

## SEED SOVEREIGNTY AS A QUEST TO PROTECT ONTOLOGIES BASED ON INDIGENOUS AND ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGES IN SOUTH-WESTERN COLOMBIA

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents one of the insights of my current thesis, which is focused on spelling out how seed sovereignty has become a fight not only to protect agrobiodiversity in south-western Colombia, but also to protect the ontologies of the territory that are based on Indigenous and Ancestral Knowledges (IAK). By applying a Political Ontology (Blaser, 2009; Escobar, 2007; Gutiérrez, 2016) framework, the quest to protect traditional and native seeds will be connected to a fight to preserve ontologies of the territory that have become unified by the embodiment of an ancestral mission as seed savers. The categories used for the two frameworks have been informed by an extensive fieldwork consisting of 50 chosen conversational circles (Kovach, 2009), and semi-structured and unstructured interviews implemented mostly in the department of Nariño, Colombia. In sum, the connection between seed sovereignty and the ontologies based on IAK of south-western Colombia will be presented amidst two main points of discussion and insights. The first one, in terms of IAK as a valid category that is not only emancipatory, as employed by the co-researching communities, but also an important contribution towards plurality and the project of the pluriversum. The evidence of the field work material will be used here to underpin how IAK are a fundamental part for the unification of south-western Colombian ontologies. And the second one will present how the ancestral mission of the territory has become a unifying element materialized within the fight for seed sovereignty in the territory. Lastly, a concluding remark will be drawn regarding how the ontologies of south-western Colombia

have materialized a political goal through seed sovereignty to further materialize an ancestral mission and offer a possible alternative to current challenges.

## INTRODUCTION: SEED SOVEREIGNTY, DEFINITION AND RELATION TO ONTOLOGY

As a concept, there are several definitions of seed sovereignty, which may vary depending on the ontology connected to it. Following the definition of the Seed Guardians Network of Colombia (SGN), which is a pioneering seed saving grassroots organization from southwestern Colombia, seed sovereignty is the freedom of seeds to reproduce, be exchanged, sown, harvested, and saved as a family (Red de Guardianes de Semillas, 2021, p. 11) to promote genetic agrobiodiversity (Krishna et al., 2016; Scaramuzzi et al., 2021). As Alba Portillo, the founder of SGN, explained, this also involves the protection of agrobiodiversity against the ecosystemic, cultural, social, and ontological consequences created by widespread use of agrochemicals, genetic contamination, and soil erosion (M. Altieri, 2000, 2009; M. A. Altieri, 2003, 2005; M. A. Altieri & Nicholls, 2005, 2012).

The ontology of the seed savers of SGN is a relational one (Escobar, 2022; Kothari et al., 2023), by which seeds are interconnected with all other beings, and conceived not just as living things with full agency of their own, but also made of the same essence as human beings. Below are excerpts of two interviews, one with a Campesino, which is a non-indigenous form of identity connected to land, and another one with an Indigenous leader:

Seeds are the basis of life, and seeds are part of who we are (...) Seeds are part of the family of our territory (...). If one seed is lost, a whole life is lost, and not just the life of the seed itself, but also the life that is inside of us. And by life of us, I do not only mean the life of us Seed Guardians, but the life of everyone in the territory, and of all species that are cohabitating the territory. Protecting seeds is an important goal on its own, because it means to protect who we are, the life that we have in the territory, and all the species that live in it. (Alba Portillo – co-founder of the SGN, 2025, conversational circle)

Likewise, in the words of one of the members of the SGN, which is the governor of the Pasto indigenous reserve of Gran Tescual in Puerres, Nariño:

Well, the seed, as I told you, in other words, is who we are (...) So, we start from the fact that we are also a seed, right? We, for example, are the seed (...) we too

are constituting seeds, or, in other words, we are seeds that can generate transformations. And the seeds come to us, because, well, we are seeds too, we are stardust. So when we talk about...planting seeds, then we immediately celebrate it... and by doing it, we recognize that spiritual, ancient, cultural pigment that comes from what we are: Cosmos, children of the stars (....)

It is also important to mention that, from other ontologies, whether similar or different to that of the SGN, Seed sovereignty has for example been connected to a food sovereignty framework (Adhikari, 2024; Greenberg et al., 2021; Jefferson & Adhikari, 2019; Kloppenburg, 2014, p. 1225; Nishikawa & Pimbert, 2022, pp. 21–24; Shiva, 2012; Trauger, 2015; Wach, 2016, p. 62; Wittman et al., 2010), as part of a public good economy (Gaia Foundation, 2023), as part of a political movement (Hernández Rodríguez, 2023; Peschard & Randeria, 2020), as a biocultural right (Bezner Kerr, 2013; Girard et al., 2022, pp. 145–159), or also as a farmer's rights (Nyantakyi-Frimpong & Carlson, 2024) evidencing a conflict of ontologies (Gutiérrez Escobar, 2016; Gutiérrez Escobar & Fitting, 2016).

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology included the implementation and selection of 50 semi-structured and unstructured interviews (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; King, 1994) and conversational method (Kovach, 2009) circles, which were recorded and transcribed with the goal of understanding IAK and the ontologies of seed savers and guardians. The recordings were implemented between April and June of 2025, mostly in the department of Nariño, Colombia, and with members of the SGN and other seed saving organizations and activists in Colombia. It is important to note, that I am a member of the SGN, and have ancestral roots in the territory, for which the SGN considers me a part of the family in the territory, which highly facilitated the implementation of the field work. The recordings additionally followed free, prior, and informed consent by obtaining such consent verbally and by establishing a direct line of communication and ongoing involvement of the co-researchers in all of the phases of my research. Because of this, the people are not seen as participants but as co-researchers who are actively contributing to the research, and will continue to do so even after I finish my PhD.

The usefulness of applying a combined mix of interviews and conversational methods lies on their sound ethical underpinnings that favor a direct and effective inclusion of the communities in the research, and because they focus on a language of the 'spirit' (Meyer, 2008, p. 227) or the 'soul', where feelings and spiritual connections are more communicative than words. Thereby, in order to understand, for example, how people can feel, and talk to the seeds, and how seeds talk back, conversational methods, semi-structured and non-structured interviews can provide flexibility to facilitate a better understanding. The methodology also

attempted (...) to unveil knowledge that was previously ignored...” (Chilisa, 2011, p. 100), while being careful to avoid romanticization of communities’ knowledges by focusing on how ontologies are effectively manifested through seed saving practices and materialized connections. The respect of the self-determination (International Labour Organization, 1989; United Nations General Assembly, 2007) of the communities was taken as a guide to provide methodological validity, as it allows communities to share experiences in their own terms (Kovach, 2009, p. 82).

#### INDIGENOUS AND ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGES: THE ANCESTRAL MISSION AS UNIFYING ELEMENTS OF THE ONTOLOGIES IN SOUTH-WESTERN COLOMBIA

As a result of the field work trip, it was evidenced that the ancestral mission is a fundamental element that allows the ontology of seed savers of the department of Nariño in south-western Colombia, to be unified. In other words, the ancestral mission assigned by the territory is one of the fundamental connecting elements that allows the ontologies of Indigenous, Campesinos and people that do not have such an identity, to adopt the same ontology (Bartra & Otero, 2019; López et al., 2023; Volverás-Mambuscay et al., 2021). And not only the same ontology, but also a corresponding political project for seed sovereignty, as explained by Camilo Muñoz, a seed saver of Quillacinga background from Nariño (Muñoz, 2025, personal interview). This is something that does not happen frequently in other territories of the country, for such identities may be clashing in terms of their ontologies and their political projects (Fontana, 2014)

In order to link ontologies to a political struggle, the framework of Political Ontology was used, which was underpinned by the concepts developed by Mario Blaser (Blaser, 2009, 2013, 2014), Arturo Escobar (Escobar, 2007, 2017, 2019, 2022) and Laura Gutiérrez Escobar (2016). Mario Blaser (2009) and Arturo Escobar (2014) provided a conceptualization of an ontologies as tantamount to worlds or embodied stories that depict ways of being amidst combined land-based thinking and feeling. Laura Gutiérrez (2016) research served as an antecedent to depict conflicts on the use of as clashing ontologies that propose different political projects.

The ontologies of seed savers of Nariño were expressed when the co-researchers (The people participating in the interviews and conversational circles), explicitly spoke about their ontology but also when they spoke about their ways of being and worldings, including struggles to protect them in the political arena. During several moments, the community used a concept, which is also formalized during my research, which is that of Indigenous and Ancestral Knowledges or IAK. This concept combines elements of knowledge systems of Indigenous Peoples and Campesinos, which can be conceived as a plural rural identity (Rico Rodríguez & Urquijo Torres, 2021). Seed savers or guardians of Nariño referred to IAK as a fundamental but marginalized element of their ontology, which is the one that contains the

interconnectedness of everything that happens on a spiritual dimension (Meyer, 2008, p. 270). Below is an excerpt of an interview of an agroecology activist and worker of Nariño, who is neither Indigenous nor Campesino, but which introduces the importance of IAK:

So, we have Indigenous and Campesino communities that have been always very closely linked to the biodiversity of the territory, and know their value at first hand. This generates several knowledges in the communities that are very vast and little explored, as there is no real recognition of such Ancestral and Indigenous knowledges (...) (Carlos Mauricio Trujillo, 2025, personal interview)

The term IAK has antecedents in the ways in which south-western Colombian ontologies have been historically underpinned by an ancestral connection to land and the community (Angulo et al., 2019; Caicedo, 1981). Under this ancestral connection, Indigenous Peoples and Campesinos, but also people that live in the territory and have neither of this identities, have become unified in the construction of communitarian and political ways of organization around seed sovereignty, understood as the protection of agroecology (Barogil et al., 2014; López et al., 2023; Volverás-Mambuscay et al., 2021) and traditional and native seeds (Villafuerte, 2017).

The category of IAK recognizes the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems and the struggle for the recognition of Indigenous stewardship on the Andean ecosystem, while also attributing a central dimension to the ancestral connection to the territory, which is the ultimate unifying element for all seed savers of the region (Fontana, 2014; Moreno-Lopez et al., 2020; Volverás-Mambuscay et al., 2021). In that sense, the use of IAK evidenced a transformative and unifying nature as it was used by members of the SGN as a way to embody the struggle of seed sovereignty that is shared by the ontologies of seed savers in south-western Colombia (López et al., 2023). Including an IAK category, in parallel to the existing categories such as Traditional Ecological Knowledges (TEK) and sole Indigenous Knowledges, promotes pluralism and enlarges the Pluviersum spectrum by including new worldviews under the umbrella of resistance against colonial structures that promote fragmentating identities (Maddison, 2013).

The interviews with Indigenous, Campesinos and other inhabitants of Nariño showed that many ontologies of Nariño entail the embodiment of IAK as seed savers, and the transcendence of a historical process of marginalization and fragmentation of ontologies that used to be unified. That is, without disregarding the victories of the global Indigenous and Campesinos movements, the seed savers of Nariño expressed their concern by the political and ontological differentiation lived in other territories between Indigenous and Campesinos. Below is an excerpt of one of the co-researchers:

(...) Protecting seeds is a way of protecting our ancestral knowledges, which mean also protecting the memories of our ancestors that taught us that we are

one with nature (...) Seeds speak to me, as they also speak to us members of the Seed Guardians Network, because we have accepted our ancestral duty and mission in the territory (...) our friends in Tescual or in Ipiales know this as well as us. We are all part of the family, and so, the problem is that in our territory, people are no longer willing to listen to what the land and the seeds have to say (Sonia Miranda 2025, personal interview)

Although there have been victories of the Indigenous and Campesino movements that have been materialized through tools such as UNDRIP 2007 (United Nations General Assembly, 2007) or UNDROP 2018 (United Nations General Assembly, 2018), several seed savers of Nariño expressed that such differential tools have meant differential access to rights, which in turn creates political division. In the case of Nariño, Campesinos and Indigenous peoples, and also people who do not have such an identity, have however managed to maintain a unified ontology (López Cortés, 2018) because IAK is embodied by the shared quest for seed sovereignty or seed autonomy seed guardians. In addition, this is an embodiment of an assigned ancestral mission of the territory. In the words of the Pasto Indigenous governor of the Gran Tescual reserve:

We can understand seed autonomy to be a fight to preserve the Indigenous and Ancestral Knowledges of our region, and of course we will form part of this (...) What we want, is what you all want as well, which is simple... the recognition of who we are, that is, in our territory, (...) this means that our seed saving initiatives are not only respected but also promoted... this also means that our ancestral knowledges will be able to hopefully influence the policies of the future (...) If we are all unified in what we are, as you know, in the sacred essence of what human beings and nature, and a profound spiritual and ancestral link with the territory, then we will not have any problems with defining seed autonomy or at least in framing this (Taita Vicente, 2025, conversational circle)

### *The ancestral mission in south-western Colombia and seed sovereignty*

As a part of IAK that informs the ontologies of seed savers of Nariño, the members of the SGN expressed that they have an ancestral mission to protect the family of the territory, which is, in other words, the commitment to protect the agrobiodiverse family of the territory of Nariño (Red de Guardianes de Semillas, 2021, pp. 10–11). In this sense, the members of the SGN, whether Indigenous or campesino, equally shared this ancestral mission in importance, and also in terms of its strong underpinning for their ontology, that is, to understand what is and what exists in the world (Ulloa et al., 2007). For the SGN, the ancestral mission to protect the family of the territory is then manifested in a political

struggle to promote agrobiodiversity and help generate policies that protect the ways of life in the territory and its spirituality

Taita Raúl Cuastumal, who is the governor of the Indigenous Pasto reserve of Muellamúes, also spoke about the importance of the ancestral mission to embody an ontology of seed savers that allows one to speak with seeds, and not in the metaphorical way:

If one has managed to establish an ancestral connection with the territory, and has embodied the ancestral knowledges of the territory, which also means that an ancestral mission has been assigned and is starting to materialized, then they become part of the family of the territory and will thus understand and connect to seeds. Only then, will they know that seeds actually talk to us... and the trees, and the land, and every single bit of life. The seeds have been speaking to us, and we have been able to speak to them, since the birth of our communities. And in order to talk to the seeds, you do not need to be Indigenous or Campesino, you need to be able to connect with your own soul (...) Because if you really connect with your soul, you will know that you, yourself have always been part of Mother Nature, and realize that you are also one with our ancestors and with the land. Only then, you can talk to seeds, and they will talk to you. Only then, will you realize that they have always been talking but you haven't been listening (...) So, you do not need to be recognized as Indigenous or Campesino to be able to protect traditional and native seeds. You need to simply connect yourself with the land, with the ancestral territory. And as in your case, be assigned a mission to then become part of the family of the territory (Taita Raúl Cuastumal, 2025, personal interview)

Another example can be found in the testimony of a neo-farmer from Nariño, Guillermo Torres, who is not a member of the SGN, but also expressed his commitment to the ancestral mission assigned to him by the territory of Nariño. Guillermo expressed that he decidedly accepted his ancestral mission very early in his life, while also acknowledging the many ways of materialization that it would adopt in his life (Moreno-Lopez et al., 2020). That is, an ancestral mission can adopt many ways of materialization, which in the case of Guillermo was reflected in different chapters of his life. Guillermo expressed how his ancestral mission is directly linked to protect IAK of the territory:

There still a way of being in the territory of Nariño that has not been fully lost... although it is very much at risk, because of... you know, this system of selfishness and individualism that has been pushed into our modern societies (...) When you go to the countryside of Nariño, it is as if you have entered a completely new space of human connection, that is, nature connection (...) It is more than frowned upon to think that your individual preferences matter... the individual

doesn't matter here, the group does! And... still, this is ever present in our territory, fortunately... still, we think collectively, we think as one, sometimes... and this is something that we must protect. (Guillermo Torres, 2025, personal interview)

As Guillermo, others such Taita Vicente Obando, of the Indigenous Pasto Reserve of Gran Tescual, or Taita Raúl Cuastumal, of the Indigenous Pasto Reserve of Muellamúes, explained that a mission can only become one if it is accepted and materialized. And in order to accept the mission, one has to be aware of it, and how it is linked to one's own ontology. In the case of the members of the SGN, the constant dialogue with seeds, through which they receive direct messages, allows them to accept and materialize their ancestral mission by mean of their everyday seed saving practices and political activism to push for agroecology policies. Such is the case of one of the senior members of the SGN, Aura Lina Domínguez, who embodied the quest against genetic contamination in the municipality of San Lorenzo, Nariño, by actively preserving traditional and native seeds and growing them (Domínguez, 2025, conversational circle).

During the field work of 2025, two other concepts were brought up by the co-researchers: Buen Vivir and Catholic values. Several Campesinos, such as Rosa and Marina Cojoa, who are not members of the SGN, but are activist seed savers and members of the Quillacinga Indigenous community of El Encano, used the concept of Buen Vivir (Rosa and Marina Cojoa, 2025, conversational circle), as mission to commit to a way of life in harmony between Nature, the Community and their individual health (Acosta, 2013; Gudynas, 2011; Waldmüller, 2014). Furthermore, members of the SGN constantly referred to God as an energy that reminds them about the mission to serve others, which is indeed ontologically similar to the Catholic notion of a mission (Imbruglia, 2014). The catholic faith, although very controversial amongst some seed savers, was, however embraced by others, who said they collectively received an ancestral mission, which is similar to the catholic concept of a mission becoming revealed through contact with other people (Mooney, 2009).

Buen Vivir was also expressed by other co-researchers within an ancestral mission that can be materialized as a source of hope, or rather an imaginary of hope (Acosta, 2013, 2016) in the context of the department of Nariño. In this context, the philosophy or development concept of Buen Vivir was understood as a materialization of the ancestral mission assigned by the territory. This was evidenced by the narratives of hope assumed by members of SGN and other seed savers, that directly tied Buen Vivir to the assignment of an ancestral mission in the territory of Nariño, which unified the ontology of both Campesinos and Indigenous:

(...) Seeds for me are life. A life that can be found in you and in me, and in everything that at this moment surrounds us. (...) And I want a life of Buen Vivir  
(...) This is why I am still waiting one day to be able to purchase this part of

additional land that you see here... I want to extend the natural reserve and build a house here (...) It is my duty, and my dream, my ancestral mission, to keep protecting our territory and our traditional and native seeds, and so I have done. This mission is what connects us all Campesinos and Indigenous throughout the territory of our sacred Nariño. So, you see? We protect our ancestral seeds because they are part of the life that is also inside of us. And we, as Campesinos know this, as well as our Indigenous allies (Aura Lina Dóminguez, 2025, personal interview).

Another member of the SNG who materialized his ancestral mission through the creation of memory cuisine, Mario Mora, also connected this mission to a narrative of hope for Buen Vivir as a means of resistance against the coercion of the capitalist system:

My Buen Vivir is lived by what I am doing right now (...) I am lucky to have found a materialization of my ancestral mission here in Taller de Amasijos. This is the mission that I also assumed when I joined the SGN, and that we hope that all people that come through here, understand, and start embracing. Protecting seeds, the wildness of nature, is also important, because we cannot forget who we are (Mario Mora, 2025, personal interview)

### *The Ancestral mission in other territories*

The concept of ancestral mission is however not unique to the department of Nariño or south-western Colombia. There are other parts of Colombia, in which communities also adopt this type of mission as a way to guide their actions and express their ontology (Osorio Calvo, 2017). Such is the case, for example, of Indigenous peoples of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, which is a sacred territory located in the northern part of Colombia. In their ontology, the mission is a collective one assigned to the ethnicities of the territory and consists mainly of maintaining the spiritual balance in their territory, to which they refer as the heart of the world. Furthermore, they introduce an ontological concept used by some Indigenous peoples called the Law of Origin, which is a set of rules and ancestral knowledges that regulate human-nature interactions:

(...) For the ethnic groups of the Sierra Nevada, all things and manifestations that exist in the universe are represented in their territory through these representations. Communication is maintained, and from that territory they have the mission of maintaining the balance of the world in a spiritual way. That is why they consider the Sierra to be the Heart of the world (Beltrán, 2017, p.34)

For the ethnic or Indigenous communities that inhabit the territory of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the ancestral mission is associated with an ontology that assumes human beings to be sons and daughters of Mother Earth (Prieto, 2014), and thus acquire an ancestral duty towards her. Such duty mainly involves restoring the harmony with its spirit, nature and all of its elements. In the case of the Arhuacos, which are one of the Indigenous peoples that inhabit the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the ancestral mission is accomplished by equally protecting the territory and all the interconnected networks of the ecosystem as well as advocating for the cultural and sociopolitical order of the Arhuaco peoples (Beltran, 2017, pp. 34–39).

Furthermore, the connection between the mission and the emancipatory need to unify previously separated ontologies becomes evident in the following paragraph:

(...) From there, each people's commitment to autonomy, and to the recovery, recreation, reconfiguration, and re-emergence of their particular and convergent collective identities and their own governing structures, has been tied to this ancestral territorial unity, to the original common bond that these four peoples maintain with it, and as an expression of their joint commitment to its quest (Juan Pablo Muñoz Onofre, 2024, p. 220).

## CONCLUSION

This article presented seed sovereignty as a political materialization of ontologies of south-western Colombia, which are informed by IAK and the materialization of an ancestral mission of the territory. With the help of a field work trip involving conversational circles (Kovach, 2009), semi-structured and unstructured interviews, as well as a Political Ontology analysis (Blaser, 2003; Escobar, 2015; Gutiérrez, 2016), the ontologies of seed savers were connected to IAK as an emancipatory and unifying element that enriches the pluriversum. In addition, such ontologies were shown to be diverse, as they sometimes included elements from narratives or life projects such as Buen Vivir or catholic values.

The embodiment of the ancestral mission assigned and accepted in the territory of Nariño, as seed guardians and savers, was shown to be a mechanism through which the ontologies of Campesinos, Indigenous and other people in Nariño, have become unified. As the quest for seed sovereignty in Colombia faces the challenges of a divided and fragmented agroecology movement (M. A. Altieri & Nicholls, 2019), a way out of such divisions could be a search for unification through the alignment of ancestral mission, which has been proven to be a shared concept for other peoples and Indigenous communities (Monje Carvajal, 2015). Furthermore, if seed sovereignty is understood also as a political quest to protect ontologies, the case of the SGN and other savers of Nariño can be a guiding of example of unifying ontologies that

have managed to create a political advocacy strategy to protect nature-cultures (Coombe & Jefferson, 2021) and agrobiodiversity (M. Altieri, 2009; Lokhandwala, 2022).

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