Oral Testimonies of Traditional Medicine

A *Kamëntša* Woman's Legacy

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an oral testimony of Mamita Maria Dolores, a Kamëntša elder and healer from the Sibundoy Valley in southwest Colombia. Through an interview, the author documents the intertwined dimensions of Kamëntša ancestral knowledge, women's roles, healing practices, and the cultural significance of the *chagra*. Mamita's narratives reveal how spirituality, plant medicine, storytelling, and communal labor sustain Kamëntša identity amid the enduring impacts of colonization, language loss, and social change. Her personal history—rooted in midwifery, uterine care, herbal medicine, and community leadership—embodies the resilience and continuity of Indigenous women's knowledge. The article blends ethnographic reflection with lived testimony, offering a window into a worldview in which healing, land, memory, and womanhood remain profoundly interconnected.

Introduction

> *That's how we've been caring for each other—healing one another with what we know.*
>
> *- Mamita Maria Dolores*

Like many before me, I visited the valley of Sibundoy during my travels in Colombia, drawn by the promise of glimpsing a way of life that has withstood centuries of disruption. Originally from Greece, I had been living in Colombia for four months, continuing a personal journey that, over the past year, had led me to explore the cultures, customs, and traditions of Indigenous civilizations across the Americas. Growing up in Crete, the largest island of Greece, I always had a profound connection with the natural world around me. I took that innate connection for granted and assumed it was a common experience for everyone. My childhood was filled with the rhythms of the land, the wisdom of my grandparents, and the nurturing presence of traditional foods and healing herbs. It was an effortless, natural connection; simply a part of the way I grew up. I never had to put too much thought into it or question it.

As I grew older, I found myself drifting away from those roots. My grandparents also aged and eventually passed. I left Greece for the United States, where I was confronted with a startling realization: many people around me lived profoundly disconnected from the land, their bodies, and ancestral wisdom. That way of life really shocked me. In that disconnection, I began searching for ways to heal, ways to reconnect with my body, my spirit and my values, and ways to help me remember how to care for myself in

the way I once had at home. That search led me to the rich histories and healing practices of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. I found great comfort in those stories. Among the many stories that resonated with me, one in particular stood out: the story of the valley of Sibundoy. As I read and researched more, I felt an undeniable pull toward this place.

I had read about the two Indigenous civilizations, the Kamëntša and Inga peoples, who still call this valley home, whose histories are inseparable from its land's rivers, forests, and sacred mountains. What fascinated me most was how, despite colonization, cultural erasure, and the relentless advance of modern industries, they have preserved a worldview where nature and community are inseparable—a way of life that feels both ancient and urgently relevant today.

I was also fascinated to learn that Sibundoy is considered to hold the world's greatest diversity of medicinal and psychoactive plants—hundreds of species that these peoples have cultivated with care and continue to use to this day.

Driven by this fascination, I decided to visit Sibundoy during the festival of Bëtsknaté, or the Carnival of Forgiveness, which was taking place at the end of February. Bëtsknaté marks the beginning of a new year for the Kamëntša people. It is a time to celebrate the valley's unique culture and heritage, to give thanks for the bounty delivered by Mother Earth over the past year, and to gather in the spirit of reconciliation, peace, and respect. It is a celebration of the past, the present, and the future. It sounded magical. And that was where—and when—my journey truly began.

Figure 1
View of the Sibundoy Valley during the Carnival of Forgiveness.

Location

The Sibundoy Valley is nestled high in the Colombian Andes, in the southwest of the country, within the upper north of the Putumayo region. It hangs in a high basin, an ancient lake bed ringed by mountains that rise two thousand feet above the plain. To the west, the road leads to Pasto, a colonial city perched at the base of the Galeras volcano. To the east, the Andes drop sharply into the Amazon lowlands. At this latitude, the mountains narrow to just 70 miles across, making Sibundoy the shortest route between the Pacific and the Amazon. For thousands of years, despite its seeming isolation, the valley has been a natural crossroads for people, goods, and ideas moving across South America (Davis 1996)

Today, the valley is home to four different towns—Sibundoy, San Francisco, Santiago, and

Colón. Sibundoy is the heart of the Kamëntša culture and the point of reference for the valley's history. It is also the oldest settlement in the valley. The Inga population is present mainly in the towns of Santiago and Colón. Kamëntša communities remain primarily in Sibundoy, though they are also present in San Francisco (Chindoy 2020). Kamëntša means "Men from here with their own thoughts and language," referring to the fact that their language does not belong to other linguistic families, so their system of thought is Indigenous (Escobar Upegui 2024).

Figure 2
View of the Sibundoy Valley. Source: Wikimedia Commons, "Sibundoy Valley," via Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sibundoy)

History & Colonization

The history of Sibundoy is deeply marked by invasion and colonization. Long before the arrival of the Spanish in 1534, the Inca had invaded the Kamëntša in 1492, establishing a Quechua-speaking settlement whose descendants are today's Inga people. In 1541, Hernán Pérez de Quesada led a brutal expedition in search of El Dorado, leaving thousands of Indigenous people who belonged to the Muisca—one of the two main groups that had inhabited Colombia until that point—dead along the way. They arrived in Sibundoy and found no gold—just rival Spaniards who had arrived before them.

Within four years of the Spanish arrival in Sibundoy, Franciscan missionaries who were based in Quito established a mission in Sibundoy and attempted to eradicate ancestral practices—banning dances, destroying ritual objects, and condemning shamans. Yet Indigenous spirituality persisted, surviving underground despite centuries of pressure. The shamans prevailed. When the Franciscans were expelled from Colombia in 1767, the valley entered a period of relative autonomy. For decades, commercial trade developed in Sibundoy, and the influence of the Church remained minimal. From 1846 to 1899, there was not even a resident priest in the valley.

By the late 19th century, however, global demand for quinine and, later, rubber renewed outside interest in the region. In 1900, the Colombian government granted the Capuchin missionaries (who were a reformed movement within the Franciscan order, which primarily came from Spain) absolute control over the Amazon. Their mandate was to evangelize Indigenous peoples; their purpose was to establish Colombia's presence and secure economic and political interests. Sibundoy became their administrative and spiritual base. For decades, the Capuchins ruled with the authority of both church and state, shaping the valley into a colonial theocracy while continuing to suppress Kamëntša traditions.

The arrival of white settlers, along with the Capuchin mission, drastically transformed the political, economic, and social organization of the valley. Claiming mutual consent, the Capuchins divided Kamëntša and Inga lands into separate zones for natives and whites. In 1903, they split the Kamëntša territory, assigning the historical town of Sibundoy to the natives and creating the white village of San Francisco. In 1911, they divided the Inga territory: Santiago was designated for the Ingas, while whites were given the town of Sucre, later renamed Colón. San Francisco, they argued, would bring peace and tranquility to all the valley's inhabitants; Colón, they insisted, would bring prosperity and civilization—though only through acceptance of Spanish culture and Catholic practices. In practice, the foundation of these towns legalized the seizure of Indigenous land (Chindoy 2020; Davis 1996)

Since the second decade of the 20th century, Sibundoy has been a tapestry of suffering and hope, resilience and fear, syncretism and survival. Walking across the valley today, one can see this history written into the land: downtowns inhabited mainly by white and mestizo populations, while surrounding rural areas remain living enclaves of Kamëntša and Inga culture. The Kamëntša and Inga peoples, like so many Indigenous nations across the world, have carried the weight of colonization, missionary imposition, and systemic attempts at cultural erasure. Yet, despite centuries of violence and dispossession, they persist in safeguarding their languages, their ceremonies, and their relationship with the land. This resilience is not abstract. It is lived and embodied in daily practices, in prayers spoken at dawn, in community gatherings, and in the knowledge passed from one generation to the next (Chindoy 2020; Davis 1996)

Storytelling

Storytelling is the oldest and most enduring symbolic expression of the Kamëntša culture. It is through stories that the ancestors transformed the Sibundoy Valley from a temporary refuge into a sacred home—*Bëngbe Tabanok*, their place of origin. These stories emerged from a deep sense of relationality with the land: the rivers, the winds, the plants, and the mountains. Even the Kamëntša language carries traces of this bond. The locative suffix -oy, found in place names such as Sibundoy, Shonjayoy (San Pedro creek), and Vinyioy (windy place), now lives on in family names like Juajibioy, Dejoy, and Mutumbajoy, weaving a sense of personal belonging to a sacred place.

Through the act of telling and retelling, these stories not only immortalized the ancestors' connection to the land but also created a cultural map for future generations, offering meaning, orientation, and continuity. In Kamëntša tradition, storytelling is not static; it is alive, a participatory process where listeners and tellers alike engage in the unfolding of time. Elders often say that, in cultivating the land, they were also cultivating their stories: speaking to the plants, listening to the winds, and dreaming with the earth (Chindoy 2020).

In many ways, the interview, as a research method widely used in qualitative studies to capture oral and personalized accounts (Folgueiras Bertomeu 2016), serves as a bridge to this ancient practice. While interviews aim to document experiences, perspectives, and memories for academic purposes, in contexts like Sibundoy they also serve as vessels for living stories. Each conversation becomes more than data collection; it becomes a dialogue where history, identity, and wisdom are not merely recorded but actively shared, nurtured, and honored. In this sense, the scientific and the sacred converge: the interview transforms into a modern ritual of listening, allowing the old practice of storytelling to continue unfolding in new ways.

It was in this spirit of living memory that I met Maria Dolores, a Kamëntša elder and a *mamita*. She is one of the guardians of these ancestral narratives, a woman whose life's work is to safeguard her people's living memory through ritual, healing practices, and prayer. Her wisdom is deeply rooted in the care of the female body—guiding young women through menarche, easing uterine pain or displacement, supporting midwifery, and tending to the sacred thresholds of pre- and postnatal care (Sanalee 2024). For the mamita, being a woman is to be a giver of life. As the Kamëntša teaching *Tsabatsanamamá*—"Life First"—reminds, life must be nurtured at every level: caring for Mother Earth and all beings that emerge from her, tending to the plants that nourish and heal us, offering guidance through words and prayer, and holding space for both the spiritual and physical care of the community.

Maria Dolores welcomed me into her home with warmth and generosity, sharing her time and stories without hesitation. This article grew from a one-hour, unplanned interview with her, carefully transcribed and translated to preserve the texture and cadence of her words. It wasn't a project I had envisioned; it came to life in the wake of our spontaneous encounter. As I asked my questions and recorded her answers, her life unfolded before me, a life rooted in communal strength, ancestral knowledge, prayer, and ceremony. The questions became a bridge, linking the academic intent of qualitative research with the Kamëntša tradition of oral history. What emerged was more than information: it was a dialogue, a co-creation of memory and meaning, honoring both the scientific rigor of documentation and the sacred continuity of her people's stories. Whenever possible, I cross-referenced her accounts with existing academic literature, weaving together her narratives with documented knowledge. In some cases, where no references could be found, her stories stand not only as personal memories but also as cultural testimony. They will carry on as living evidence of history held in voice and experience.

Indigenous women like Maria Dolores are more than keepers of ancient wisdom—they are active agents of cultural survival and ecological restoration. As discussed earlier, many such interviews, which are like vessels for an ancient ritual of storytelling, have been conducted to honor these voices that hold the power to heal, to resist, and to remind us of ways of living that modernity too often forgets. This, to me, is why amplifying Indigenous women's voices matters:

they have always stood at the frontlines of both resistance and renewal.

The times we live in demand that we listen—that we let these gentle, authentic ways of living and healing touch our hearts, and guide us in reweaving our connection to the world. Let this article serve not just as a record of one Indigenous woman's wisdom, but also as a call to action: to protect Indigenous women's legacy, which, in truth, is our shared inheritance.

Healing

I first met Mamita Maria Dolores through a friend who was receiving treatment from her for gynecological issues. My friend said Maria Dolores was an expert in such matters—a healer known in the community for her skill. Instinctively, and without giving it much thought, I asked if I could accompany her to a session and stay afterwards for an interview. I had been in

Sinbundoy for about two weeks already and had many interesting encounters with locals, but this was the first time I would get to meet a Kamëntša mamita.

The next morning, we arrived at her home. She greeted us warmly, a soft smile lingering, and led us into a small room where she performs her healing work. Before we fully entered, I asked permission to take photos and videos. She agreed, but said she wished to wear her traditional clothing for the filming. The Indigenous Kamëntša women wear long, blue and violet ponchos called *kapisaius* and *baitas*. She left to change, and we waited in the quiet wooden room.

The room was simple: two wooden chairs, a shelf holding small bottles filled with various liquids and herbs, and a bed covered with bright, woven blankets. Outside, roosters crowed and dogs barked, their voices carrying in the morning air. When she returned, she wore a striking blue cape that seemed to hold the weight of her identity. She explained that she would begin with my friend's treatment and then we would have time for the interview.

Figure 3
Mamita Maria Dolores inside her healing space. Photograph by Rozalia Agioutanti.

Maria Dolores asked about her patient's progress. She was treating her for irregular bleeding and sharp uterine pain, prescribing a special herbal tea to be taken several times a day, and a colorful woven belt covered in Kamëntša symbols to be worn around the waist. Both practices can be traced back to the Kamëntša cultural history and their ancestral knowledge of the *chagra*, or *jajañ*—a sacred space where a diversity of plants are cultivated for food, ritual, and medicine. Within the chagra, medicinal plants, known as *shnan*, hold a special place.

Research on the use of plants for gynecological conditions (Díaz Rubio and Asenjo-Alarcó 2023) highlights that medicinal plants have been used since ancient times to treat a variety of health problems.

Figure 4
Mamita Maria Dolores' healing space. Photograph by Rozalia Agioutanti.

This knowledge, carefully passed down through generations, has made medicinal plants a reliable and effective alternative to synthetic medications, particularly because, when used responsibly, they have minimal side effects. Giraldo Tafur (2000) argues that this healing practice is rooted in an intimate understanding of the ecological environment, enriched over time by the exchange of knowledge and remedies. During the period of Spanish colonization, a process of integration between European and Indigenous medical systems took place. While colonial medicine often failed to address new diseases due to a lack of understanding of the Latin American environment, the Hispanic pharmacopoeia was enriched by the knowledge of Amerindian peoples, incorporating Indigenous plants and remedies alongside species brought from Europe, Asia, China, and India. This fusion of practices gave rise to a hybrid medical tradition—one that continues to live on in the Kamëntša approach to healing today.

The belt, called *tsõmbiachë*, is traditionally used to cover the stomachs of women and newborn babies—a gesture that honors the origin of life by wrapping it in meaningful stories. The tsõmbiachë is considered an essential garment for the care of a woman's body, particularly her womb. It is traditionally worn during pregnancy, menstruation, or moments of physical pain to keep the womb in place and to support the body through these transformative cycles. Its use also extends to postpartum care, where it is tied around the belly to protect the uterus and support the organs as they return to their natural state.

For Kamëntša women, the belly is more than a part of the body. It is the heart of the woman. To care for the belly is to care for the heart, for the center of life itself. When they wrap themselves in the belt, they wrap themselves in the history of the sacred places and the sacred elements of the territory. This history is captured in the symbols of the belt, giving them strength to sustain their belly, their womb, their heart. They feel protected by their roots, their territory and their community. In this way, the tsõmbiachë provides more than physical support; it is a sacred symbol of protection and belonging, a living bond between women, their roots, and their community.

Therefore, the tsõmbiachë carries an eminently feminine connotation; its very fibers are woven with the collective memory and hopes of the Kamëntša community. Through patient and intentional weaving, Kamëntša women have kept their ancestral stories alive—stories once whispered in secret during times of oppression and now spoken openly in everyday conversation. When a Kamëntša woman weaves the tsõmbiachë, the past, the present, and the future converge in the rhythm of her hands, infusing the belt with meaning beyond its physical form. This act of weaving condenses the art of storytelling within the Kamëntša tradition.

The beauty of the belt's symbols and patterns lies not only in their design but also in the stories shared alongside them. Without the storytelling, the fabric would lose the essence that makes it sacred. Even the materials hold deep significance: the wool, once dyed with vibrant vegetable pigments, is said to resemble a newborn—raw life, tender and full of possibility, ready to be nurtured and shaped by the cultural conceptions of nature that surround it. In this way, the spinning and unwinding of wool become acts of humanization, transforming mere fibers into vessels of heritage.

Through this process, the tsõmbiachë becomes both a protective layer for the womb and a timeless thread that ties generations together—a practical garment imbued with spiritual meaning, carrying the resilience, memory, and sacred connection of the Kamëntša community (Chindoy 2020; Leyva Mosquera 2015).

My friend said she had followed the instructions and had begun to feel some relief. Maria Dolores then asked her to lie down and remove the belt. She began a traditional uterine massage, using almond oil, her hands moving in slow, circular motions across my friend's abdomen. I photographed quietly, watching the way her fingers pressed with both gentleness and strength. In the Kamëntša culture, this type of massage is a central part of traditional healing practices, performed with different oils and techniques depending on the purpose of the therapy—whether for postpartum recovery, menstrual care, or restoring balance to the womb (Escobar Upegui 2024). Each movement is intentional, guided by ancestral knowledge passed down through generations, making the massage not just a physical treatment but a spiritual act of connection and care.

Figure 5
Mamita Maria Dolores performing a traditional uterine massage. Photographs by Rozalia Agioutanti.

She must have performed this same ritual countless times before. I thought about the bed beneath my friend—how many generations of women had come here seeking healing, lying in that same position, trusting those same hands. Though in her mid-eighties, Maria Dolores's movements were steady and sure, the muscle memory of decades of practice guiding her touch.

After ten minutes, she wrapped the tsõmbiachë around my friend's waist again, and the colorful symbols pressed back into place. She blessed it softly, as if sealing the healing work with both her hands and her words.

After the healing process ended, she sat down, and as she smiled at me, she asked, "So, what is it that you want to know?"

Women in Community

The interview began. My first question to her was about the roles women held in the community where she grew up. She told me that women worked in agriculture. Men took on tasks such as ditch cleaning and preparing the soil for maize planting, but the tending of crops was women's work.

The community maintained a shared garden, gathering there a couple of times a week. Over time, the women began selling their produce and eventually formed a cooperative fund to support their work. She recalled how that fund became a lifeline for the community in moments of grief:

> Because the costs of an Indigenous wake are kind of… unusual, right? You have to kill a chicken or a pig, and make *chicha*—the traditional fermented drink—for the people so they can come to accompany and carry. Before, we had to carry the deceased like that, the coffin tied to a stick, on the shoulder, all the way to Segundo, the main square.

This insight opened the door to a deeper understanding of the vital role Kamëntša women—or mamitas—play in sustaining their communities. Their relationship with the chagra or jajañ—is at the heart of food sovereignty, community health, and cultural continuity (Dallo 2023). The mamitas' practices surrounding the cultivation and care of the chagra are not simply agricultural tasks; they are acts of guardianship, nurturing a living space that feeds both body and spirit.

The Kamëntša woman, as Dallo (2023) explains, shares an intimate bond with the *bastana mamá*, or Mother Earth. Both are seen as producers of life. For this reason, women grieve when the Earth is mistreated: "Because one day she will be like Mother Earth, productive. And she will create many generations, and for that, she must learn to compact," she explains (Dallo 2023). This worldview situates women as life-givers in an expansive sense—caretakers not only of children but also of seeds, soil, and ancestral knowledge.

Through the cultivation of the chagra, cultural constructs such as the role of women and their connection to ancestral knowledge are strengthened. The chagra becomes a site where seed conservation, food cultivation, and the preservation of medicinal plants converge, ensuring that nutritional and cultural needs are met through what is grown and harvested.

According to Dallo (2023), mamitas who maintain chagras or home gardens can cultivate up to 70 species of plants, including food crops, fodder, medicinal plants, forestry species, and resources for livestock. Home gardens, usually smaller than chagras, are often located behind the house. These gardens are deeply personal spaces, named and organized by the women who care for them, often reflecting their intimate connection with the land. Beyond their immediate uses for food and medicine, plants from the chagra can also provide monetary benefits, fuel, and raw materials for crafts.

Through this relationship with the chagra, Kamëntša mamitas actively exercise agency. Their deliberate actions—such as conserving corn seed varieties that are at risk of extinction—demonstrate a conscious effort to preserve biodiversity and cultural heritage, ensuring that future generations inherit a thriving, resilient ecosystem.

While her garden yielded abundant harvests, not everyone embraced the produce right away. Some were hesitant to eat unfamiliar vegetables, such as beets, particularly because of their color. She, however, adopted them early, and over the years, more people became curious, eventually accepting and even buying these foods—a process that, she said, took the community eight years to fully adapt to.

Now, with age slowing her physical work, she relies on her daughter to help with organizing, but she still attends community meetings to help plan their collective efforts.

I asked her what is usually discussed in the community meetings.

> In our meetings, we often talk about work and about how we support each other when someone in the group gets sick. If one of our compañeras falls ill, we take her to the doctor and use money from our communal fund to cover the costs of her care.
>
> Some of the women have had to go to the hospital more than once, but thankfully, not all of us have needed it. Personally, I haven't suffered from any illnesses yet—maybe when I'm older, but for now, I've been healthy. I live a fairly quiet, peaceful life. These days, what affects me most is fatigue. I get tired more easily and sometimes need to sleep early—just rest. That's what I notice now.
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> When someone in the group is sick, we don't always rely on modern medicine. There are still traditional ways of healing that we use. Back then, we weren't used to drugs or pharmaceuticals like today. Over time, I've learned a lot. Now, if a compañera isn't feeling well, we prepare natural remedies and give healing baths. And with God's help, they get better. That's how we've been caring for each other—healing one another with what we know.

Her gaze was steady, her hands resting quietly in her lap.

> I'm often the one people come to when they need help healing. It's something I do for the community. We have many ways of caring for each other.

Ancestral Knowledge

I continued the interview by asking her what her own work had looked like over the years. She chuckled softly and said, "I have been doing this work for 33 years. Let's see.. where do I start?"

Maria Dolore's journey began in childhood. Her grandmother, a curandera, involved her

from a young age and told her she would one day need this knowledge. She told us, "I always helped my grandmother, even when scolded. I was proud to help and learn from her."

Much of her work drew directly from the jajañ, the area of the garden closest to the house, where aromatic plants, or *shanan*, are cultivated to care for life in different ways. These plants serve multiple purposes: some act as insecticides, others are used for baths or to alleviate pain and inflammation. The latter uses are known as *jáshnan*, meaning "to cure," and refer to the holistic practice of healing—mental, sentimental, territorial, physical, and spiritual—through the means and remedies of native medicine. In general, the jajañ promotes a state of calm and fullness, fostering balance within oneself and with those around them (Institución Etnoeducativa Rural Bilingüe Artesanal Kamëntša et al. 2020).

She married young, at 17, and devoted herself to raising her children and working. By the time she was 25, she felt called to follow a different path—one that drew from her ancestry and from a desire to care for others without the exhausting strain of heavy labor. She then paused and said to us:

> Once had a vision while near death. In the vision, an old woman told me what I must grow. That was when my grandmother passed on her healing spirit to me. She held my hands to the earth, blessed them with herbs, and told me the gift was for healing only, not for harm. Her own parents had also been healers. She passed the spirit to me, and I now share freely, asking no fixed price, only a gift from the heart.

It was clear that this spiritual experience solidified her calling.

In the beginning, her practice was small—neighbors who came to her for help when nothing else worked, people she could diagnose and treat with natural remedies. She would treat them with herbal baths and cleansing rituals, especially for those burdened with what she described as spiritual or financial blockages.

> Now, I serve my community using plants I grow and forage. I help 25 people in my group with medicinal herbs: descansel, calambo, chunduro, among others. These are powerful plants, but it's hard to keep them; the flooding washes them away. I grow what I can, and harvest from the forest too. I make remedies using many plants like oregano, chamomile, miraculous leaves, for stomach health, menstruation, and cleansing. My grandmother had many plants, but I married young and missed learning all."

As people began to heal, word spread. Stories of her work traveled through the same networks that once shared seeds for planting or food for a grieving family, and soon, more and more people sought her help. That was how her healing practice began to take root and grow, much like the gardens she and her neighbors tended together.

Her daughter didn't have the same calling as she did, but her young grandson—just seven years old—shows deep interest and intuitive understanding of the remedies: "My grandson already helps and knows the remedies. [...] He may be the one to inherit the gift. It seems the gift skips a generation. He helps and even welcomes visitors: 'My grandmother is busy, but she will be right with you,' he says."

Legacy

Apart from her grandson, there are more people interested in Mamita Maria Dolores' practices. She receives students from a bilingual school nearby as well as a university named Marianita every two months, and shows them how to make ointments, herbal waters, how to perform the massages, and lets them in on all the healing secrets. She teaches them so the knowledge can continue. So that when elders pass away, the wisdom doesn't die with them. She wants future generations to carry this legacy forward. She's said she is really moved by their interest, especially from the university students, who deeply value these ancestral practices.

She then shared with us a basic cleansing ritual involving herbal water. It's not about a specific plant, but rather the intention—chewing a sacred herb and drinking clean water with it, all accompanied by a spiritual blessing. This, she explains, is how her wisdom can be passed on: simply, clearly, and spiritually. "I will show you", she said.

She stepped out of the room and returned with two cups filled with a ritual tea made with millonaria and culanguillo verde. With quiet reverence, she blessed the water for safe travels and success in our endeavors. The ritual involved receiving the cup with the right hand, making a

Figure 6
Preparation of a ritual herbal infusion. Photograph by Rozalia Agioutanti.

Figure 7
Sacred herbs used in a traditional cleansing and blessing ritual. Photograph by Rozalia Agioutanti.

silent wish for one's needs—whether for a journey, a business, or a personal challenge—and then chewing the sacred herb to seal the intention. The moment carried a sense of gratitude, respect, and ceremony, grounding us in a tradition that has been kept alive through generations.

She handed the herbs to us first and then the cups filled with the blessed liquid. She patiently waited for us to chew on them and then drink the liquid.

I remember the taste of the herbs. They were bitter and hard to chew. The more I chewed on them, the more intense the flavor was. Maybe that was the taste of the blessing.

Resilience

After the small ritual—still chewing on the herbs and sipping our blessed water—we slipped back into the rhythm of the interview. I decided to go straight to the heart of things:

"Were women equal to men, or did only men make decisions when you were growing up?"

"Between men and women, decisions had to be made together—as couples," Mamita Maria Dolores said without hesitation. "But women could also make decisions. Yes, women had the right to organize work too. We organized ourselves, that is."

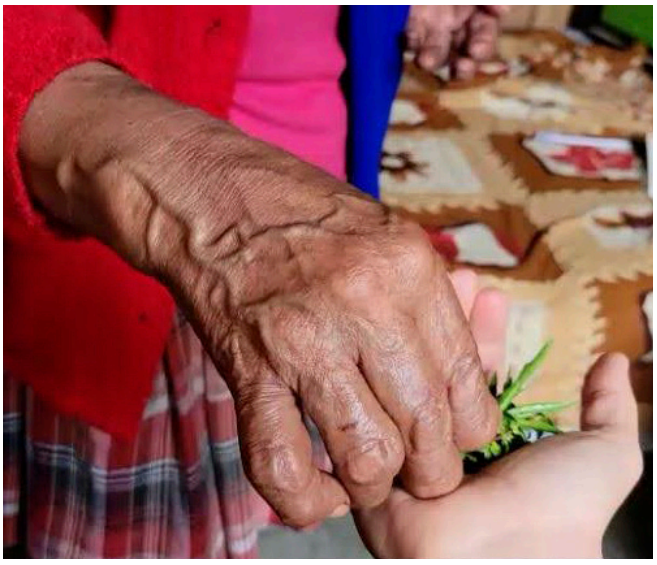

Figure 8
Ritual of the blessed herbs. Photograph by Rozalia Agioutanti.

Figure 9
Blessing the ceremonial cup of herbal water. Photograph by Rozalia Agioutanti.

From there, the conversation naturally bent toward a heavier subject: colonialism.

"Was there violence?" I asked.

Her eyes held both memory and distance. "Yes, there was a lot of violence—around 15 years ago," she recalled. She spoke of military raids, of innocent people killed, of Indigenous lands invaded and overtaken. "They came and destroyed the people living near the river—just killed them all." Her words fell like stones in water, rippling through silence. Those were times of violence. "But now", she assured me, "things are calmer. There's more peace—here it's not like other places."

I followed with a question that felt necessary: "So, how is the community now? Are they united?"

"There were always issues," she admitted, "especially with a governor placed in San Francisco (one of the local towns). People had disagreements and didn't like how he governed. There were misunderstandings, but thanks to God and the Virgin Mary, it calmed down. There are still difficulties, but now things are more organized. People vote every year."

However, she explained, the community is facing many more challenges now than what existed in the past. In previous years, especially the last one, tensions and conflicts were common between different parts of the community. People often doubted or challenged each other, especially over who would benefit from shared resources. These interpersonal conflicts were a source of ongoing tension.

Religion came up next, almost inevitably. When I asked her about it, Maria Dolores smiled, as if conjuring her grandmother—or *abuela*, in Spanish. Her abuela had been a devout Catholic. Each year, she organized celebrations in honor of the Virgin Mary, weaving together mass and shared meals that stitched the community closer.

But before the arrival of the priests, the Kamëntšá people looked up not to saints, but to the sun, the moon, and the stars. These celestial beings were their first temples. That changed when a priest named Bartolomé built a church and set out to "civilize" the people through religion and schooling.

Long before colonization, the Kamëntšá honored the natural world as sacred. Their ancestors worshiped the sun, *Shinyë*—the main god, creator, and giver of life—together with the moon, Juashcona, associated with fertility, nature, and crops. They also revered Tsabatsanamamá ("responsible mother"), the giver of food and sustenance. Their spiritual home was, as mentioned before, Bëngbe Tabanok ("place of origin"), now the urban center of the municipality of Sibundoy. As Juajibioy (1989) notes, rituals and offerings were once dedicated not only to the sun and moon but also to the stars, wind, forests, rivers, and lagoons. This deep connection formed a naturalistic, animistic belief system—one that saw all elements of nature as alive and sacred, a worldview whose traces can still be found in the community today.

"Do you think it was a good change?" I asked, curious about her perspective.

"Yes," she nodded, "because it brought education. Before, I only went to first grade. Then I just worked. I only learned to sign my name. My siblings also didn't study much."

And yet, with this education came loss. One of the deepest wounds of colonization was the erosion of the Kamëntšá language, *Kamsa*.

"The Franciscan nuns didn't like us speaking our language. They didn't like it at all. That's why the language is barely spoken now. But I've preserved it well," she told me with quiet pride. "I speak Spanish, but I've kept the language. *Bastín* is 'good morning,' for example. At noon, it's *guán*, and in the afternoon too. When you meet someone, you greet them and chat. When they answered, they'd say, 'Thanks to God, I'm well.' I've kept that very well."

Her daughter doesn't speak the language, though she understands it when she hears it. Still, there's hope: bilingual schools are working to teach Kamsa alongside Spanish, and even university students visit Maria Dolores to record and learn its vocabulary.

She admitted that learning Spanish had been difficult, especially with pronunciation. "But little by little," she said with a slight shrug, she managed. What mattered more was that she held on—anchored by the strength of her heritage while navigating the pull of the dominant tongue.

Today, Kamsá is considered an endangered language, spoken fluently by fewer than 800 people (O'Brien 2021). The Kamëntšá have shared the Sibundoy Valley with the Inga people—speakers of a Quechuan language—for over 500 years. Historically, many Kamëntšá and Inga families were multilingual, speaking both languages alongside Spanish. But with the growing dominance of Spanish, such multilingualism has sharply declined. The Inga language now has as many as 18,000 speakers in Colombia (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2021, citing Civallero 2008), while Kamsá continues to lose ground. Even so, the linguistic ties between the two groups remain evident: Kamsá has borrowed many words from Inga, as well as from Spanish, reflecting centuries of cultural and social exchange.

Attempts to trace Kamsá to other language families, such as Chibchan, have been inconclusive (Campbell and Grondona 2012). Some scholars suggest that it may be related to the language of the Quillacinga people, whose ancestral lands were in present-day Pasto, though their language disappeared centuries ago. Similarly, connections have been hypothesized between kamsá and the language of the Mocoa people (a group that once lived in the area of the present-day city of Mocoa, a neighboring city of Sinbundoy). Still, without surviving records, these links remain speculative.

Estimates of the number of Kamsá speakers vary widely. Ethnologue reports around 4,000 speakers (Simons and Charles 2018), UNESCO suggests about 3,500, and the Endangered Language Catalogue cites 4,773 (Crevels 2012). Yet, community-led research and demographic data suggest the reality is far more precarious. Based on the ages of fluent speakers and census

records, fewer than 800 people today speak Kamsá fluently, most of them over the age of sixty (Ministerio del Interior and Cabildo Indígena Kamëntšá de Sibundoy 2012). Younger generations may understand some words or phrases, but few are capable of fluent conversation. This reality places Kamsá in the "severely endangered" category on the Language Endangerment Index (Lee and Van Way 2018).

Despite this, efforts to revitalize Kamsá continue. Language classes, community programs, and cultural initiatives are working to reconnect the younger generation with their ancestral tongue—to ensure that the words whispered by elders will not be silenced with them.

Family Life

We then turned to the topic of family. Maria Dolores told us she had nine children in total—though heartbreakingly, four of them passed away from whooping cough. She described it simply: "A cough that couldn't be calmed by anything. Yes, they died from that. Many years ago. Yes, now there's a cure. Now it's like a very strong flu." She had her first child at twenty-one, after marrying at seventeen, and her last at thirty-nine.

After reflecting on the past, she leaned toward us: "Do you mind if I ask you a question?" Of course, we agreed. "Would you like to have children?" Both of us said yes, and she nodded knowingly, smiling. "I see it like a celebration of life. A source of companionship, especially in old age." She explained that without her daughter and grandchildren, she and her husband would be alone, with no one to even offer support when bedridden. For her, having children meant more than just raising a family—it meant ensuring continuity, connection, and care. Still, she acknowledged the challenges: children tether you to home, which can feel limiting, but the care and presence they bring make it worthwhile.

She then shared glimpses of how she and her husband built their family life together. They began by raising animals and working hard to prepare for their growing household. With her parents' guidance, she learned to organize community work collectives, in which neighbors rotated labor across households to share the burden. These mutual aid systems helped her become self-sufficient—eventually allowing her to forgo outside work and dedicate herself fully to her home and family.

We also talked about her marriage. Her memories of food and marriage customs added color to her story. Daily meals were simple and hearty, served on wooden plates, often shared communally. "Beans, all mixed together, and they'd give it to us on a wooden plate with chili on the side. Wherever we went, they'd serve mote, a traditional Colombian soup, with a piece of chicken—or whatever they had—in that old plate, that's how they'd offer it," said Mamita.

Marriage followed a particular ritual: at dawn, the groom and his father would visit the bride's home to negotiate the union. A performance of refusal often followed, with the groom insisting the bride had already agreed—even if she hadn't.

Once settled, the marriage would be sealed the same day with a church ceremony, dancing, and a grand celebration.

The wedding would always start with the bambuco playing, the bride and groom danced with their godparents, and the festivities lasted until dawn. Although alcohol was served, Maria Dolores herself never drank, choosing instead to rest early while others danced through the night.

> The marriage happened that same day. We had to find wedding godparents that day, and they took me to the church. And that same day was the dance, the whole celebration. After the wedding, the music started. But it wasn't like it is now—they started with *bambuco*. We had to dance as a couple, then the bride danced with the godfather, and the groom with the godmother, and so on. They started handing out [drinks], and the problem was I didn't know how to drink. So I'd just sit down until I got sleepy, and I'd tell my mother-in-law I was going to sleep. Everyone else kept dancing until morning, but I went to bed—since I didn't drink, and I still don't. I don't like it. That's what I'm telling you. That was my wedding.

She still recalls the wedding attire vividly: a crown and a white sash draped across her shoulders. Not all marriages, however, were celebrated so fondly. She reflected that in the past, women often had little say in who they married. Sometimes, just being seen speaking with a man could lead community authorities to arrange a marriage, regardless of the individuals' feelings. Many unions were unhappy as a result. In her own case, though her husband never directly proposed, he later claimed she had agreed to marry him. She was persuaded eventually—but importantly, she notes that she truly liked and cared for him, which made her marriage a partnership she could embrace.

Her Garden

As our conversation drew to a close, Maria Dolores asked us with a playful smile, "Would you like to see my garden, where I grow all the herbs I use for healing?" Delighted by the invitation, we immediately stood up and followed her. She led us through her home and into the backyard, where a small but vibrant patch of land unfolded before us—lush, green, and full of life.

Figure 10
Home garden (jajañ) of medicinal and spiritual plants. Photograph by Rozalia Agioutanti.

Pointing from one plant to another, she introduced us to a variety of medicinal and spiritual herbs she had cultivated: descansel, calabombo, chunduro, llilo verde, millonaria, chamomile, zucarena, and milagrosa.

Almost all of these names were new to me, and to my untrained eyes, the plants looked so similar that it was hard to distinguish one from another. For Mamita, however, there was no confusion. These were the plants she had grown, nurtured, and relied on for decades—plants she planted, harvested, and brewed into remedies for 33 years.

She explained that these herbs are used mainly for protection and healing, both physical and spiritual. Each one carried a specific purpose, and each one was cared for with intention. Because the river floods the area every year, she grows them in pots to keep them safe from the rising water.

I was able to find most of the medicinal plants Maria Dolores was using in her therapeutic practices in the literature review that I did, and cross-referenced their uses and healing properties. Their names and characteristics are included in the Table below (Canamejoy 2011; Upegui, 2024).

Figure 11
Millonaria plant. Photograph by Rozalia Agioutanti

Plant	Name in Kamëntša	Species	Use
Calabombo	Kalambombesh	Iresine diffusa	Postpartum and breastfeeding
Chamomile	Manzanillesh	Matricaria chamomilla	Menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum and breastfeeding
Chonduro		Cyperus sp	Pregnancy and childbirth
Descansel		Ouretsanguinolenta	Pectoral, nephrotonic, anti-infective, urinary antiseptic and anti-inflammatory
Illio Verde or Pronto Alivio		Lippia alba	Anti-inflammatory, antipyretic, soothes stomach pain, relieves indigestion, constipation, and diarrhea. It is also used for respiratory problems such as asthma and bronchitis, as well as for nervousness and insomnia.
Millonaria		Plectranthus verticillatus	Antiviral, antibacterial, and anti-inflammatory. Relieves gastric ailments. It is also a symbol of abundance.

Mamita Maria Dolores' garden is more than a place where medicine grows—it is a living expression of what the Kamëntša call the jajañ, or traditional chagra. The chagra is not simply a field or a garden; it is a sacred space where knowledge, spirituality, and survival converge. It is where the wisdom of the elders is manifested, where the rhythms of planting, harvesting, and healing are guided by ancestral understandings of the stars and the seasons. To enter this space is to step into a living classroom, a sanctuary, and a home all at once.

For the Kamëntsá, the chagra is deeply tied to identity, community, and sustenance. It conserves seeds, nurtures medicinal and food plants, and ensures both nutritional and cultural survival.

For women, the chagra holds a particular significance. It is a feminine space, a place where the ability to give, nurture, and sustain life is honored and enacted daily. It is where mothers and grandmothers teach younger generations to care for the land, to recognize plants not only for what they give but also for the relationships they sustain. Through this knowledge, agrobiodiversity thrives, food security is preserved, and a sense of belonging and health is reinforced.

Caring for the chagra is an act of care for the self, the family, the territory, and the future. As some Kamëntsá women say, "The chagra shares the same spirit and blood as us." It is a place where women not only grow food and medicine but also strengthen their roles as guardians of memory, culture, and balance.

Traditionally, the chagra was also a space of collective labor and reciprocity. Families gathered for *mingas*, communal workdays where sowing, harvesting, and food preparation became opportunities to share stories, exchange knowledge, and reinforce social bonds. This practice, called *enabuatambayan*, created a cycle of support and reciprocity that extended beyond the garden to the community as a whole.

But like many ancestral practices, the chagra has not been immune to change. The pressures of capitalism and monoculture farming have transformed the landscape of the Sibundoy Valley. Land once used for diverse chagras is increasingly rented out for bean, lulo, or corn monocultures that promise quicker economic returns. Younger generations, drawn away by studies or jobs, often lose touch with the practice of tending the chagra. Even for those who wish to maintain the tradition, the economic pressures of modern life make it difficult; the land is needed not only for the sustenance of the family but also for cash crops to cover the rising costs of survival—electricity, education, transportation.

Despite these pressures, the chagra remains a space of resistance, continuity, and hope. It is a place where nature and culture are not separate but deeply intertwined—a web of life that sustains humans, animals, and plants in a reciprocal relationship. As one elder explained, "Approaching the chagra is to touch the center of the family." In these gardens, memories are kept alive, knowledge is transmitted, and healing—physical, emotional, and spiritual—continues to take root.

In María Dolores' garden, I could feel that vitality. It was not just a patch of earth with pots and leaves. It was a living thread that tied her to her ancestors, her territory, and her community—a quiet yet powerful act of preservation in a world that constantly pushes toward forgetting.

Standing there in her garden, it was clear that this was more than a place of plants. It was a living archive of ancestral wisdom, a continuation of the path she chose as a young woman when she devoted herself to healing. Just as she has tended

Figure 12
The chagra (jajañ), where ancestral knowledge is sustained. Photograph by Rozalia Agioutanti.

her family and community, she tends these herbs with patience and devotion—protecting them, adapting with the seasons, and ensuring that their power and knowledge will endure. Her garden, like her life, is a testament to resilience and continuity: the weaving together of tradition, care, and the unbroken cycle of healing.

Closing Reflections

As part of my work, I wanted to include this chapter to allow some space for personal reflections. This has been my first time engaging with an article in this way. My background has always been very technical and academic, leaving little, if any, room for spirituality, sacredness or personal stories. So, even though the interview itself came very naturally for me, writing this article, using my own voice and weaving in my own experience, was not easy. My mentor constantly encouraged me to embrace my own voice and allow my work to unfold without constraints. This section is my attempt to do exactly that.

What struck me most throughout the process of creating this article was the deep sense of groundedness I felt. I approached this work with a quiet peace and tranquility that I had never experienced in my previous projects. Unlike the fast-paced, results-driven work I was used to, this process required, and even demanded, that I slow

down. To actively listen to the stories of elders and Indigenous researchers. To tune into my own intuition. To engage not just with my mind but with my heart and soul. To tune into sacredness.

This work reminded me that the smallest, most ordinary actions, the ones we often dismiss in our rushed routines, can be sacred and ceremonial. This work became a ceremony of its own. I had the opportunity to learn about rituals and prayers, learn about herbal remedies and blessed medicines. Simply reading about them felt like a blessing in itself. It nourished me. The words felt cleansing, as though Maria Dolores' herbal baths were reaching across the distance to bathe my spirit.

Through this process, I also began to reconnect with what it means to hold the power that comes inherently from being a woman. That intuitive instinct to give care, to protect, to preserve life, to nurture. To be the giver of life not only to humans but to Mother Earth. I saw how that power lives in the simplest of things: in weaving a traditional belt, in tending a garden, in sharing medicine with someone in need, healing them, freeing them from pain. This realization brought me to a new kind of responsibility: a duty to myself, to my ancestors, and to the generations that will come after me—to define what this feminine power means to me and to embody it in my words, my choices, and my actions.

This work also made me pause and reflect on my own life. In that quiet pause, my thoughts filled with questions. What traditions and customs do I follow? Which ones have I forgotten or left behind? And how can I integrate what I've learned here into my own path? Most importantly, how can I honor the spirituality that comes with this knowledge—not just intellectually but in how I live?

With this article, I wanted to open a window into this ancient world—as every story from the past does—and to invite the reader's heart, body, and soul to wander with me. Let this work move through you. Then, notice what remains. What would you like to take from it? How do you honor spirituality in your own life, your roots, your customs, your traditions? What feels sacred to you? Are there women elders in your life whose wisdom you can connect with, empower, or amplify? Can you listen—truly listen—with intent and grace, with a soft heart? Because to understand the truth of Indigenous peoples' oral histories and their present-day struggles, we must first listen. And that is true not only for Indigenous stories but for the stories of all our elders. They hold wisdom, they carry truths, and they want to be heard.

I hope this article has touched you, even a little, the way this process has touched me. I hope you can feel the love, the reverence, and the inspiration that carried me through it. We each have a voice in shaping the future of this world; it is both our privilege and our responsibility. And perhaps the first step in creating a better world is finding the courage to ask—and answer—these questions, with the same intention, love, and care that a Kamëntša mamita would show to her healing, to her garden, to mother Earth.

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