

*Recent findings on indigenous navigation in the North of
Colombia*

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This paper describes recent findings on indigenous navigation in Northern Colombia. We must warn the reader that there is no previous notion that indicates the nautical skills of the indigenous people of Colombia, both in pre-Hispanic times and in colonial and modern times. Perhaps this historiographic trend is due to the statement made by G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, in the 1970s (Londoño, 2011), about the fact that pre-Hispanic social developments had been a consequence of agricultural developments away from the coasts.

When using the notion of “indigenous navigation”, we must bear in mind that we do not discriminate between pre-Columbian times and historical times; thus, the idea is handy to see continuities in material culture practices. Since it is an ongoing investigation, historical, ethnographic, and, to a lesser extent, archaeological sources have been taken to understand indigenous navigation’s general elements in this part of the world.

In some compilations made of colonial documents from the 16th century (Tovar, 1994), it is possible to catch some data about indigenous people’s navigation. In the famous Battle of Pueblo Grande, which occurred perhaps in the summer of 1528, the person who wrote the document reported that several wounded were carried in “rafts and canoes” from the Ciénaga to Santa Marta. This document is of great relevance because it tells us about two types of smaller ships. Later, when the document narrates the explorations north of Santa Marta, the canoes are mentioned as artifacts used in indigenous contexts. It is easy to understand that these ships were used by the natives and not brought by the Spanish. The same cannot be said of the “rafts”, which were probably made by techniques brought from the Iberian Peninsula.

The historiographical information on this matter is scant, although we could not say the same about the historical sources. What happens is that historical sources, such as those of

Spanish archives, have not been explored to evaluate the information related to indigenous technologies.

Regarding historical evidence, colonial documents often narrate aspects of indigenous material culture, and it is there that it is possible to infer the types of naval architecture existing at the time of the conquest; These images narrated in the Spanish chronicles are essential starting points for understanding these technological traditions. However, the archaeological record is more erratic, mainly because the tropical soils' acidity means minimal wood conservation conditions (Sánchez et al. 2008). Although the conservation conditions are eventually more significant at the bottom of the sea, there are still no reports of canoes' underwater finds. However, there is some crucial evidence, such as a pair of anchors found in a pre-Hispanic context (see figure 1). According to the Cabildo Mayor of Taganga, the anchors were found in some town's archaeological context, near the population's current cemetery. In this area and adjacent areas, it is possible to find evidence such as indigenous ceramics, which speak of the site's high archaeological potentials.

The anchors shown in figure 1 are part of the repertoire of indigenous nautical culture elements that rest in the Museum of Memory of the indigenous community of Taganga, Magdalena (Londoño, 2020). In this museum, there is a recreation of the traditional fishing arts that involve canoes, fishing nets, and anchors.

As can be seen in this museum, fishing, as a subsistence practice, is not seen as a historical, exotic and folkloric element. Rather, it is seen as a way of life that has even survived Spanish colonialism (XVI-XIX), internal colonialism (XIX-XX), and global new colonialism (XX-XXI).

From an ethnographic point of view, the evidence on indigenous navigation is more abundant. Along the entire coastline adjacent to the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, it has been possible to detect some canoes made of a single trunk, called "monoxyl", which are part of a naval architecture in the process of disappearing. The monoxyls (Elkin, 2002) are canoes made of a single throne, which, in the case of Colombia, are made of trees such as the snail *Anacardium Excelsum*. The manufacturing process consists of cutting a tree according to the passenger load needs of the canoe to proceed to reduce the trunk to the dimensions that the length would have; later, through the excavation of the trunk, the concavity is made to give the shape to the hull of the ship (see figure 2).

One of the characteristics of the monoxyls, like the one in figure 2, is that they come from family traditions, that is, they are inherited elements, especially from grandparents, whose grandchildren are current fishermen in the region. Monoxiles have not been manufactured again because some decades ago, there are strict regulations on trees' pruning. These vetoes are directly related to the creation of protected areas such as the Tayrona National Natural

Park. In many of these monoxyls, it is possible to see processes of repair of broken parts by various means using wood and synthetic resins that began to arrive in the region in the 1970s.

At present, fishers in areas like Camarones, in the Colombian guajira, have chosen to make their canoes no longer of wood but fiberglass.

In figure 3, we can see that, currently, canoes made of fiberglass are used with sail to navigate the lagoons in parts such as Camarones. This is done mostly by indigenous people of the Wayuu ethnic group.

If we could make a stratigraphy, we would have that monoxyls were manufactured until the 1960s, then they were refurbished until fiberglass was used entirely in the 2000s to replace wood as the primary source of manufacture permanently. Today, as I confirmed with Wayuu weighers, wooden canoes are not repaired, but fiberglass canoes are made and repaired. We face the last phase of the refurbished monoxyls, which will be taken to earth once they have some breakdown to be abandoned or recycled as another type of artifact.

In addition to monoxyl canoes, we found a Mediterranean technique reported in Brazil in northern Colombia (Castro & Gomes-Dias, 2015). This technique consists of the use of molds and ribbands to produce the ships. This technique is used to built ships from following a previous framework, to which slats are added to form parts such as the hull. In the case of northern Colombia, these vessels were used for fishing in areas far from the coast, and in the 1960s and 1970s, diesel engines were added. This technological development is associated with the money that circulated in the region due to the bonanza left by the cultivation of cannabis (see figure 4).Figure 4. Mould and ribbands, Camarones, Riohacha, Guajira

As can be seen in this paper, we have been able to identify, through three types of sources, data on indigenous navigation in northern Colombia. In time, the first source would be the archaeological one. As the two anchors found in Taganga point out, there is substantial evidence of naval technologies to make cabotage on the coast. Then we have the historical reviews, especially the Spanish documents that describe how the indigenous people transported themselves in their canoes. Finally, we have the ethnographic data that tells us about the production of monoxyls, which were no longer manufactured several decades ago; this halt in the production of artifacts was due to the absence of the raw material necessary to produce the canoes.

This type of research is important, because it goes beyond native fishing as an antoquity. By studying indigenous material culture, especially marine technologies, it is possible to understand other forms of periodization of history; from the point of view of the Caribbean's Argonauts, navigation is what indicates, rather than the disappearance of culture, maintaining of the tradition.

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Figure 1. Indigenous anchors from Taganga

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Figure 2. Monoxile from Camarones, Guajira, Colombia



Figure 3. Canoe from Camarones, Riohacha, Guajira, Colombia



Figure 4. Mould and ribbands, Camarones, Riohacha, Guajira