



Katoü (Wayuu bag): a material axis of the relationship between Arijunas (non-Wayuu) and Wayuu people

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Abstract

This article presents the exercise of following the katoü or Wayuu bag, critically observing the Colombian-Arijuna (non-Wayuu) society by exploring the representations of the Wayuu territory (as another territory) constructed from positions of power as a hegemonic society, in different strategies of economic intervention in which the katoü becomes a central element. The Wayuu bag turns into an ethnographic magnifying glass for investigating the relationship between Wayuu and Arijuna in a disputed territory in Colombia.

Key words

Materiality; katoü (Wayuu bag); environment; State margin

Resumen

El artículo presenta un ejercicio de seguimiento de la bolsa katoü o wayuu, observando críticamente la sociedad colombiana-arijuna (no wayuu) a través de una exploración de las representaciones del territorio wayuu (como cualquier otro territorio) construidas desde posiciones de poder como sociedad hegemónica, en diferentes estrategias de intervención económica en las que el katoü se convierte en pieza central. La bolsa wayuu se torna en lupa etnográfica para investigar la relación entre los wayuu y los arijuna en un territorio de Colombia en disputa.

Palabras clave

Materialidad; katoü (bolsa wayuu); medio ambiente; margen del Estado

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1. Introduction

This article aims to present a brief history of the Wayuu bag (katoü), as a material bridge between Wayuu and Arijuna (non-Wayuu) society. This history refers to the interventions of public and private Arijuna institutions in the Wayuu territory using the katoü as part of economic policies, with an underlying extractive strategy. Here I present an exercise of following the katoü and critically observing the Colombian-Arijuna society, exploring the representations of the Wayuu territory (as another territory) constructed from positions of power as a hegemonic society, in different strategies of economic intervention in which the katoü is a key element. My proposal is that by observing the katoü, as part of that material world, we can see economic strategies from the hegemonic society, which aim at defining the members of the Wayuu community only as “the others”, as the “producers of handicrafts”, following the definition of “anthropology of domination” presented by Ochy Curiel (2010). The object of study in this article is the Arijuna institutions (the Capuchin mission, the Cerrejón company and the State institutions) and their use of economic strategies that make use of the katoü as a means of intervention in the Wayuu territory.

The article begins with a short ethnographic description to situate the reader in the production of the katoü within two particular *Rancherías* of different economic levels in Itaca in the territory of the municipality of Albania, La Guajira, Colombia. It continues with a section on the material world (to which the katoü belongs) as a meeting place between social groups, which can be the object of an anthropology of domination; this in a “frontier space”, La Guajira, Colombia, where two narratives reign: the absence of the State and corruption. Later I present two institutions that arise in the interviews made in fieldwork to Wayuu women about their learning process on textile work: the boarding schools that have their origin in the Capuchin mission; the Cerrejón, a coal extraction company; and state institutions of education and management of the artisanal sector. For the development of my argument, I worked both with primary sources of information (resulting from my fieldwork in the region), and secondary sources, such as newspaper articles, historical records, and institutional reports.

1.1. *Women were weaving under the setting sun*

The inclement sun beats down on a roof made of yotojoro¹ and rubber from old car tires, woven by Wayuu men in Itaca, a *ranchería*² close to Riohacha, the capital of the Department of La Guajira, Colombia. The women of the Cotes family belonging to the Apshana clan, many of them teachers of the ethno-educational school about 4 kilometers away, who have done their housework, lie down in hammocks to weave the spiral of the katoü. Their hammocks are woven by themselves or by other Wayuu women who sell their labor. They must wait for their goat to return, in case it is necessary to walk through the dry forest or the desert in their search. Although they are busy creating the katoü, they know that at any time they might have to stop crocheting to attend a new household

¹ *Stenocereus griseus*, endemic species of the region of the Colombian and Venezuelan Guajira peninsula. This cactus has a stem that when dried is used as wood.

² The *ranchería* is the traditional settlements of the Wayuu community. These settlements are made up of 10 to 15 families belonging to the same *ei'rruku* or clan.

chore. For them, teachers with state salaries, the creation of the katoü is a space of recreation which, although it brings in money, this is not their primary purpose.

The girls of the Cotes family play knitting; they want to learn. Their fabrics are not yet strong, nor have the ideal shape of a katoü. Wayuu girls begin to learn to knit as a game; traditionally this learning is consolidated in the ritual of confinement (*encierro*), which marks the passage from girl to *majayut* [young Wayuu woman] (Mazzoldi 2004). However, nowadays women also learn to weave in workshops given by Arijuna³ institutions. Their mothers know that this will be a possibility of securing a livelihood for them when becoming *majayut*. The art of weaving is their heritage. Soon the Cotes girls get bored with the game of weaving, leaving the threads and needles on the sandy floor of the *ranchería*.

IMAGE 1



Image 1. Woman knitting a yellow katoü over recycled *chinchorro* (hammock).

A family of the Urianan clan of Venezuelan origin recently established in Itaca, begins their day. The sun rises over the plains of the dry forest. In a humble Wayuu *ranchería*, everyone has been awake for a few hours already. Because there is no electric light in their houses, it is essential to make the most during the sunlight. This family was the most worrying case that I knew; their economy was based mainly on the production of *chinchorros* (hammocks) and katoü; they sold their labor, and the threads and even the needles were loans from the buyers of the textile pieces that they created. Each

member of the family (excluding children under the age of 8) worked for the sustenance of the family group; one of the children had died a few months before my arrival in Itaca due to malnutrition, like many others in La Guajira. A cup of coffee accompanies the dawn of the women with coppery skin.⁴ They do their household chores, the grandmother, who is also a *piache*⁵ (traditional Wayuu doctor), checks the three looms of *chinchorro* that she has not finished yet. The night before she worked hastily under candlelight since her customers (Arijuna and Wayuu) expected a prompt delivery of the *chinchorros*.

³ "Arijuna" is the wayuu category for non-Wayuu.

⁴ This idea of "the coppery skin" is a reference to a Wayuu writer, Vicenta Siosi (2002), and her book *El dulce corazón de los piel cobriza* (The sweet heart of the copper skinned).

⁵ The figure of the *piache* is central to the social organization of the Wayuu community. Michel Perrin (1995) called them the "practitioners of dreams": shamans. The *piache* interprets the messages of dreams, the primary vehicle of communication between the world of the living and the dead. Dreams warn humans of conflicts, diseases and other evils to come. The healing process, according to Perrin (1995), is understood in terms of exchange, where the *piache* is an intermediary. Perrin (1995) explains payment for the shamanic cure as constituted by three costs: 1) the "price of the order", meaning the cost of the visit; 2) the "price of the things presented", this is, the payment for the auxiliary spirit of the shaman to guarantee the cure; and 3) the "price of the party", this is, the ritual dance of the Yonna that takes place the last day of the shamanic process. (Perrin 1995, pp 182-186).

Men, boys, and girls after doing their daily tasks, such as taking care of the goats, doing household chores or bringing water, sit on their chairs to start knitting the spiral of the katoü. If an order comes, they may not be able to go out to play or go to school. Each pair of hands is working to contribute to the support of the family; they will be paid 7,000 CPs, Colombian pesos (2 euros and 21 cents) for each single-colored bag they make. While it is true that there are Wayuu families that have successfully integrated into this boom of the katoü, acquiring more capital, most families successfully integrated into the katoü economy that I identified in my fieldwork were families with a high previous economic level. They speak *arijunaiiki* (Spanish), and at least one member of the family had professional careers allowing them to access to sales spaces where the value of the object is higher; these families hire the labor of other families with fewer resources. However, the majority of the population is in a survival economy, which reduces their ability to decide the prices of the katoü they make and sell. This economy of survival of many low-income families minimizes the ability to create extra capital to invest in the katoü business in the future and in doing so increasing the profit margin.

These bags are sold elsewhere at higher prices: in Riohacha, the closest city, katoü are sold from 11 euros (38,000 CP) to 14 euros (50,000 CP); in Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, katoü are sold for 27 euros (100,000 CP); abroad they can cost from 100 up to 300 euros.⁶ But only the little ones know *arijunaiiki* and the money – if there is any – is only sufficient to get them to the next city. Many men of Itaca once traveled to Venezuela to work as day laborers,⁷ but due to the devaluation of the Venezuelan currency (bolívar) they are now taking refuge in their homes to weave the spiral, far from the punitive eyes of tradition, which sees the fabric of the spiral as women's work, labeling any man who knits katoü as *asinasi* (man who acts as a woman).⁸

IMAGE 2



Image 1. Loom and woman knitting.

⁶ In Itaca, there is no industry, and there is no more formal employment offer than the few related to the State (officials, politicians, and teachers). The minimum salary in Colombia 2017 was 737,717.00 CP (207 euros). The wage of a teacher or technologist in education is 1,405, 442 CP (393 euros) per month.

⁷ For the Wayuu people, the territory is one, although it is divided by the borders of the nation-state (between Colombia and Venezuela); they all have dual citizenship, which allows them to live in their territory according to their culture. A finding of this investigation is the fact that many of the Wayuu men worked as *jornaleros* (day laborers) in Venezuela, and the current Venezuelan economic crisis has impacted the mixed Wayuu economy. However, there is no statistical information about this phenomenon.

⁸ In the last five years Wayuu men were producing katoü in the ranchería where I did my fieldwork, due to the reduction of the traditional male productive spaces (grazing, hunting, and crops). Wayuu boys, since an early age, are educated along with their maternal uncles in these masculine productive spaces, where they learn the art of grazing (central element in the Wayuu economy) and on cultural patterns of male behavior (including specific textile techniques). However, in this article, I will not elaborate on this, since it is an extensive topic that I covered in depth in a chapter of my doctoral thesis.

According to the Wayuu women of Itaca, years of drought have left the desert in the throes of death; streams devastated by the cutting of trees for charcoal, are dry. The Englishmen no longer buy *dividive*⁹ fruits to paint and tan their leathers, as they did in the past. *Juya* (the rain) has not returned; a few years ago, the national government stopped the flow of the Rancheria River with a dam to feed the coal extractive industry. The old mill – made under the policies of president Rojas Pinilla (military dictatorship from 1953 to 1957) – was destroyed by time, and each bucket of water involves walking up to 1 kilometer with the help of an old donkey. The friendly and faithful donkey of the neighbor was found a few days ago without its skin, dead in the desert. They say that someone bought its leather; “who could do that to those animals?”, asks a Wayuu woman.

The *roza* (traditional garden) does not produce *auyama* (pumpkin), beans, watermelon or corn anymore. The mixed economy of the Wayuu that allowed them to live according to the rainy calendar of the desert has shrunk and increasingly it seems to be a single-product economy: that of the katoü.

One morning, these bags arrive at the New Market in Riohacha, and the women of Itaca will choose one of them to take their creations to the market. This woman, dressed in her best *manta* (traditional dress), will travel kilometers by foot or motorbike and in crowded trucks full of goats and *paisanos*¹⁰ to the market. The New Market¹¹ is a place of katoü, mantas, chinchorros, *gasas* (bag straps) and goats so scared they wet themselves, impregnating the atmosphere with a nauseating stench. When they open the car door, men and women (many of them Arijunas) will “help” the woman to unload her large plastic black bags full of katoü from the ranchería, and with aggressive movements will check them. It is important for buyers to be the first having access to the katoü, as they will be able to choose the best ones. A Wayuu craftswoman and Arijuna men try to reach an agreement on price, but the man with a beautiful bag in his hands, says to the craftswoman: “It is ugly and expensive; you should be thanking me for buying it” (fieldwork diary; 05/26/16). This woman, without frowning or sounding aggressive, says “no”, takes her bags and walks away.

The Wayuu woman who goes to the New Market needs to be serious, strong, smart and patient because this is a space of distrust and bargaining between buyers and sellers. These buyers will also be sellers of the katoü, and they will not earn much more money for each sold bag. Hopefully, they will sell them wholesale to some Chinese woman, to a *gringa* (North American) or to a *cachaca* (Bogotanian).¹² Sometimes an Arijuna says that the bags are beautiful and that they – the Wayuu women – should not give away their crafts. Although they say this, they do not pay more for the bags; the Wayuu women know it, yet they patiently listen to the Arijuna’s words.

La Guajira is the department with the largest indigenous population in Colombia. Since 2014, different institutions have warned about a growing humanitarian crisis related to social, economic and environmental problems which impact mainly the Wayuu

⁹ *Caesalpinia coriaria*.

¹⁰ “Paisanos” or “paisanas” (countrymen or countrywomen) is the word Wayuu people use to name other Wayuus.

¹¹ The New Market, is one of two markets in the city of Riohacha.

¹² A person from Bogotá, the capital of Colombia.

community. The population is affected by changes in the rainy calendar and by different projects for water management, such as stream diversions and construction of a dam to satisfy the needs of the mining industry in the region. For many families, the production of the traditional katoü becomes the primary form of income, neglecting traditional forms of production, such as agriculture.

1.2. *The material world as a magnifying glass for the anthropology of domination*

The idea of looking at an object, such as the katoü, in a context like Colombia began with the notion that we are born into a material world (a world of objects created by humans, that allows us to inhabit it) in which we grow, learn, nourish and socialize, allowing or restricting certain actions (Miller 2010), even if we are not aware of it. It is through this material world that we learn to coexist with members of our group, and coexist with other members and communities of society, while also creating a material world in which future generations will socialize. Following Marx's concept of "commodity

IMAGE 3

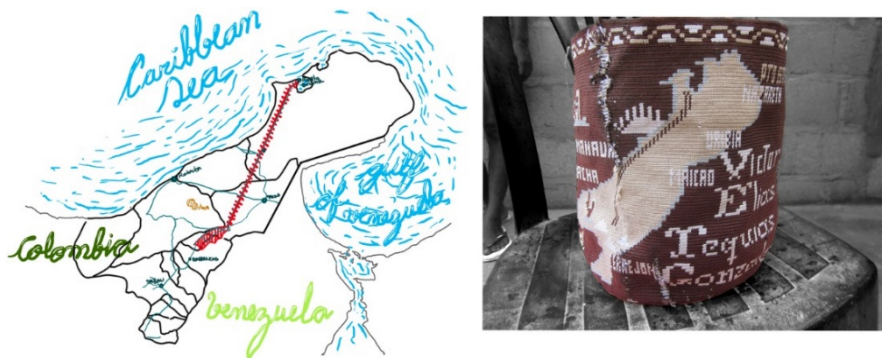


Image 2. Map La Guajira and map of La Guajira woven in an old Wayuu bag, with railroad, port and mine of Cerejón company.

fetishism", things take on a central value. People and their social relations are relegated to a role subordinated to that central value. Thus, the material world also gives clues to the workings of processes of subordination and exploitation, which are also part of this process of socialization in which communities and society are reproduced. Following the process of production and commercialization of the katoü, it is possible to observe these processes of socialization, always considering the historical and the environmental contexts.

Following the idea of "anthropology of domination" of Ochy Curiel (2010), who proposes an exercise of "unveil the forms, ways, strategies, discourses that define certain social groups as 'others' and 'others' from places of power and domination" (Curiel 2010, p. 15), I propose that, by observing the katoü as part of that material world, we can see economic strategies from the hegemonic society, which aim to define the members of the Wayuu community only as the others, as the "producers of handicrafts".

A material characteristic of the katoü is its color; traditional katoüs are mixtures of bright colors and geometric figures that together make a visible object. By visible object, I mean an object made to be seen, to be looked at or observed. From the moment of its creation, its visibility grows in the eyes of its creator and then in the eyes of buyers and users; it

can change contexts easily. Although the katoü is an object of use, made to carry things, it dazzles consumers with its shape, design, and colors, hiding the exploitation conditions in its production and sale. The discourses that surround the katoü, speak to us of an “exotic” and colorful culture. There is no trace in its materiality of the context of environmental and social crisis in which it is created.

Some Wayuu women work on intellectual property issues of the object, such as Karmen Ramírez Boscán, to name one; the Wayuu women leaders of their communities present themselves as weavers, and even the katoü has been part of images that call for territorial resistance that fights against the detour of the Bruno stream. In this article, I do not elaborate on this; the purpose of this text is to present an exercise in the anthropology of domination, seeing the katoü as an object that is part of economic policies of intervention in Wayuu territory from Arijuna institutions.

La Guajira peninsula is a territory that was never conquered by the Spanish colonizers for whom the Guajiros, or Wayuu, were an enemy nation, an untamed people. From academic texts, there is an established discourse about the resistant character of the Wayuu against the Spanish conquest (Perrin 1987, Vergara 1990, Barrera 1990, Polo Acuña 1999, 2011, Orsini 2007). Barrera (1990) argues that La Guajira was never conquered by arms since the Wayuu people mastered the art of weapons and horses, elements and knowledge acquired by trading with English and Dutch smugglers. The Wayuu community has been one of skilled traders, which is one of the reasons for its survival despite the colonial regime imposed on the territory; this is because they had control over smuggling routes through the desert, creating trade relations with pirates, the smugglers who inhabited the Caribbean Sea (Barrera 1990). With the independence and subsequent construction of the Nation-State, La Guajira was appropriated, remaining for a long time a territory of little interest. A place of “frontier”, in other words, part of a political geography or a space of projection and mystification of the Nation State, as explained by Serge (2011) in her book *El revés de la nación* (The reverse of the nation). This frontier character is what has allowed two national narratives to flourish about La Guajira: corruption and that of the absence of the State.

Corruption is a major problem in La Guajira, according to an article of the national newspaper *El Tiempo*, on the review of accounts of former general attorney Ordóñez in Riohacha were: “He said that the problem is not drought, but corruption. He added that disciplinary investigations are being carried out against officials from the region who would be involved in acts of corruption” (El Tiempo 2014). During the time I was in La Guajira, corruption was a ghost who lived in every street and every conversation: the former governor of La Guajira was being accused by the prosecution of murder and corruption.¹³ The concept of “corruption” speaks of a transgression of a normative

¹³ From Redacción Judicial 2017; a summary: Wilmer Gonzalez Brito (Governor of La Guajira) accused of corruption in an atypical election in 2016. Oneida Pinto: twice elected mayor of Albania (municipality where the Cerrejón mine is located). Former Governor of La Guajira, dismissed for irregularities in her candidacy, she was also prosecuted for threats to the emergency-governor Jorge Enrique Vélez, commissioned by President Santos to govern while atypical took place. Kiko Gómez, sentenced to 55 years in prison for the murder of Yandra Brito, former mayor of Barrancas. Jorge Eduardo Pérez, 2008-2011 governor, accused of embezzling 26,000 million Colombian pesos destined for a “mega” school. José Luis Gonzales Crespo, governor 2004-2007 (Redacción Judicial 2017) “crimes of embezzlement by appropriation to third parties and contract without compliance with legal requirements”.

system (a fragmentation of the border between the private and the public), as is the Nation-State; so, when one speaks of corruption as a problem of a region, one is dealing with a problem of the State as a national structure. Along with corruption, we find another element in the national narratives; later in the same article, we read: “Andrés Epieyu, an indigenous leader of this community of La Guajira that is made up of one hundred families, said that the population lacks drinking water, electricity, and schools. ‘We feel the absence of the State’, he said. He added that the issue of malnutrition in children is worrying and has increased in recent months” (El Tiempo 2014).

It seems impossible to live in La Guajira without thinking of corruption; in daily experience the word “corruption” becomes the origin of all problems, justification of the inefficiency of the State and its absence of this in the life of the Wayuu community. The narrative of corruption limits the possibility of seeing the complex relationship between the state and its intervention in Wayuu territory and its population, either by its institutions or delegating roles to other private institutions such as the Capuchin mission or Cerrejón company.

While I lived in the *ranchería* of Itaca with Doña María, her daughters, and granddaughters, the State was present in two forms: on the one hand, with *Families in action*, a food security plan; on the other, providing weaving and sales workshops of Wayuu bags/katoü by Artesanías de Colombia S.A. (a public and private institution), Cerrejón (a private coal extraction company) and SENA (National Learning Service, a public institution). So, asking today about the Wayuu bags/katoü is asking also about the Colombian State and its intervention in the Wayuu territory.

2. The Capuchin Mission: Transformation of the Wayuu into a producer

When I started fieldwork, every time I asked where I could find the best handicrafts, people answered me: Nazareth or Aremazai. The space of the boarding school (formerly called “orphanage”) is a recurring image in the stories about the fabric and Wayuu art. As Vicky¹⁴ commented, a woman selling in First Street, Riohacha, a street where the bright colors of hundreds of bags blend with the blue Caribbean Sea:

I learned how to knit in my *ranchería* and started doing small plates [base of the bag]: but they were twisted. However, in the boarding school, I learned to do better because there they taught us how to make a straight plate, and I enjoyed it because I learned it right away. (Vicky, interview, 04/05/2016)

This formula repeats itself. When asking Wayuu craftswoman where she learned to knit, she will first say: “On my own”. Later she will say: “I learned it from my mother and aunts in the *rancherías*”, and finally, they will say that in boarding school they got better. In the narratives of life in the desert, the image of the boarding school has more strength and presence than that of the Colombian State.

Boarding schools in La Guajira were formerly orphanages created by the Capuchin mission in the framework of the relationship between Colombia and the Holy See. Below is a brief historical account of this relationship, which will help contextualize why the boarding school seems to have greater relevance than that image of the State in the Wayuu territory. After independence (1810), many religious congregations were

¹⁴ The names of the informants have been changed by the author for this text.

expelled from the country. Pope Gregory XVI would recognize the independence of Colombia in 1835. However, in 1853 under the government of José María Obando (1853-1857) the State was separated from the Church; in 1861 the president and General Mosquera expropriated ecclesiastical property (Bosa Bastien 2015). Two years later it was established the Constitution of 1863, which briefly instituted freedom of worship. According to Bosa Bastien, “[t]his means that, during a good part of the 19th century, the indigenous peoples who had survived the Conquest could live without much interference from the missionaries and the State” (Bosa Bastien 2015, p. 148). It is under the government of Rafael Núñez (four times president) and with the creation of the Constitution of 1886 (before the current Constitution of 1991) when it returns to the intervention of the Church in the State.

In 1887 a reopening of the Concordat with the Holy See and the Colombian state was created. One article of this concordat is essential to understand the role of Catholic Missions in places of “frontier” of the state; Article 31 declares that the agreements between the Holy See and the Government for the promotion of Catholic missions in the barbarian tribes do not require congressional approval. This article establishes a considerable distance between the State and the missions in territories of “barbarous tribes”, without political control, the missions acquire greater independence in these territories, delegated by the state.

La Guajira is a disputed territory, delegated by the State to the church and its missions, as evidenced by Law 32 of 1912 about the creation of orphanages in the Guajira. By this law, the government closed all public schools that by then were in the department of La Guajira (article 8) and created three orphanages. Also, Law 64 of 1914 established measures “for the reduction and civilization of some indigenous tribes”. In the first article of this law, the government says: “The Nation will contribute two thousand pesos (2,000 pesos) for expedition expenses dealing with the reduction of the motilones Indians”. In these two laws, we see a government that delegates functions to another non-State institution, in this case to the Capuchin mission. These laws tell us about a project of reduction and civilization, two words that give us an idea of the colonial regime and the space of the Nation in La Guajira.

These laws also tell us about an education space for indigenous people. Following Law 64/1914, three orphanages were established: San Sebastián de Rabago (Nevada), San Antonio (Pancho) and Nazaret (Macuira). In these places, children were educated not only in sciences and religion but, above all, the body was educated in daily life, through strict schemes of routine and discipline:

The regulation to which children of both sexes are educated in our orphanages, with very small variations, is analogous to those that govern the homes asylums and the beneficence houses of the Nation. They do everything at a fixed and determined time: at five o'clock they get up, clean themselves, pray and hear the Holy Mass. At seven o'clock they had already finished the house cleaning, have breakfast, and after a while, they begin their studies and exercises of reading and writing. At a quarter to ten they are given recess, and very soon they resume their school work until eleven when they are served lunch. At noon, they are engaged in manual work until three o'clock, when they are served ‘onces’ and given half an hour of recess. At five-thirty they eat, and then they are given an hour and a half to play and entertain themselves with other exercises of solace and distraction until seven thirty, where the holy rosary is recited,

accompanied by the prayers of the night. Then retire at eight o'clock to rest. (Iglesia Católica, Vicariato Apostólico de la Guajira 1915, p. 1; translated by the author)

I would like to emphasize the similarity of the rules governing the orphanage with that ruling the home asylums and the beneficence houses of the Nation. The article 31 of the Concordat of 1887 established the independence of the Church from the State concerning territories of missions or barbarian tribes. Article 11 stipulated that the Holy See will lend its cooperation to the Government to establish religious institutes dedicated to Missions, education and other works of public utility and beneficence, as the missions were part of a project to expand the “national project” in territories of internal borders, with the flag of education that was then monopolized by the Church.

It shows a way to legitimize its existence in times of the Nation-State as an extension of this, a process of legitimacy on the margins of the State. Also, homes, asylums and beneficence houses are spaces of regulation and normalization of some “devious behaviors”, places of production of docile subjects that must be controlled and regulated.

The Capuchin Mission educated in what Mauss (1991) labelled as “techniques”, such as weaving:

In labor, the indigenous women can compete with girls of any other institute, and even with advantage, since they cut, sew and patch the dresses which they use and help the nuns in the confection and patchwork of the children's clothes. They hand-sew with great perfection, they mend very well, and they handle the sewing machine correctly. The children are engaged in the making of common hats and *suaza*, and we believe that soon the fabric workshop established in San Antonio, will provide the necessary cloth to dress the children of all establishments. (Iglesia Católica, Vicariato Apostólico de la Guajira 1915, p. 15)

This passage tells us about a transformation of the Indian child into a producer of something – hats and dresses –. Following this idea, another section of the report of the Capuchin Mission (1915) states:

A great amount of energy has been deployed by the teachers of our orphanages to implant among the indigenous, a love for work. At first, they believed that their life in the orphanage was only to eat and be served in everything; but, little by little, with great care and patience, they were made to understand that they had to dedicate themselves to some trades, first domestic and later the industry. (Iglesia Católica, Vicariato Apostólico de la Guajira 1915, p. 15)

Educating indigenous children, first in domestic and later in industrial activities, had an economic aim: through the “love for work”, converting the indigenous child into a subject capable of producing capital. It is important to understand that teaching the “Indians” in the process of the industry was part of the Concordat with the Holy See, according to article 13. As Córdoba (2012) expresses in his thesis on the missions in Urabá and La Guajira:

The missionaries promoted sociability with the development of the manual arts. In addition to enabling them to comply with Article 13 of the Concordat of the Holy See, which established that religious communities on missions should disseminate and teach some industries to the Indians; giving them a means of using ancestral knowledge of the Guajira region and mixing them with Christian devotion (...). With *fique* [or

henequén]¹⁵ knapsacks made by the girls, while the children made hats of great perfection. (Córdoba 2012, pp. 221-222)

Thus, through manual or industrial arts in orphanages, a material bridge (bags and hats) was constructed between ancestral Wayuu knowledge and Christian principles.

3. The Cerrejón and the extractivist economy

As was said before, La Guajira was a place of little interest to the State, but this changed with the 1973 energy crisis when the State set eyes on one of Colombia's largest coal reserves (discovered more than a century ago in 1864). In 1975, the Colombian Government established a mining concession to exploit the territory that today is Cerrejón Norte, bidding granted to INTERCOR, a subsidiary company of Exxon. This company sold INTERCOR in 2012 to the consortium of BHP Billiton, Glencore and Anglo American; the three are actors involved in the distributive ecological conflicts in Africa, Asia, and South America, as can be seen in the Environmental Justice Atlas.¹⁶ The concession was granted by the Colombian government, for 28 years (exploration, construction of the mine and production), and in 1999 a new agreement was signed between the Colombian State and the mining company to extend the exploitation until 2034. However, the concession in the territory of the State to the Cerrejón was not only for the exploitation of the mine but also for the different means of transportation to move the coal out of La Guajira via ports and railroad tracks. So, it happens that the traditional export of the Guajira is, until today, coal. Colombia is the world's fourth largest exporter of coal: it produced 85.8 million tons of coal in 2011 and 89.2 million tons in 2012. Despite the increase in the exploitation of this mineral, the royalties received by the State and the department rely on international coal prices. The economy of the department relies mainly in mining: salt, coal and natural gas. In fact, according to the National Administrative Statistics Department (Departamento de Administración Nacional de Estadísticas–DANE), it is the most stable industry in the region, while other activities such as agriculture, hunting, services and others are maintained stable or tend to decline (DANE 2012), and will never compete with the industry of mining.

The accumulation regime is clear; it is that of the coal exploitation industry. And for this industry, water is a major resource required to hydrate the coal, to reduce its environmental impact, for its transport and storage, to avoid its combustion and maintain its quality. The average temperature of La Guajira is 28 to 32°C, being the region with the lowest annual amount of rainfall (500 millimeters or less). So, it is easy to imagine that water is a scarce resource of great importance. However, the largest source of water available is the Rancheria River. This aquifer system is strategic since it is the primary source of water supply for the inhabitants of the region. In 2005 the multipurpose dam project El Cercado was started with the following objectives: “(1) Aqueduct: water supply systems for nine municipalities of La Guajira: San Juan del César, Distracción, Fonseca, Barrancas, Hato Nuevo, Uribía, Manaure, Maicao and Albania; (2) agriculture (...); and 3) energy generation (...).” By Resolution No. 3158 of

¹⁵ Natural fiber, extracted from a plant through a drying process.

¹⁶ To see the environmental conflict of each company: BHP Billiton <https://ejatlas.org/company/bhp-billiton>; Glencore <https://ejatlas.org/company/glencore-international-ag>; Anglo American <https://ejatlas.org/company/anglo-american>.

August 10, 2005, Corpoguajira gave the Colombian Institute for Rural Development¹⁷ the environmental license for the project *Ranchería River* (Corpoguajira 2015).

This transformation of the territory seems to be part of a pattern imposed in the subaltern or underdeveloped territories/spaces, a concept that helps us to understand this as the Coloniality of Nature (Colonialidad de la Naturaleza of Alimonda (2011):

... As well as its biophysical reality (its flora, its fauna, its human inhabitants, the biodiversity of its ecosystems) and its territorial configuration (the sociocultural dynamics that articulates these ecosystems and landscapes significantly) appears before the global hegemony and before the dominant elites of the Region as a subaltern space, which can be exploited, destroyed and reshaped according to the needs of the current accumulation regimes. (Alimonda 2011, p. 22)

Consequently, the territory is reshaped, damming the only river in the desert. Eleven years after the start of the dam El Cercado, the Attorney General's Office in a report entitled *La Guajira: Wayuu People hungry for dignity, thirst for justice and other unmet needs* indicates as antecedent the *Cerrejón* project, which would include a mining area of more than 69,000 hectares, corresponding to the sum of the titles granted to Cerrejón “which would imply a future potential of direct affectation” and establish that the water of the Ranchería river would be destined to this project. The Ranchería river water is a public good, to which the Wayuu community has no access since it is administered and controlled by the Centro Administrativo del Río Ranchería (Procuraduría 2016, p. 27).

One year before this report of the Attorney General's Office, on December 11, 2015, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (2015) informed the Colombian State of the decision to “request precautionary measures in favor of children and adolescents from the communities of Uribia, Manaure, Riohacha and Maicao of Wayuu village, in the department of La Guajira” (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2015). The reason for this decision was the lack of drinking water and the high levels of malnutrition, which caused the death of 4,770 children during the last eight years (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2015).

In the introduction to the report of the Attorney General's Office (*La Guajira: Wayuu people hungry for dignity, thirst for justice and other unmet needs*), of what we can call a systematic genocide of the Wayuu people and the inhabitants of La Guajira (in this report we also find the figure of 4,770 dead Wayuu children); we find a parallel between textiles and territory, a feature of the hegemonic imaginary of La Guajira desert:

Of the preventive function and control of management, a report on La Guajira, one of the 32 departments of Colombia, having the largest indigenous population, is also evoked by its beautiful landscapes, such as the one that thousands of tourists have seen in the Cabo de la Vela (Cape of the Vela), its carboniferous richness and

IMAGE 4



Image 4. Poster: La Guajira, Colombia is magical realism.

¹⁷ It is worth saying that the INCODER was liquidated due to management problems and corruption.

the colorful fabrics made by its indigenous communities. (Procuraduría 2016, p. 5)

The Attorney General's Office (an institution of the State), reveals important elements of what the State believes – the imaginary hegemonic construction of desert (Tomé Martín 2013) – to exist in the department that has the largest indigenous population. Beautiful landscapes: territory to be observed by tourists (those who bring income to the territory), carboniferous richness (the extractivist economy that transforms the territory and brings capital to it) and colorful fabrics made by indigenous people (traditional population of the territory which is productive, despite living in a crisis). All these elements reflect an economic function, but the report is talking about a humanitarian crisis, which seems secondary in this introductory paragraph.

We can see a parallel between the report of the Attorney General's Office and the tourist campaign *Colombia is magic realism* (2002-2010) created by the Colombian Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism (image 4). In the poster of this campaign where La Guajira is shown, we can see the Cabo de la Vela (Jepira, a Wayuu sacred land), two enramadas¹⁸ of which hang *mantas* (traditional Wayuu women's clothing) and *katoü*; in the background, six Wayuu women dancing, a Wayuu man playing the drum, in the center a white woman, with a *katoü*, who dances with the group of Wayuu women and in the foreground some brown hands weaving a desert with *kannas* (the same that appears in the logo of Cerrejón; image 5), as if knitting the territory; I could say that she does it for the observer or the central subject in the image: the white woman. The image of this advertising campaign shows in the "woven territory" a particular type of *kannas* (drawing, in Wayuunaiki) typical of the Wayuu community and its weaving art: two diamonds with two opposed triangles inside, resembling an hourglass. This *kannas* is also visible in the Cerrejón company logo (image 5). The appropriation, reconfiguration and transformation of symbols, knowledge and territory of the Wayuu population, by institutions, seems to be part of a pattern imposed in the subaltern or underdeveloped territories/spaces. La Guajira is a clear example of these subaltern spaces that are forgotten, exploited, devastated and reshaped, all in pursuit of accumulation of capital.

IMAGE 5



Image 3. Green katoü (left); Cerrejón logotype (top right); Cerrejón Foundation logotype (lower right).

¹⁸ This economy of the survival of many low-income families minimizes the ability to create extra capital to invest in the business of katoü in the future and in so increasing the profit margin.

Cerrejón is one of the companies that appear in the narratives on the learning of the fabrication of the katoü. Many women attend workshops ran by the mining company, which could be observed clearly after a few days in La Guajira, as was explained by Gracia, an old Wayuu woman from Cabo de la Vela, who had previously taken a workshop on Wayuu bags/katoü taught by the Sena (National Learning Service):

The same thing; that Cerrejón workshop was also the same. But we finished, and the Cerrejón gave us, but we never got one a... how is that called? a certificate that we have taken these courses with them. We never received it [voice down], and it was something they had to do, to give us a certification that we were already weavers and we could knit and get ahead. And they sent us more teachers to perfect, but they did not return, and I wonder why (...). [Gracia, interview, 13/02/2016]

From this fragment, the idea of the “certificate” is interesting. Why does a Wayuu woman need a Cerrejón certificate saying she is a weaver? It is part of the power of Cerrejón: naming/labeling. Not insignificant elements, defining and naming are traces of the hegemonic power. Following the law 36 of 1984 (regulation of the profession of artisan, the national board of artisan), the State defines what an artisan is:

Article 1. It is considered an artisan, the person who engages in a creative professional activity around a specific matter, at a mainly manual work and according to its knowledge and technical and artistic skills, within a production process. The person who works in an independent manner derive its sustenance mainly from this work and transform it into useful goods or services physical and mental effort. (Ley 36 de 1984)

In a second article, categories are created for different types of artisans: 1) apprentices; 2) officials; 3) instructors, and 4) master artisans. Artesanías de Colombia S.A as a State institution, is which accredits each artisan in one of these categories. It is important to note that it is this mechanism by which artisans can be included in the social security system.

However, why would a mining company be interested in delivering textile workshops in the Wayuu territory? These workshops are part of the social responsibility programs of the mining company. This relationship goes beyond “social responsibility”; if not, why is their logo a kannas? The truth is that in most of the rancherías I went into, I was told about a bag workshop taught by Cerrejón.

An anthropologist who works for this company, at a meeting in the Cerrejón offices in Riohacha, told me about the workshops:

... there are different methods of handicrafts. In the program, what they do is giving some training, especially about quality improvement. You know that although Wayuus know how to knit, this is virtually innate, women learn to knit from a very young age. However, with a changing market, good quality is being demanded. But, what does good quality mean? For example, a single-thread fabric, is more valued than a two-threads, because the first one takes more time and it is a more rigid fabric. Then this type of elements begins to matter, that of good quality and not so good quality according to the market. Then, what is sought in the program is not to tell the artisans ‘you do not know how to knit’, but say: come here, if you are practically the source of income for your families, what we are going to do is show you some alternatives to improve that fabric for the market and to ensure that you can sell your products at a good price’. They are also advised on entrepreneurship (...). Many women do not take risk selling, having no way to explain to the Arijuna what their fabric is worth, what is

in every bag. Then as they are told especially in training on how they should relate so, they can show what their fabric worth, the price, how to fix a price. (Anthropologist Cerrejón, interview, 06/10/2016)

The anthropologist, who is the representative of Cerrejón, told about a change in the market. The central element of her speech is the market as an art regulator, a good craft is what the market establishes as such. And what is left to the Wayuu who cannot cultivate the land or raise goats? As Joro said, when I asked her if the fabric was of men and women:

Of men and women, now with this of the bag has caught (...). Yes, strength, is sold, even men, as they have nothing to do, also weave bags (...). Oh, because there is nothing to do, because nothing more than caring for animals, those who have animals because now there is nothing to work on (...). First, the Indians cut timber and sold their timber and they could live out of that. They burned their charcoal (...). The Indians cannot burn coal because it is forbidden. Moreover, they sold their wood to the houses and that, but they can no longer cut a stick because they had forbidden them from cutting the sticks (...). At least now in winter they grow their beans, corn. They cultivate (...). Yes, they looked after animals. Now the Indians have no animals; I do not know what happened in La Guajira that they have died out from the strong summer, the Indians have been without animals, without goats (...). Before, if there was a good winter, spring and then summer and so on, they had animals for the livelihood and other stuff, before the Indians sold dividive. (Joro, interview, 05/10/2016)

Joro, a great merchant in her youth, tells us something that will also collect the report from the Attorney general: "Storage systems and streams that supplied water to communities are completely dry, which precludes their consumption and the realization of activities that would allow breeding and grazing goats and subsistence crops" (Procuraduría 2016, p. 27).

The lack of water to produce food for self-consumption of the rancherías eliminates the food self-sufficiency of the community, forcing their inhabitants to be consumers of an external food market, which they can only access if they sell their productive force or produce something for the market, something "nice and colorful" for the Arijunas: the katoü.

4. State institutions in the Wayuu territory

On February 21, 2017, the National Council for Economic and Social Policy (Conpes) decided to intervene in the department of La Guajira. The National Government would assume the management of resources for education, health and potable water destined for the department. The intervention would last for three years. The reason for this: corruption had plundered the department. "'The Government comes to put order and to end corruption', said Finance Minister Mauricio Cárdenas" (El Espectador 2017).

During my time in the ranchería, the State made presence only with two projects: the first, *Families in Action*, a project of the Department of Social Prosperity which is offered to families with children under the age of 18, financial support for food and growth control. In Itaca, this was part of the mixed economy of women. They went to the government caravan *Families in Action*, which weighs and measures children, to have 100,000 to 170,000 Colombian pesos depending on the child's age, every two months. It is not for me to say whether it is a good State policy or not; the truth is that this money

helps the *ranchería*. It is always clear that it is an institution of the State because they must enroll children in the national system of families in action, what implies a material relationship with the State bureaucracy.

The second project concerns crafts workshops and projects; the institutions offering these services can be private (Cerrejón), public (SENA), or semi-public (Artesanías de Colombia S.A.). Cerrejón, through its own Cerrejón Foundations System, provides katoü workshops as one of its multiple projects in the region under the label of “corporate social responsibility”.¹⁹ The National Learning Service (SENA) offers katoü workshops, taught by Wayuu women, throughout La Guajira in *rancherías* and at their regional headquarters. However, the SENA also provides katoü workshops in other departments of the country, expanding and redistributing traditional Wayuu textile knowledge to a larger population.

However, Artesanías de Colombia S.A. is the entity in charge of the promotion and commercialization of handicraft production by the National State. It is a mixed commercial company that manages state and private budget. Although it is linked to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism, it enjoys administrative autonomy.²⁰ Artesanías de Colombia S.A. held a workshop process (one meeting every week), whose promise was to be able to go to Bogotá to sell their handicrafts (the best quality handicrafts stipulated by Artesanías de Colombia S.A.) in Expoartesanía. This fair is a partnership between Artesanías de Colombia SA and CORFERIAS, born in 1991 as a strategic program of Handicrafts Colombia that sought to improve the quality standards of craft products and thus contribute to the socio-economic welfare of the craft sector (Artesanías de Colombia S.A. 2016, p. 2). It is important to remember that 1991 is the year in which the new Colombian Constitution was enacted, stipulating that Colombia is a multiethnic and multicultural country, where according to Article 7: “The State recognizes and protects the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Colombian nation”; followed by Article 8: “It is the duty of the State and individuals to protect the cultural and natural wealth of the Nation” (Republic of Colombia, 1991). Is it the idea of the cultural wealth a logic of capital?

These workshops have been conducted by the Cerrejón in its area of influence, but in other areas they have been conducted by the SENA (National Learning Service); sometimes workshops are associations between these three main companies, blurring the already thin line between the State and the market.

Why is the fabrication of Wayuu bags so important for businesses and the State? And when did this fetish for the hegemonic power over the bags start? The Orphanages (the Capuchin mission) taught the crochet technique to Wayuu people, then Wayuu people appropriated and through a Wayuu logical aesthetics of form and color, the technique

¹⁹ The Foundations System is constituted by: Cerrejón Foundation for the Strengthening of La Guajira Institutions; Cerrejón Foundation for the Progress of La Guajira; Foundation for Water of La Guajira; and Cerrejón Foundation for the Quality of Life.

²⁰ Artesanías de Colombia S.A. has a board of private shareholder; As well as a board of directors formed by the minister of Culture and minister of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism, as well as two representatives of the President of the Republic and five members with extensive experience in the private sector, elected by the shareholders’ meeting. On the other hand, the employees of Artesanías de Colombia S.A. are divided into public employees and employees that are linked by an employment contract; this means that they are under two different salary regimes.

was included in the realm of Wayuu art, making the katoü a unique object, an object born in the clash of two civilizations. However, when was the State interested in the Wayuu art?

5. Wayuu women and the State

A milestone in the State-fabric-community relationship is the project of Artesanías de Colombia S.A. for the first textile workshops taught by Iris Aguilar (a Wayuu leader and textile artist) and Marta Ramírez (Arijuna textile designer) in La Guajira in the decade of the 1970s. Iris Aguilar remembers:

... before Wayuu women, women, people they knew [the art of Wayuu textile], were only those of an economic power; poor people and normal people did not know it because they deal with herds, with their kitchen. The rich girls, the young ladies were the only ones who knew the topic of fabrics and textiles (...). [Iris Aguilar, interview, 14/03/2016]

Traditionally²¹ Wayuu women learned the weaving art in the *closure* or *whitening* ritual, the step from girl into woman. It begins with the menarche of the girl. In this ritual, the child is separated from the community and secluded in a small cottage where she will learn to knit and become a woman. However, the time of seclusion depends on the economy capacity of the household. Not all Wayuu women have the possibility of being secluded in her own space for a long time, because this implies a large economic investment for the family. The education on knitting techniques received by the *majayut* (Wayuu girl at puberty) is accompanied by an older Wayuu woman with the prestige of being a great artisan; she can be her aunt, her grandmother or an acquaintance, but she will always be paid for her work as a weaving teacher. This is to recognize that knowledge of traditional textile techniques is something valuable.

Iris Aguilar continues remembering that moment when she spoke with her elders and teachers about the possibility of holding weaving workshops with the help of the State (Artesanías de Colombia S.A.) and their resistance to the transformation of the ritual learning dynamics of textile and mass use of this knowledge:

... eh, when I broke that division, I thought about it for two years. I met with my mom and my aunts and old women over there in Nazareth. I said to them, and then they said to me, 'Iris, you are crazy, this is not like that. They will hit you in your head', and that was true (...). That is true if one shares the secrets of the weaving arts with other people. (Vicenta: to Massify) Yes, I said, no, no, this is selfish from you, I told them, and my mom said to me: 'Iris: *no* means *no*' and I said, well, one day I will sit down, and say – I will be able to tell them, yes, I am capable of (...) I have already spoken with Artesanías de Colombia S.A. to make some workshops, the first workshops; then I told my mom if she could be a teacher, she opened her eyes, and told me: 'What? What are you saying?', – This, and so these people also learn how to do that –, 'Iris, you do not do that, this is expensive; when I was taught by my grandmother and aunt, my mom had to pay her sister, and my mom is my mom and all to teach me, which is expensive, you cannot do that'. She told me [her mother]: 'You cannot do that because you are going to be hit in

²¹ The meaning of "traditional" in Wayuu context has a liquid meaning, it is constantly changing, as Wayuu tradition has been always renewed with present techniques.

your head; they will say: *get out of here; we are the sages*'. And that is true, and it is happening, and it is true (...). [Iris Aguilar, interview, 14/03/2016]

This fragment of Iris Aguilar interview talks about the State intervention (she had already spoken with Artesanías de Colombia S.A.) which changes the idea of the value of the Wayuu weaving art, from within the worldview of the community. This intervention seemed to change the idea of the value of the Wayuu textile. Before the artistic capacity, this is aesthetics and technical knowledge of the woman who knew how to weave; it was the element that was valued by the community. Now, with the mass use of knowledge through workshops, it is the object [katoü] that becomes the element that has value. It also tells us who are the ones who impart the knowledge (before and now): Wayuu women.

All the workshops I attended were taught by Wayuu women accompanied by other Wayuu or Arijuna women; they were and are the ones that continue to manage this knowledge: "A Wayuu teacher was coming to teach us. Yes, then she taught us how we should knit, how we should do, how we have to do to make them look very pretty; all right then and there, we started with the SENA" (Gracia, interview, 13/02/2016). But always in the workshop mode, not in another way. As we can see in a fragment of the interview of Iris Aguilar about her project of a textile school:

Then I told them [the university], 'there are many things, why don't we think about those things?' Right now, I am thinking of a textile school here [in her ranchería]. I got close to the University I offered it there. About five years ago I offered again and what happened? They already turned a blind eye. But this year, yes. I said it was better to do it here, whoever wants to do this with me is welcomed, a textile school is a very valid idea. (Iris Aguilar, interview, 14/03/2016)

Wayuu women are not subjects without agency of State actions; many more Wayuu women, like Iris Aguilar, apply to calls for weaving workshops for their communities. They know that through these workshops they can receive supplies in addition to contacts with people who can help in their own katoü sale at a national and international level. There is a strategic interest in that Arijuna ("other") that comes to the wayuu territory with money, aid on workshops. It is possible that the backpack as a material bridge of economic policies of Arijuna society has the problem of being surrounded by codes whose origin is the colonial and extractive relationship that defines the group as part of the landscape of La Guajira. But it can also be thought of as one of the few successful economic policies. It is not successful because it is a product of the Arijuna world, but because it is part of financial practices that arise from the same Wayuu group, from its cultural system, which prioritizes the economic autonomy of women, in a society in which they are central, strong and wise.

6. Conclusions

To make an ethnography in Colombia, La Guajira is a strategic place for capital, because of its natural resources, for the production process of katoü and interventions of Arijunas institutions in this process. It forces us to look Wayuu bags/katoü not only as a beautiful object of female creation but as a mediating object between two cultures in a context of subordination and economic exploitation. The Wayuu community is threatened by

changes and reconfigurations in their territory by multinationals and the Colombian State itself, as a functioning part of the accumulation regime.

Weaving is part of the mixed economy of the Wayuu people. With the intervention of the State (mainly through Artesanías de Colombia S.A. and Sena) and non-state actors, the Wayuu weaving art becomes an object of the market laws and demands. The Wayuu woman is an artisan; it is through her textile that she becomes a productive subject, integrated into the machinery of capital. Furthermore, the indigenous woman is transformed into a readable subject for the State, but if she is only a subject capable of “producing handicrafts” as a one-dimensional subject, the strategies and policies to “improve” the quality of life of the Wayuu community will be one-dimensional solutions. Without water for farming or for raising animals, or other means of subsistence, the Wayuu women, men, and children are forced to sell their work at the cost of a saturated market. Members of the *rancherías* centered in the production of *katoü*, invest most of their time in their production, leaving other productive areas of great importance, such as grazing and cultivation, (where cultural dynamics were self-developed) in a second place. Thus, through an intervention of more than a century by different Arijuna institutions, using the textiles as a medium (especially the *katoü*), certain traditional cultural dynamics of the Wayuu people have been transformed according to the needs of the current accumulation regimes.

Earth looks like a space for exploitation and Wayuu people become producers of capital: the Wayuu artisan. Wayuu people sell their bags at low prices, which then Arijunas sell at a higher price elsewhere (in the *Corte Inglés* in Madrid and airports *katoü* are sold at 90 euros or more). The Wayuu people wear out their bodies, hands, back, and eyes in the production of the *katoü*, very much as earth, their territory, is worn out because of coal mining.

Neglected by the State, threatened by a long-term extractivist economy, the Wayuu community survives, transforms and will undoubtedly remain for a long time, but at the very high cost of human lives.

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