the moment, I can get some through a community relationship, but also throughout the entire process of reciprocity, for example, when we go to sow, it

¹⁶² Discussions during community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5th, 2023.

doesn't only go to the family, but rather a community process of minga takes place... So we go to our cousins, we go to our grandparents, we go to our uncles, we all plant there, then the next week we go to the next farm.

The Minga was noted as a powerful tool towards achieving food autonomy¹⁶³ in the Cauca region, as Indigenous communities are utilizing agroecological mingas to advance the defense of native seeds, organize and revive traditional agricultural practices, and more:

Right now, we are attending the agroecological Mingas, we are working with agroecological associations and trying to raise awareness about safe-guarding our own native seeds... There have always been practices such as bartering, exchanges between families, and the minga to help make each other's gardens. With that everything revolves around the seed¹⁶⁴.

Indigenous communities in Cauca have utilized the recent revitalization of the Minga in processes of defending territory in a wide array of strategies. For example: Communities have engaged in reforestation efforts, restoring degraded lands, and protecting water sources, promote Indigenous languages, and celebrate cultural heritage through communal events and workshops, as well as collaborate on building and maintaining local infrastructure, such as roads, schools, and health centers¹⁶⁵. Moreover, when discussing the deliberative aspect of the minga, one interviewee stated:

And what is governance? It is being able to operationalize the mandates that the Assembly gives, because it is discussed and analyzed with the elders in those meetings, in

¹⁶³ Discussions during a community-based workshop in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023.

¹⁶⁴ Interviews with Indigenous activists in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, March 17, 2022.

¹⁶⁵ Discussions during a community-based workshop in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, September 27, 2022

*the mingas of thought, in the conversations, in the knowledge exchanges, many important things are mandated, they give us the direction to move*¹⁶⁶.

Importantly, the CRIC have more recently expanded the concept of Minga and conferred a politically charged meaning. During the last decades, the use of the word minga has been utilized to motivate organization and movement, drawing attention to the collective, cooperative work of political struggle. For example, a 2004 Great Minga for Life and Dignity began in the municipality of Santander de Quilichao, Cauca. This Minga was specifically to organize in protest of what the Indigenous peoples of Cauca saw as the dismantling of constitutional protections in the signing of free trade agreements. In 2008, the CRIC organized the Indigenous and Popular Minga, which was a six-week mobilization in protest of the government's economic development and military/security policies. This Minga began in La María, Piendamó, in Cauca, and moved to organize numerous other Indigenous peoples of the region. During the six-weeks the Indigenous peoples were joined by groups of peasant sugarcane cutters, groups of victims of state-sponsored political violence, public university students, state employees, leaders of the Central Workers Union (CUT), and more. By the time the Minga had marched to Bogotá, upward of 50,000 people had participated. This was followed by the 2009 Minga of Social and Communitarian Resistance which had five points of focus: 1) War, peace and human rights, 2) sovereignty, land and territory, 3) legislation on dispossession, 4) unfulfilled agreements and 5) the Indigenous peoples' agenda. The 2017 National Indigenous Minga "for the defense of life, land, peace, and the enforcement of the Peace Accords" was to draw attention to the continued and often increased violence experienced in rural and Indigenous communities after the signing of the Peace Agreements with the FARC-EP (Murillo 2010, Laurent 2019, Palacios & Dent 2020).

¹⁶⁶ Interviews with Indigenous activists in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, March 17, 2022.

In 2019, a Minga was organized during which around 15,000 individuals gathered in the Sat Tama Kiwe ancestral territory in Cauca, advocating for life, territory, democracy, justice, and peace. After President Duque did not show up to a scheduled meeting the Minga responded by blocking the Pan-American Highway for 25 days. This was eventually negotiated with the government, and the highway was cleared, however, the Minga demands were later not met (Laurent 2019). Again, in 2020, the CRIC initiated the *Minga for Life, Territory, Democracy, and Peace*, a national mobilization that brought together various social movements, including Indigenous, Black, campesino, women, ex-guerrilla, student, LGBTQI, trade union, and human rights groups. The main goals of this 2020 Minga were to draw attention to violence in rural territories and to press for increased government attention to the 2016 peace accord implementation. Around 8,000 people from the Cauca department arrived in Bogota, to meet with President Duque, a meeting which again never took place¹⁶⁷.

Many of these large-scale politically focused Mingas explicitly call for agrarian reform, land restitution, and food sovereignty. The protests challenge policies that prioritize agribusiness and monocultures (such as sugarcane for biofuels) over Indigenous agroecological practices. This has led to renewed efforts to reclaim and cultivate ancestral lands with traditional crops. Moreover, during these mobilizations, Indigenous communities organize food collection and redistribution systems to sustain participants. Solidarity networks extend beyond Cauca, as food donations from other regions support protest encampments, reinforcing alternative economies and food-sharing practices. However, government and landowner responses to these Mingas often include blockades and militarization, limiting access to food markets and supply chains. This can cause temporarily food shortages in Indigenous communities, while also deepening the

¹⁶⁷ Discussions during a community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, September 27, 2022 & July 5, 2023.

urgency of demands for self-sufficient food systems (Volkhausen 2019, Sánchez-Garzoli 2021a, 2021b)¹⁶⁸.

Table 10: *Mingas* as Massive Mobilizations

Year	Name	Agenda (Claims)
2004	Great Minga for Life and Dignity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The signing of free trade agreements (w/USA) • Implementation of Constitutional and Legal Rights • Policy of “Democratic Security”. • Opposition to Plan Colombia and Militarization. • Democratic Participation and Dialogue. • Solidarity with Other Popular Movements.
2008	The Indigenous and Popular Minga	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stop proposed free trade deals with the U.S., Canada, and Europe. • Stop laws allowing extractive activities without Indigenous consultation. • Demilitarize Indigenous lands. • Fulfill legal obligations to Indigenous peoples under national and international law.
2009	Minga of Social and Communitarian Resistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • War, peace and human rights • Sovereignty, land and territory • Legislation on dispossession • Unfulfilled agreements • The Indigenous peoples’ agenda.
2017	National Indigenous Minga for the defense of life, land, peace, and the enforcement of the Peace Accords	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denounces ongoing violence against Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and campesino leaders. • Rejects the exploitation of Indigenous lands by extractive industries without proper consultation • Calls for implementation of the peace agreement • Call to respect tools like prior consultation and cultural objection. • calls for an end to free trade agreements that undermine national food sovereignty and allow for the entry of GM seeds and agrottoxins. • Call for National and International Solidarity.
2019	Minga in Defense of Life, Territory, Democracy, Justice, and Peace.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denounced the increase in violence against Indigenous leaders and social activists • Called for the full implementation of the 2016 Peace Agreement • Sought recognition of traditional governance structures and the right to participate in decisions affecting their communities.
2020	Minga for Life, Territory, Democracy, and Peace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlight failure to protect Indigenous communities. • Maintain the ban on aerial spraying of chemicals on illegal crop plantations such as coca,

¹⁶⁸ Also, these topics were discussed during a community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, September 27, 2022 & July 5, 2023.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns over the environmental and social impact of fracking, mining and other extractive industries. • Demand for public investment in Indigenous-led environmental programs, education, and agricultural research. • Criticize militarization of regions despite the signing of the peace agreement
2024	Minga for the Defense of Life, Territory, and Peace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formalize the decree recognizing the ATEA (Autoridad Territorial Económico Ambiental) • Respect for Indigenous systems of knowledge • Denounce violence against Indigenous community leaders.

On a local level, the *minga* fosters collective action where communities engage in shared tasks such as environmental restoration, cultural preservation, and infrastructure building, reinforcing their ties to the land and one another. This communal labor creates a foundation of solidarity and mutual support, essential for territorial stewardship and food autonomy. In its broader political mobilizations, the *minga* challenges external forces—such as neoliberal policies and extractive industries—that threaten Indigenous territories. Through these collective efforts, both at the grassroots and national levels, the *minga* becomes a powerful tool for asserting territorial rights and defending the land against external encroachment, while promoting sustainability and self-determination.

The Territorial, Environmental, and Economic Authority

The Autoridad Territorial Económico Ambiental (Territorial, Environmental, and Economic Authority, ATEA being the acronym in Spanish) is a governance framework established by the CRIC to assert Indigenous authority over territorial, economic, and environmental matters in the region. The ATEA was mandated and ratified by the CRIC in 2018, stating that the:

Indigenous peoples have been guardians and caretakers of the territory for thousands of years, and that, in accordance with the mandates of the different CRIC congresses, especially the XII and XIII, it ratifies the traditional Indigenous authorities as environmental, economic and territorial authorities to order, plan, administer, control and self-regulate our territories and living spaces in an integral manner according to the worldview of each Indigenous people (CRIC 2018).

Rooted in the principles of *derecho mayor*, *ley de origen*, and *usos y costumbres*, ATEA embodies the CRIC's commitment to self-determination and the protection of ancestral lands.

After a 2024 Minga for the Defense of Life, Territory, and Peace, which ended with 4,500 Indigenous people in Bogota for 12 days (Patiño 2024), the ATEA was formally recognized by the Colombian government through Decree 1094 on August 28, 2024 (CRIC 2024). This decree acknowledges the CRIC's mandate and competencies as a traditional Indigenous authority, enabling it to exercise jurisdiction over its territories in alignment with constitutional provisions and international agreements such as ILO Convention 169. As explained by an interviewee who had recently met with representatives with the Environmental Ministry of the Colombian national government:

We have come from technical discussions with the Environmental Ministry positioning our mandate for the Territorial Economic Environmental System, the ATEA. Yes, to position it as our environmental policy and the defense of life and territory, so that we have the autonomy to protect and determine what to do and how to do it in our territories in order to continue preserving life¹⁶⁹.

¹⁶⁹ Interviews with Indigenous activists in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, Jul5, 5 2023.

ATEA operates under the CRIC's Programa Económico Ambiental (Economic and Environmental Program, PEA for its acronym in Spanish), which focuses on three core components: territory, economy, and the protection of life spaces. The program is led by key figures including Consejeros Mayores (senior council members) and coordinators who oversee various aspects of its implementation. The responsibilities of the ATEA include activities aimed at strengthening Indigenous autonomy and sustainable development, including: managing land use and ensuring the protection of sacred sites and natural resources, promoting community-based enterprises and the commercialization of Indigenous products through initiatives like the Marca Regional CRIC (the CRIC's regional brand or trademark), implementing conservation practices that align with Indigenous worldviews and the principle of harmony with nature, exercising jurisdiction in accordance with Indigenous laws and customs, thereby reinforcing the CRIC's legal and political autonomy.

Consequently, ATEA coordinates actions such as territorial mapping, environmental zoning, and the development of local Planes de Vida, which provide long-term strategies for sustainable development and territorial control. It also promotes Indigenous-led economic systems that prioritize subsistence, local exchange, and ecological sustainability over extractive or market-driven development, reinforcing economic foundations for territorial defense.

As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, the ATEA has pushed forward the CRIC's focus on the importance of food and particularly of seeds. When stating the objective of the ATEA, the 2018 mandate recognizes the importance of building food autonomy in protecting the Indigenous territories and consolidating systems of self-governance. In fact, the ATEA defines food autonomy as:

The fundamental right of Indigenous peoples to decide what to produce, distribute, and consume, generating autonomy, self-determination, and diversity with respect for their territory. It is conceived as the community's capacity to invigorate their own forms of production that guarantee the availability of products for consumption; regulated, controlled, and protected by Traditional Authorities, in order to achieve the good life (buen vivir) for Indigenous peoples (CRIC 2018).

By institutionalizing Indigenous control over land, resources, and ecological governance, domains that are central to the protection and promotion of native and creole seeds, the ATEA plays a key role in advancing seed activism. Through ATEA's normative framework, seeds are not viewed as commodities, but as collective goods tied to ancestral knowledge, food sovereignty, and spiritual practices. ATEA affirms the community's right to control, reproduce, and exchange seeds freely, resisting biopiracy, GMO contamination, and seed patenting. With its formal recognition by the Colombian state (Decree 1094 of 2024), ATEA gives the CRIC regulatory authority to implement Indigenous-led policies on biodiversity conservation and sustainable agriculture. This includes the ability to create internal norms for seed exchange, crop cultivation, and protection from GMO infiltration, making it a legal-political tool of seed activism¹⁷⁰. As stated by an interviewee when discussing inter-community seed exchanges:

And since the central theme under discussion here revolves around seeds, through these exchanges, we can begin to exchange knowledge, incentivize the issue of culture, and be able to raise the issue of GMO-free territories. It's about operationalizing this mandate we already have for the Indigenous peoples of Cauca. It's about complying with Article

¹⁷⁰ Discussions during a community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, September 27, 2022 & July 5, 2023.

27, which states that Indigenous territories are to be a “GMO-free Territory”. The same decree, the same ATEA mandate already has the guidelines. It says that this is strengthened through the construction of houses or the establishment and structuring of seed houses, and structuring the issue of the networks of custodians, the networks of seed custodians. I believe that these goals, these commitments, won't be seen in one or two years, no, but in two, three, four, or five years. We are sowing a seed, and I believe that the time is right, and I am convinced that we are cultivating this process in fertile soil¹⁷¹.

The ATEA functions as a key institutional mechanism through which the CRIC operationalizes seed activism as part of a broader strategy of territorialization and territorial defense. By affirming Indigenous jurisdiction over environmental and economic governance, ATEA provides the normative and regulatory framework necessary to protect native seeds as collective heritage, enforce bans on transgenic contamination, and sustain traditional agroecological practices. It enables Indigenous authorities to develop their own policies, standards, and educational programs centered on food autonomy, grounded in *derecho propio* and guided by the principles of *ley de origen*. In this way, ATEA not only safeguards biodiversity and ancestral knowledge but also materializes the exercise of territorial autonomy, transforming Indigenous claims to land into concrete practices of governance that resist the dispossessive logics of state and market¹⁷².

Seed politics is increasingly embedded within CRIC's broader territorial governance structures, from *cabildo* mandates to school curricula, which institutionalize Indigenous control over agricultural practices and biodiversity. These forms of ecological regulation are not simply

¹⁷¹ Interview with Indigenous activist in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, March 17, 2022.

¹⁷² Discussions during a community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, September 27, 2022 & July 5, 2023.

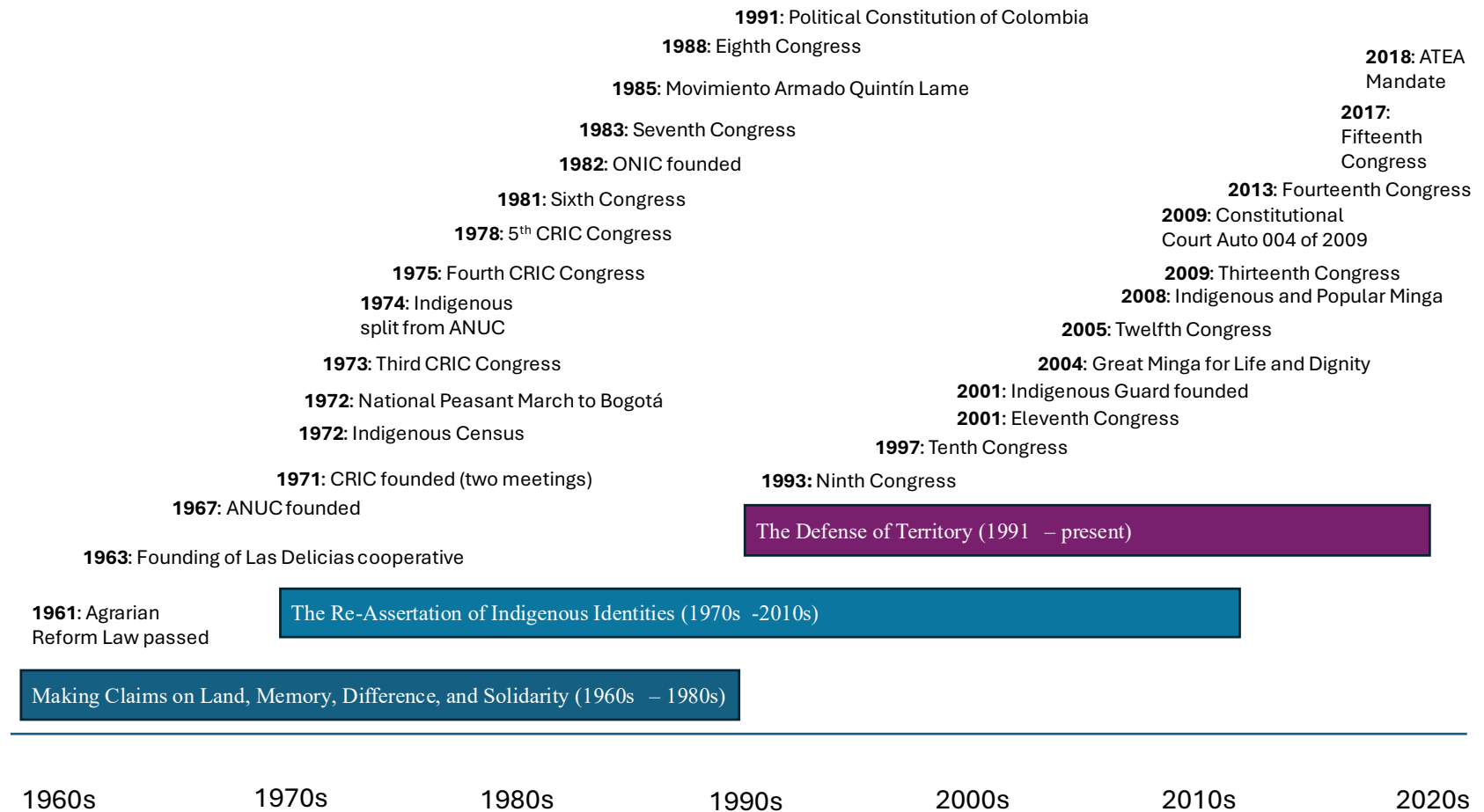
cultural but explicitly political, reinforcing the authority of Indigenous institutions in defining land use, development, and food systems.

Taken together, the guardia indígena, the mingas indígenas, and the ATEA illustrate the multi-dimensional nature of territorial defense. Each represents a distinct yet interrelated mode of action, physical presence and deterrence, collective mobilization and political negotiation, and institutional governance rooted in *derecho propio*. By combining grassroots organization, cultural authority, and formalized territorial regulation, these three indicators demonstrate how the CRIC transforms territorial claims into lived practices of autonomy. They not only defend land from external threats but also construct alternative modes of governance from within.

Table 11: Indicators and Evidence of CRIC Territorial Defense

Indicators	Empirical Manifestations
Guardia Indígena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical intervention to protect territories • Growth in members and expanding impacts • Institutionalization T-601/11 • Actor in national social movements
Mingas Indígenas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reclaiming cultural practices of community building • Tool for building food autonomy • Developed larger political significance • Tool to grow relations of solidarity
The Territorial, Environmental, and Economic Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal Recognition by the State (Decree 1094 of 2024) • Creation of Normative Frameworks Based on Derecho Propio • Territorial Monitoring and Environmental Planning • Institutional Support for Autonomous Economies • Multi-Community and Interethnic Coordination

Figure 2: Timeline of CRIC Process of Territorialization



Process of Autonomy Construction

In the CRIC's experiences of building autonomy, we can uncover how the process of contentious claims-making caused the assertion of the latent political identity of Indigenous people(s). This also led to enlivened efforts at territorializing this specific political identity across the Cauca region. Still, the overarching goal of territorial autonomy remains central to the organizing efforts of the Indigenous peoples of Cauca. Drawing on Lefebvre's concept of *autogestion* (self-management), autonomy for the CRIC involves the ability of Indigenous communities to master their conditions of existence and challenge the dominant political and economic structures. This extends to territorial governance, as seen in the CRIC's efforts to reconstitute cabildos, recover ancestral lands, and establish autonomous education systems, and more. Through these actions, the CRIC works to govern their territories according to their own norms and needs, engaging in *autogestion* as a pathway toward autonomy. Therefore, following Bretón et al. (2002), and Velasco and Kline (2025), autonomy should be understood as a project, a practice, and a vision. The CRIC's territorial governance reflects these dimensions, embodying a long-term commitment to self-management, self-determination, and the defense of their collective rights. This section will demonstrate how the CRIC built their seed activism into these aspects of autonomy.

Projects

The project(s) of autonomy refers to the specific plans or strategies which the Indigenous peoples, members of the CRIC, employ to claim Indigenous rights, especially the way they frame key sociopolitical and economic interests. In this, a central goal of the Indigenous peoples of Cauca has been the defining and codifying of their own laws, forcing a legal pluralism in the

region. This project involves both the revitalization of ancestral legal systems and their integration into contemporary governance practices within Indigenous territories. As a project, it is not merely about reclaiming historical norms but strategically asserting these frameworks as legitimate systems of law parallel and in opposition to the Colombian state's legal system. For example, in the 2007 CRIC Life Plan:

The Indigenous peoples of Cauca stand out for the great diversity of thought and cultural origins that differentiate them from other inhabitants. For this reason, our elders say that we are natives, that we have our own laws and that those laws are the basis of our existence. We call this natural law, the law of origin, or what we also call the Higher Law (derecho mayor) of each people; because it is ours and lives within our thoughts (CRIC 2007).

By actively codifying and defending derecho mayor, the CRIC is emphasizing jurisdiction over internal matters such as conflict resolution, land governance, and regulation of community life according to traditional norms. In this, the CRIC asserts its capacity for self-governance and reinforces its political autonomy in and demonstrate the practical aspects of this project. This is best represented in the growing and strengthening (as well as the reappropriating) of the cabildos, in the organization of community-based assemblies up to the regional wide CRIC assemblies or congresses.

We, the Indigenous peoples, have the Highest Right (Derecho Mayor) in these lands - in their different names in how the continent is called by each People -, in the different usos y costumbres, in the way the territory is conceived in relations of respect as a living being and how it is strengthened from the legislative systems of the authorities themselves from the oral and written sources today, at the same time we have constitutional rights, Human

Rights and International Humanitarian Law (Autoridades del Nu Nakchak del Pueblo Misak. 2013).

Meanwhile, *usos y costumbres* function as the practices that operationalize this legal system, providing a set of procedures and norms for decision-making, justice administration, and cultural preservation. This can be seen in the revival of the Saakhelu ritual, in the establishment and work of the Indigenous guard, as well as in the diversity of Mingas that are practiced in the region. By implementing and strengthening these customary practices the CRIC is engaged in a long-term project of political and legal pluralism, and the institutionalization of Indigenous governance. The establishment of Indigenous education and health systems also make this evident. In addition, the CRIC have developed mechanisms for electing leaders, as well as governing land use, all of which collectively uphold the community's self-governing capabilities. This approach challenges the dominant state-centric explanation of governance and demonstrates a bottom-up, territorially rooted form of Indigenous self-determination. A one interviewee shares:

*In these communities, the concept of collective property still prevails; they have recognized the resguardos as such, as collective territory, and at the level of custom and cultural uses (usos y costumbres), there is a very strong identity with things being held in collective*¹⁷³.

At the heart of this project is the *ley de origen*, which offers an overarching vision of autonomy rooted in a cosmological relationship with the land and a mandate to protect it. The *ley de origen* provides a normative framework that justifies the CRIC's actions not only as political resistance but as a sacred duty to safeguard territory and community well-being. This vision

¹⁷³ Interview with Indigenous activist in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, March 17, 2022.

binds the project of *derecho propio* to a broader struggle against extractivism, GMO seeds, and state policies that threaten Indigenous sovereignty¹⁷⁴.

*The ley de origen and the revitalization of our internal law is what is called our own legal system, through which Indigenous peoples exercise social and territorial control in order to maintain equilibrium. Using this system throughout history, we have created our own institutions to fulfill a specific purpose, and we have recreated and appropriated external figures to enrich our own legal system*¹⁷⁵.

This focus on developing, strengthening and implementing ancestral customs and laws also frames the protection of native seeds as a fundamental aspect of Indigenous self-governance and territorial sovereignty. In this context, seeds are not merely agricultural resources but are seen as carriers of cultural memory, identity, and spiritual connections to the land. The *ley de origen* of various peoples of the Cauca region emphasize a sacred responsibility to preserve biodiversity and traditional agricultural practices, which directly opposes the introduction of GMO seeds and industrial agriculture.

One priority is awareness of the value of seeds, through pedagogy and education. And the other priority is using the measures which dictate our own rules to declare our territory free of GMOs. This comes from our own right, derecho mayor, from the natural law that our Indigenous peoples have. To speak of the derecho mayor, for example, is to speak of the fact that our territory is sacred. Therefore, it is imprescriptible,

¹⁷⁴ Discussions during a community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, September 27, 2022 & July 5, 2023.

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Indigenous activist in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, March 17, 2022.

impenetrable, inalienable. And to speak of the chagra¹⁷⁶, of conserving the chagra, of maintaining the chagra as biodiversity and food biodiversity, well, that is the derecho mayor, that is the Indigenous and millennial rights of our peoples¹⁷⁷.

Seed activism, therefore, becomes an extension of the CRIC's autonomy project, symbolizing a rejection of colonial and capitalist encroachments represented by GMOs and corporate control over seeds. By framing seed preservation as both a legal right under *derecho propio* and a sacred duty under *ley de origen*, the CRIC transforms seed activism into a powerful form of resistance that not only preserves biodiversity but also strengthens Indigenous governance systems.

I believe that it is the Indigenous communities themselves, from their own knowledges and usos y costumbres. If they implement a true territorial, economic, and environmental authority, and if there are strong processes of that control, I think that it is much more difficult for those transgenic seeds or transgenic crops to enter the territory¹⁷⁸.

In the case of the CRIC, the project of autonomy, grounded in the establishment and strengthening of *derecho mayor*, *ley de origen*, and *usos y costumbres*, reflects a comprehensive approach to self-governance. By integrating the defense of seeds into the broader practice of *derecho mayor* and the principles of *ley de origen*, the CRIC has woven the politics of seeds into the fabric of their autonomy project. This approach not only reinforces the authority of their

¹⁷⁶ A *Chagra* is a traditional agricultural system of the Indigenous peoples of Colombia “and consist of polycultures that integrate livestock, medicinal plants, fiber plants and silviculture and resemble in many ways the canopy levels and the diversity of the ecosystems that surround them.” (Castañeda Sánchez 2009).

¹⁷⁷ Interview with Indigenous activist in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, March 17, 2022.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Indigenous authority in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023.

traditional institutions but also positions the defense of seeds as a vital element of a larger struggle for self-determination and territorial autonomy.

Practices

Investigating autonomy as a set of practices seeks to understand the concrete actions implemented to empower or organize the Indigenous authorities in Cauca to be able to make autonomous decisions. It is these practices which form the larger project discussed above.

Regarding seed activism in the region, the practices of the CRIC which have strengthened their construction of autonomy have included the establishment of community-based seed banks, joining and participating in regional and national seed guardian networks, testing seeds for genetic contamination from GM seeds, holding community and regional seed exchanges, and larger gatherings.

The establishment of community-based seed houses is understood by Indigenous CRIC members as taking part in and strengthening an alternative economy¹⁷⁹. Rather than participating in the market economy, like the conventional seed stores, the seed houses take part in the communitarian economy, strengthening the *economia propia*. With this, the community-based seed houses are understood as continuing the legacy of the early community-based enterprises established during the land recuperations¹⁸⁰. An interview discussing the importance of the seed houses, states:

I am currently a community organizer for the Community Seed House. The Seed House is a process that we have been carrying out for seven years, which involves rescuing

¹⁷⁹ Discussions during a community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023.

¹⁸⁰ Discussions during a community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, September 27, 2022 & July 5, 2023.

traditional seeds from the territory and we are talking, in this case, more specifically, about corn and beans. Caldono had a very large diversity of corn. I think it once had around 38 varieties. In this process that we have carried out, we have only found around 13 varieties in the territory. The others are already very scarce, almost lost¹⁸¹.

The Seed House has also worked with Indigenous schools, leading projects to teach the students the importance of rescuing native seeds. These projects teach students how to recognize the different types of seeds, native seeds, hybrid seeds, transgenic seeds, etc.¹⁸².

Sampling and testing seeds in the region has also become a routine practice. By identifying any traces of GMOs, these tests provide crucial information about whether external contamination has occurred, either through cross-pollination, seed mixing, or other forms of genetic drift. Contaminated seeds could compromise traditional farming systems and reduce the diversity of crops that have been carefully maintained through ancestral knowledge. Additionally, GMO contamination can expose communities to potential legal and economic risks, such as intellectual property claims by biotech companies or the loss of organic certifications. A 2016 test found that four varieties of commercial corn sold throughout the region as well as one variety of certified seed donated in the region were found to be contaminated (Red de Semillas Libres de Colombia 2019).

In the tests for contamination of native corn seeds and the seeds bought at the commercial stores, we have been able to demonstrate that a seed donated by a certified seed project was contaminated. Fortunately, so far, none of the seeds that we handle at

¹⁸¹ Interview with Indigenous activist in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023.

¹⁸² Interview with Indigenous activist in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, March 17, 2022. Also, discussions during a community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, September 27, 2022 & July 5, 2023.

*the seed house have been contaminated. I don't know, if our native corn seed were ever found to be contaminated, it would be a very big loss, very painful*¹⁸³.

In addition, the Indigenous peoples of Cauca have organized numerous inter-community exchanges, which include seeds and the sharing of knowledge about the seeds. These have led to a larger dispersal of native seeds throughout Cauca and a larger commitment to the defense of those native seeds. These have grown into broader gatherings with participants from all around Cauca which have included international organizations like SWISSAID, regional councils of cabildos, and more. These spaces not only include the exchange sessions, but also trainings on GM seeds, recuperating and saving native seeds, and more¹⁸⁴.

These practices not only safeguard native seeds from external threats but also embed seed activism within the legal frameworks of *derecho mayor*, *ley de origen*, and *usos y costumbres*. By weaving these practices into their broader governance structures, the CRIC reinforces their territorial autonomy and ensures that the control of seeds remains a collective, community-driven endeavor. For instance, seed houses not only function as storage spaces but also as sites of cultural and legal assertion, where the management and protection of seeds align with *derecho mayor*'s principles of communal authority and stewardship. Seed exchanges reinforce *usos y costumbres* by reviving traditional networks of reciprocity and mutual aid, strengthening community bonds and collective governance over biodiversity. The practice of testing and sampling seeds for genetic contamination acts as a safeguard under *ley de origen*, defending the integrity of seeds as culturally important.

Visions

¹⁸³ Interview with Indigenous activist in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023.

¹⁸⁴ Discussions during a community-based workshop in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023.

While the practices outlined above are built into and embedded within the larger project of autonomy (through establishing and strengthening traditional legal norms and systems), both the projects and the practices are guided by certain visions or ideas. These visions encompass sets of symbols and normative views which support the political project of Indigenous territorial autonomy sought by the CRIC.

The foundation of this vision for the CRIC is the construction of food autonomy. Food autonomy refers to the ability of communities to control their food systems, from production and distribution to consumption, based on their own knowledge, traditions, and decision-making processes. It involves reclaiming control over seeds, land, and agricultural methods, ensuring that food systems reflect and sustain the cultural and ecological values of the community. The vision of food autonomy is not just an abstract aspiration but a transformative framework that guides both practices and projects, aiming to reclaim sovereignty over territory and resources from the Colombian state's regulatory frameworks¹⁸⁵.

Food autonomy, strengthening our own seeds, having our own custodians in the communities, being able to conserve our own varieties, our own crops, with our own ancestral techniques, this is fundamental for our survival¹⁸⁶.

For the CRIC, food autonomy means embedding agricultural practices within their ancestral legal frameworks, such as *derecho mayor*, *ley de origen*, and *usos y costumbres*. This approach allows them to protect traditional seeds, regulate agricultural practices according to spiritual and ecological principles, and resist external pressures like GM seeds and industrial

¹⁸⁵ Discussions during a community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023.

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Indigenous activist in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, March 17, 2022

agriculture. In essence, food autonomy for the CRIC is about sustaining life, culture, and territory through self-determined and community-centered food systems.

I believe that the GMO model is the same model of agro-food system that deepens our dependence on large corporations for food production. What it exacerbates is dependence in times of social unrest, natural disasters, conflicts, pandemics. The more dependent we are on these corporations to feed ourselves, the more fragile this system is. In addition, there are all the other ecological implications of the use of GMOs, with unexpected consequences on food chains and on human health itself¹⁸⁷.

The treatment of food as a competition-based commodity, shaped by dynamics from the global market down to the local level, is viewed by the CRIC as a deeply problematic aspect of capitalist systems that undermines community-based food practices. The notion that producers are pitted against each other, rather than collaborating to guarantee that all community members are nourished, is seen as a fundamental distortion of the traditional values of reciprocity and collective well-being. This competitive model undermines vision of food autonomy, which emphasize cooperation, shared responsibility, and the sustainable management of resources to ensure food sovereignty for present and future generations¹⁸⁸.

For us, the Indigenous peoples of Cauca, and especially for the Yanacona people, food autonomy is the transversal axis of our process of survival as a people. So, through food autonomy, we can strengthen our own strategies, our own policy.

¹⁸⁷ Interviews with Indigenous leader in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, July 5, 2023.

¹⁸⁸ Discussions during a community-based workshops in Popayán, Cauca, Colombia, September 27, 2022 & July 5, 2023.

Food autonomy embodies a broader political project of territorial autonomy that integrates cultural, economic, spiritual, political, and legal dimensions. The practices of seed testing, creating seed houses, seed exchanges, and regional gatherings are concrete actions that operationalize this vision by defending the integrity of traditional seeds against genetic contamination, revitalizing ancestral knowledge, and strengthening community networks.

Conclusion

The process of constructing territorial autonomy for the Indigenous peoples of Cauca is intricately tied to broader goals of social transformation, aimed at achieving solidarity with all marginalized and oppressed peoples. At its core, however, it reveals the assertion of Indigenous identity as a political force, transforming a private identity into a public, political, and mobilizing one. This mobilization initially spurred on by land recuperation processes and the building of an *economía propia*. With this, the CRIC has embedded its resistance to GM seeds within a long-standing system of Indigenous governance, using practices like seed testing, the establishment of seed houses, and regional exchanges to fortify its resistance to industrial agriculture and GMOs. These actions intertwine with their spiritual, ecological, and legal frameworks, reinforcing their vision of food autonomy and securing the right to food and territory for future generations. The CRIC's approach underscores that autonomy is not just a political goal but a comprehensive vision of self-determined, community-centered agricultural systems. Additionally, through the establishment of autonomous educational systems, the revitalization of the Minga, and the Indigenous Guard, the CRIC strengthens its social and political fabric, embodying a broader struggle for cultural survival, self-determination, and resistance to external pressures. In grounding their seed activism within these enduring practices of governance and collective

memory, the CRIC demonstrates that autonomy is an ongoing project that requires continuous reclamation and protection of both territory and culture.

Chapter 7: Seed Politics and the Mechanisms of Indigenous Autonomy: A Comparative Analysis of the Zenú and CRIC Cases

Introduction

In both the Zenú and CRIC cases, long-standing struggles for Indigenous autonomy have incorporated seed politics as a new, vital arena of resistance. Far from being isolated concerns, conflicts over GM seeds have become extensions of deeper territorial and political struggles, reflecting broader efforts to defend and reshape Indigenous governance.

The two distinct processes of constructing autonomy found in the cases of the Zenú Indigenous people on the northern Caribbean coastal region and the CRIC organization in the Andean southwest reveal similar social causal mechanisms to be at work. The mechanisms identified in the cases, activated by the agrarian reform efforts, are claims-making, memory work, identity formation, boundary activation, and territorialization, all moving within a larger process of the construction of Indigenous autonomy. In both cases, we find the politics of seeds to illuminate important dynamics regarding these mechanisms and their impact on processes of Indigenous autonomy. However, the ways that each mechanism interacts with the context causes variance in the types of impacts each mechanism has in moving the process along, and how each case approaches the politics of seeds. This chapter will analyze and compare the mechanisms revealed in each case and discuss how the context in which they interact created differing causal pathways. In each case we find commitments to food and seed sovereignty, however, the different ways this is carried out help us to understand more profoundly how the identified social mechanisms function in the world.

While the beginning of all social processes is context-specific, these cases each identify the attempt at agrarian reform which began in the 1960s to have triggered important changes in the relational field in rural Colombia (a shift in power, a new threat, or a collective opportunity). The starting point, therefore, is understood as a critical juncture that sets institutions or social actors on a particular path (Collier & Collier 1992, Tilly 2001, Falletti & Lynch 2009). In this case, agrarian reform represented not only the possibilities for a material redistribution of land but also a reconfiguration of rural power relations, drawing Indigenous and peasant communities more explicitly into negotiations over land, territory, identity, and state recognition. As such, the agrarian reform initiatives (however uneven or incomplete they were carried out) can be understood as the initial conditions that shaped the trajectories of grassroots organizing, institutional formation, and claims to seed sovereignty in the decades that followed.

This political opening catalyzed a wave of claims-making on lands and territories all around the country. Groups, communities, organizations, and peoples all mobilized to push for land distribution and to change the dynamics of property across the country, while large landowners and political elites pushed back against redistribution (Fajardo 2019, 2022). Such claims to land tended to rely on arguments of identity (whether it was class-based claims, ethnic claims, or other economic-oriented identity claims such as those put forward by ranchers, landowners, religious institutions, as well as extractive and industrial interests). In this process, certain identities were revived or newly politicized, especially collective identities such as that of an Indigenous people.

The mechanism of claims-making, activated by the critical juncture of agrarian reform, shaped the trajectory of each process under investigation. For example, the revival of an identity

which had previously been made invisible in one case, and the political assertion of an existing identity in another case, each interacted with the types of claims being made.

Additionally, the mechanism of memory work or the collective construction of the historical narrative is about justifying the claims being made. It is the active engagement of social groups in constructing, maintaining, and transmitting shared narratives of the past, which are essential for forming group identity and guiding present and future actions (Rappaport 1990). The different types of claims-making in each of the cases is found to be shaped by the ways that this memory work was done in each case. One focused on the historical injustices of dispossession and assimilation, while the other focused on the legacy of Indigenous resistance.

Claims-making together with the memory construction mechanism led to processes of political identity formation. As the new political opportunities of agrarian reform opened possibilities for land redistribution, claims to that land were largely founded on historical ties to living and working that land. As demonstrated in the case study chapters, identities were constructed, revived, asserted, in order to demonstrate claims to such histories. In these cases, identity-based claims fostered solidarity, creating stronger social movements that could challenge the status quo. For Indigenous groups, land was essential not just for economic survival but for preserving their culture and territory, shifting the focus from land ownership to territorial rights and changing the types of claims being made.

In each case under investigation here, the mechanism of political identity formation played a central causal role in the unfolding challenges and opportunities brought on by anti-GMO seed politics and activism. While we see in both cases the identities being formed are Indigenous based, the process of identity formation served different purposes in each case, leading to different forces behind the identity, including different needs, obstacles, and

possibilities rising from the Indigenous identity(ies). For example, in one case a specific Indigenous identity (Zenú) was positioned in order to make claims on an almost completely lost and forgotten resguardo. In another, a broader Indigenous identity was utilized to develop inter-group solidarity and common agendas.

The forming of identities necessitated the creation or the activation of social (and physical) boundaries. As each case reveals, such boundaries are often manifested in unequal access to resources and social opportunities, reinforcing systemic disparities that limit Indigenous and peasant communities' ability to secure land, political representation, and economic stability. However, these boundaries are not merely imposed from above; they are also shaped through Indigenous agency and struggle. The very act of resisting dispossession and asserting territorial rights helps define and activate these boundaries, influencing not only who is included or excluded but also how Indigenous identity is reaffirmed in relation to land and governance. In this way, the process of boundary activation is co-constituted, both a response to external pressures and an assertion of self-determination, ultimately shaping the identity being formed and guiding the broader impacts of the mechanism.

What initiated the formation of the identities under investigation in each case was the claims to land and territory. With this beginning, the identities inherently necessitated territorialization. The Indigenous identities exemplified political projects, the construction of autonomy, that challenged the current spatial organization of the Colombian state. Identity alone, without a corresponding claim to a physical space, would have remained politically and legally weak in the face of state institutions, powerful economic interests, and competing land claims. For both groups, territorialization was necessary to transform identity from a cultural or historical assertion into a concrete political and legal reality. Therefore, the mechanism which

tied all this together with the higher process of constructing Indigenous autonomy was territorialization, or the process by which a specific geographic area comes to be understood, recognized, claimed, and controlled (Sack 1986).

However, the differences found in the preceding mechanisms, in the ways that collective memories were constructed, in the ways that social boundaries were created, as well as differences in context, caused an important distinction between the cases regarding territorialization. In the case of the Zenú , it was about territorializing the Indigenous Zenú identity onto the resguardo lands. However, in the case of the CRIC, it was largely about defending, reclaiming, and expanding the already existing territories controlled by Indigenous groups in the region while establishing and asserting a broader and collective ‘Indigenous’ identity. This difference between territorialization and territorial defense, although subtle and not completely clear-cut, caused important differences in the ways that each case approached and implemented their seed activism as tied to their Indigenous identity, as well as the construction of autonomy.

This circular figure below illustrates the recursive and interdependent nature of the mechanisms that drive the construction of Indigenous autonomy. Rather than unfolding linearly, these mechanisms interact dynamically, with each one shaping and being shaped by the others over time. This highlights how autonomy emerges through ongoing cycles of political action, cultural resurgence, and territorial engagement.

Indigenous autonomy in Colombia is a larger, ongoing process shaped by interconnected social mechanisms that were set into motion in specific ways by the critical juncture of the agrarian reform. Claims-making emerged as Indigenous groups demanded recognition of their historical land rights, often invoking legal and ancestral frameworks. Memory work played a

crucial role in reconstructing collective histories and legitimizing these claims, while identity formation transformed Indigenous identity into a political force, reinforcing a sense of belonging and self-governance. Boundary activation further strengthened these claims by demarcating Indigenous territories both physically and symbolically, distinguishing them from external actors and state control. Finally, territorialization materialized autonomy by securing land, implementing governance structures, and embedding legal, cultural, and ecological practices within Indigenous jurisdictions. Together, these mechanisms reveal autonomy as a dynamic and contested process, deeply rooted in historical struggles but continuously evolving through collective action and resistance. In this sense, the struggle against GM seeds, as well as the defense of native seeds, can be considered as a new layer placed on top of already existing territorial dynamics. This new layer adds different challenges and opportunities, discursively, materially, epistemically, and organizationally.

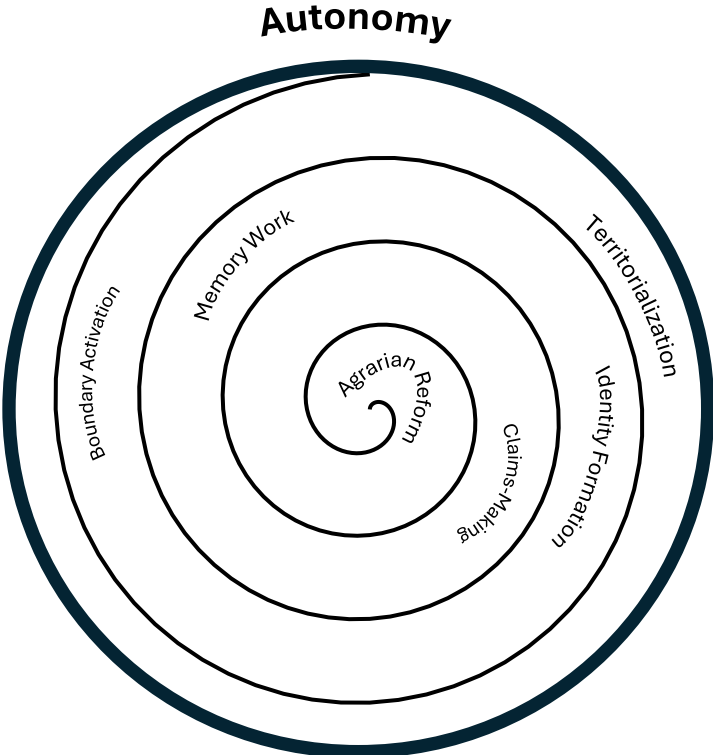


Figure 3: Process towards autonomy, including identified mechanisms

Similarities and Differences: Contextual Backgrounds of the Cases

The ways that mechanisms function only makes explanatory sense when understood within specific configurations of power and identity. This is because the same mechanism in different contexts can have different effects. Therefore, understanding context is essential for explaining variation in outcomes, even when the same mechanisms are at play. Also, while mechanisms may be generalizable, their activation depends on local structural and situational conditions. Context defines the boundaries of possibility for mechanisms to operate or produce effects, and it determines which type(s) of change is possible.

All this means that understanding how mechanisms such as boundary activation, territorialization, or identity formation operate in Indigenous contexts (e.g., CRIC or Zenú) requires situated knowledge about colonial histories, institutional legacies, cultural norms, discursive framings, and ecological conditions. The same political actions (e.g., declaring a GMO-free zone) may mean different things, trigger different feedback loops, or fail to activate at all, depending on the Indigenous peoples' governance structures, memory, and types of threats faced.

The autonomy projects of the Zenú and the CRIC case studies emerge from distinct historical trajectories, socio-political contexts, and agrarian structures that have shaped their struggles for territorial and political self-governance. The Zenú people, whose ancestral territory once spanned vast areas of the Caribbean lowlands, were systematically dispossessed of their lands and nearly erased as a distinct Indigenous group during the colonial and republican periods. Their autonomy project began in the late 20th century with the revival of their identity and the reconstruction of their resguardo, culminating in official state recognition of the

Resguardo Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento in the early 1990s. The Zenú land recuperations involved reclaiming territory through strategic mobilization and legal mechanisms, emphasizing the impacts of historical injustices. Their movement was rooted in a revival of cultural and ethnic identity, where territorialization, including in the form of GMO-free activism, became an important means of asserting self-governance.

In contrast, the CRIC's autonomy project originated in the 1970s¹⁸⁹ in the Andean region of Cauca, a department characterized by a deeply feudal agrarian structure where large haciendas dominated Indigenous and peasant labor. The CRIC emerged within the broader context of leftist organizing in Colombia, drawing from Marxist-inspired rural movements and other forms of peasant resistance. Their struggle was centered on land recuperations that directly challenged landowner dominance, leading to violent confrontations with both state and paramilitary forces. Unlike the Zenú, the CRIC's autonomy project was not just about recovering land and territory but about restructuring political power in the region. Their movement was closely tied to broader socialist and more progressive struggles in Colombia, positioning their demands within a vision for systemic transformation rather than a purely ethnic-based territorial claim.

The geographical and agrarian differences between the Caribbean coast and the Andean regions also shaped the nature of these movements. The Caribbean region, where the Zenú resguardo is located, underwent more intensive capitalist agrarian development, with land more concentrated in commercialized agribusiness and less organized in feudal estates (Ballve 2020, *Resguardo Indígena Zenú San Andrés de Sotavento* 2015). Still, a major obstacle the Zenú confronted was the power of the large landowning class. However, this landowning class had

¹⁸⁹ Although the legacy of resistance, as highlighted in the case study, reveals how this project as the CRIC, is more a newer manifestation of the struggle for autonomy rather than a distinct beginning.

strong ties to international commerce and were intent on implementing the most updated farming technologies and systems of labor. The Zenú movement, therefore, navigated a landscape where landownership, corporate interests, and state-driven modernization shaped the agrarian economy. Their territorialization strategies focused on carving out spaces within this structure, using legal recognition, cultural symbols, and agroecological alternatives as tools for constructing autonomy. Meanwhile, in Cauca, the persistence of a semi-feudal agrarian economy meant that the CRIC's struggle was more explicitly anti-landlord and anti-oligarchic, demanding radical land redistribution as a foundation for autonomy (Galeano Lozano 2006).

In the Zenú case on the Caribbean coast, the widespread use of GMOs due to the dominance of large-scale monocrop plantations (mostly corn and cotton) means that Indigenous resistance operates in a landscape where agribusiness interests tied to international markets are deeply entrenched, both economically and politically. The struggle against GMOs here is more directly a confrontation with powerful corporate and state-backed agricultural models, requiring legal, political, and institutional strategies to carve out spaces of Indigenous control within an evolving agro-industrial economy. The Zenú declaration of a GMO-Free Territory is thus a direct challenge to the expansion of industrial agriculture in a region where GMOs are already largely normalized.

In Cauca, where there is more mountainous terrain that creates challenges for the spread of large monocrop plantations, GMO use is less pervasive. However, this does not mean there is no threat, as the seed testing in the region has discovered, unlabeled GM seeds are being sold and distributed in the region. Therefore, resistance takes a different form, focusing on preventative territorial defense. The CRIC's struggle over seeds is embedded in broader efforts to defend

Indigenous agricultural systems, even if GMOs are not yet dominant. This is further complicated by the legacy and persistence of semi-feudal land relations, where large landowners (or *terratenientes*) continue to exert control over vast tracts of land, limiting Indigenous land access and autonomy. These structures, remnants of the colonial *hacienda* system, reinforce economic and political inequalities, making Indigenous control over agricultural production and seed sovereignty even more precarious (CRIC 1978). In this context, the CRIC are not just fighting against GMOs but against the structural forces (land concentration, agribusiness expansion, and state-backed agricultural policies) that could bring GMOs into the region in the future. The fight for seed sovereignty, then, is inseparable from the broader struggle to dismantle these historical systems of exclusion and reclaim land for Indigenous governance and autonomy.

Overall, this contrast highlights how territorial context shapes the nature of Indigenous resistance: in Córdoba and Sucre, the Zenú are resisting a GMO presence that is already widespread, while in Cauca, the CRIC is working more to prevent its expansion before it takes root more deeply. These differences in the material landscape also influence how Indigenous communities frame their struggles legally, politically, and discursively, shaping their broader projects of autonomy.

Additionally, while both movements pursued autonomy, their interactions with the state and broader political movements differed. The Zenú engaged primarily with the legal frameworks of multicultural recognition to recover land and establish political authority, emphasizing cultural revival and righting historical injustices. The CRIC, however, remained deeply embedded in Colombia's broader social movements, maintaining alliances with trade unions, student movements, and other grassroots organizations pushing for structural change.

These divergent paths reflect the varied historical and socio-political conditions that shaped each movement's approach to autonomy, territorialization, and self-governance.

Claims-Making in Action

The process of claims-making involves performing or articulating demands that bear on someone else's interests, always requiring at least two actors: the claimant and the addressee (Linkekilde 2013). These claims can be expressed through various forms of action such as legal challenges, public protests, policy advocacy, or direct occupations of land. The cases of both the Zenú and the CRIC illustrate how claims-making is fundamental to political processes, particularly in shaping Indigenous autonomy. Claims-making is not only about access to resources but also about asserting political participation, recognition, and, crucially, the territorialization of Indigenous political projects (Tilly 1978, 2008, Tarrow 1998).

Both the CRIC and the Zenú began their claims-making processes through land takeovers, influenced by the agrarian reform efforts and the mobilization of the ANUC. These land recoveries served as the foundational moment for asserting territorial rights, but the way each movement developed their claims-making strategies diverged due to differences in organizational structures and historical trajectories. The CRIC, already equipped with established organizations and governing institutions, extended its claims beyond land and territorial recognition to demand the right to construct alternative economies and self-governance mechanisms. Their claims-making was deeply rooted in mass mobilization, collective assemblies, and building solidarity networks in and between the disparate resguardos and other Indigenous communities. This structured, large-scale approach allowed the CRIC to frame their

struggle not only as a defense of territory but also as a project of political and economic autonomy, aligned with broader goals of societal transformation.

The Zenú Indigenous people’s land recovery process involved asserting their territorial and cultural autonomy through the resguardo, transitioning from a peasant to an Indigenous identity. This transition included (and necessitated) shifting a claim on the land to a claim on the territory and became intertwined with a broader goal for recognition and political sovereignty. Legal advocacy was central, as the Zenú used legal tools to gain title to recuperated lands, as well as to challenge state and external encroachments. Accompaniment from Indigenous organizations, human rights groups, and other social movements played a crucial role in supporting their legal efforts and amplifying their voice, providing solidarity that strengthened their pursuit of autonomy and justice. This also includes the early and sustained accompaniment of SWISSAID pushing a focus on agriculture and seeds as fields of struggle for autonomy.

Table 12: Similarities and Differences in Claims-Making mechanism

Key Similarities	Key Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land recovery processes • Reconstitution or formation of cabildos 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CRIC establishment of cooperatives • CRIC 1972 Census • Zenú international accompaniment (SWISSAID)

While the issue of seeds developed later in the cases, it also reveals the mechanism of claims-making by providing a tangible, material arena of struggle for asserting Indigenous autonomy. In both the Zenú and CRIC cases, seeds become both an additional material and symbolic layer of struggle which Indigenous communities can utilize to articulate their sovereignty, rights, and governance structures.

For the Zenú, the declaration of a GMO-Free Territory serves as a formal claim to self-determination, reinforcing their right to regulate what is cultivated on their lands. This claim is backed by legal recognition from institutions like INCORA, as well as by the establishment of community-based agricultural organizations that manage and protect native seeds, provide education and training, and advance advocacy priorities within and outside of the resguardo. Seed politics is attached at the level of cultural revival within the claims-making mechanism. It also extends into the autonomy layer, as Zenú political and community-based organizations make legal and territorial claims based on agroecology and GMO-free declarations.

For the CRIC, seeds are embedded in a broader struggle for territorial defense and land recovery. The promotion of native seeds and rejection of corporate-controlled agriculture reinforce their broader claims to land and self-governance. Through mingas, communal agricultural projects, and the Indigenous Guard, CRIC-affiliated communities actively assert their right to determine the agricultural and ecological future of their territories. This is all based on attaching seed politics to ancestral legal traditions and structures. Therefore, for the CRIC, seed politics is attached more to the outer layer of autonomy construction. In this it reinforces earlier layers but does not initiate them (see Figure 4).

In both cases, the politics of seeds serve as an emerging material and symbolic battleground impacting Indigenous autonomy. The ability to grow, exchange, and protect native seeds is a direct assertion of self-determination, positioning Indigenous communities as stewards of both their lands and their agricultural heritage. These struggles challenge state-imposed agricultural policies, multinational corporate influence, and the broader logics of extractivism and industrial agriculture, reinforcing Indigenous claims to autonomy.

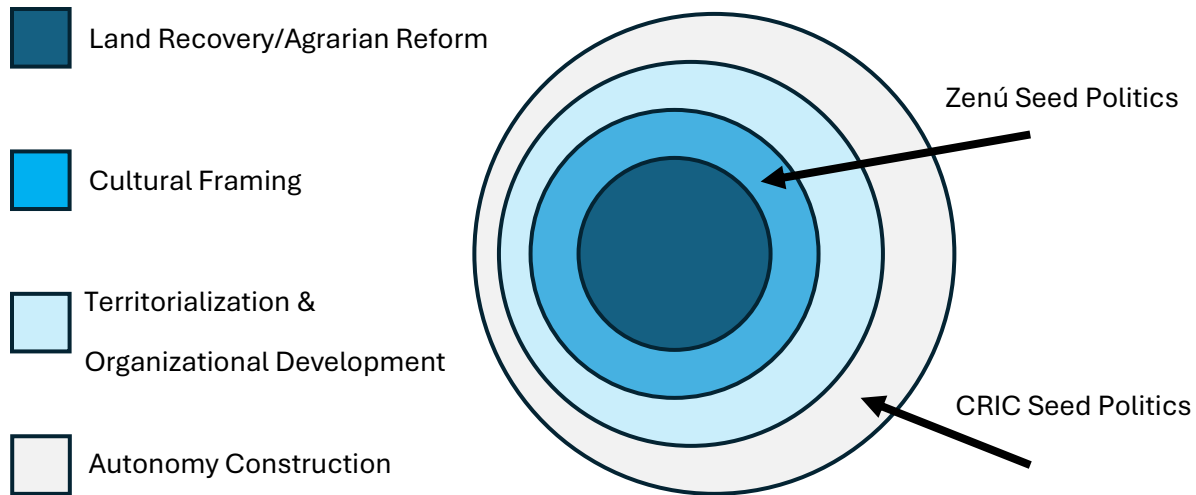


Figure 4: The attachment of seed politics to the claims-making mechanism

Memory Work and Historical Narrative

Memory work played a crucial role in shaping the claims-making processes as well as the identity formation of both the Zenú and the CRIC, though in distinct ways. The collective construction of memory is the deliberate processes through which groups reconstruct, reinterpret, and transmit historical narratives to shape identity, legitimize claims, and mobilize political action. This occurs through storytelling, commemorations, rituals, educational practices, and material symbols, reinforcing collective belonging and justifying present struggles based on past experiences (Rappaport 1990, 1993, Khittel 2001, Zerubavel 2003, Stern 2004, and Velasco 2014). These narratives are not static but are continually reshaped to address contemporary challenges and aspirations. For the Zenú, memory work centered on righting historical injustices, particularly the loss of their resguardo lands over centuries. Their claims-making process, from the land recuperations of the 1970s to the declaration of a GMO-Free Territory, relied on invoking their colonial title over 83,000 hectares as legal and historical justification for their contemporary land and governance claims. By reclaiming their historical identity as rightful

stewards of the land, the Zenú not only made claims for territorial recognition but also framed these claims as part of a longer struggle for justice and restitution.

For the CRIC, memory work was centered on the history of resistance, drawing on narratives of Indigenous uprisings and past struggles against dispossession to fuel contemporary mobilization. Their claims-making process was deeply tied to recovering and reinforcing Indigenous governance structures based on *derecho mayor*, *ley de origen*, and *usos y costumbres*, further contextualizing current claims as a part of the broader historical struggle for Indigenous autonomy. Land recuperations, the formation of Indigenous educational institutions, and the establishment of the Indigenous Guard all functioned as claims to self-determination that extended beyond legal land titles to assert an autonomous political structure. Through memory work, the CRIC linked their present struggles to historical cycles of resistance, strengthening collective identity and legitimizing their claims to territory and self-governance.

Table 13: Similarities and Differences in Memory Work mechanism

Key Similarities	Key Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical ties to the land/territory • Ethnic difference from dominant society • Conquest and colonization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zenú focus on righting past injustice • CRIC focus on legacy of resistance

In both the Zenú and CRIC cases, seeds are not merely agricultural inputs but are understood as types of living archives that encode historical knowledge, ancestral practices, and cultural identity. Consequently, Indigenous movements tend to emphasize that native seeds have been cultivated for generations, embedding agricultural knowledge passed down through oral traditions, rituals, and ecological practices. Resisting GMOs, therefore, becomes a way of reaffirming historical continuity and asserting that Indigenous peoples were stewards of

biodiversity long before colonial and state-imposed agricultural systems sought to erase their autonomy.

The imposition of industrial agriculture, including GMOs, represents a continuation of colonial dispossession. By defending native seeds, Indigenous communities reject the historical erasure of their agricultural knowledge and challenge narratives that frame modern industrialized farming as inherently superior. This is a direct confrontation with colonial histories that sought to suppress Indigenous food systems through land expropriation, forced labor, and monoculture plantations.

Moreover, in both cases, seed-saving is often integrated into cultural and educational initiatives that explicitly frame native seeds as carriers of memory. Festivals, ritual plantings, and seed exchanges become acts of historical reaffirmation, teaching younger generations not only how to cultivate but also the political significance of protecting these seeds. Therefore, the struggle against GMOs does not just preserve Indigenous agricultural traditions; it also serves as a political tool to strengthen collective identity and stimulate mobilization. Memory work around seeds helps unify communities in the present by invoking a shared past of resistance and self-governance in one case, and of the historical injustices of dispossession in the other. This places the defense of native seeds as a part of broader movements for land rights and autonomy.

Both cases demonstrate that claims-making is inseparable from identity formation and memory work. By linking claims to historical continuity (whether as a rectification of injustice in the Zenú case or as an ongoing legacy of resistance in the CRIC case) both groups mobilized collective memory to reinforce territorial demands. This interplay of claims-making, identity formation, and memory work shows how Indigenous movements in Colombia have used historical narratives to justify, sustain, and expand their struggles for autonomy.

The Formation of Political Identity

Identities are social arrangements, argues Tilly (2005). Therefore, identity formation is a dynamic social mechanism through which individuals and groups construct narratives about who they are, how they are connected, and what has happened to them. These identities become political when they engage with or challenge the state, whether through claims directed at government institutions, state classification and recognition processes, or third-party disputes that force state responses, such as land titling (Tilly 2002, 2005, 2008, Jackson 2019, Jung 2008, and Yashar 2005). Identities are often crafted to assert control over resources, territory, or economic opportunities, but they emerge within layers of already existing constraints and opportunities. In the political realm some facilitate collective action more readily than others (Scott 2009, Tilly 2002). The cases of the Zenú and the CRIC illustrate distinct yet overlapping processes of identity formation, shaped by different historical trajectories of dispossession, marginalization, and resistance.

For the Zenú, identity formation was a process of “identity revival”, recovering an identity that had been made invisible by centuries of displacement and assimilation. In addition to the claims on the land and territory, through cultural practices such as traditional weaving, agricultural production, and gastronomic customs, Zenú leaders reactivated a collective identity that had been largely absorbed into the broader peasant population. This revival was crucial in legitimizing their claims to ancestral lands, reinforcing their status as an Indigenous people with distinct territorial rights rather than just another rural community. By positioning their struggle within the framework of historical injustice, they challenged dominant state narratives that had long denied their existence, thereby compelling the government to recognize their *resguardo* and later their authority over it, including their ability to declare it a GMO-Free Territory.

In contrast, the CRIC’s identity formation process was not about reviving a lost identity but about actively transforming a private, relegated, or de-politicized identity into a public and political one. The causal mechanism of “identity assertion” in the CRIC Indigenous movement is strongly evidenced through the reconstitution of cabildos. The revival of cabildos restored traditional governance to reflect Indigenous values and self-determination. This process has meant not only preserving their cultural identity but also using it as a foundation for political mobilization and advocacy. Such political mobilization and advocacy has occurred through both local and regional arenas, as well as the national arena. Indigenous communities in Cauca had maintained elements of their traditions and governance structures and were recognized as having such ethnic distinction.

However, their identities had been largely depoliticized due to state policies of integration and mestizaje, and they largely related to the state as peasants. The CRIC activated and politicized their Indigenous identities through the land recoveries, the reappropriation and strengthening of cabildos, as well as establishing later methods of control like the guardia indígena, all of which are visible assertions of self-governance. By framing their struggles in terms of historical traditions of resistance, rather than historical processes of injustice and loss, the CRIC actively redefined their identity as a mobilizing force, directly challenging the state’s territorial control and its vision of national identity as a mestizo, homogenized project.

Table 14: Similarities and Differences in Identity Formation mechanism

Key Similarities	Key Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systems of autonomous education • Separation/split from peasant movement • Empowerment of cabildos 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zenú focus on cultural renewal • Zenú revival of identity, CRIC assertion of ‘indigenous’ identity • CRIC seeking national impact

The struggle over seeds has become one important dimension of the broader process of forming Indigenous identities amidst struggles for autonomy. The issue of seeds, however, is seen as reinforcing Indigenous identity by further grounding it in connections to the land, ancestral knowledge, and self-governance. For the Zenú, the fight to protect native seeds was integral to the revival of their Indigenous identity. Seed politics enters into the mechanism of identity formation regarding the revival of cultural practices, and even partially in the arguments surrounding ancestral connection to the land. Therefore, seed saving, critiques of GMOs, and the defense of ancestral seeds are used as claims to being Indigenous, to justify territorial claims, and to differentiate themselves from dominant peasant mestizo or urban society. For the Zenú, seed politics helps articulate and stabilize Indigenous identity itself. The politics surrounding seeds is utilized as a tool to revive their indigenous identity which had been partially erased.

For the CRIC, in contrast, the struggle over seeds fits into a broader assertion of an already recognized and mobilized Indigenous identity. Seed politics, therefore, enters as a way of deepening cultural recovery, expanding economic autonomy, and resisting neoliberalism. In this, seed politics works to reinforce CRIC's already-developed identity. For the CRIC, the politics surrounding seeds is utilized to expand an identity already rooted in long-standing governance and struggle (see Figure 5 below).

In both cases, identity formation was not only about self-definition but about restructuring power relations, using history, culture, and memory as tools to assert political claims and territorial rights. All of which found a material base in the politics of seeds, as well as further agricultural questions.

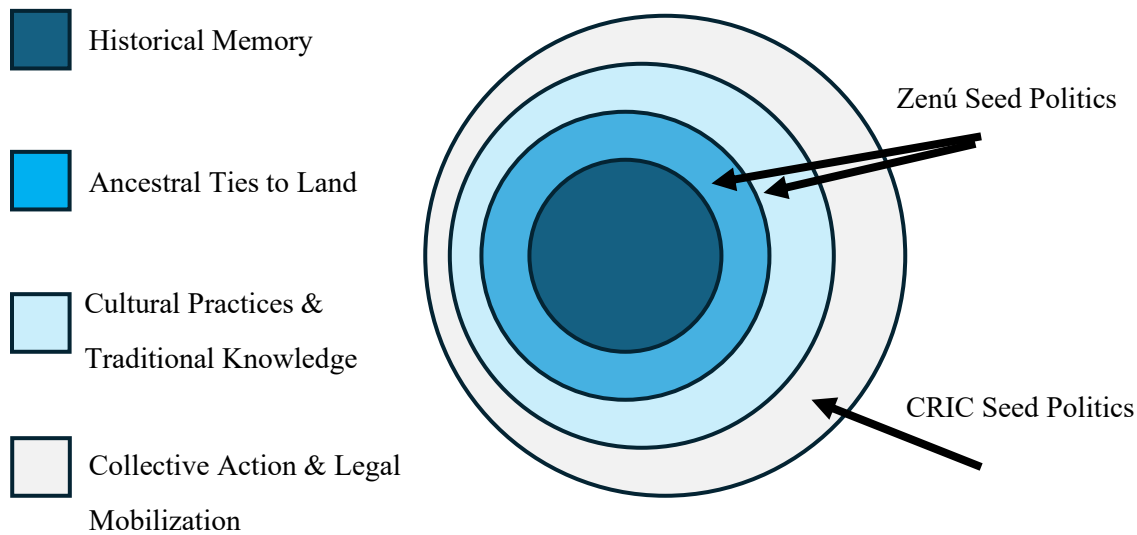


Figure 5: The insertion of seed politics into the identity formation mechanism

The process of identity formation required the activation and reinforcement of social boundaries that distinguished Indigenous governance, land use, and political authority from external forces, including the state and agribusiness, as well as other peasant and rural identities. Social boundary creation played a critical role in shaping these processes of identity formation (Tilly 2005, Gibson 2012, Wimmer 2013). For the Zenú, reviving their identity meant drawing a boundary between themselves and the broader peasant population, articulating a distinct Indigenous identity tied to historical land tenure and governance structures, justified through the colonial title to the resguardo. For the CRIC, boundary activation was about asserting governance structures that stood outside and often in direct opposition to state institutions, as well as the creation of organizational structures which could be independent of other identities. These distinctions were not only cultural but also political, as both groups used their identity to demand autonomy, challenging the state’s monopoly over land governance and national belonging.

In both cases, seeds became a key marker of social boundaries by distinguishing Indigenous agricultural practices, knowledge systems, and governance structures from those imposed by the state and agribusiness, and even the agriculture of differing peasant communities. The defense of native seeds and the rejection of GMOs served not only as an assertion of cultural and political autonomy but also as a means of drawing a clear distinction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous agricultural landscapes. In the Zenú case, the declaration of a GMO-Free Territory formalized this boundary, legally demarcating Indigenous seed sovereignty against external influences. For the CRIC, actions such as the protection of traditional crops and community seed exchanges reinforced collective identity and strengthened Indigenous control over food production, further separating their governance structures from those of the state.

Through these mechanisms, both the Zenú and the CRIC contested dominant state narratives of national identity and territorial dominion. While the Zenú forced the state to recognize a people it had long deemed assimilated, the CRIC rejected the state's terms of recognition altogether. The CRIC asserted a form of identity rooted in autonomous governance, collective land rights, and historical continuity. By demanding the expansion and protection of resguardos, they defied the agrarian policies that sought to turn Indigenous people into peasants within a private property regime. This act of rejection was a key moment in boundary activation, as it reinforced a distinction between state-imposed Indigenous identity and the self-determined identity shaped through struggle. In doing so, the mobilizations not only challenged exclusionary state policies but also solidified a collective Indigenous identity that was tied to territorial defense, communal governance, and political autonomy.

Table 15: Similarities and Differences in Boundary Activation mechanism

Key Similarities	Key Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separation/split from peasant movement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zenú focus on “our seeds”, “their seeds”

- Define indigeneity in opposition to extractive agriculture
- CRIC focus on incorporating all indigenous peoples

Building Autonomy: Territorialization as a Strategy of Resistance and Defense

Territorialization, understood as the practices that produce and define a territory (Sack 1986), is a mechanism through which groups assert control over geographic space, shaping relationships, governance structures, and resource management. It is the process of making territory, which can be observed in the claims and the counterclaims over such a space during a political process on a territorial question (for example, the contentious reconstruction of an Indigenous *resguardo*) (Penu 2023), a political struggle linked to a piece of land. In the context of Indigenous autonomy in Colombia, territorialization can be thought of as the actions seeking to demarcate, specifically looking at the connections between natural resources, the population, and political institutions within a social space. Such demarcation serves the purpose of making claims for self-government and the protection of cultural integrity (Velasco 2022). This includes de-territorialization and re-territorialization as new institutions are created or re-established in the process of territorialization (Halverson 2018). While claims-making can address issues such as equitable distribution, legal recognition, and participation, claims concerning territoriality are distinct in their pursuit of self-governance. This can involve demarcating land, establishing governance structures, asserting control over resources, and embedding cultural practices within spatial and ecological frameworks (Shattuck & Peluso 2021). However, territorialization does not occur in the same way for all Indigenous groups. A comparison of the Zenú and the CRIC reveals different processes: the Zenú engaged in territorialization as part of their identity revival, while the CRIC engaged in territorial defense, maintaining and expanding existing territories while resisting state and third-party encroachments (Vandergeest & Peluso 2023).

For the Zenú, territorialization was inseparable from the process of reviving their Indigenous identity. The reclamation of resguardo lands went hand in hand with rebuilding traditional governance institutions and embedding cultural practices into territorial management. A central element of this process was seed activism. The Zenú's agricultural practices, were not just about food security but also about reinforcing their territorial claims. By establishing their resguardo as a GMO-Free Territory, the Zenú formalized their control over land and natural resources, territorializing their identity and redefining their relationship with the state. Their struggle was not only about reclaiming physical space but also about ensuring that space was governed in a way that aligned with their Indigenous identity and autonomy. Various practices aimed at territorializing the Zenú political project in regard to agriculture include saving and exchanging native seeds, creating a seed inventory, establishing seed houses, founding school gardens, hosting cultural events, community-based education campaigns, increased seed testing for genetic contamination, and advocacy at various government levels. These practices collectively contribute to the Zenú 's goal of establishing the resguardo as a GMO-Free Territory, reflecting their ongoing political project within the claimed territory¹⁹⁰. These all became tools for reasserting a Zenú territorial presence that had long been made invisible. In the Zenú process, seed politics helps catalyze spatial narratives and organizing the institutions of governance. In fact, their GMO-free declaration is one of the first concrete forms of territorial regulation they assert.

In contrast, the CRIC's engagement with territoriality was less about reconstructing re-discovered Indigenous resguardos and more about reclaiming, defending, and expanding existing

¹⁹⁰ Conversations during community-based workshops, San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba, Colombia, October 6, 2022.

ones (as well as reclaiming lost but not forgotten resguardo lands). Unlike the Zenú, many Indigenous communities in Cauca had maintained a degree of territorial continuity despite historical attempts at dispossession (although some resguardos had been dissolved). The case of the CRIC reveals the mechanism of territorial defense, challenging state-imposed (and church-imposed) land divisions and actively reclaiming lands that had been taken by settlers and large landowner interests. Their strategy was rooted in collective land recuperations, legal battles for recognition, and the strengthening of autonomous governance structures. The expansion of the resguardos was key to this process, as it provided a legal and political framework for resisting land privatization and state interference. For the CRIC, seed politics emerges as a way to consolidate economic and ecological sovereignty. This links territorial governance to education, health, and food production systems as a way to deepen and defend autonomy.

Territorial defense refers to the protective and reactive actions taken to maintain control over a territory that is already claimed or recognized, but contested, often in the face of external threats. These threats can be from state actors, private entities, armed groups, or even through environmental degradation. The goal of territorial defense is to strengthen, protect, and preserve the sovereignty and integrity of a territory. It can often have more of a reactive approach than a process of territorialization, responding to threats that jeopardize territorial claims, livelihoods, or cultural survival. While territorialization seeks to embed the community's presence through political, legal, and cultural processes, territorial defense ensures the survival and protection of that established space from immediate external threats. These mechanisms often work in tandem, with territorialization laying the groundwork for governance, and defense ensuring its continuity in the face of conflict or exploitation. Therefore, the distinction helps to understand the differences in the cases, but they are not easily or completely separable.

For the Zenú, seed activism evolved into an important approach to their territorialization, a process of reclaiming and reconstructing a connection to land after decades (or centuries) of displacement and cultural erasure. Their declaration of a GMO-Free Territory was not only a legal or environmental stance but a political act of bolstering claims on the boundaries of their territory in accordance with ancestral knowledge and agroecological practices. By recovering, conserving, and using traditional seed varieties and organizing collective seed-saving initiatives, the Zenú restored cultural practices that had once defined their relationship to their territory. Along with the cultural symbols like the sombrero vueltiao, these practices played a role in materializing their identity on the land, and to anchoring the revived Zenú identity within their physical and symbolic territory. For Zenú, seed politics plays a foundational and catalytic role in converting cultural claims into territorial logic.

In the case of the CRIC, seed activism reflects a more defensive territorialization, grounded in the principles of *derecho mayor*, *ley de origen*, and *usos y costumbres*. Here, territorialization is less about reviving lost connections and more about protecting and expanding an existing territoriality against external threats like agribusiness, mining, and other state-imposed regulations. The establishment of community seed banks, agroecological training schools, and seed-saver networks, guided by traditional authorities such as *cabildos* and CRIC councils, upholds Indigenous identity and enacts autonomy. These small, everyday practices of cultivating, exchanging, and protecting native seeds are acts of territorialization, expressing ancestral knowledge, collective governance, and resistance to extractive and assimilative forces. By opposing transgenic seeds and asserting seed sovereignty, CRIC communities are actively defending not just land, but a way of life grounded in their own legal systems. In this case, seed activism is a tool of resistance used to repel extractive logics and assert Indigenous governance

over agricultural landscapes. For CRIC, it's a strategic instrument that expands the functional control of already-claimed territories (see Figure 6 below).

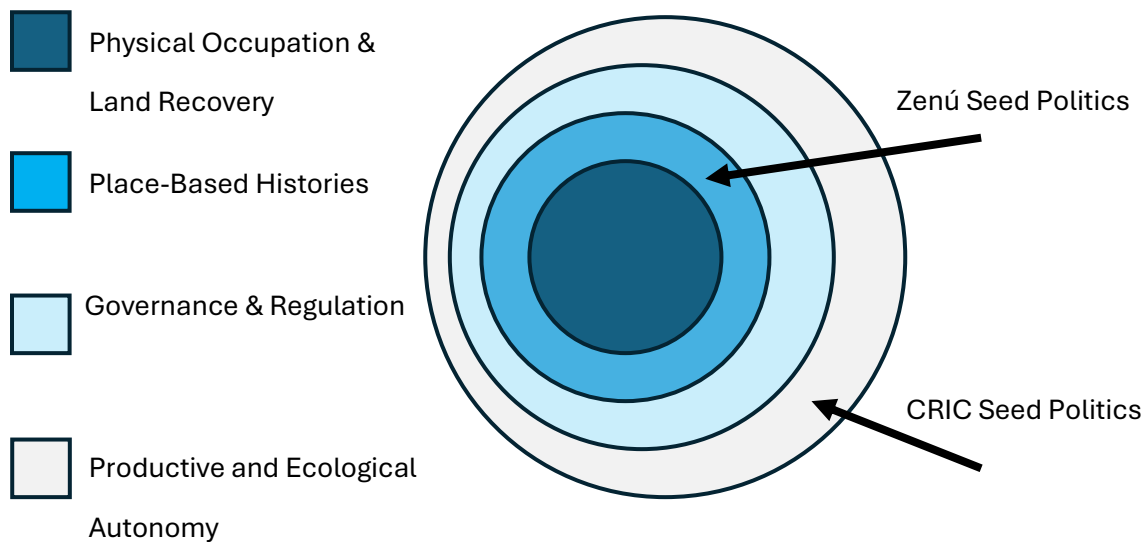


Figure 6: The insertion of seed politics into the territorialization mechanism

In both cases, then, seed activism is a territorializing force: for the Zenú, it assists the reconstruction of territory through its role in cultural resurgence; for the CRIC, it acts as a shield and extension of already-governed territories. Territorialization here is not only spatial, but also ecological, political, and ontological. Both cases illustrate how territorialization, whether through the creation of new Indigenous spaces or the defense of existing ones, functions as a mechanism of Indigenous self-governance. The Zenú territorialized and embedded their revived identity into the landscape, while the CRIC's territorial defense aimed to protect and expand their already-

existing territorial presence. In both instances, these processes challenged the state’s territorial dominion and its narratives of national identity, asserting Indigenous governance as a legitimate and enduring form of political organization (Blomley 2003, Hann 1998, Peluso & Lund 2011, Sack 1986, Sassen 2013, Elden 2010, Agnew 1994, Velasco 2014).

Table 16: Comparison of mechanisms in context

Mechanism	Zenú Case	CRIC Case
Claims-Making	Recovery of Indigenous land and territory rights through legal and public action after centuries of near erasure.	Ongoing defense and expansion of ancestral territories and legal claims building from decades of mobilization.
Memory Work	Revival of submerged histories and identities to legitimize land and territorial claims.	Strengthening of active historical memory tied to land defense and collective struggle.
Identity Formation	Re-indigenization among marginalized peasant populations, creating new collective political identities.	Consolidation and reaffirmation of pre-existing Indigenous identity through cabildos and community institutions.
Boundary Activation	Declaration of the resguardo as a GMO-Free Territory, marking symbolic and political boundaries.	Traditional defense of communal land boundaries through guards and community action.
Territorialization	Reaffirmation and revitalization of resguardo governance structures alongside municipal entanglements.	Expansion of Indigenous territorial governance through cabildos and Indigenous Guards (Guardia Indígena).
Process of Autonomy	Emergent, through contestation and partial recognition; grounded in ecological stewardship and territorial claims.	Deepened, through long-standing governance and proactive territorial defense against extractivism and GMOs.

Mechanisms in Interaction

The mechanisms discussed above are not acting in isolation of each other; rather, they operate in sequences or combinations that generate complex and often variable outcomes. This process of concatenation refers to the way mechanisms link together causally over time, forming

dynamic chains of interaction. These chains are rarely linear—mechanisms frequently interact recursively, generating feedback loops that reinforce or transform social dynamics (e.g., claims-making → boundary activation → identity formation → territorialization → new forms of claims-making → further territorialization, etc.). The sequence and interaction of these mechanisms are crucial, as they can either amplify or dampen the effects of institutional or social change. Mechanisms not only unfold in relation to one another but also shape the conditions under which others emerge or gain traction. This is why they are so deeply context-dependent, often co-occurring or reshaping one another's effects. In this way, one mechanism may trigger, redirect, or intensify another. Attention to combinations of mechanisms (such as claims-making, memory work, and identity formation) that recur across cases but with varying sequences and intensities, reveals how mechanisms form complex causal chains, with earlier ones reconfiguring the terrain on which later ones act.

The autonomy projects found in the Zenú and CRIC case studies offer valuable insights into the complex interactions of the mechanisms elucidated above. The recursive interactions of claims-making, memory work, identity formation, boundary activation, and territorialization reveal how these processes are not only interdependent but also dynamic in shaping Indigenous political movements. In both cases, seed politics (particularly the defense of native seeds and opposition to GMOs) has become a powerful vehicle through which these mechanisms unfold. Community seed banks, anti-GMO declarations, and agroecological initiatives are not only practical strategies for food autonomy but also expressions of commitments to Indigenous autonomy. While both cases are engaged in struggles for autonomy, their approaches highlight significant divergences that reflect distinct historical contexts and sociopolitical realities. These

differences, in turn, offer a deeper understanding of the nature of autonomy as a process and how it evolves within Indigenous communities.

Claims-making, as a social mechanism, is the primary tool through which both groups articulate their demands for land, recognition, and autonomy. In the case of the Zenú, claims-making was directly tied to the revival of their Indigenous identity and the assertion of their historical territorial rights. Through land recuperation processes and the declaration of their territory as GMO-free, the Zenú framed their territorial claims as an extension of cultural and political self-determination. The act of claiming land was not only about reclaiming physical space but also about asserting a cultural identity that had been systematically erased by colonialism and state policies. These claims, therefore, were deeply embedded in a larger project of identity formation, which emphasized the restoration of a historically silenced Indigenous identity.

Similarly, for the CRIC, claims-making was intertwined with the formation of a collective political identity. The CRIC's approach to claims-making focused on defending and expanding the territories that had been historically assigned to Indigenous peoples. However, their claims were not rooted in a revival of lost identities but rather in the defense and assertion of existing ones. This was the (re)politicization of a private identity. The process of identity formation in the CRIC was centered on the consolidation of a unified Indigenous identity in the face of external threats. As with the Zenú, claims-making was a way to mobilize around a shared cultural identity, but in the case of the CRIC, this identity was based on the consolidation of already-existing territorial and cultural practices.

Territorialization, the process of asserting control over a geographical area, is an important mechanism that connects and reinforces the previous mechanisms. For the Zenú,

territorialization was a process of re-establishing and legitimizing their territorial control, drawing on practices related seed activism and agricultural production. These practices not only reinforced their territorial claims but also embedded their revived identity within the territory they were reclaiming. Territorialization for the Zenú was thus an act of both cultural and spatial reassertion, intertwining the physical and symbolic dimensions of their struggle.

For the CRIC, territorial defense involved maintaining control over existing territories, expanding on those territories, and resisting encroachments by state and external actors. The CRIC's territorialization efforts were therefore more focused on defending and expanding their resguardos through legal and political means, as well as strengthening their governance structures within those territories. Seed activism also played a role in the CRIC's territorial defense, as it symbolized their resistance to agro-industrial practices and the protection of their traditional ecological knowledge. Territorialization for the CRIC was not only a political project but also an ecological and cultural one, emphasizing sustainability and resistance to external pressures.

Despite the shared mechanisms, the Zenú and CRIC took distinct approaches to their autonomy projects. The Zenú's process of territorialization was rooted in a revival of a lost identity, requiring a transformation of the way they related to their land, culture, and systems of governance. This process of reasserting territorial control was intrinsically linked to the reconstitution of their collective identity, which had been marginalized for generations. The Zenú's activism, therefore, was not merely about reclaiming land but about redefining their position within a larger national and global context. Their identity formation was closely tied to the rebuilding of cultural practices, governance structures, and connections to the land, demonstrating that autonomy, for them, was not just political but also deeply cultural. In this

sense, the Zenú's autonomy project is an example of the way that processes of Indigenous territorialization reveals deeper efforts of cultural resurgence and self-determination.

The case of the CRIC reveals a distinction between how the mechanism of territorial defense differs from territorialization. Their struggle was not about reclaiming a lost identity but about securing, consolidating, and expanding lands that had long been under their stewardship. While this sometimes involved the re-establishment of resguardos that had been dismantled, their focus remained on protecting existing territories from encroachment and ensuring Indigenous governance over land, reinforcing autonomy through active resistance rather than through a process of identity revival. The CRIC's autonomy project was therefore more centered on territorial expansion and political negotiation with the state, making claims to protect the sovereignty of their existing territories. Their approach reflects the ongoing struggle to maintain autonomy in the face of external pressures, such as land invasions and state-imposed agricultural policies. Territorial defense, for the CRIC, is a response to the long-standing threat of dispossession and the need to maintain control over their lands and resources. Their activism is focused not only on asserting rights to the land but also on resisting the encroachment of external economic and political forces that threaten their territorial and cultural integrity.

These differences in approach reveal important insights into the nature of autonomy as a process. For the Zenú, autonomy is framed as a process of cultural resurgence and identity reformation, wherein the political project of land recovery is inseparable from the cultural revitalization of their people. This highlights the role of history, memory, and cultural practices in the formation of political identities and territorial claims. For the CRIC, autonomy is primarily a process of territorial defense and resistance to external forces. This reflects the fact that autonomy is not a static state but a continuous struggle to defend and expand one's political,

cultural, and territorial rights in the face of external threats. Moreover, autonomy is inherently relational, shaped by interactions with the state, landowners, and other social actors who both challenge and, at times, reinforce Indigenous claims. It emerges through conflict, negotiation, and adaptation, highlighting the ways in which Indigenous agency is exercised within, against, and beyond dominant power structures.

The politics of seeds, struggles against GM seeds and to defend native seeds, reveal the concatenating interactions of claims-making, memory work, identity formation, boundary activation, and territorialization in both the Zenú and CRIC cases, exemplifying how these mechanisms build upon and reinforce one another. In both cases, the struggle over seeds does not act as a standalone mechanism but as a window that reveals how autonomy emerges through the interlocking effects of making claims, memory, identity, political struggle, and territorial defense.

In each case, the struggle over seeds followed a trajectory in which each mechanism not only built upon the last, but they each impacted each other in a recursive and iterative process, shaping their broader autonomy project. For the Zenú, claims-making began with the assertion of land rights, and later defense of native seeds became an extension of their claims to the right to govern their territory and agricultural practices. As they reclaimed land, they engaged in memory work, reconnecting with ancestral agricultural knowledge that had been marginalized by colonialism and state policies. Consequently, the recovery and cultivation of native seeds became a key component of identity formation, reinforcing a revived Zenú identity rooted in traditional land stewardship and agroecological practices. This, in turn, activated social and political boundaries, distinguishing Zenú agricultural practices from others and positioning their struggle in opposition to GMO-driven agrarian extractivism. Finally, these interwoven mechanisms

solidified their territorialization, as the declaration of their lands as GMO-free was both a legal and material assertion of self-governance. The defense of seeds, therefore, did not stand alone—it was integrated as a new layer (offering distinct challenges and opportunities) to their broader efforts to reclaim identity, land, and political autonomy.

For the CRIC, the mechanisms interacted differently with each other and in a different context, causing diverse trajectories and outcomes. Therefore, for the CRIC, the politics of seeds was embedded within their longstanding Indigenous governance structures, shaping their broader struggle for autonomy. Claims-making remains as the starting point, as the CRIC separated from the broader peasant movement during a period of contentious land takeovers. Later, the CRIC positioned the defense of native seeds within their broader struggle against state-imposed agricultural policies and land encroachment. This struggle reactivated memory work, linking contemporary opposition to industrial agriculture with historical Indigenous resistance against colonial extractivism. The act of saving, exchanging, and planting native seeds reinforced ongoing Indigenous identity formation, strengthening a collective Indigenous identity across different communities in Cauca. This identity became a tool for boundary activation, as seed protection policies became a defining feature of Indigenous governance, marking a clear distinction between CRIC-controlled territories and the encroaching agrarian capitalist system. Finally, these interactions all wove into processes of territorialization, as the CRIC's seed activism directly reinforced their governance over land, embedding autonomy not just in legal claims but in the material reality of Indigenous-controlled agriculture. By asserting control over their food systems through principles of *Derecho Mayor*, *Usos y Costumbres*, and *Ley de Origen*, the CRIC not only defended their traditional knowledge but also reinforced the

legitimacy of their autonomous governance, demonstrating how seed politics was a concrete expression of Indigenous autonomy.

Both cases demonstrate that autonomy is not a fixed or monolithic process. Rather, it is shaped by historical context, cultural practices, and political strategies. The Zenú underscore the importance of identity formation in the process of autonomy, while the CRIC highlights the significance of territorial defense and political negotiation. Together, these two cases illustrate the diverse ways in which Indigenous communities conceptualize and pursue autonomy, revealing the complex interplay between cultural resurgence, territorial conflict, and political resistance.

Chapter 8: Conclusion: Rethinking Territorial Formation Through the Zenú and CRIC Cases

From Seeds to Territory

This dissertation began with questions about genetically modified seeds, specifically seeking to understand: Why do Indigenous communities in Colombia mobilize against GMOs? What does it mean for them to declare their territories “GMO-Free”? At first glance, these appeared to be questions about agriculture, food safety, or environmental issues. But as this research has shown, these questions uncover additional profound political matters about land, power, territory, and the construction of autonomy. By tracing the movements of the Zenú Indigenous people and the CRIC organization, this dissertation has followed the thread of seed politics into the contested terrain of state territoriality. What emerges is not simply resistance to biotechnology, but a redefinition of territorial sovereignty: one that challenges the extractive logics of state power and asserts alternative visions of territory rooted in Indigenous knowledge and collective life.

While this dissertation has closely followed the movements and meanings surrounding seed politics in Colombia, it has ultimately traced how a seemingly narrow agricultural concern opens up insight into much larger political phenomena. Across the territories of the Zenú and the CRIC, seeds function not only as sources of sustenance or symbols of cultural heritage but as a material entry point into questions of governance, land, and sovereignty. The contestation over GM seeds (who owns them, who regulates them, and who benefits from them) reveals deeper tensions about who gets to define territorial production. These conflicts are not reducible to

technocratic disputes; they are struggles over the right to reproduce social and ecological life on collective terms.

From this perspective, the seed is not a neutral input but a site of opposing political assertions. It is where contested sovereignties converge: state authorities seeking legibility and regulation, corporations seeking profit and control, and Indigenous communities seeking to sustain life on their own terms. In asserting seed sovereignty, these Indigenous communities challenge the state-aligned agricultural models and open space for alternative territorial orders. The seed thus becomes a means of access into broader political struggles, not only over what can be grown, but over how it is grown, and for what purposes, as well as who gets to decide and whose knowledge counts towards that decision. Through this lens, the rejection of GMOs becomes an act of political autonomy and territorial defense, inviting a deeper inquiry into how territory itself is made and contested.

The imposition of GM seeds in Colombia was demonstrated in a broader logic of agrarian extractivism, where land, biodiversity, and agricultural knowledge are reconfigured to serve national and global markets. Consequently, GM seeds are not simply technological innovations; they are instruments of commodification that facilitate the standardization and control of agricultural production. Through certification schemes, intellectual property regimes, and development policies, states and corporations seek to render rural life legible, governable, and profitable. In this context, GMOs become a method for asserting not only economic but also territorial control.

These dynamics are central to state-building processes in historically marginalized and plural territories. The Colombian state, like many others shaped by postcolonial, extractivist, and neoliberal logics, often deploys agricultural modernization policies as a means of asserting

authority in regions where its presence has been partial or contested. As such, seed regulation and rural development programs function as tools of spatial governance, embedding particular forms of value, legality, and control into the landscape. By promoting GM crops and marginalizing Indigenous seed systems, the state does more than shape food production, it extends its own territorial reach by redefining who controls reproduction, both biological and political, in rural zones.

Yet this form of territorialization is not neutral. It is aligned with extractive development models that privilege efficiency, monoculture, and export-oriented agriculture, often at the expense of local autonomy and ecological diversity. GM seed regimes consolidate power in the hands of corporate and state actors while rendering Indigenous agricultural practices increasingly unfeasible or illegal. This mode of governance reflects a deeper political project: to reorganize territories in the service of accumulation. It is precisely this extractive and spatializing logic that Indigenous communities resist when they assert seed sovereignty, defend native seed systems, and declare their territories as GMO-Free. Their opposition is not only to a particular agricultural technology, but to the broader regime of spatial control and state territoriality that it sustains.

Seed politics thus offers a revealing lens into the processes of territorial formation. By promoting patented, often genetically modified seeds and enforcing standards through extension programs or certification mechanisms, the state seeks to make agrarian production legible, predictable, and governable. In regulating seeds, the state regulates land, labor, and life, extending its authority into regions historically shaped by Indigenous autonomy and agrarian diversity. Seed politics, in this way, bring into sharp focus how territoriality is not simply inherited or administered, but actively produced through everyday practices of governance, contestation, and control.

Recognizing seed politics as a territorial question, therefore, reframes the stakes of GMO resistance in Colombia. Rather than treating GMO-Free Territories as only symbolic or sectoral interventions, this dissertation approaches them also as material and political projects that intervene into the meaning of territory, governance, and sovereignty. Moreover, their intervention adds new layers onto already contentious territorial debates, with long histories of resistance and oppression. This shift prompts additional guiding questions such as: Through what mechanisms do GMOs and the creation of GMO-Free Territories transform understandings of territoriality and political authority? Such questions ultimately lead to a broader engagement with Indigenous autonomy as both a response to and a reimagining of state territorial logics.

From Territory to Autonomy

As Indigenous communities resist GMOs and construct GMO-Free Territories, they do far more than protect biodiversity or traditional agriculture, they stake claims to governance, identity, and autonomy. These movements challenge the state not only by opposing extractive development but by cultivating and institutionalizing alternative institutions. Through practices like seed saving, collective land management, and building grassroots institutional arrangements, Indigenous actors reassert jurisdiction over their territories. In doing so, they make visible the political factors embedded in ecological reproduction and expose the fragility of state territorial coherence in contexts shaped by historical exclusion and colonial dispossession.

Indigenous autonomy, then, emerges in this inquiry not as a fixed or static condition but as a dynamic, ongoing process, negotiated, enacted, and defended in everyday practices. In both the Zenú and CRIC cases, autonomy takes root through the creation of self-governed institutions, the revitalization of ancestral knowledge, and the refusal to cede control over ecological and social reproduction. These communities are not merely resisting the state; they are reconfiguring

territory on their own terms, blending strategies of legal engagement, memory work, direct action, and spatial practices. In reclaiming the means of reproduction (of seeds, land, and governance) they enact political futures grounded in relational understandings of sovereignty and collective life. Seed politics thus functions as a concrete method of resistance and a platform (one among many) for building Indigenous jurisdiction, revealing how communities use the regulation of life itself as leverage to reconfigure their relationship with the state and advance demands for autonomy.

Therefore, again, what initially seemed to be a study of seed politics, focused on the dynamics surrounding GMO-free territories, soon revealed itself to be much more complex, rooted in broader territorial politics. As I examined the Zenú and CRIC cases, it became clear that the control over seeds was inextricably linked to questions of the control of land, as well as state formation, sovereignty, and Indigenous autonomy. This realization prompted me to further consider the mechanisms that shape how Indigenous communities organize to resist state control and assert greater power over their land and resources.

The Zenú and CRIC cases offer two distinct yet deeply instructive pathways of Indigenous resistance that expose the limits of state authority while also revealing the constraints placed on Indigenous autonomy within the framework of the nation-state. While both movements confront extractive territorial logics, the Zenú have responded directly to the already entrenched presence of GM agriculture and industrial land use in the Caribbean lowlands. In contrast, the CRIC's activism has been more preemptive, grounded in a longstanding defense of land, seeds, and governance structures before large-scale GM implementation takes hold. This difference reflects not only regional variations in agro-industrial development but also divergent

histories of autonomy: the CRIC's governance capacity enabled a more proactive resistance, while the Zenú organized in response to more immediate encroachments.

Through methods such as land recuperations, building seed sovereignty, and the institutionalization of cabildos, these movements have pushed back against the state's monopoly over space and legitimacy. However, their experiences also underscore the ways in which Indigenous autonomy remains circumscribed by legal, political, and economic structures imposed by the state. The partial recognition of Indigenous rights, bureaucratic obstacles, and the encroachment of extractive and agro-industrial interests complicate the exercise of full self-determination. Thus, while these cases illuminate the creative and powerful ways Indigenous communities resist and reconfigure dominant systems of governance, they also illustrate the structural limits of autonomy within the broader context of state territoriality.

Mechanisms of Resistance and Autonomy

An inquiry into the politics around GM seeds revealed issues not only about agriculture, but about territory, governance, and power. In both the Zenú and CRIC cases, the fight against GM seeds was never just about food; it was about who controls land, knowledge, local institutions. These struggles unveiled a complex concatenation of mechanisms (claims-making, identity formation, memory work, boundary activation, and territorialization) which reveal how Indigenous communities reassert authority over their territories in the face of state and corporate encroachment. As the comparison between the Zenú and CRIC has shown, while contexts and trajectories differ, common mechanisms illuminate how Indigenous communities reshape territory and articulate new visions of autonomy.

These mechanisms are deeply relational and mutually reinforcing. Memory work reanimates ancestral ties to land, strengthening identity claims and legitimizing demands for territorial recognition. Claims-making and boundary activation together challenge state-imposed spatial orders, asserting Indigenous jurisdiction within contested geographies. In this way, anti-GMO activism becomes a site where territorial politics unfold, a nexus where ecological, cultural, and political claims intersect.

As these communities defend their right to seeds, they simultaneously enact new forms of governance that coexist with or resist the state. Practices like communal land management, the establishment of Indigenous guards, and autonomous education systems give institutional shape to autonomy. Rather than merely resisting state power, these mechanisms have pushed forward alternative sources of authority rooted in Indigenous law, relationality, and land-based knowledge. They illustrate how mechanisms of resistance become mechanisms of governance, and how struggles over seeds become struggles over sovereignty.

In the Zenú case, the declaration of their territory as GMO-Free was a direct response to the harms of industrial agriculture together with a juridical claim over land and territory found in the 1773 Royal Charter of the *resguardo*. For the CRIC, seed activism built upon a longstanding project of territorial defense and was embedded within a broader framework of ancestral law. In both cases, seed politics became a vehicle for asserting territorial control, resisting extractive development, and enacting Indigenous futures.

These movements are creative, not just oppositional. They are shaped by local geographies, histories of struggle, and the dual need to survive and self-determine. Whether through legal recognition, the creation of autonomous institutions, or the enactment of ecological alternatives, both the Zenú and the CRIC offer visions of Indigenous autonomy negotiated within

state-claimed spaces. Their strategies blend confrontation with engagement, carving out jurisdictions from below while challenging state hegemony.

Ultimately, this research engages the broader question: What factors shape the ways Indigenous communities in Latin America resist state control and assert greater power over their land and resources? The experiences of the Zenú and CRIC suggest that the answer lies not solely in legal structures or resource access, but also in their dynamic interplay with historical memory, oppositional identity formation, and the everyday practices that bind communities to territory.

Implications

As exemplified in the cases, Indigenous identity is not a static or essentialist category but rather one that is continuously constructed and enacted within the ongoing context of colonialism. This dissertation has shown how Indigenous movements in Colombia, specifically the Zenú and CRIC, express their identity and political agency through oppositional, place-based practices that resist state and corporate efforts to dispossess and assimilate them. These practices, especially those centered on the defense of native seeds, the rejection of GMOs, and the building of autonomous institutions, are not merely about agricultural preferences or environmental sustainability. They are political acts that confront dominant structures of power and knowledge embedded in state formation processes. In asserting control over seeds and land, these communities articulate forms of governance and belonging that lie outside, and often in tension with, the state's extractive and territorial logics. What began as an inquiry into the defense of native seeds exposed the deeper problem of who controls territory. As these communities rejected GMOs, they simultaneously rejected the epistemological and territorial logics of the

state, illuminating how seed sovereignty serves as a gateway to understanding broader forms of Indigenous governance.

In this way, the cases examined here reinforce a relational and contested understanding of the state. The Zenú and CRIC are not simply seeking inclusion within the state's framework; they are reshaping the very terms of political and territorial belonging. Consequently, in both Zenú and CRIC territories, resistance to GMOs is not simply about agricultural preference but about protecting a broader system of life tied to territory. In doing so, these communities carve out political spaces that operate in tension with, or even outside of, state frameworks. By defending native seeds and resisting the legal and technological regimes that support GMOs, these movements enact and update an historical political consciousness forged through struggle, and build new institutions rooted in ancestral norms and histories of ecological stewardship. They position themselves not only in opposition to the state's projects but also as caretakers of alternative futures rooted in Indigenous knowledge and ecological stewardship. Thus, seed politics becomes a prism through which we can understand how Indigenous resistance challenges the coherence of state authority and opens space for grounded, community-based forms of governance that are decolonial in nature.

The struggles of the Zenú and the CRIC resonate with broader trends across Latin America, where Indigenous peoples have responded to centuries of exclusion and dispossession not only with resistance, but with the construction of alternative political worlds. These movements are not merely reactive; they are generative. Through practices rooted in cultural identity, historical memory, and collective territorial claims, they are reshaping dominant paradigms of governance and sovereignty. While this dissertation focuses on Colombia, its

findings speak to wider processes of Indigenous resurgence and territorial reconstitution across the Latin America region. The assertion of jurisdiction through native seed protection, communal land recovery, and autonomous institutions reflects a regional pattern in which Indigenous actors are reimagining the political from the ground up. Future research must center these movements not as marginal or exceptional, but as crucial sites of political innovation, sites that challenge the authority of the state while offering alternative visions of social and ecological governance. This shift in analytical framing (from viewing Indigenous peoples as recipients of policy to seeing them as architects of political transformation) can help us better grasp the plural and contested nature of state formation in postcolonial contexts.

The struggles and practices documented in this dissertation ultimately bring us back to the central provocation of its title: *When the People Are the Territory*. In both the Zenú and CRIC cases, territory is not simply a bounded space to be administered or controlled, it is lived, cultivated, remembered, and defended through the embodied presence and collective action of the people themselves. By asserting jurisdiction through seed guardianship, communal land recovery, and alternative institutions, these movements show that territory is not a fixed object of state power, but a relational field produced through social, ecological, and political practices. In this sense, when the people are the territory, territorial formation cannot be separated from the ongoing assertion of Indigenous life, autonomy, and resistance.

Seed politics, in this light, offer a lens through which to see the limits of state territoriality. As Indigenous communities mobilize to protect native seeds and declare GMO-Free Territories, they expose the inability of centralized institutions to fully govern or regulate the entire claimed territory. This leaves space for them to construct for themselves the territory which they envision. These acts reveal that governance can be generated from the ground up

through community norms, ancestral practices, and building new institutions. In both the Zenú and CRIC cases, seed sovereignty becomes a gateway to envisioning and enacting alternative forms of rule rooted in Indigenous worldviews.

In closing, this dissertation calls for future research to take more seriously several topics. First, the central role of extractivist economic models on political phenomena, especially the resistances they incite. Whether through industrial agriculture, genetically modified seed regimes, or resource concessions, extractivist logics turn seeds, water, land, and biodiversity into sites of control and commodification. The cases of the Zenú and the CRIC demonstrate that Indigenous resistance to extractivism, through the defense of native seeds, the practice of agroecology, and the reassertion of territorial governance, offers more than environmental critique. These are political projects that unsettle dominant models of sovereignty, development, and state formation, advancing instead grounded forms of autonomy and alternative territorial orders.

Second, the significance of food systems (as represented with seed politics here) to political processes. Struggles over seed sovereignty not only resist commodification and enclosure but also confront broader regimes of extractivism that seek to reorganize life and territory in service of capital accumulation. By reclaiming control over biological life and ecological systems, Indigenous movements articulate alternatives to both extractivist governance and statist development logics. Strategies such as declaring GMO-Free Territories or embedding seed protection into communal governance reflect both resistance and a vision for autonomy. This redefinition of political agency through food and seed systems underscores how struggles over everyday practices can serve as foundational acts of territorial and epistemic self-determination.

Third, Indigenous peoples in Latin America, particularly in Colombia, have responded to centuries of exclusion and dispossession with robust organizational strategies rooted in cultural identity, historical memory, and collective territorial claims. The political impacts of this activism are important to broader dynamics in the region. Future research should center these movements not only as subjects of policy or resistance but as generative political actors whose practices and worldviews reshape dominant understandings of sovereignty, governance, and democracy. Attending to Indigenous politics can thus provide deeper insights into the contested and plural nature of state formation and political authority in postcolonial contexts.

Future research must take seriously the interconnected struggles against extractivism, the defense of food systems and seed sovereignty, and the transformative power of Indigenous politics. These are not isolated issues but overlapping fronts in broader efforts to reconfigure relationships with land, life, and power. Taken together, they offer generative sites for reimagining autonomy, sovereignty, political belonging, collective rights, and the possibilities of more just futures.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Statement of Positionality

This positionality statement reflects on how my identity and background influenced my research on the construction of GMO-free territories among the Zenú and CRIC in Colombia. Recognizing my own position within the research is crucial to understanding the dynamics of power, representation, and knowledge production that shaped this work, especially in an engaged and collaborative research project. The research aimed not only to identify the mechanisms that explain why some communities declare themselves GMO-Free Territories while others do not but also to serve as an empowering process for the Indigenous communities involved. By centering their voices and perspectives, the research methods themselves sought to strengthen their agency and decision-making capacities.

As a researcher trained in political science with a focus on Indigenous, territorial, and environmental politics, my position as an outsider to the Zenú and CRIC communities shaped the way I approached fieldwork. For example, rather than assuming the role of an expert, I began by attending community meetings, social movement network gatherings, I visited farms, and seed exchanges as an observer, listening to local leaders and seed guardians as they discuss their struggles and priorities. This approach allowed me to build trust gradually and demonstrate respect for their knowledge systems before conducting interviews or collecting data.

My educational background and prior work with Indigenous rights focused organizations like Cultural Survival oriented me towards examining power relations and advocating for Indigenous self-determination. Moreover, prior to beginning Ph.D. training and research, I lived

in Colombia for five years. In this time, I built relationships with the organizations, networks, and activists involved in promoting GMO-Free Territories across Colombia. These long-standing relationships acted as gatekeepers, vouching for me with the local or territorial communities which became the case studies in this project. The organizations and networks both guided me in identifying which processes of territorial resistance to GMOs would be the most enlightening for the research I was proposing, as well as which ones could benefit the most from the engaged methodology being proposed.

Additionally, as an act of trust building with the Indigenous communities, upon entering their territories, I brought verified non-GMO seeds from a North American Indigenous seed organization to donate to their community-based seed houses. This is an important act in rural communities and among transnational peasant and Indigenous social movements. The exchange of seeds across territories fosters the interpersonal sharing of knowledge and values, creates alternation outside of the localities where the seeds have gained their histories and meanings in the first place, and more¹⁹¹.

How my race influenced my research with the Indigenous Zenu people and the Indigenous members of the CRIC in Cauca is difficult to identify concretely. Racial identities in the regions in which I conducted research are not homogenous. However, my whiteness and US nationality surely shaped the nature of each and every interaction. In many situations it meant that I was offered immediate respect by community members, especially during interviews. I found that many participants were willing to discuss difficult political and social contexts and

¹⁹¹ See: Balázs B., Smith, A., Aistara, G. and Bela, Gy. (2016) Transformative Social Innovation: Transnational Seed Exchange Networks. TRANSIT: EU SSH.2013.3.2-1 Grant agreement no: 613169. As well as: Peschard, K., & Randeria, S. (2020). 'Keeping seeds in our hands': the rise of seed activism. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 47(4), 613–647.

histories including various forms of violence and oppression they have experienced. However, this was also fostered by the national level organizations' and networks' support of my research and prior meeting and discussions with community groups in which the research project was approved.

My class position also plays an important role in my own identity. While the Indigenous communities I worked with in this research are characterized as impoverished, they are not uniformly so. There is socioeconomic disparity in circumstances between communities and peoples, between rural and urban, and more. I attempted to conduct interviews across the entire spectrum. I also sought to diminish as much as I could the socio-economic differences between the communities and myself. This meant while visiting the communities I ate with community members, I did not spend money extravagantly, I traveled by walking, taking buses, or motorcycle taxis. While I attempted to minimize the class differences between myself and community members, it is impossible to know how I was understood by the community members themselves.

My gender also has an important role in my research. On one hand, as a male researcher, I found it easier to access and build rapport with predominantly male community leaders and Indigenous authorities, facilitating interviews and discussions on governance and decision-making. This alignment of gender roles could have contributed to a perception of shared authority or legitimacy in those interactions. On the other hand, this same positionality might have posed challenges in engaging with women who are central to seed activism and the role of seed guardians. In many Indigenous communities, women's knowledge systems related to seeds, food sovereignty, and biodiversity are profound but can be less visible or formalized compared to male-led governance structures. As a male researcher, it required more intentional strategies to

build trust and create spaces where women felt comfortable sharing their experiences and expertise without perceiving a hierarchical or extractive dynamic. This was especially facilitated by a co-investigator from the Free Seeds Network of Colombia, a woman, who accompanied me to each community and helped ensure that women community members were being invited to the meetings and to have space to discuss their own points of view.

Building trust with the Zenú and CRIC communities required navigating power asymmetries inherent in researcher-participant relationships. Recognizing this, I adopted a participatory, collaborative, and engaged approach, prioritizing community-led narratives on territorial governance. My status as an outsider necessitated ongoing reflection to avoid imposing external frameworks on Indigenous knowledge systems. For example, we organized workshops or informal gatherings where knowledge exchange was mutual, allowing community members to teach about their food systems without immediately framing these insights within academic theories. Afterward, I sought their feedback on how their knowledge is represented in my work.

My alignment with relational and decolonial paradigms shaped the methodological choices in my research, prioritizing Indigenous epistemologies and narratives over state-centric frameworks of territory. This approach demanded an ethic of reciprocity and accountability, ensuring that the research process was mutually beneficial, and that knowledge was co-produced through dialogical and participatory methods that respected community consent and sovereignty. Instead of solely relying on academic frameworks to define the research questions, I collaborated with Indigenous leaders and seed guardians to co-create questions that reflected their priorities, such as the protection of native seeds and the impact of GMO crops on traditional territories. This ensured that the research was relevant and valuable to the communities themselves. The use

of community-based workshops, online participant observation, and interviews, therefore, were intended to amplify community voices rather than passively extract information.

Throughout my fieldwork, moments of reflexivity emerged when participants resisted academic terminologies I used, prompting me to reconsider the language and frameworks applied. This included challenging the use of the term ‘natural resources’ and instead grounding such discussions in the preferred ‘life spaces’, or rather than ‘seed banks’ we discussed ‘seed houses’ which recognize the interconnectedness of land, seeds, and community as a legitimate and essential way of knowing. For example, understanding seeds not merely as biological entities but as kin imbued with memory and responsibility, which challenges extractivist and commodifying logics.

Ensuring reciprocity, I shared findings with community leaders for feedback, acknowledging that knowledge production must be accountable to the communities it represents. This included discussing some of the preliminary findings to ensure that they make sense to community members, activists, leaders. This allowed them to critique, clarify, or approve the results before moving forward. This practice reinforced accountability and ensured that the outcomes accurately reflected Indigenous perspectives.

In recognizing the ways my positionality shaped this research; I aim to contribute to a more transparent and reflexive practice of qualitative inquiry. Moving forward, I am committed to deepening my engagement with decolonial methodologies that prioritize the voices and governance frameworks of Indigenous and other marginalized communities.

Appendix B: Online Participant Observation

This research incorporated online participant observation of online meetings, webinars, and gatherings organized by Indigenous organizations, environmental networks, and other rural social movements. These digital spaces provided valuable insights into ongoing political debates, organizational strategies, and trans-local expressions of seed sovereignty, territorial defense, and autonomy. The following list outlines the key online events attended, including the dates, and thematic focus of each session. Participation in these virtual gatherings allowed for continued engagement during periods when in-person research was limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic, or due to security concerns, and offered a broader view of how Indigenous movements articulate their struggles across geographies. I attended nine online meetings, and one in-person gathering in Bogotá.

Event	Type	Format	Date
<i>The Defense of Water: Consultation and Resistance</i>	Community Forum	Online	9/17/2020
Public Hearing: <i>For a Just and Necessary Transition for Communities: Territorial Experiences on Community Energies and Community Management of Forests and Territories as a Necessary Condition for a Just Energy Transition</i>	Public Hearing (Colombian Congress)	Online	11/10/2021
<i>The Peoples Resist UPOV and Defend their Seeds in Latin America</i>	Expert Panel Discussion	Online	1/12/2022
<i>Private Utility, Public Dispossession</i>	Public Presentation of Research Report	Online	4/7/2022

<i>The Agrifood System and its Role in the Socioenvironmental Crisis in Colombia: Problems and Alternatives</i>	Expert Panel discussion	Online	5/3/2022
<i>Peasant Territories: Experiences with Environmental Management</i>	Public Forum	Online	6/28/2022
Public Hearing: <i>Regulation of Transgenic Seeds (Article 81 of the Constitution)</i>	Public Hearing (Colombian Congress)	Online	9/1/2022
<i>Challenges of the Integral Rural Reform for Indigenous Peoples</i>	Public Forum	Online	8/22/2022
<i>Agro-biodiversity and Food Sovereignty: Their Importance in the Current Rural Policy Scenario</i>	Gathering of Social Movement Network: <i>Alianza por la Agrobiodiversidad</i> (Agro-biodiversity Alliance)	In-person	9/21-22/2022
<i>The Bogotá Declaration: Towards a pact with the land: The Geopolitics of Transitions and Re-existences</i>	Social Movement Public Presentation of Declaration	Online	7/6/2023

Appendix C: Participatory Strategic Planning: Workshop Methodology

As part of this research, I conducted participatory workshops in Indigenous communities that were adapted from the Institute of Cultural Affairs' *Participatory Strategic Planning* methodology (2005). Drawing on its core structure (visioning, identifying contradictions, strategic directions, and implementation), the workshops were modified to focus on community reflections about seed sovereignty, agricultural practices, territorial governance, and autonomy. These sessions provided a space for participants to collectively articulate their long-term aspirations (such as constructing a GMO-Free Territory), surface obstacles to those visions, and begin to identify locally grounded strategies for ecological and political self-determination. The workshops served both as a research method and as a political tool, supporting the co-construction of knowledge and the strengthening of community-defined goals. All workshops were conducted with informed consent and in accordance with ethical research protocols approved by Colorado State University IRB Protocol 3333

The participatory workshop series was not only a method for gathering insights but a deliberate practice of knowledge co-production. The workshops were designed to recognize and elevate the expertise embedded within Indigenous communities themselves. Rather than treating participants as sources of data, the process fostered mutual learning and reflexivity, allowing community members to collectively define priorities, articulate challenges, and envision strategies for seed and territorial sovereignty. The workshops were adapted and designed collaboratively with participating communities and organizations. This method created a collaborative research space where Indigenous histories, ecological knowledge, and political aspirations shaped the analytical categories and interpretive directions of the project. As such,

the workshops advanced not only the empirical goals of the dissertation but also its ethical commitment to conducting research *with* communities, rather than *on* them.

The following section outlines the design of the workshop series, detailing the sequence of activities, guiding questions, and participatory tools employed. Each component was carefully adapted to reflect local realities, cultural contexts, and the thematic focus on seed sovereignty and territorial governance. The structure aimed to balance open dialogue with strategic reflection, enabling participants to move from personal and collective experiences toward actionable insights. This design reflects both the methodological foundations of participatory planning and the political goals of community-led inquiry.

Workshop 1: Timeline

Context	Timeline	Organize	Reflect
<p>1. Highlight Focus Question</p> <p><i>How did we get here? What historical policies, actions, events, environmental changes, etc. have shaped our current food system?</i></p> <p>Clarify how the Vision Workshop fits into the strategic planning process.</p> <p>2. Outline the Process, Timeline, and Product</p> <p>Goal: Understand the process that has taken place so far in carrying us towards constructing a GMO-Free Territory.</p>	<p>We collectively reconstruct the process of taking action to protect native seeds and resist GM seeds, and the actions and experiences that followed. Each participant shares their contributions on the timeline.</p> <p>What strategies have you tried in order to protect seeds and defend the territory?</p> <p>How did conversations about this topic begin? And why?</p> <p>Who was involved?</p> <p>What did they do?</p> <p>Think about the local, regional, national, and international levels.</p>	<p>What concrete actions have you taken to construct your territory as a GMO-Free Territory?</p> <p>Form groups of 3-5 people,</p> <p>Look for similar items on the timeline.</p> <p>3. Develop Groups or Categories of the policies, actions, events, etc. that have impacted the development of their food system (ex. Corporate and/or market actions, resistance, technological developments, etc.)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why did these events occur? 2. What did we learn from these experiences? 3. What questions do you have about the process? 4. What do you want to understand more deeply?

Workshop 2: Vision

Context	Brainstorming	Organize	Name	Reflect
<p>1. Highlight Focus Question</p> <p><i>What do we want to see in five years?</i></p> <p>2. Outline the Process, Timeline, and Product</p> <p>Clarify how the Vision workshop fits into the strategic planning process.</p> <p>Goal: To identify the visions and hopes of the group.</p> <p>Direct the group's Thinking into the Future by visualizing or imaging in "their mind's eye."</p>	<p>1. Brainstorm Individually Each person lists concrete elements of the vision that you can see completed in the next three to five years.</p> <p>2. Select your Clearest Ideas Choose three to four ideas. Write each on a card (three to four words).</p> <p>3. Brainstorm as a Group 1st, clearest 2nd, wildest 3rd, different, additional cards</p>	<p>1. Working with a Partner Look for similar accomplishments.</p> <p>2. Develop Columns Discern focus of each.</p> <p>3. Relate all the extras to these columns</p>	<p>1. Select One Column and Ask: , "What do you see happening in five years?"</p> <p>What is going on?</p> <p>What will be our accomplishment?"</p> <p>2. Give the Column a 3-5 Word Name.</p> <p>3. Repeat Process for Other Columns</p>	<p>1. Have column titles read.</p> <p>2. Which is most vivid for you?</p> <p>Which is hardest to imagine/fuzziest?</p> <p>3. What is the significance of the change we've described?</p> <p>4. Next steps Next, we will identify the obstacles that block this vision.</p>

Workshop 3: Contradictions

Context	Brainstorming	Organize	Name	Reflect
<p>1. Highlight Focus Question</p> <p><i>What is blocking us from moving toward our vision?</i></p> <p>2. Explain the Product/Outcome</p> <p>Not “lack of” or abstraction, but concrete social contradictions. Give examples.</p> <p>Goal: To identify the obstacles to our vision. To be sure we’ve identified real issues.</p> <p>3. Review the timeline and vision</p>	<p>1. Brainstorm Individually</p> <p>Each person lists 8-10 obstacles that block us from our vision. List at least one obstacle for each column of the vision.</p> <p>2. Select your Clearest Ideas</p> <p>Choose 3-4 ideas (35-45 are needed from the group). Write each on a card In BIG LETTERS (3-4 words).</p> <p>3. Brainstorm as a Group</p> <p>Ask for 2 most confrontational cards and 1 or 2 cards which are different.</p>	<p>1. Working with a Partner</p> <p>Together look for issues which share a common root cause.</p> <p>2. Develop Columns</p> <p>3. Discern the Contradiction Arena for each Column</p> <p>4. Participants Assign Remaining Cards to Appropriate Clusters</p>	<p>1. Discuss the Columns for Clarity and Insight.</p> <p>What is dysfunctional?</p> <p>What has gone wrong?</p> <p>2. Give the Column a 3-5 Word Name.</p> <p>Start with largest cluster.</p> <p>3. Repeat Process for Other Columns</p>	<p>1. Arrange the titles with the cards under them – longest column at the left and shortest at the right.</p> <p>2. Which did you expect to see?</p> <p>Which was a surprise?</p> <p>3. Which is a “window” to the future?</p> <p>4. Next steps</p> <p>Next, we will look at strategic directions which will deal with the contradictions.</p>

Workshop 4: Strategic Directions

Context	Brainstorming	Organize	Name	Reflect									
<p>1. Highlight Focus Question</p> <p><i>We can do any number of things, but what will unblock us so we can move toward our vision?</i></p> <p>2. Explain the Product/Outcome</p> <p>Outline the process of the workshop and the time allotment</p> <p>Goal: To identify what we need to do this year, and gain excitement for the next practical steps.</p> <p>3. Review the timeline, vision, and contradictions</p>	<p>1. Brainstorm Individually Each person lists actions which will deal with the contradictions, at least 1 action per contradiction column.</p> <p>2. Select 5-7 Actions Include venturesome and conservative actions. Write on cards (3-5 words per action)</p> <p>3. Brainstorm as a Group Send up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clearest action • most venturesome action • most conservative action • others 	<p>1. Working with a Partner</p> <p>Together look for actions with similar intents.</p> <p>2. Develop Clusters in boxes (there may be fewer than 9 boxes with data in them).</p> <p>3. Name Each Box Quickly give the box a 2–4-word name which describes the group of actions.</p> <div style="text-align: center;"> <table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 100px; height: 100px;"> <tr> <td style="width: 33px; height: 33px;"></td> <td style="width: 33px; height: 33px;"></td> <td style="width: 33px; height: 33px;"></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="width: 33px; height: 33px;"></td> <td style="width: 33px; height: 33px;"></td> <td style="width: 33px; height: 33px;"></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="width: 33px; height: 33px;"></td> <td style="width: 33px; height: 33px;"></td> <td style="width: 33px; height: 33px;"></td> </tr> </table> </div>										<p>1. Discern a Strategic Direction</p> <p>Locate 3 boxes that together describe a common direction.</p> <p>2. Group Together the Remaining Boxes</p> <p>Locate second group of 3, then a 3rd group (they may fall in different groups, i.e., a 4-box group or a 2- or even 1-box group).</p> <p>3. Name Strategic Directions Name all groups with 3-5 word phrases, beginning with an “ing” word.</p>	<p>1. Read through the strategic directions.</p> <p>2. Which action is the key thrust?</p> <p>3. Which ones support the key thrust?</p> <p>4. Which actions build on our strengths?</p> <p>5. Which venture in new directions?</p> <p>6. Where were the breakthroughs?</p> <p>7. How have we dealt with the contradictions?</p>

Workshop 5: Implementation

Context	Brainstorming	Organize	Name	Reflect
<p>1. Highlight Focus Question</p> <p><i>What do we intend to do the next 12 months?</i></p> <p>2. Explain the Product/Outcome</p> <p>Outline the process of the workshop and the time allotment</p> <p>Goal: To design implementation steps. To feel part of a winning team.</p> <p>3. Divide into Teams One for each Strategic Direction. Participants Select teams.</p>	<p>One-Year Accomplishments</p> <p>1. Brainstorm Events/projects that can be done during the next 12 months to implement the Strategic Directions.</p> <p>2. Select Key Events Put them on cards. Phase them over the next 4 quarters, selecting 2 for each Quarter.</p> <p>3. Reports Have a member of each team read their events by quarters. Ask after each report: Are there any questions of clarity? Ask after all reports are completed. Will these events move us in the strategic directions?</p>	<p>90-Day Implementation Steps</p> <p>1. Again, in teams, talk through the Quarter 1 accomplishments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will we do these? • Who will do it? • When? Where? • What will it cost? • What is the source of funding? • Who will coordinate? <p>2. Complete the 90-Day Implementation Steps for each quarter 1 accomplishment.</p> <p>3. Gather as the whole group.</p>	<p>Reports</p> <p>1. Have a member of each team read their 90-day timelines.</p> <p>2. After hearing all reports, ask:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will these events and Action Steps implement the Strategic Directions? • Where do they overlap? • Where are the gaps? • What can be combined? <p>3. Name task forces and coordinator. When do we meet again?</p>	<p>1. What six things on this 90-day timeline would be most catalytic? Star and place on a priority wedge.</p> <p>2. Where do we sense a breakthrough?</p> <p>3. What have we learned together?</p> <p>4. What will be the significance of accomplishing these actions?</p> <p>5. What are the next steps?</p>

Community-Based Workshops Held

Workshop #	Workshop Title	Territory	# of participants	Date
1	Timeline	Cauca	14	9/27/2022
2	Vision	Cauca	14	9/27/2022
3	Timeline	San Lorenzo, Nariño	17	10/1/2022
4	Vision	San Lorenzo Nariño	18	10/1/2022
5	Timeline	Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre	20	10/6/2022
6	Vision	Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre	18	10/6/2022
7	Contradictions	Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre	15	5/25/2023
8	Strategic Directions	Resguardo Indígena Zenú de San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba y Sucre	15	5/25/2023
9	Contradictions	San Lorenzo, Nariño	17	7/1/2023
10	Strategic Directions	San Lorenzo Nariño	17	7/1/2023
11	Implementation	San Lorenzo, Nariño	16	7/1/2023
12	Contradictions	Cauca	12	7/5/2023
13	Strategic Directions	Cauca	12	7/5/2023

Appendix D: Interviews

This appendix provides an overview of the semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted as part of the research. It includes the guiding questions used during interviews, as well as a summary of when and where interviews took place and the general profile of participants. Interviews were carried out between March 2022 and July 2023 across numerous Indigenous and peasant communities, with participants including community leaders, farmers, seed guardians, and organizational representatives involved in Indigenous territorial governance and seed sovereignty. All interviews were conducted with informed consent and in accordance with ethical research protocols approved by Colorado State University IRB Protocol 3333.

Guiding Question in Interview Protocol

A. Context

1. How is your community's '*modelo propio*' of food production and seed saving threatened by GMOs?
2. What role do seeds play in maintaining the social fabric of your territory?
3. What types of property relations exist in the Territory (private, communal/collective, public, etc.)? How clear is this?

B. Conditions

4. Through what ways does the state try to influence your territory? (military presence; transportation/communication networks; survey & maps; policing, education, other state services; stimulate economic activity, etc.)?
5. What was your motivation for declaring this as a GMO-Free Territory? Or, Why would you be interested in Declaring your territory as a GMO-Free Territory?

C. Relations

6. What kind of linkages does your territory experience with the state? (political parties, government agencies, judicial-legal, constitutional, etc.)
7. Who are the different actors trying to exert influence over the territory, state and non-state? (IFIs, MNCs, UN-IGOs, private foundations, certification organizations, etc.)
8. How does the declaration of a GMO-Free Territory help to unite with other socio-environmental struggles? (Like mining, dams, etc.)

D. Organizing

9. From your experience, what advice would you give to a community looking to declare themselves a GMO-Free Territory?

10. What practices in your community/territory represent the demand/struggle for a GMO-Free Territory?

11. What is emancipatory about a GMO-Free Territory?

List of Interview Participants

Int. #	Date	Gender	GMO-Free Territory	Location of interviewee
1	3/17/22	F	No	Santa Rosa de Viterbo, Boyacá
2	3/17/22	M	No	La Calera, Cundinamarca
3	3/17/22	F	No	Guasca, Cundinamarca
4	3/17/22	M	No	Santa Helena, Antioquia
5	3/17/22	M	No	Villa de Leyva, Boyacá
6	3/17/22	F	No	Turmequé, Boyacá
7	3/17/22	M	No	Tuta, Boyacá
8	3/17/22	F	No	Natagaima, Tolima
9	3/17/22	M	No	Cáqueza, Cundinamarca
10	3/17/22	M	No	Bogotá, Cundinamarca
11	3/17/22	F	No	Firavitoba, Boyacá
12	3/21/22	M	No	Pasto, Nariño
13	3/21/22	F	No	Cumbal, Nariño
14	3/21/22	M	No	Caldono, Cauca
15	3/21/22	M	No	Guachucal, Nariño
16	3/21/22	M	No	Popayán, Cauca
17	3/21/22	F	No	Caldono, Cauca
18	3/21/22	M	No	Silvia, Cauca
19	3/21/22	M	No	Pasto, Nariño
20	3/21/22	M	No	Cumbal, Nariño
21	3/21/22	F	Yes	San Lorenzo, Nariño
22	3/24/22	M	Yes	San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba
23	3/24/22	M	Yes	San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba
24	3/24/22	M	Yes	San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba
25	3/24/22	M	Yes	San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba
26	3/24/22	M	Yes	Tuchín, Córdoba
27	3/24/22	F	Yes	San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba
28	3/24/22	M	Yes	Tuchín, Córdoba
29	3/24/22	M	Yes	San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba
30	3/24/22	F	Yes	San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba
31	3/24/22	M	Yes	San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba

32	6/8/22	F	No	La Sierra, Cauca
33	6/8/22	F	No	Paez, Cauca
34	6/8/22	M	No	La Vega, Cauca
35	6/8/22	M	No	Paez, Cauca
36	10/3/22	F	Yes	San Lorenzo, Nariño
37	5/25/23	M	Yes	San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba
38	5/25/23	M	Yes	San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba
39	5/25/23	M	Yes	San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba
40	5/25/23	M	Yes	San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba
41	5/25/23	M	Yes	San Andrés de Sotavento, Córdoba
42	7/5/23	M	No	Popayán, Cauca
43	7/5/23	F	No	Totoró, Cauca
44	7/5/23	M	No	Caldono, Cauca
45	7/5/23	M	No	Popayán, Cauca
46	7/5/23	M	No	Popayán, Cauca