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## The Inga indigenous people of Colombia as "the guardians of the land". Inga community and Communities' leader Hernando Chindoy Chindoy

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## **The Inga indigenous people of Colombia as "the guardians of the land." Inga community and Communities' leader Hernando Chindoy Chindoy**

The leader of the Inga community shares some of the ideas behind constructing an indigenous university in the Putumayo region of the Colombian Amazon. And he presents the book *Una Nueva Universidad Indígena en la Selva en Colombia (A New Indigenous University in the Rainforest in Colombia)*.

P. R. Who are the Inga communities? And the Community Project?

H.C. The Inga communities are descendants of the Inca civilization. In the 15th century, they migrated from the southern Andes to settle in the tropical forests of Ecuador and Colombia. The Inga communities in Colombia are in Putumayo, Nariño Caquetá, and Cauca departments. They are currently engaged in conceptualizing, designing, and constructing knowledge pathways to build a new indigenous university in the forest. This project, led by the communities, aims to create a meeting point between different approaches, including and integrating ancestral and Western knowledge systems. A few years ago, a fruitful meeting took place between the Inga community and Colombian universities, the Humboldt Institute and UNESCO to initiate the Pan-Amazonian Indigenous Biocultural University project, known as AWAI, which means 'weave' in the Inga language. Taita Hernando explains it as the weaving of knowledge.

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P.R. How did the project start?

H.C. The project results from a previous process that began in 2017 in the Assembly following the National Census. The organization of the indigenous government issued a mandate that expresses the people's will: to strengthen education in the indigenous communities at different levels. The main slogan of this mandate is to safeguard the people's knowledge and promote the development of knowledge. In the process, institutional synergies were sought by connecting with the Office of Heritage and Culture to make the trajectory and work of the communities visible through art. On that occasion, contact was made with the Swiss artist Ursula Biemann, who played an essential role in making the process visible. She is an international supporter and key ally, who has joined the Inga communities, knows Inga's people, and can clearly comprehend the communities' processes, efforts, and struggles. In the same way, other allies from Canada and the Javeriana University in Colombia have joined the project for the construction of the University in the territory.

P.R. What are the projects' goals and vision?

H.C. The AWAI Indigenous Biocultural University envisions three specific goals: 1) to participate in the research and creation of the higher institution to foster a vision of biocentric support; 2) to engage in the co-creation of knowledge with the same recognition given to academic professors and teachers of ancestral knowledge and wisdom; 3) to actively advocate for a paradigm shift in the relationship between nature and culture, where nature and culture are closely intertwined and correspond in their ecological dimensions. Thus, studying the AWAI means strengthening the efforts of the ancestral cultures from the Andean and Amazonian peoples to cultivate Abya Yala's concept to preserve life from the lens of pluriverse perspectives and decolonial approaches. The university's vision is oriented to enhance knowledge in such a way that students and their communities experience towards the acquisition of knowledge and instruments that contribute to the solution of their concerns and problems in their communities in both the medium and long term.

One of the main purposes of the creation of the University is to enable the community to rethink the interaction with non-human beings and to mitigate the damage that has been caused because of unconscious interactions with the surrounding natural systems in the habitat areas of indigenous peoples. In this sense, the Inga communities, like many other indigenous communities, are fully aware of the responsibility of the Amazon and especially of the provision of water sources, i.e., aware of the importance of the water star represented by the Caquetá and Putumayo rivers. This awareness is closely linked to the pan-Amazonian regional composition

and the joint efforts of the upper and lower parts of the Amazon, which together form a single entity.

The indigenous university in the Inca territory is understood as a meeting point where different knowledge converges and dialogues. It is a matter of designing with the various forms of knowledge that will be present in the University. To approach the understanding of the different systems of knowledge, as well as different forms of communication and interaction from both ancestral and western cultures, as well as science and technology knowledge contribute to the understanding to build peaceful environments; thus, we take care of both human and non-human resources fulfilling our task as guardian/ caretakers (*guardianes de la tierra*) of the earth at a global level.

P. R. What are some important aspects of Inga's community history?

H.C. The indigenous populations of Putumayo, Colombia, have experienced the displacement and expropriation of their territories since colonial times. Although some documents prove the ownership of original territories, especially the reserves surrounding the Valle de Sibundoy- Alto Putumayo and Aponte Nariño, the ownership of these territories has been challenged several times. The original document dates from 1700, in which the Taita of the Taitas, Carlos Tamabioy, attests to the Spanish crown ownership of the territories.

In the international context, legal frameworks advocating the importance of the recognition of ethnic identity have provided a platform for indigenous communities to organize and channel their internal struggles for the vindication of their rights. These processes led to the national level with the formation of the Indigenous Council of Cauca and Popayán, CRIC, which has become the emblematic example of indigenous struggles over the years. The Inga communities have been surrounded by extraction, the sowing of illicit crops, and fumigation. This problematic environmental and social context has led them to initiate an internal process to devise strategies to strengthen their institutional structures and protect their cultural identity.

The Resguardo Inga decided to recover their autonomy, dignity, sovereignty, and spirituality as ancestral peoples created the Inga People's Mandate to preserve the Inga People. Working with other indigenous communities in Nariño, they support each other in their efforts to recover their ancestral lands. They have also created the Tribunal of Indigenous Peoples and Authorities of Southwest Colombia, including other communities such as Awá, Confán, Eperara Siapidaara, Inga, Nasa Uh, Quillansinga, and Siona. At present, the Inga people are administratively organized

through the Entidad Territorial Indígena Atun Wasi Iuiai-AWAI-of the Inga people of Colombia. This administrative figure aligns with government policies promoting territorial governance, and the Inga Safeguard Plan is embedded.

Thus, the foundation of the indigenous university in the territory of the Colombian Amazon is oriented towards creating and constructing the needs and requirements of life in the territory. The university is an institutional creation project that seeks to strengthen and provide an institutional anchoring space for the indigenous peoples' ancestral and millenary knowledge and wisdom. The educational and research programs focus on environmental studies, ecological agriculture, indigenous medicine, and territorial governance, considering the indigenous ethic of the Rights of the Earth.